

# Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies

<http://journals.cambridge.org/BSO>

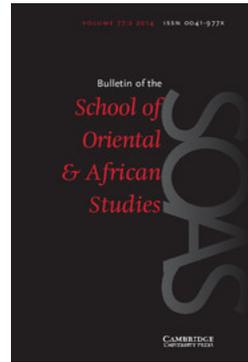
Additional services for *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



---

**Yuming He: *Home and the World: Editing the “Glorious Ming” in Woodblock-Printed Books of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries.* (Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series.) xvi, 343 pp. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Asia Center, distributed by Harvard University Press, 2013. £29.95. ISBN 978 0 674 06680 9.**

Lianbin Dai

Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies / Volume 77 / Issue 02 / June 2014, pp 415 - 417

DOI: 10.1017/S0041977X14000366, Published online: 13 June 2014

**Link to this article:** [http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract\\_S0041977X14000366](http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0041977X14000366)

**How to cite this article:**

Lianbin Dai (2014). Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, 77, pp 415-417 doi:10.1017/S0041977X14000366

**Request Permissions :** [Click here](#)

between place and literary memory, but the contribution to theoretical debates might have been stronger.

**David Pattinson**  
University of Leeds

YUMING HE:

*Home and the World: Editing the “Glorious Ming” in Woodblock-Printed Books of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries.*

(Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series.) xvi, 343 pp.

Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Asia Center, distributed by Harvard University Press, 2013. £29.95. ISBN 978 0 674 06680 9. doi:10.1017/S0041977X14000366

In this book Yuming He recovers a hidden late Ming book culture (1570s–1620s) that has, owing to its poor quality, been bibliographically condemned and ignored by scholars since the eighteenth century. By examining dozens of Ming commercial imprints, in particular their textual and physical features, she reveals the mechanisms of textual (re)production and book production, and the patterns of book use in urban society.

Unlike bibliographers or textual scholars, He endows Ming commercial publications with cultural significance. In the xylographic culture, she observes, blocks, pages, texts and images were all objects for re-use and (re-)editing because of the market-driven impulse and a common desire for novel fashions and new cultural forms. Ming editorial strategies, with small but creative changes in the adaptation of extant materials, served new purposes, created new forms, generated new social and cultural meanings, and reached new audiences. Through this process Ming editors established a new system of signs which correspondingly demanded from readers a complex set of interpretive skills and encouraged new modes of reading and interpretive strategies.

The investigation begins by examining the intended uses of *Boxiao zhuji*, a collection of verbal and textual games which mixes lines from canonical texts with references distinctive to the late Ming. Readers of this book are invited, as active performers, to interact with the text by dissolving and reassembling it, with a general tendency to challenge established uses of texts and even the orthodox classical exegesis (pp. 49–73). Because of the diversity of the collected constituent texts, readers need a range of textual command, a mastery of books, and the skills to reorganize and display what he knows, as well as compositional skills (pp. 22–8). Therefore, He further discusses the Ming categories *guwen* (ancient-style writing), *suyu* (common speech) and popular anthology, in order to discover how game players/readers developed their literary competences and concepts (pp. 33–40) and acquired their abilities to switch in gaming between the canonical discourse and other non-elite experiences (pp. 43–9).

Chapter 2 discusses how the combination of format and content affected reading habits and practices, illustrated with the triple-register page layout in the Ming drama miscellany (*xiqu zashu*). In this layout, dramatic excerpts are printed at the top and bottom registers, and amusing or practical texts for social activities in the narrower middle. Yuming He examines the commercially opportunistic impulse behind these books (pp. 83–7) and their readers’ expectations. This layout, she

assumes, reflects the ideal of projecting the world of theatre at home into a larger world of social performance (pp. 87–91). It also represents a common desire to become conversant with up-to-date specialized insider knowledge, and Ming publishers appealed to readers by textualizing the current forms of entertainment to distribute such knowledge as they encountered in daily-use encyclopaedias, character books and imperial publications (pp. 95–122). The triple-register layout provides an alternative to the sequential reading of text in the usual undivided page format, and creates the visual impression of a lively simultaneity of happenings within a single space. Thus readers become more active in selecting and combining different texts and genres (p. 139).

Chapter 3 discusses the patterns of circulation and reproduction of Ming woodblock printing. Books are examined in their networks of inter-referentiality, built on a common repertoire of various texts, images and books (p. 142). In addition to textual recycling, the adaptation of old blocks was common and significant in Ming printing. It kept production costs low and kept materials such as illustrations in circulation (pp. 143, 149–56). Thus media and genres in woodblock books are interrelated, yet creative tailoring in recycling and adaptation generates a new text and meaning (p. 160). Page layout and other techniques of xylographic compositions carry the same significance. In terms of visual variation, Ming editors did not adhere to “orthographic standardization or editorial regularization”, but were rather concerned with the adaptability of texts (p. 167). Therefore the meanings of the woodblock text are derived from the webs of reference, repetition, and variation that link them to other popular forms (pp. 170–87). These webs shaped the possibilities for their readers.

Chapter 4 examines the operation of the patterns of reproduction in creating a sixteenth-century bestseller *Luochong lu*, collected pictorials of alien lands and peoples that shaped both the popular and elite imagination of the exotic. Yuming He examines its (re)production, circulation, and reception, with an attempt to recover the Ming cognitive model of understanding the Chinese identity (p. 204). The sixteenth-century editors of this book picked up its constituent parts from old books. Meanwhile they were also mindful of more recent developments (pp. 211–24). As a collection of extraordinary phenomena, for private readers this book was appreciated just for its bibliographical sophistication, privileged access to unique and rare books, displays of erudite and comprehensive knowledge, and delight in speaking of unusual matters (pp. 231–2). As a Ming imperial spectacle is underscored in this book, the depictions and descriptions of the exotic articulate a personal, domesticated use of the outside world (pp. 238–40).

Yuming He approaches Ming book culture from the perspective of the books themselves. She terms her approach “book conversancy”, which goes beyond any social and cultural distinctions in reading skills and practices. This notion of conversancy renders obsolete the dichotomy between form and content, and crosses the conventional boundary between subfields of historical studies of the book. The text, images, genres, woodblocks, physical features and implied readers are all organized into a family of the book. It does not perhaps accord with the conventional academic discipline but allows us to get closer to how historical readers actually used books (p. 248).

This rich and innovative study is clearly inspired by and confirms Roger Chartier’s concept of appropriation and D.F. McKenzie’s sociology of texts. In the field of China’s book culture, He prompts us to rethink some traditional presumptions. For instance, she suggests that conventional bibliographic distinctions of commercial, household and government publications are misleading in clarifying any given book’s circulation and influence (p. 35). Admitting the poor quality of Ming commercial imprints, He insists on their cultural significance on the grounds

that they were produced not within the world of classical erudition or archaist learning but instead in the realm of “current fashion” for speed, affordability, and pleasure for wider readership (p. 81). In terms of textual practice, she emphasizes variation in textual circulation over fixity, authority and authenticity that the scholarly and bibliographical norms require (pp. 141, 167). Both her theoretical and methodological contributions to the field of China’s book history also are inspiring for scholars in popular culture, history of art, vernacular literature, and even historical linguistics.

**Lianbin Dai**

Harvard University

TIMOTHY BROOK:

*Mr. Selden’s Map of China: Decoding the Secrets of a Vanished Cartographer.*

xxiv, 211 pp. New York and London: Bloomsbury Press, 2013. \$25.

ISBN 978 1 62040 143 9.

doi:10.1017/S0041977X14000378

The so-called “Selden Map”, discovered some years ago in the Bodleian Library, has attracted much scholarly attention. There are now several learned articles on this unique work, which John Selden (1584–1654), an English lawyer and early Orientalist, bequeathed to Oxford in 1654 (hence the map’s current name). Brook’s account, written for a general audience with an interest in China’s maritime heritage and the history of cartography, is not exclusively dedicated to the map as such; rather, it wishes “to explore the age in which it was made” (p. xxii), the circumstances of its acquisition, and why it is such an important piece. By and large, the narrative mixes dry historical facts, based on extensive reading of the relevant sources, with personal experiences, various assumptions and hypotheses, and an audacious effort to look into the minds of certain individuals involved in early-seventeenth-century trade and politics, as merchants, scholars, mariners or in other capacities.

The book opens by briefly comparing the story of the Selden Map’s discovery to the story of the famous Waldseemüller map which came to light in 1901. The author then switches to the general importance of maps as documents instrumentalized by “lawyers” and governments – and by reminding readers of the current dispute over some of the many islands in the East and South China Seas. This is also the area covered by the Selden Map. Here it becomes clear that Brook supports an anti-Chinese point-of-view. Indeed, references to political issues are scattered throughout his book and they all suggest one thing: in the early modern period the atolls in the Nanhai did not belong to China’s “territory”, or *bantu* 版圖. Therefore the People’s Republic cannot base its current claims on historical evidence.

Chinese written references to the islands in this region abound. They go back to very early times (beyond the Yuan period; p. 9) and one should make clear distinctions between different archipelagos when discussing their status. But to us that may not matter very much, because Brook is mainly interested in an old map (and its times), even if he fills several pages with the Hainan incident of 2001 and his unfortunate experiences as a student when he tried to carry a map across the Chinese border in 1976.

Here we may turn to history. One early modern issue leading to vivid discussions among politicians and scholars was the question of whether the sea should be a *mare*