

A Precious Raft to Save the World The Interaction of Scriptural Traditions and Printing in a Chinese Morality Book.

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**“A Precious Raft to Save the World” The
Interaction of Scriptural Traditions and
Printing in a Chinese Morality Book***

Catherine Bell (bio)

In 1755 Huang Zhengyuan, the compiler of “illustrated explanations” (*tushuo*) of moral tracts, introduced his edition of the *Taishang ganying pian* (Treatise of the Most High on Action and Retribution) with a compelling argument about the merit to be obtained from distributing morality books (*shanshu*). Since good deeds bring good fortune and bad deeds bring calamity, he argued, those who would maximize their good fortune should look to the most efficient way of performing good deeds. “There is more than one road to virtue,” he noted, “but none can compare to distributing morality books. By transforming one person, a morality book can transform ten million people. By spreading its teachings throughout one city, it can spread them throughout ten million cities. By exhorting one generation to virtue, it can exhort ten million generations. This is different from all other means of virtue, which do things one at a time and in only one direction.”¹ Huang made clear that the personal recompense to be had for such far-reaching virtue was also enormous. Countless people who had contributed to the dissemination of morality books, he argued, were not only saved from calamity and danger, but also amassed prosperity, prestige, and years of life. If such enormous social and personal results could be had from such simple acts, he asked, “why are there so few believers and so many unbelievers?” He concluded that since people just “do not know the truth within morality books,” the first and most important step was to make sure they got the chance “actually to see the book.”² **[End Page 158]**

Huang Zhengyuan was describing the properties of books that existed primarily, although far from exclusively, as printed texts. Indeed, without printing it is hard to imagine how he could make such claims. Yet Huang’s own edition of the Treatise on Action and Retribution demonstrates that his argument rested on more than the ramifications of printing technology for mass-distribution. His argument about the merit to be had from morality books was also rooted in the construction of a particular type of text, a construction that used printing to bring together—more in terms of tense juxtaposition and relations of

dominance and subordination than harmonious and balanced syntesis—several different traditions of textuality. The result was a particularly dynamic and influential type of text that not only communicated certain messages, it also involved people in particular types of practices. Although the analysis laid out here rests on a broader set of data, more than a dozen editions of the Treatise ranging from the twelfth to the twentieth century as well as several companion tracts, Huang's rather elaborate edition provides a convenient focus for exploring issues concerning the cultural influences of printing.³ Indeed, the complexity and significance of his amalgamation, particularly the accompanying emphasis on distribution, all suggest something of how the tensions and even contradictions within a text—as a message, a medium, and a commodity—are what enabled it to act in socially effective ways.

The technological and cultural history of printing in China does not look like that of Europe. Beguiling similarities appear in tandem with substantive differences. Yet in both histories, questions concerning the complex interdependence of medium and message are opening up new perspectives on the dynamics involved in the construction of culture.⁴ One such cultural construction is, of course, the text. A clear benefit of the postmodernist analyses that have twisted the concept of the text into such non-intuitive shapes is a heightened **[End Page 159]** awareness of the constructed nature of texts and the internal evidence for this process of construction. Historians can no longer take for granted what makes something a text or how that text is understood and used.⁵ With the longest tradition of text-production in the world, Chinese culture has developed a rich spectrum of understandings—and veiled debates—of what a text is or should be. This study will focus on only one particularly interesting example in order to explore some of the ways in which...



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