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Book Reviews



T. H. Barrett

From Religious Ideology to Political Expediency in Early Printing: An Aspect of Buddho-Daoist Rivalry. Working Papers in the Study of Religions, No. 4. London, Minnow Press, 2012.

T. H. Barrett is one of the leading authorities on the origin and spread of printing in China and he has written a succession of studies dealing with how printing arose in East Asia. The book under review is the author's third monograph devoted to this important subject, the second that came out as part of the Minnow Press series 'Working Papers in the Study of Religions'. From the point of view of an outside observer, Barrett's research in this field is characterised by an ongoing flow of studies that are interconnected and build upon each other, rather than milestone volumes that provide a comprehensive examination of distinct topics. Indeed, this book is also a continuation of Barrett's former research and is closely linked with his previous research. Rather than trying to establish the monograph as a self-contained entity, every opportunity is taken to embed it within the author's existing research. As former studies are often referenced without reiterating earlier findings, the reader is expected to be familiar with these, or at least have immediate access to them. Among the most commonly cited works is *The Woman Who Discovered Printing* (New Haven, Conn.: 2008), and it is clear that the new monograph is in effect a continuation of the same ideas and that the two books complement each other. Barrett's aim is not to do a comprehensive survey but to open up new topics and integrate hitherto unnoticed pieces of information into research, a task which he accomplishes with great mastery. While the bits and pieces he uncovers cannot be taken as direct evidence by themselves, he expertly reconstructs their religious and political context, and thereby makes the otherwise fragmentary information meaningful and relevant.

This book is devoted to the role Buddhism and Daoism, the two major religions in the medieval period, played in the rise of printing in China and East

Asia in general. One of the central questions is why the Chinese state did not take advantage of the technology of printing until it was already widely used in the commercial world, to which the most likely explanation is that it was associated with Empress Wu and her use of Buddhism for legitimisation purposes. In terms of its structure, the book consists of six sections, of which the first functions as an introduction and the last as a conclusion or summary. Thus the essence of the book lies in the four sections in between, which contain four separate studies arranged in chronological order.

The first of these, entitled 'Imprinting the Ruler's Body: An Imaginary Ritual of Seventh Century China', turns to Daoxuan's 道玄 (596-667) visions recorded in the *Fayuan zhulin* 法苑珠林 [*Forest of Pearls in the Garden of the Dharma*] for accounts of how inscribed seals were stamped onto the body of the Buddha, and links these with the origins of printing. Barrett stresses that even if the references in question cannot be linked with the use of printing in Daoxuan's time, they nevertheless illustrate the environment in which it arose, including the competing ideologies employed for asserting imperial legitimacy in which textual production played a vital role.

The second study, 'Cutting Wood and Giving Gifts: Life on the Frontier, c. 800', examines a Tang-Dynasty document from around 800 that has survived in Japan, pointing out its relevance to the early history of the spread of printing in China. This is a short piece of writing by the lay person Lu Shenze 盧審則 that testifies to the moral standing of his teacher Daosui 道邃. The document, written in 798, concludes with the words that Shenze 'carves wood to make this description'. Barrett raises the hypothesis that this enigmatic statement may refer to the creation of a woodblock that could be used for producing paper copies of the text, and suggests that this was a project carried out semi-officially by the local administration, since the state would have refrained from employing the technology as a result of it once having been utilised by the 'usurper' Empress Wu.

The third study, 'The Last Gentleman: The Huichang Persecution of Buddhism as a Stimulus to the Spread of Printing', interprets the massive destruction Buddhism experienced during the Huichang 會昌 persecution of the mid-ninth century as a driving force behind the spread of printing. Barrett claims that the sudden need for restoring the bibliographic tradition of Buddhism made people resort to an already available—but largely unused—technology in order to mass-produce texts. The case study for this argument is that of a preface by the eminent poet Sikong Tu 司空圖 (837-908) who was engaged in fundraising for the reprinting of the Vinaya.

The fourth study, 'Daoism and the Origins of State Printing: Du Guangting and the *Guang shengyi*', examines Du Guangting's 杜光庭 (850-933) preface/

colophon to the *Daode jing guang shengyi* 道德真經廣聖義 [*Broad Sagely Interpretations of the Scripture of the Way and Virtue*]. This text states that the project was sponsored by the high official Ren Zhixuan 任知玄 who set aside a portion of his monthly salary to pay for the woodblocks of the text in Chengdu. Barrett suspects that this 'private' printing project in fact enjoyed the support of the ruler of the Former Shu, and was thus a state-sponsored enterprise in disguise. Once again, the state's reluctance to be seen as directly involved in printing may be attributed to the technology's connection with 'the still feared usurper, Emperor/Empress Wu' (p. 114).

While Barrett specifically states that he is willing to explore historical possibilities even if there is no strong evidence to back these up, the cases he presents in these four studies are credible scenarios. The book is engaging and is full of intriguing ideas that will no doubt stimulate further research in the fields of history, and Buddhist and Daoist studies. Regardless of whether future research and archaeological discoveries will support or take issue with Barrett's findings, we can be grateful that he has produced such stimulating and ground-breaking work.

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