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*David Helliwell (Review Article), "Impressions de Chine (Exhibit on Chinese printing in the Autumn of 1992 in the Galerie Colbert of the Bibliothèque nationale, Paris)", The Gest Library Journal 6, no. 2 (1993): 93-101, accessed January 14, 2017, [https://library.princeton.edu/eastasian/EALJ/article\\_david\\_helliwell\\_review.EALJ.v06.n02.p093.pdf](https://library.princeton.edu/eastasian/EALJ/article_david_helliwell_review.EALJ.v06.n02.p093.pdf)*

# Review:

## “Impressions de Chine”

DAVID HELLIWELL

This skillfully named exhibition was held in the autumn of 1992 in the Galerie Colbert of the Bibliothèque Nationale, only a few steps from the Palais Royale in the heart of Paris. It was accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue,<sup>1</sup> in color where necessary, in which each exhibit was carefully described and documented, with each group of items being preceded by a short introductory essay. The selection of the exhibits and the text of the catalogue are the work of Monique Cohen, director of the library's Oriental Department and herself a sinologist, and Nathalie Monnet, the curator of the Chinese collection. As most of the items have never been exhibited before, and a few were hitherto unknown even to specialists in the history of Chinese printing, it is appropriate not merely to review the manner in which this remarkable collection has been presented to the public, but also to give an account of some of the objects themselves and invite further consideration of them.

The first section, “Procédés techniques et formes du livre,” illustrates the history of Chinese printing and binding processes along the traditional lines laid down by Carter and Goodrich, Tsien, and others.<sup>2</sup> Though doubtless intended for the general public, this section instantly catches the attention of the trained eye through the very rarity and quality of the examples offered. There can surely be no better way of starting an exhibition than by presenting an item that is not only the earliest known example of the genre, but preserves an otherwise lost text, an ink squeeze of the “Wenquanming” (“Hot spring inscription”) of Tang Taizong (no. 1). Two pieces of ephemera in this section are also noteworthy: a paper stencil of a Buddhist deity whose small perfora-

tions enabled the artist to reproduce faithfully the correct proportions and aspect of his subject (no. 5), and a scroll wrapper of finely split bamboo and silken threads that are carefully woven to form the title and number of the volume (no. 14). These three items are all from Dunhuang.

The earliest surviving printed images are of course pictures, and the next section, "De l'image au texte," illustrates the transition from the rather crudely executed "thousand Buddha" scrolls of the eighth century, through illustrated prayer sheets, to the fully developed printed text. At this stage, the sheer wealth of the Bibliothèque Nationale's holdings becomes apparent, as the library preserves some thirty printed documents from cave no. 17 at Dunhuang, and thus shares with the British Library by far the greatest surviving corpus of the earliest Chinese printed material: surely it would not be beyond the capacity of the two institutions to reproduce the entire corpus in facsimile? Among the finest exhibits in this section is a tenth-century printed image of Guanyin (no. 31) depicted with such consummate artistry that the divinity seems to emerge from the page to greet its beholder — how far the art of printing has progressed from its earliest manifestations! It is most unfortunate that this item is marred by a particularly obtrusive red library stamp applied in less enlightened times, and one wonders if it could perhaps be removed. Like most other libraries outside the Far East, and certainly in Europe, the Bibliothèque Nationale holds very little in the way of Song and Yuan editions. The golden age of Chinese text printing can therefore only be represented by Buddhist sutras, which were printed in huge numbers and very widely distributed, and an edition of *Zhuangzi* (no. 45), formerly owned by Huang Peilie which may date from the twelfth or thirteenth century.

A somewhat diffuse section on illustrated books, "Livres illustrés," brings us away from the historical approach of previous sections into a more thematic consideration of the subject. The emphasis now shifts away from the art of printing itself to a fuller consideration of the nature and variety of what is printed and the circumstances of its publication, and aristocrats such as the *Chengshi moyuan* (no. 66) and *Lienüzhuàn* (no. 67) rub shoulders with the vulgar, but in many ways more interesting popular works that began to reach Europe in the opening years of the seventeenth century, almost certainly through the Dutch East India Company. These early imports were split up and sold in Amsterdam, the center of the "curiosity" trade, and are now widely scattered among European libraries. Examples of these fascinating and often unique survivals are a *Bencao* edition (no. 51), other parts of which are in



1. *Daci dabei jiuku Guanshiyin pusa* (Dunhuang?, tenth century; no. 31). Single sheet, 28.9 x 9.5 cm. The print is monochrome, but the halo of the divinity has been hand colored in yellow, the flesh in pink.

IN DIE VISITATIONIS.

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- A. Nazareth, vbi representatur Annuntiatio, post quam Virgo Mater statuit Elisabetham inuisere.  
 B. Iter habet Maria festinanter cum Ioseph ad montana Iudææ.  
 C. Domus Zachariæ in tribu Iuda in montibus.  
 D. Ad quam cum pervenisset Maria festinavit ad Elisabeth.  
 E. Sedula illi Anus occurrit, sed eam tamen

- R.R. prior salutet Maria.  
 F. Audita Matris Dei salutatione, ecce exultat in vtero Elisabeth Filius, & repletur Spiritu sancto Mater, & prædicat Mariæ divina encomia.  
 G. Zachariæ & Ioseph laudant Deum.  
 H. Nascitur Ioannes.  
 I. Post eius ortum, redit Nazareth Maria Virgo Mater cum Ioseph.

2. Copperplate depicting the Visitation. From Geronimo Nadal, *Evangelicæ historie imagines* (Anvers: Martin Nutius, 1915; no. 71). One vol., 35 x 24.5 cm. It is known from a letter of Matteo Ricci that a copy of this work was in the hands of Emmanuel Diaz in south China in 1605.

爾伯撒依顧往母聖



甲聖母因天神之報  
 知依撒伯年老家  
 恩懷孕思往顧之  
 乙聖母同若瑟速行  
 三日路程之如德  
 亞山中  
 丙維嘉禮亞居室  
 丁聖母一見依撒伯  
 便為稱賀  
 戊依撒伯聞聖母言  
 覺胎中子踴躍母  
 子被蒲聖神稱讚  
 聖母  
 己維嘉禮亞與若瑟  
 相接供讚天主  
 庚依撒伯誕生大聖  
 若翰  
 辛聖母同居三閱月  
 後歸本鄉  
 見行紀卷二四章

3. The Visitation, expressed in the idiom of the Chinese woodcut. From Giuli Aleni, *Tianzhu Jiangsheng chuxiang jingjie* (Jinjiang: Jingjiaotang, 1637; no. 70). One fasc., 23.8 x 14 cm.

Oxford, Rostock, and Bern, and the well-known unique surviving edition of *Shuihuzhuan* (no. 55) now shared with Copenhagen and Stuttgart, Oxford having piously preserved a single leaf.

The section on the Jesuit press in China, "Impressions sino-européennes," again demonstrates the careful research that has been devoted to this exhibition, evident, for example in the placing of Ferreira's *Rosary* (no. 69) and Aleni's *Life of Christ* (no. 70) beside Nadal's *Evangelicae historiae imagines* (no. 71), from whose fine copperplates the illustrations in the two Chinese works were largely derived. Among several block-printed works containing Latin script is Kangxi's "Red Decree" of 1716 (no. 74). Irritated by the failure of his two envoys to the papal court to return to China (the first had, in fact, been shipwrecked off Portugal), Kangxi announced that no missives from that quarter would be believed until the two envoys appeared in person, and lest there be any doubt about the seriousness of the matter, the decree was printed in Canton in Manchu, Chinese, and Latin, and a copy given to every European who left China. Copies of this document are now exceedingly rare, and it is worth adding to the four examples noted in the catalogue in Paris, London, Wolfenbüttel, and Stockholm a fifth in Oxford, which has recently been identified as a direct result of this exhibition.

There is a short section on the well-worn theme of imperial printing, "Des presses impériales," containing few surprises other than an exquisite Buddhist sutra that after being printed in silver, was then retouched in gold by hand in 1615 (no. 82). Sustaining the extraordinary interest of the exhibition to the end, the concluding section on color printing, "Impressions polychromes," presents some of the finest examples of this art that have ever been produced. For virtuosity of both design and execution, surely nothing could rival the so-called Kaempfer prints made in Suzhou in the late seventeenth century (nos. 99–102), or even the outstanding *nianhua* with which the exhibition closes (nos. 104, 105). Monique Cohen and Nathalie Monnet deserve special praise for recognizing the importance of the *Hushan shenggai* (no. 94), apparently unknown hitherto, but of outstanding quality and quite unlike most of the other late Ming or early Qing picture albums. The work includes twelve full-page scenes of Wushan in Hangzhou, which are predominantly of a subtle blue, articulated with black, reds, and yellows, and printed by the *taoban* technique. The way in which dimension is given to the rocks by varying the concentration of the block markings themselves rather than their inking has more in common with Western processes than the *douban*



4. From the *Hushan shenggai* (Hangzhou?, ca. 1620–1640?, no. 94). One of twelve illustrations from a set of forty-eight detached leaves, incomplete. Printed in color by the *taoban* technique. Blue predominates, with the roofs printed in black, the lattices of the gate in red, and some of the garments in yellow.

shadings of the Ten Bamboo and Mustard Seed albums, which produce a quite different effect. A work of the same name from Peking Library was exhibited in Machida in 1988;<sup>3</sup> the edition is different, and though similar in style and execution, appears to be altogether inferior in quality to that of the Bibliothèque Nationale.

The provenance of Chinese books in European libraries is of intrinsic interest, and is duly supplied for each item in the catalogue. Only a minority of the exhibits reached the Bibliothèque Nationale through the agency of the Jesuits, who are often wrongly credited with being solely responsible for the excellence of that library's historic Chinese holdings. Throughout this exhibition one is aware of the towering presence of Paul Pelliot: as many as one-third of the items displayed were acquired by him, whether from Dunhuang or through judicious and informed purchasing in Peking and other places, including such enormous works as the *Zhengtong daoze* (nos. 15, 44) and the original edition of *Qinding gujin tushu jicheng* (85). It would be interesting to have heard a little more on the subject of provenance, particularly concerning such named donors as Atherton Curtis, who gave such a large percentage of the fine illustrated editions.

For those who approach the Chinese book for the first time, *Impressions de Chine* is a valuable introduction to both printing itself and what is printed. Equally, the specialist will find much that is new in the pages of the catalogue, which has been conscientiously researched and beautifully printed with the support of the Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation, and should take its place on the shelves of any serious student of Chinese bibliography. The catalogue may also serve as a guide to one of Europe's most outstanding collections of old Chinese books until it is possible to follow the excellent example of the Gest Library itself, and find some means of offering the republic of letters a complete catalogue of the entire collection compiled according to sound modern principles.

## NOTES

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| <p>1. Monique Cohen and Nathalie Monnet, <i>Impressions de Chine</i> (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, 1992).</p> <p>2. Thomas F. Carter, <i>The Invention of Printing in China and Its Spread</i></p> | <p><i>Westward</i>, ed. L. Carrington Goodrich (2d edn.; New York: Roland, 1955); Tsien Tsuen-hsuei, <i>Written on Bamboo and Silk</i> (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).</p> |
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3. *Chūgoku kodai hangaten: Chūgoku hanga 2000 nen ten dai 3 bu Machida shiritsu kokusai hanga bijitsukan*

(Machida: Machida shiritsu kokusai hanga bijitsukan, 1988), p. 248.

GLOSSARY

*Bencao* 本草

*Chengshi moyuan* 程氏墨苑

*douban* 餛版

*Dunhuang* 敦煌

*Guanyin* 觀音

*Hangzhou* 杭州

*Huang Peilie* 黃丕烈

*Hushan shenggai* 湖山勝概

*Kangxi* 康熙

*Lienüzhuan* 烈女傳

*Ming* 明

*nianhua* 年畫

*Qinding gujin tushu jicheng*

欽定古今圖書集成

*Qing* 清

*Shuihuzhuan* 水滸傳

*Song* 宋

*Suzhou* 蘇州

*Tang Taizong* 唐太宗

*taoban* 套版

*Wenquanming* 溫泉銘

*Wushan* 吳山

*Yuan* 元

*Zhengtong daozaog* 正統道藏

*Zhuangzi* 莊子