

# Reading and Transcendence of Ming Dynasty Texts

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**Abstract:** In the Ming Dynasty, reading groups proliferated, readers were “no longer restricted to the intellectual class,” nor reading “a special right of scholars.” In recent years, commercial publishing research in the Ming Dynasty has gradually received attention. However, scholars’ attention is still lacking on these questions: When did these books for specific readers begin to enter the public’s field of vision? Who compiled the books? And what effect it had on the reading community? This paper attempts to sort out the development of reader communities and reading materials in the Ming Dynasty, taking the readers as the subject of reading and how they construct reading rules, habits, and interests in the Ming Dynasty. As for books, the object of reading, how popular book break the class of “text” within the elite class and begin to provide the general public with access to knowledge. Also, the impact of social background on the reading subject in the specific historical conditions of the Ming Dynasty deserves attention. Few scholars have thus far discussed the specific profile of “readers” and “reading materials.” Reading is essentially a collective phenomenon; readers are as much as individuals as members of a reading group. The social background of a reader shapes in a significant way his reading skills, reading concepts, and interpretation strategy. By combing through the social environment, we can explore the reading behavior and reading norms of a particular historical period from a new perspective. This study attempts to expand the cultural and social context on which the “reading action” is based and discuss the social conditions for a particular set of “reading norms” that oriented the reader before the act of reading.

**Keywords:** Reading History, Downward Diffusion of Reading Groups, Cultural Publisher

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## 1. Introduction

Reading history is a subfield of the history of books which is not especially concerned with the material form, production and consumption patterns of books, but more considers the reader and the text. The interaction between “reading behavior” and “reading mode,” – allows the text to generate “meaning” and affect society and the ideological culture through the transmission of the readers. [1] Under specific historical conditions, this act of pursuing meaning reveals the relationship between reading and the changes in ideology, social relations and power. One of the contributions of reading history is to let the researchers realize that the “text” is to be read by the reader to produce meaning. Through such an interpretation and communication process, the purpose of the text can become part of the thoughts or culture of a particular period. This paper focuses on the Ming

Dynasty, where a booming publishing industry existed. The rapid increase in the number of books, the participation of new reading groups, and the emergence of professional publishing literati gave rise to new reading interests and habits, and also changed the traditional knowledge structure, making the reading culture of this period particularly intriguing.

## 2. Current Status of the Subject

As an interdisciplinary area of enquiry, reading history intersects with other disciplines such as intellectual history, literary history, and popular culture, incorporating elements of textual criticism, bibliography, and cultural history. As an independent field, however, it has to delineate the relationship between “reading,” “reader,” and “text.” Dai Lianbin proposes, “Reading is the process by which readers

respond with spirit and body to the symbols that appear in material form." [2] In other words, reading consists of "input" and "output." The former refers to reading ability or the cognitive ability of understanding the "symbols in the form of matter," and the latter the reading process and the subsequent "interpretation and cognition."

Writing ability is a precondition for reading ability. Compared with verbal communication, writing codifies the content of "word of mouth" in the visual form of the text. The emergence of writing ability means that oral communication can be preserved and circulated in the text, with which people can enter into a dialogue. [3] As the deliverer and the recipient of the reading action, the "reader" will consciously accept a universal text reading rule before reading the text, which is determined by the reader's "language ability" [4] or "literary competence". [5] Nevertheless, individual readers have their own reading norms and routines and the same text may consequently yield different interpretations. Furthermore, different reading environments and expectations directly affect the reader's interpretation and cognition. In his study of local gazetteers, Joseph Dennis discusses such practical applications of reading that has inspired Chinese scholars to undertake similar investigations, leading to the development of a full-fledged study of traditional Chinese printing and the history of reading and commercial publishing. Xie Renxuan's review gives an account of the acceptance of Dennis' book in China. On this basis, Chinese scholars have discovered new materials for reading behavior and readers' reaction research, such as the "Marginalia and Proofread Edition" mentioned by Wei Yizong. [6]

The theory of the coexistence of the reader and the text proposed by the French scholar Michel de Certeau provides what can be seen as the basic principle of reading history research. His research underscores the importance of the status of the reader, claiming that reading is a process of creation of ideas. The traditional view is that writing is "making text," and reading only its passive acceptance. By this view, readers appear only as "bystanders." However, to De Certeau, there is a difference between the text and the reader's interpretation, which is likely to be at variance with the text's original intention. The reader takes apart the text and recombines it, "interpreting [its] infinite meanings." [7]

The text, then, can only be meaningful with the participation of the reader. [8] Reading history researcher, Robert Darnton, suggests that reading is not only a capability but also a method of building meaning in the process of communication. Reading preferences and habits determine a reader's mode of thinking and expression of thought. [9] The reader is now no longer a consumer per se, but his post-reading expression is likely to lead to changes in social trends and behavior and values. [10] This makes reading not only a personal behavior but also a social behavior. Thus, "reading" should raise these questions: Who is the reader? What does he read? Do readers subscribe to standard reading rules, habits, and interests? What are the specific social conditions that lead to changes in the reading environment?

What affects a reader's action, and the expression of his thoughts after he reads?

Turning to the study of the reading history of Ming, Li Chenghua looks at the production and dissemination of woodblock printing in Ming. The mass reproduction of books, the mutual illumination of text and image, and the multiple channels for the dissemination of books dramatically enriched the way people watch and read. [11] In revisiting reading, memory and publishing in Ming, Inoue Sin is not contented with merely dealing with the moral implications of reading but sets out to dissolve the idea of the morality of art and the position that "the Six Classics are history." [12] Liu Tianzhen regards the development of the publishing industry and the expansion of the novel-reading group as the external driving force for the compilation of classical Chinese novels. [13] While this body of scholarship has led to specific studies of reading history in the Ming Dynasty, especially that of literature and history, they fail to offer a comprehensive picture of the reading history of the period. So, this paper is trying to sort out the development of reader communities and reading materials in the Ming Dynasty, taking the readers as the subject of reading and how they construct reading rules, habits, and interests in the Ming Dynasty. As for books, the object of reading, how popular book break the class of "text" within the elite class and begin to provide the general public with access to knowledge. And attempting to expand the cultural and social context on which the "reading action" is based and discuss the social conditions for a particular set of "reading norms" that oriented the reader before the act of reading.

### 3. The Whereabouts of Knowledge—The Reader Under the Traditional Knowledge System

In a traditionally highly controlled knowledge system, cultural classics such as the Confucian canons and poetic masterpieces were the basic subjects of publication in the Ming Dynasty. These texts were given the responsibility of conveying orthodox values to society. In early Ming Dynasty and before, the royal family and bureaucrats were endowed with the right the "text world" and give new meanings to the "text" through reading. They were the editors and collectors of Confucian classics. The content of the publications in the early Ming Dynasty was relatively unitary. The book market was taken up mostly by official publications, and the subjects of the printed books at that time was narrower than that of Song and Yuan. Lu Rong (1436-1497) in *Jiaoyuan zaji* speculated: "In the early Ming Dynasty, only the Imperial College has the right to publications. Other regions may not be allowed to print books. One can see from Song Lian's essay, "On sending off Dongyang MaSheng" that the woodblock printing was not popular at all in the Xuande (1426-1435) and Zhengtong (1436-1449) era. [14] Lu Rong succinctly summarized the publishing situation from the early Ming Dynasty to the Zhengtong years. With the

exception of a small representation of "elite literature," official publications were made up of reconstructed Confucian classics, popular dictionaries rhyme books, official history books and the shupaben, a kind of souvenir book. [15]

Book exchange and gifts are the main ways for the elites to obtain books. For example, one reads from Yang Shiqi's (1366-1444) inscriptions that there was a great change in the number of books in his collection before and after he was an official. Before the first year of Jianwen (1399-1402), his collection was a meagre 48 volumes. After he became an official, they jumped to as many as 184 books and 70% of which were printed books. Almost all the printed books are from friends or acquaintances who obtained printing plates from official publishing organizations and produced printed books for him. Another way to get a book is to copy a text by hand. Due to the unitary content of the official publications, when literati looked for books outside the primary fields, they were often confronted with the difficulties of obtaining complete texts and had to search for hand-copied books or copy the books by themselves. Ye Sheng (1420-1474) and Yang Xunji (1458-1546) relied on friends to find other incomplete texts to supplement the incomplete texts they had in hand. Through this process of putting together incomplete texts, Ye Sheng finally assembled a complete set of books of Sima Qian's non-history work, while Yang Xunji only succeeded in arriving at a complete text of Wen xuan after several years of looking. [16]

Although it is not so easy to obtain books, most scholars in the early Ming Dynasty valued books for the "material" they contain and cared more about their quality rather than quantity. Reading was just for "learning." It is a "method" for experiencing Zhu Zi's "truth," and not ultimate a goal in itself. At this time, although readers seemed to subscribe to a set of reading rules that came to exist under the system of the official publications, they were bound to be readers who, in the process of reading, wanted to break away from these rules. Once the "traditional thoughts and concepts" that the book serves to impose on the individual conflict with the reader's own "perceived judgment," the reader cannot but respond. For example, Chen Xianzhang (1428-1500), who grew up in such a knowledge system, nevertheless put forward the idea that "questioning is essential in the learning process" in Baisha wenji. He found that no matter how hard he tried, "this heart does not match with the principle [that he was told to follow]." Also, his enunciations of this state of confusion was identified as the starting point of xin xue in later generations. [17] Chen Xianzhang conducted such self-reflection and cognition at a time when the publishing industry began to develop. [18] It is at this time that the original texts of the works of Cheng Hao, Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi books that were not in the imperial examination's curriculum, began to appear in the market. Since then, other unknown ancient books also came to be published, and the number of publications increased dramatically, just as the variety of books also increased. The implicit rules of the book establishment gradually collapsed, and the world of

knowledge underwent a silent change.

#### 4. The Emergence of the Cultural Publisher and the Downward Diffusion of Reading Groups

In the late Ming Dynasty, the profession of "cultural publisher" appeared, combining the occupations of the writers, the editors, and the publisher. The cultural publisher is usually a literati who is a shengyuan (a student who passed the provincial examination but not the imperial examination) with literary abilities. Researchers often overlook the sheng yuan group in their analysis, even when they regard "elite readers" that is taken to represent all "literate-reading classes" in studying the development of "reading patterns" of this time. Whether they planned to enter the officialdom and the upper class or were contented with securing and maintaining the student status, getting the sheng yuan qualification through the examination is the only way to enter the world of knowledge. This led to an increase in the number of people who wanted to obtain student qualifications, thus forming a fixed "reading group" whose demand for books exerted an enormous thrust on the popularization of books. This expanding "reading group" also opened the market for the compilation and distribution of the "test manuals." [19] It is worth noting that some such "test manuals" were compiled by candidates who failed the exam. Although they failed to gain the reputation that the next level of examination would secure for them, they were familiar with Confucian classics and literature and understood the book market. Benefitting from the flourishing publication trade, they profited from the sales of books and even became cultural celebrities. Before the Ming Dynasty, it would almost be impossible to gain fame and fortune without passing the imperial examination.

Since the Jiajing period, due to the loosening of political control of the government and the decline in the cost of publications, the rise of the publishing houses turned "publishing" into a profitable business, and the number of books grew exponentially. According to Table 1, of the 3,094 books that date from the Song Dynasty to the end of the Ming Dynasty, 2019 can be confirmed to have been produced in the Jiajing, Wanli, and Chongzhen eras. The quality of books is uneven, with scholars' complaints ranging from "too many books to read" to "no readable books" [20] Commercial publications in the late Ming Dynasty included fiction, drama, songs, examination essays, elementary educational books, and other daily encyclopedia such as medical books and calendars. Within the four categories (siku), the publishing share of "Classics" and "Histories" were gradually dominated by "Philosophy" and "Assorted works". In the 19th year of Jiajing, the collector Gao Ru (dates uncertain) triggered heated debates for categorizing drama works as histories in his private collection, but towards the end of Ming, including drama and fiction into book catalogues had become a commonplace.

**Table 1.** *The Number of Publications from Song to Ming Dynasty.*

Dynasty	Number of Publications
Song	362
Jin and Yuan	280
Ming (Hong Wu-Zheng De)	422
(Jia Jing-Long Qing)	701
(Wan Li-Tai Chang)	973
(Tian Qi)	114
(Chong Zhen)	231
Total	3094

Outside the world of the elites and officials, people sought to articulate their views and feelings through printing and publishing, and the emergence of the cultural publisher is not unrelated to this trend. A representative figure of the publishing culture, Feng Menglong's (1574-1646) contributed most notably to the reading world by his publication of popular literature. He dedicated himself to collecting the original materials of various types of folk literature. Shen Defu (1578-1642) mentioned in his book *Wanli yehuo pian* that he brought to Feng Menglong a copy of *Jinpingmei* when he had hand-copied." Feng Menglong was very surprised to see the *Jinpingmei* manuscript and immediately discussed it with the bookstore to buy a copy for publication. [21] It can be seen that he paid close attention to popular literature and had intimate connections with bookstores and publishers. Although the active part of cultural publisher is attributed to the promotion of material and spiritual conditions such as money and status that can be brought to them, it is undeniable that they have published popular culture and brought it into the eyes of elite readers. The boundaries between elegance and vulgarity seemed to have shifted, in a way toning down the solemnity that had always associated with reading, as Reading now was no longer just for learning but for entertainment as well.

The cultural publisher's attention to "lower-level readers" is also noteworthy. As they were often separated from the traditional education system in their daily life, besides the common readers were oriented towards "educationalization," their access to knowledge is extremely limited. This situation began to change during the late Ming Dynasty when the literate population increased, and cultural consumption prevailed. The addition of the emerging reading group allowed the development of books that differed from that of the "elite class." The popular daily-use books in the late Ming Dynasty, such as *Santai wanyong zhengzong*, broadened the subject matter of reading to include the discussion of "personal well-being" – life, old age, illness, death and so on. These are the mundane subjects that Confucianism avoids, such as life, old age, illness, death, etc. Meanwhile, the content of orthodox knowledge is also quite reduced, especially Confucianism and basic classic trainings. [22] In the compilation of popular books for daily use, Yu Xiangdou (1560-1637) clearly stated that his target audience was not limited to the "elite group"; the four people are the objects in his concern. Popular books for daily use not only redefined the knowledge system but also changed the traditional way of conceptualizing knowledge. In this way, they did not intend

to proffer a system that is marked by clearly defined forward a, but instead provides a way for the underlying reader community to gain knowledge.

## 5. The Emergence of Female Readership

One of the manifestations of the downward movement of the reading group is the expansion of the female readership. In the early Ming Dynasty, women's reading ability was usually related to their father's educational level. For example, the father of He Huilian taught her *The Confucian Analects* and *The Book of Filial Piety*, and the daughter of the garrison commander Cheng Kai was proficient in *Records of the Grand Historian* and *The Book of Documents*. However, the reading of women outside the elites is irrelevant to the classics. Twitchet and Mote think that "few women have the cultural standard beyond basic knowledge." [23] They did not have the right to participate in the imperial examinations. Reading was only for enlightenment or "moral needs." [24] Most of women's reading are related to novel dramas. Although women from the relatively uneducated families could not become "readers" in the strict sense, there were still women who were interested in the content of books and 'read' them in their own way. A story in *The Collection of Poems of the Dynasty* relates how a Zhi Zhong from Changzhou province, with his good memory, would recite "dozens of unofficial history novels and declaimed to the women audience." [25] This situation had changed significantly in the middle and late Ming Dynasty. [26] In the Jiangnan region, while the female readership was expanding, they also participated in the compilation and dissemination of books as authors and editors. [27] The collection of poems about female authors also became popular. For example, in the middle of the 16th century, Tian Yiheng (1524-?) compiled *History of Female Poetry Writer* to lay the foundation for the development of women's poetry anthology; Qu Juesheng (1578-?) edited the anthology of *Female's Li Sao* as a way to affirm woman's status in the world of literature. As Dorothy Ko puts it, "By reading, writing, editing, and publishing, and as cultural consumers and producers, women began to participate in the writing culture. Whether it is in their own living environment or in the world of printing, they had entered a new era." [28]

## 6. Factors Affecting Reading in the Ming Dynasty

Most likely, the late Ming readers felt the impact of information explosion. The number of books surged, with an emphasis on entertainment and daily use rather than the refinement and pragmatism of an earlier period. The reading community began to move down the social ladder, as the "people of the four classes" entered the world of knowledge, paving the way to a "reading revolution". [29] I understand this phenomenon in two ways.

Politically, central government's emphasis on the role of moral instruction coupled with the relatively relaxed social

ethos laid the foundation for the broadening of the reading public. At the beginning of the establishment of the Ming Dynasty, the war crisis of external troubles temporarily lifted. At the same time, the central government began to build the justification of thought and culture by achievements in culture and education to consolidate political power. As an outcome of national wisdom, the early rulers had more reason than the Yuan Dynasty to promote and advocate "neo-Confucianism" to prove the legitimacy of power and to limit the boundaries between elite thought and knowledge. Zhu Yuanzhang (1328-1398) called for the establishment of the school in every province while the system of the imperial examination restored by the Yongle Emperor, who passionately supported the publication of Confucian texts, such as *The Great Compendia of the Five Classics*, and *The Great Compendia of Four Books*. With the rise in literacy, these policies allowed reading to flourish in society, accounting also for the diversity of books published in the late Ming Dynasty. [30]

Ideologically, the rise of the Study of the Mind in the middle and late Ming Dynasty broke rank with the Cheng-Zhu School of an earlier period and made for a plurality of reading. Neo-Confucianism remained by and large a matter of intellectual debate in its initial stage in the Song Dynasty, involving very little politics and having no place in the imperial examination. The Yuan Dynasty associated neo-Confucianism with the imperial examination as a condition for accommodating the intellectuals. The Ming dynasty continued this practice, and the Cheng-Zhu School of thought became the official doctrine. Yet, the rigid nature of such an official doctrine soon became apparent, which had the effect of delimiting the discussion of ideas. The literati and intellectuals then turned their gaze onto the "heterodox" thoughts and culture, resulting in the gradual expansion of the scope of reading. Before the Jiajing era, the types of books that were distributed consisted mainly of the Five Classics, *The Great Compendia of Four Books* and *Xingli Daquan*. By the Jiajing era, however, with the re-publishing of *The Records of the Grand Historian*, the five block-printed editions of *Wenxin diaolong* and the collection of other late Tang Dynasty authors, in addition to Li Bai (701-762), Du Fu (712-770), Han Yu (768-824) who had never been collected even in the official publications. the shift of reading and academic ethos was well on its way. Other factors such as the hobby of book collecting, the conscious promotion of reading on the part of the intellectuals, the emergence of leisure culture, the influence of popular entertainment, and the participation of members of lower social echelons are all subjects for further studies.

## 7. Conclusion

Through the discussion of the development and changes of "readers" and "reading materials" and the combing of the social background of a particular historical period, reading history provides a new perspective, allowing us to deepen our understanding of the history of thought and culture in this period based on a series of social effects between the "world

of readership " and the "world of the text." This paper attempts to discuss the relationship between the different "reading groups" and "book types" in the Ming Dynasty, analyze the formation of the reading ethos in the Ming Dynasty and the downward diffusion of the reading group, and summarize the factors affecting the above changes. In the early Ming Dynasty, due to the single type of publishing and the promotion of Li xue by the elite class, the traditional knowledge framework constructed by the official publishing books formed the "rules" that the readers of the Ming Dynasty needed to understand and accept before reading. Through this order, the official outputs the orthodox values to the readers, and thereby limits the boundaries of the reader's "thought and knowledge." In this period, "reading" is only a tool for "learning" and a method of acquiring knowledge. However, the ability of "reading individuals" to innovate and the accelerated development of the publishing industry has broken the rules established by books, and the boundaries between knowledge and ideas have begun to extend. The Xin xue as the "edge of thought" re-entered the scholar's vision, and the "heretical" thought outside Confucianism gradually became active. With the decline in the cost of publications and the revival of the imperial examination system, the number of books has grown dramatically since the Jiajing period. Reading is no longer an elite patent, and the reading group is spreading downward. The booming publishing industry has spawned the unique cultural phenomenon of "Cultural Publisher," a unique combination of Confucianism and business. The cultural publisher promotes the integration of the "vulgar" and "elegant" cultures, bringing the "secular world" to the scholars through printed forms. This trend has changed the phenomenon of "reading only for learning" to a certain extent, making reading begin to entertain. Besides, the "cultural publisher " also provides a way for readers who are excluded from orthodox knowledge to acquire knowledge which out of the hierarchy. The structure of knowledge presents the trend of "de-orthodox values" and begins to develop into informatization for more and more readers to enter the reading world. At the same time, the increasingly prosperous book-making market has turned its attention to female readers, and female readers, who are rarely able to make a significant impact on the reading field, have gradually stepped onto the stage of text writing and even played the role of editor and publisher.

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- [24] Books about the moral requirements: *Stories about the Famous Women, Norms Expected of Women, Female Norms, Four Norms Books of Female*.
- [25] See Qian Qianyi, *The Collection of Poems of the Dynasty, Lie chao shiji xiaozhuan jiaji*, Haikou: Hainan International Press and Publication Center, Cheng cheng Culture Publishing Co., Ltd., 1995, p. 492.
- [26] During this period, the reader's attention was gradually guided by the printed industry, and the "talented women" phenomenon began to get the attention of the intellectuals in the middle and late Ming Dynasty.
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