

Subproject C10

For readers and collectors: publishing copies of works on demand; copy houses in Beijing from the late 18th to the early 20th century

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Description of the project

During the 18th century, publishing houses were founded in Beijing that would copy opera libretti, ballads and other short literary texts on demand and sell them cheaply from catalogues at regularly held temple markets. These manuscripts, clearly produced on a commercial basis, were booklets that mostly contained six to twenty pages and which could be described as a kind of 'chapbook'. Works of a longer length were published as a series of booklets each spanning a chapter. To date, we know of at least five such copy houses by name, identifiable by the seal impressions on the booklets' title pages. The most prominent of these copy houses belonged to a family called Zhang, also known as 'Hundred-book Zhang' (Baiben Zhang), which is known to have been active from 1790 onwards.

Apart from these 'chapbooks', at least eight sales catalogues survive in which titles are listed along with some brief information about their contents and price. A number of the surviving manuscripts stem from an early private collection belonging to a Mongolian nobleman and notable opera lover from the first half of the 19th century – the Chewangfu Collection. Most of the manuscripts come from later private collections dating from the 1920s/30s, however, when Chinese academics started to become interested in folk literature. These collections are now scattered across various libraries in Beijing, Taipei and Japan.

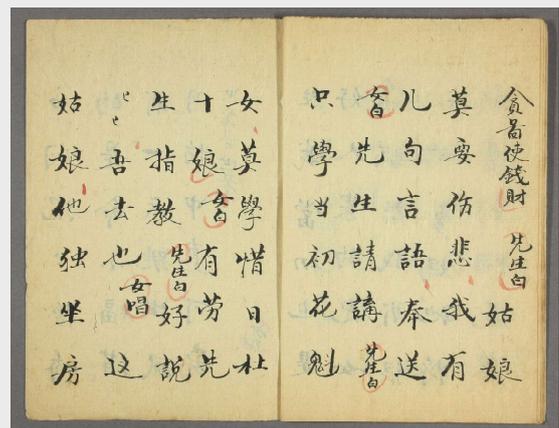


Title pages with seal impressions for two different copy houses, *Jujuan tang* and *Baiben Zhang* (© Waseda University Library)

Aims

The project will undertake a comprehensive survey of surviving manuscripts produced by copy houses and attempt to date them relatively accurately. In doing so, the intention is to resolve how many publishing houses of this sort there were and during which period they were active. On the basis of the findings, the social history of this group

of manuscripts, which is very limited temporally and regionally, will also be investigated in order to answer the following questions: what practices were associated with the manuscripts? Were they read before, during or after a performance, for example? Were they used to aid the learning of song lyrics by singers? Or were they artefacts to be collected? Did they undergo any changes as a result of political and societal upheavals in that period? What were the reasons for the fact that some publishing houses continued to produce handwritten manuscripts for decades in a period when book printing and lithography had already been introduced? Was it for reasons of cost, or less monitoring of content compared to print media?



From a booklet produced by the *Jujuan* copy house (© Waseda University Library)

Manuscript culture in late Imperial China

Whilst it is true that book printing, which as is generally known to have originated in China, was widespread in late Imperial China (from around the 14th until the early 20th century), manuscripts continued to play an important role. Even the documented boom in the production of printed books from the 16th century onwards did not bring Chinese manuscript culture to an end. Rather, print and manuscript cultures continued to exist in parallel. Manuscripts were valued by scholars for their aesthetic nature, and even preferred to print media. They were also favoured when it was a question of disseminating potentially dangerous subject matter (such as heterodox religious teachings) or when the contents need to be kept secret (e.g. specific craft or medicinal knowledge). As the example of the copy houses demonstrates, manuscripts could also compete with printed books on a commercial footing..