

BOOK REVIEW

Robert Culp,

*The Power of Print in Modern China:
Intellectuals and Industrial Publishing from the End of Empire
to Maoist State Socialism*
(New York: Columbia University Press, 2019)

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In his new book *The Power of Print in Modern China*, with the usual adagio of words, Robert Culp unfolds to us the radical changes in the Chinese knowledge system through commercial publishing from the early twentieth century to the 1960s. According to Culp, common staff editors in three major publishers—the Commercial Press, Zhonghua Book Company and World Book company—were key to this transformation. If the leading elite intellectuals engineered the ideological frame, Culp argues, the staff editors' daily practices of writing and compiling fulfilled this new knowledge system.

As stated in the introduction, the entire book analyses publishing as cultural production with multiple dimensions, including producing books as commodities, producing contents as knowledge, and producing staff editors as a social group. To provide a thorough understanding of the historical development surrounding the cultural production and knowledge it produced, the book is structured both chronologically and thematically. Part I (chapters one and two) and Part III (chapters six and seven) trace modern commercial publishing through the changing historical context covering the Late Qing, the Republican period, and the PRC 1949-1966. Between the two chronological sections, the entirety of part II (chapters three to five) analyses in detail how new lexicons, modern knowledge and Chinese classics were introduced and reorganized in the changing knowledge system through staff editors' works. Culp calls these focuses "the material side" of culture; this refers to neither printing materials nor technological details, but the mundane operational side of knowledge making.

This interpretation of cultural production reminds me of Igor Kopytoff's theory of the "cultural biography of things," which argues that the salability of commodities is determined by their cultural value.¹ Considering books that have everyday use as commodities with cultural meanings and the staff editors as their creators somehow resonates with Kopytoff's theory, although from a different angle. Meanwhile, as a microhistory of mundane cultural practices, Culp's work provides a fresh focus on grassroots beyond the pioneer elites, and thus it is in line with various new books, including Sebastian Veg's *Min Jian*² and Jennifer Althenger's *Legal Lessons*.³ What stands out in Culp's book, in my opinion, is the detailed materialization of conceptual terms, such as "knowledge

making" and "cultural continuity." Modern knowledge making is analyzed via new lexicon in dictionaries and textbooks. Similarly, the continuity of literati tradition is interpreted through work and life details about the staff editors. In this review, I will focus on several ground-breaking arguments Culp makes. These include the suggestion that the staff editors were the creators of modern Chinese knowledge, the continued literati conventions in modern publishing, and the pedagogical nature of the socialist state of 1949-1966.

Firstly, who were the staff editors? In Culp's understanding, they were the leftover literati in the 1920s (27-38), the petty intellectuals who had received primary to middle school education in the 1930s (61), and the politically sidelined editors during the PRC 1949-1966 (208). These common employees in the major publishers, Culp declares, shaped the modern Chinese knowledge system with their intermediate level classic Chinese training and knowledge of foreign systems.

This remarkable argument might sound like it overstates the cultural importance of common people at first glance. Many known cultural giants, the elites who introduced foreign concepts and provoked language reform, have been accepted as pioneers of modernization. However, if modern culture in China is in any sense a thought revolution aiming at bringing down the aristocracy and including the masses, Culp's announcement reflects an in-depth consideration of "culture," not in its ideological frame, but in practices that merged into everyday life. When the written language was transformed from classics that tied imperial examination to vernacular, it is reasonable to argue that the educated common people would be equally, if not more suitable than the elites for interpreting their own language in textbooks and dictionaries.

The cultural importance of these editors was proven by the nature of their work. Culp points out that elsewhere in the world, it was rare that publishers organized large in-house content production teams like these staff editor departments. At its peak, over 200 staff editors worked at the Commercial Press during the 1920s (65), and they were a stable internal force for creating books with new lexicon and foreign knowledge (70). Further, with educational pursuits, the publishers also created upwards mobility for their employees. Staff editors like Yang

Yinshen were promoted via self-motivated compiling work and internal courses provided by the publishers. All this made the staff editors not just operational workers, but writers and creators, fulfilling the transformation of the language and knowledge system.

What is equally impressive is Culp's observation of the literati's influence on modern publishers. The staff editor departments, Culp argues, were operated with horizontal literati cooperation during the 1920s. Recruiting, organization of work space, work schedules, and even the editors' social lives, were all largely following literati conventions. These seemingly non-modern elements, the author argues, attracted literati who had some modern knowledge to work for the publishers, and therefore guaranteed the source of mental labor for the businesses (28, 29-34, 50-52). These dimensions of cultural production were gradually professionalized and stratified during the 1930s. The publishers adopted clearer mental labor divisions, attempting to define managerial and productional roles with industrial Taylorism. The main force among the intellectuals structurally changed from literati to foreign educated intellectuals, yet the editor group remained relatively big (58-60, 65).

As Culp argues, state interventions affected the large editorial department after it shrunk dramatically during wartime, both in the 1940s (87-91) and later during the PRC (186-194). This resonates with Culp and Eddy U's earlier argument that the modern Chinese states seized nationalist opportunities during wartime to legitimize their authority.⁴ Noticeably, in both cases, the modern stratified system was replaced by a horizontally structured large department when in the situation of "state emergency." This also indicates, in my opinion, that the specialized and professionalized Taylorism was somehow alien to the Chinese society by then, and thus it was removeable when necessary.

In the final part, Culp presents a ground-breaking argument on the pedagogical functions of the socialist state. While fully recognizing its propagandist nature, the author argues that the cooperation between state and private publishers, the level of state investment into education, and the fact that party cadres often worked as educators, all indicate the pedagogical inclination of the socialist state (244). Generally inexperienced in controlling an urbanized China, the CCP recalled old intellectuals to compile important reference books such as *Cihai*, and they continued the 1920s literati cooperative mode with state allocation where necessary (235). The state actively engaged in the cultural production of knowledge, Culp argues, by inheriting the tradition of "transforming the people through education" to strengthen the nation economically and culturally (244).

However, even before the joint management movement, the Five Antis Campaign indicated "the state's coercive potentials" (197). Culp argues that one of the reasons why the capitalists cooperated with the socialist state was that their entrepreneurial goals were guaranteed. Entrepreneurs like Zhang Yuanji continued their businesses with state allocations and a secured market share, since their competitors were officially removed

via state enforcement (194-202). At an individual level, editors and writers were stabilized by the material privilege and publishing opportunities (239-47). However, considering their previous pursuit of educating the Chinese nation, the private side also cooperated, in my opinion, from a nationalist wish and an over-optimistic understanding of communist governance and its anti-intellectual nature.

Since publication, the author's journey has come to an end, but the book's adventure is just commencing, with unforeseeable challenges and questions. As a reviewer, I propose two ideas for discussion. Firstly, I wonder what Culp thinks about the Japanese and Soviet Union influences on the modern Chinese knowledge system. In many places, the book uses the phrase "foreign and West" to describe modern influences, without specifying who this "foreign" state is. In early twentieth-century China, the "foreign"—洋 (*yang*)—as many historical records indicate, referred to both the "Western foreign" (*xiyang*, 西洋) and the "Eastern foreign" (*dongyang*, 东洋): Japan.⁵ However, the entire structure of the book generally sets up the "West" as the "modern" in comparison to and in negotiation with the "Chinese," whilst Japan is not given the same weight.

In the twentieth century, although it is arguable that leading intellectuals accessed Western knowledge more directly from Europe and America, Japanese influences can still be seen clearly in the publishing houses. As noted in the book, the Commercial Press had Japanese shareholders, and there were frequent interactions between the two sides. Zhang Yuanji and the managers travelled to Japan many times, and their Japanese partners often returned the visits (29,50).⁶ Many editors, such as Wang Boxiang, took the internal Japanese classes the publishers provided (83). Mao Dun described the staff editors' department as a literati "teahouse" (40), but it also looked similar to open work spaces in Japan. Meanwhile, many of the loanwords listed in chapter three, such as 科学 (*kexue*, science) and 社会 (*shehui*, society), had Japanese origins (99).⁷ Possibly for nationalist reasons, leading Chinese intellectuals mentioned these influences less after the Japanese invasion of the 1930s. However, all the above indicates that Japan was also involved in the structural transformations in the modern Chinese knowledge system.

Similarly, the Soviet Union influence is sidelined throughout the book, despite the fact that it also left marks on modern Chinese politics, language and educational systems. Leninism is observable in both the National Party and the CCP political systems. During the PRC, Soviet impacts on culture were omnipresent in the large-scale translations of Soviet literature, the political writing style, the socialist realism in art, and the political and economic cooperation. The publishers were also deeply involved in this discourse. For example, in 1936, commissioned by the nationalist government, the Commercial Press reprinted a rare edition of *The Complete Library in Four Sections* (*Siku quanshu*, 四库全书) as a national gift to the Soviet Union.⁸ As the author writes in chapter seven, *Cihai* was revised to accommodate new socialist lexicon during the 1950s, among which a large amount was from the Soviet Union.

However, the structural impact this had on the cultural system is less emphasized.

Another point I invite Culp to elaborate concerns the relation between intellectual and non-intellectual classes in the publishing houses. Workers, another newly emerged class, are mentioned in the book through the lens of staff editors, as the ones with an undesirable lower social status. To avoid being labelled laborer (*laolizhe*, 劳力者), staff editors refused to engage in physical tasks, including the production of house works (67-68). The editors supported workers in strikes, however, according to the author, they rarely interacted with each other (74-75).

However, urban workers were by far the lowest labor class in modern China. Alongside industrialization, modernization also led to urbanization, another structural change in Chinese society. By prioritizing urban experiences, this culturally re-labelled the peasants (*nongmin*, 农民) as the new lowest class in an obstinately long-lasting “despicableness chain” (*bishilian*, 鄙视链).⁹ Both the editors and the workers, with their rural roots, might have had to adjust their cultural identities in metropolitan Shanghai. If resources permit, details of interactions between the two social groups would be helpful in understanding the changing cultural dynamics in the process of urbanization.

¹ Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,” in Arjun Appadurai ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 64-92.

² Sebastian Veg, *Minjian: The Rise of China’s Grassroots Intellectuals* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

³ Jennifer Althenger, *Legal Lessons: Popularizing Laws in the People’s Republic of China, 1949-1989* (Cambridge (Massachusetts) and London: Harvard University Asia Center, 2018).

⁴ Robert Culp and Eddy U, “Introduction: Knowledge Systems, Knowledge Producers, and China’s Distinctive Modernity,” in Robert Culp, Eddy U and Wen-hsin Yeh eds., *Knowledge Acts in Modern China: Ideas, Institutions, and Identities* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 2016), pp. 1-26.

⁵ Lu, Siyuan, Tang, Zhenchang and Lu, Yunzhong, *Shanghai’s Journey to Prosperity, 1842-1949* (Hong Kong: Commercial Press, 1996), p. 1.

⁶ See also: Lin Qingzhang 林庆彰, Wang Qingxin 王清信 and Ye Chunfang 叶纯芳, eds., *Jindai Zhongguo Zhishifenzi zai Riben 3 近代中国知识分子在日本 3* (Taipei: Wanjuanlou tushu gufen youxian gongsi, 2003).

Further, studying intellectual history with considerations of non-intellectuals could also extend our focus on the power of print to the general masses. In *The Reading Nation*, St. Clair Williams writes that during the Romantic Period (1780s-1830s) in England, printed pages of Byron’s poems were widely read, but at the same time, they were also often used for wrapping butter and cakes in bakeries.¹⁰ The author’s choice of 1966 as the end of this book indicates the structural ruptures in the printing culture as a result of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). The influence of print on broader audiences before 1966 might provide clues as to why the knowledge system was repeatedly questioned and smashed in radical political campaigns during the following years.

The abundant historical details revealed slowly throughout this book enchanted me, as a book reviewer, creating ripples in the thoughtfully balanced structure and the ground-breaking arguments. Closing the book, as a reader, I also sensed a deep sympathy with common people from the grassroots. This sympathy is not expressed via words, but illustrated in the numerous historical facts. I cannot help imagining that one day in July 1921 in Shanghai, in the Commercial Press, when Hu Shi was writing vernacular poems in his office, he had a dictionary of new lexicon in hand.¹¹ This dictionary was compiled by the staff editors downstairs, and printed by the workers, the daily vernacular speakers. These people together were creating the future Chinese culture in their own ways, with or without words.

⁷ The two words are written in the same Chinese characters in Japanese, pronounced *kagaku* for 科学 and *shakai* for 社会.

⁸ “Siku Quanshu zhenben zeng sulian” 四库全书珍本赠苏联, *Libao* 立报, Shanghai, 8 March 1936.

⁹ Gong Renren, “The Historical Causes of China’s Dual Social Structure,” in Erroi P. Mendes and Sakunthala Srighant eds., *Confronting Discrimination and Inequality in China* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2009), pp. 30-69. For the “despicableness chain” see Feng Qingyang 风青杨, “‘Bishilian’ weihe wuchu buzai?” “鄙视链”为何无处不在? In *Dafenghao zimeiti* 大风号自媒体, ifeng.com 凤凰新媒体, 8 November 2017, available at: <https://wemedia.ifeng.com/36243106/wemedia.shtml> [Accessed on 1 August 2019].

¹⁰ St. Clair Williams, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 26.

¹¹ Hu Shi was invited to work at the Commercial Press in the summer of 1921. Robert Culp, *The Power of Print in Modern China: Intellectuals and Industrial Publishing from the End of Empire to Maoist State Socialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), p. 53.

Response

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I thank Dr. Lara Yang for her thoughtful and stimulating review of *The Power of Print*, and I am grateful to Prof. Yidi Wu and the organizers of the PRC History Group for the opportunity to respond. Dr. Yang's review highlights many of the book's major themes and arguments. As an author it is always gratifying to see that the reader is receiving the messages one was trying to transmit. In any good review, the reader extends the discussion through probing questions and insightful suggestions, which Dr. Yang has done here.¹

Dr. Yang astutely points out that I may have underplayed the intellectual and cultural impact of Japan and the Soviet Union as manifested through the publications of the major commercial publishers from the Republican period through the early PRC. To be sure, those influences could be explored more thoroughly. For example, a number of titles published in Commercial Press' series Universal Library (Baikē xiǎo congshū) from the 1920s into the 1930s were translations of recent or contemporary Japanese scholarship in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences.² Tracking the proliferation of Japanese and Euro-American scholarly approaches to common subjects and fields in series publications during the Republican period would reveal a great deal about the genealogy of academic disciplines in China, and the differential impact of Japanese, American, and European intellectuals on them. Yet the very pluralism of these intellectual traditions in the major publishers' collections reinforces my point (chapter 5) that Chinese scholars had an opportunity to choose between or synthesize foreign theories and methods in developing their own academic fields. In terms of Soviet influence after 1949, I make note, for instance, of the many different series publications drawing from Soviet sources that Commercial Press and Zhonghua Book Company published during the early 1950s (216-217). However, I quickly turn my attention to publications of the late 1950s and early 1960s, when Soviet influence was less widespread and obvious, as my focus was on the two publishers' book production after they reorganized during the mid-1950s. Certainly, how publications transmitting Soviet scholarship influenced cultural and intellectual change during the 1950s, especially in relation to the spread of science and technology, offers a rich field for further inquiry.³

Dr. Yang also calls for more attention to interactions between the intellectuals serving as editors and lower social classes. My focus, as she notes, was mostly on staff editors' efforts to differentiate themselves socially and culturally from industrial workers. I made a strategic decision not to revisit the history of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) organizing at Commercial Press and Zhonghua Book Company, which was a major context of interaction between some intellectuals and workers. My goal was to emphasize work dynamics within the

companies' editing departments. Of course, there were also many everyday interactions between staff editors and print workers, as manuscripts and page proofs circulated between editing departments and print factories, but extant sources reveal less about these quotidian interactions than one would like. Still, Dr. Yang goes further in reminding us of the contrast between both editors and workers, on one hand, and the rural peasantry, on the other, pointing to the fascinating question of how workers and editors of all kinds constituted themselves as urban subjects. Much more could be said about how staff editors' everyday work experiences—such as clock-regulated office time—and leisure culture—like attending movies and visiting cafes—not to mention dress, transport, and residential patterns distanced them from rural life. At the same time, editors and workers regularly returned home to rural villages and small towns primarily in Jiangnan that kept them tied in some way to rural life. In general, Dr. Yang's perceptive question charts a promising area of research regarding how Chinese intellectuals of all status groups situated themselves in the urban social milieu, claimed to be cosmopolitan urban people, and traversed urban and rural social and cultural spaces from the end of the Qing through the early PRC period.⁴

Differentiation was not just an issue with relations between staff editors and workers, or those groups and rural peasants. It was also salient for relations among the various kinds of intellectuals working within the publishers, including foreign-trained scholars, a group which Dr. Yang mentions in passing in her review. This group's experience with overseas study and foreign language mastery made them much more cosmopolitan than many of their literati and petty intellectual colleagues, who had lived and studied primarily in China. While *The Power of Print* does emphasize the productive role of petty intellectual staff editors, as Dr. Yang suggests, it also details the presence at the publishers of elite intellectuals as authors and editors, especially during the 1920s. At that time, part of what made publishers' editing departments such culturally and intellectually generative places was the interplay among literati, foreign-trained academics, and petty intellectual staff editors. Foreign-trained scholars provided a model of urban cosmopolitanism and professionalized scholarship against which the other groups of intellectuals compared themselves.

Dr. Yang ends her review by raising the important question of the "influence of print on broader audiences," especially during the first seventeen years of the Mao era. In this regard, one of the most unexpected and intriguing discoveries in following Commercial Press and Zhonghua into the early PRC period was the increased focus on distinctions among levels and kinds of readers who were the targets of specific publications. We see this differentiation most generally in the designation of internal circulation (*neibu faxing*) publications but also with Hu Yuzhi's

identification of cadres as the intended readers of the Knowledge Series (Zhishi congshu) and Zhonghua's distinction between classical publications for "specialized research workers" (*zhuanmen yanjiu gongzuozhe*) and more accessible books for "ordinary readers, including cadres and students who have a secondary level of education and higher" (219, 226, 228-229). These kinds of distinctions suggest that the early PRC book market was intentionally variegated and stratified in contrast to the Republican period's quest to maximize profits through publications targeting the broadest "general reading public" (*yiban dushu jie*) possible (161, 167).⁵ Identifying distinct communities of readers with specific categories of texts reflects what I see to be the pedagogical function of much Mao-era cultural production. The pedagogical state used books to cultivate knowledge and skills, which functionally delineated groups of people could use to build socialism.

¹ My thanks to Janet Chen and Eugenia Lean for their perceptive comments on earlier versions of this response.

² In the promotional catalogs published by Commercial Press, the original authors of translated books and their countries of origin were not always clearly marked. See Wang Yunwu 王雲五 et al., eds., *Wanyou wenku diyiji yiqianzhong mulu* 萬有文庫第一集一千種目錄 (Catalog of one-thousand titles of the first collection of the Complete Library) ([Shanghai]: Shangwu yinshuguan, [1929]), 15-22. The records in the Shanghai Municipal Library catalog, however, nearly always indicate the original author and his or her country of origin.

³ Nicolai Volland's outstanding work on translations of literature and literary criticism from the Soviet Union and

But the state's designation of target readers does not mean that texts published during the early PRC were not read and repurposed in unintended ways by unanticipated audiences. Dr. Yang's closing reference to wrapping cakes in Byron's poems reminded me of a good Shanghainese friend's use of the edition of *Cihai* that was painstakingly revised during the 1950s and 1960s and published in the late 1970s variously as a paper weight or a door stop! I look forward to future cooperative work with Dr. Yang and her colleagues at University of Freiburg, along with my longtime collaborators Wen-hsin Yeh and Eddy U, on textual production and reading communities during the Mao era. This collective effort promises to shed more light on early PRC reading practices, which will give us greater purchase on the question of published texts' social influence.

Eastern Europe has pointed the way in this regard. See his *Socialist Cosmopolitanism: The Chinese Literary Universe, 1945-1965* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), especially chapter 6.

⁴ Wen-hsin Yeh pioneered this inquiry with her groundbreaking book on Zhejiang's radical intellectuals in the 1910s and 1920s. See *Provincial Passages: Culture, Space, and the Origins of Chinese Communism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

⁵ Although, the Republic's commercial publishers also targeted more specialized reading groups with specific publication series, such as the University Series (Daxue congshu), and reprints of classical texts, such as *Sibu congkan* (chapters 4-5).