

A Brief Review of the Price of Novels in the Ming and Qing Dynasties

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Translated by Daniel Fried

In the Ming-Qing period, the artistic accomplishment and social influence of fiction reached unprecedented heights. Questions regarding the number and character of readers and their methods of reading fiction during this period have of late received ever-increasing scholarly attention. Among such studies, there has been particular interest among researchers in the influence of book prices on the dissemination of fiction. The Japanese scholars Akira Isobe and Yasushi Oki have relied heavily on evidence of the price of novels in their analyses of the levels of readers of Ming fiction, and related arguments can also be seen in recent writings by the American scholar Robert E. Hegel. But because materials relating to the prices of Ming vernacular fiction is extremely limited, such research has been light on evidentiary support or overly general, and hence does not appear completely persuasive. Fan Jianguo's "Readership and Methods of Dissemination of Ming-Qing Fiction" in the *Journal of Fudan University*, is the most recent essay on this question, but its materials and conclusions do not go far beyond the work of the aforementioned Japanese scholars. The present essay aims to go beyond vernacular fiction to supplement such research by drawing on the relatively ample materials relating to the prices of classical-language fiction. This focus is based primarily on two considerations: firstly, the fact that the achievements and influence of Ming-Qing classical-language fiction are worthy of interest in their own right; and secondly, while the pricing of classical-language fiction was rather complex, the fact that most printed editions of such works included fixed prices can also be used to reconsider the pricing of vernacular fiction. This essay investigates Ming-Qing fiction pricing in both the period prior to the late Qing [late 19th century], relying primarily on traditional print technologies, and in the late Qing, when modern Western print technologies and traditional technologies were both in use. Furthermore, it will

attempt to explore elements with a direct bearing on fiction prices, and from this expose the novel's status as a particular kind of commercial product, the circulative processes of which are limited by non-literary elements.

Traces of the Evolution of Fiction Prices

1. Book Prices Prior to the Late Qing

In its examination of the book prices of this era, this essay will focus on the period from the mid-Ming onward. This is because the development of print industry before this period was relatively gradual and limited in extent, with woodblock-print workshops limited to government offices and the traditional centers of engraving. At that time the only editions from the Huaiwang Offices and Jianning Book Publishers which were widely available in the market were titles such as the *Four Books*, *Five Classics*, *Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Governance*, and philosophical works; though other books were engraved, only antiquarians were able to maintain collections. In such a situation, with the uniformity of genres on offer, and the rarity of fiction, it can readily be imagined that the prices for such works were high. This can be seen in a note in the florilegium of Qian Xiyan (1573-1620): "On a southern tour of the Emperor Wuzong, one evening he suddenly commanded the acquisition of a rare edition of the *Tale of the Jin's Uniting of the Tang*, and his steward had to pay a heavy price for it, of fifty taels of gold." (Sun) The record of the "Jin's Uniting of the Tang" in the *Minor Affairs of Jinling* of Zhou Hui (fl. late 16th-17th c.) corroborates this account. With prices so high, it is clear that book buying was not a casual leisure pursuit even for high officials, let alone the average scholar. At the time, the monthly salary for a class-one civil servant was fifty-four taels, eight mace, and one candareen, with an additional allowance of 4,263 bronze farthings, for a total of sixty taels, nine mace of silver, so such a book purchase would have been relatively extravagant. Of course, this is only a single example, and there remains the possibility

that the steward spent freely in order to please Wuzong, or that he inflated his receipts. But the limited circulation of books, and especially of woodblock-engraved fiction, was a reality.

But starting in the mid-Ming, the fashion for engraving books by individuals or local publishers slowly took hold, eventually replacing government offices as the center of the print industry. The *Various Notes from the Bean Garden* (juan 10) of Lu Rong (1436-1494) records: “In the Xuande and Zhengtong periods [1426-1449], book printing was still not widespread; but now those printing books are growing in number daily, so that all over the world the appearance of writing is increasingly more grand than before. However, modern scholars are dissolute in their habits, and those canonical books which can be printed for the benefit of students are few, and those books which are printed are without benefit, which one finds detestable.” Tastes had changed, with bookshops commonly printing fiction and miscellaneous books. Ye Sheng (1420-1474), in his *Eastwater Journals*, says, “Nowadays booksellers circulate fake versions of novels, by those looking to make easy profits; there are southern favorites such as Han Guangwu, Cai Yong, and Yang Wenchang, and northern favorites such as Ji Daxian. Peasants, laborers, and tradesmen buy copies of illustrations, and even some poor households have them...there are many fiction printings by local publishers, but few good editions.”

What kind of influence did this sort of situation exert on book prices? For clarity’s sake, first consider the cost of books in the Jiaqing (1522-1566) and Wanli (1573-1620) periods, when compared against civil service salaries and the price of rice, in the chart below:

Table 1

Book Prices	Civil Service Official Salaries				
Mid-16 th century, books bought by	Civil	servant	silver	Monthly	Taels per stone-weight

Japanese in Suzhou, Ningbo, etc.	yearly	rice	silver	Jiajing period average 0.584
<i>Jade Dewes in the Crane Forest</i> , 4 vols., 2 silver mace	allowance (stone-weight)			
	Hanlin	58.5	4.9	
<i>Comprehensive Examination of Literary Sources</i> , 9 mace	Academy Editor (seventh grade)			
	90			
	Hanlin	54.6	4.6	
	Academy Copyeditor (sub-seventh grade) 84			
	National University	50.7	4.2	
	Tutor, Five Classics Scholar (Eighth grade)			
	78			
<i>Compendium of Herbal Remedies</i> , 10 vols., 4 taels 9 mace	Hanlin academy	46.8	3.9	
	archivist,			
<i>Amazing Reagents and Sound Prescriptions</i> 7 mace	National university scholar, teaching			

	assistant (sub-			
	eighth level) 72			
	Hanlin academy	42.9	3.6	
	library			
	technician,			
	compositor,			
	National			
	university			
	advisor (ninth			
	grade) 66			
Wanli period		39	3.3	Wanli period average 0.638
		23.4	1.95	
Jinchang Shuzaiyang edition,				
<i>Romance of the Investiture of the</i>				
<i>Gods</i> , 2 taels				
Jinchang Longshaoshan edition,				
<i>Tales of the Spring and Autumn</i>				
<i>Kingdoms</i> , 1 tael				
<i>Notes of the Lunar Dew</i> , 8 mace				

The book prices and official salaries in this chart demonstrate that there was a sharp reduction in book prices as compared with the early Ming period, so that a National University scholar, advisor, and registrar already had sufficient income to purchase a copy of the *Romance of the Investiture of the Gods*, and even the non-career positions of Hanlin Academy copyists and footmen had adequate purchasing

power. At the same time, taking into account the number of *juan* (fascicles) in each work, the price of vernacular novels is not higher than those of other books. Although to a certain degree booksellers might raise the price of novels popular with readers, for the most part fixed prices were determined by the cost of production, including the cost of woodblocks, paper, engravers' labor, and the total expenses involved in printing and binding.

From the beginning of the Qing dynasty right until the beginning of the Guangxu period [1875-1908], the price of novels maintained the same position it had had since the mid-Ming. The *Correspondence of the Yan Family*, held in the Shanghai Library, records a missive sent by Li Yu (1611-1679) in the early Qing to a friend on the occasion of his moving house:

My packing for the barge is done, and I will be returning south any day now; but I still have many leftover cheap editions, and as the roads are difficult and I can't bring them along, please sell them for me. Or if you want to read them yourself, or give them away, anything is fine with me. For the very cheapest I don't need to say anything, just get what you can, selling them by the volume, maybe five cents each, or one mace per complete set. The southern books are the thickest; compared to what the bookshops sell [around here], one volume there is worth three here, and then also there is a difference in the quality of the binding—they can't be compared. If you can't use them then no matter, but if you can then make a distinction.

From the phrase, "compared to what the bookshops sell [around here], one volume there is worth three here", in the average bookstore one book would sell for 1 mace 15 candareens. At the end of this letter Li Yu appends a list of books for sale, including the novels *The Twelve Towers* and *The Continuous Wall*, each in six volumes: the fixed price for Li Yu is 3 mace, and hence the books had a theoretical market value of 9 mace each, roughly comparable with the Jiajing and Wanli periods. At the time of the

Emperor Qianlong (1736-1795) a copy of *Dream of the Red Chamber* had a price of roughly 2 taels of silver, also approximately the same as the price of books in the mid-Ming.

As for the price of classical-language novels in the early Qing, there are very detailed records in Mao Yi's *Bibliography of Special Collections at Jigu Pavilion*. This bibliography was compiled as a bill of sale when Mao Yi, in straitened circumstances, was forced to sell off his father Mao Jin's rare book collection to Ji Zhenyi (1630-?) and hence lists the price of each individual book. The lists of "Novelists" and "Ming Novelists" are excerpted in the table below:

Table 2

General Fiction	Fiction by Ming Authors
<i>Fine Discourses from the Jade Hall</i> , 2 vols.	<i>A Mite's Collection</i> , 8 vols
6 mace	2 taels, 4 mace
<i>Weird Records of Guang Zhuo</i> , 3 vols.	<i>Records of the Beside-the-Autumn Pavilion</i> , 1 vol
1 tael, 5 mace	2 mace
<i>Leftover Discourse from the Fields</i> , 1 vol.	<i>Records of Jinglin</i> , 1 vol.
4 mace	2 mace
<i>Additional Speech from the Wilds of Qidong</i> , 1 vol. 2	<i>Elite Cavalry Collection in Six Juan</i> , 3 vols.
mace	1 tael
<i>Collected Old Scholarly Debates from the Shu Study</i> ,	<i>Things Seen and Heard at the Yin Study</i> , 1 vol.
<i>in four juan</i> , 1 vol.	2 mace
3 mace	
<i>Records from the Collected Jade Hall</i> , in 11 juan, 3	<i>Notes on the Move Westward</i> , 1 vol.
vols.	2 mace

9 mace

The Discourse-Garden of Kong Pingzhong, in six juan *Speech from the Precincts of Western Wu, 1 vol.*

6 mace

North Window Naggings

2 mace

Records of the Weird from the High Hills, 1 vol.

5 mace

Ancient and Modern Notes, in 2 juan, 1 vol.

3 mace

Leisurely Notes from the Green Stream, 1 vol.

3 mace

One Juan of Additions to the 'Record of Genuflecting *Brush-Tokens, in Two Juan, 1 vol.*

to the Gods, in Six Juan', 2 vols.

3 mace

6 mace

Leftover Words of Luancheng County, 1 vol.

1 mace

The prices of Mao Yi's books ran to 5 mace per volume at the upper limit, with an average of 3 mace, somewhat higher than the market price; this is related to the high quality of the editions, but is still not far off the prevailing book prices of the Wanli period.

After the Jiajing period, pocket editions became popular, especially in fiction. Volume six of the *Miscellaneous Notes from the Cold Hut* by Lu Yitian (1802-1866) has a note which reads, "Pocket editions began in the Song dynasty (see Dai Zhi's "The Pretender") and recently the booksellers have been printing ever more of them, with many mistaken characters." These pocket editions were narrow, printed on inferior paper, and carelessly edited, so their price was also inexpensive

The readers of classical-language novels were primarily literati, but the extant data on book prices can be extrapolated to readers of vernacular fiction. Fan Jianguo's "Readership and Methods of

Dissemination of Ming-Qing Fiction” points out that relatively high sale prices limited the number and status of purchasers of vernacular fiction, who were primarily merchants, minor officials, and their apprentices, as well as intellectuals of a certain economic status. What Fan calls “relatively high” is of course in relation to incomes and commodity prices, and the official salaries listed in table 1 are the primary parameters used to measure readers’ purchasing power. But it is important to point out that these numbers were fixed in 1640, so that Ming officials’ actual incomes would have been higher than this. As times changed, so did civil service salaries, and officials had other sources of income as well. Official Qing salaries were set rather low, but officials often boosted their incomes through graft, as governance was extremely corrupt—hence the so-called “three-years-pure prefectural magistrate, with 100,000 silver snowflakes.” Hence in measuring purchasing power actual incomes should be the starting point. It is worth carefully considering the relationship between purchasing power and readers’ levels. Though officials and the literati could afford to buy novels, under the restriction of conceptions of literary value and other elements, how many people would actually have been *buying*, as opposed to borrowing, copying, or renting novels? Beyond this, further sections of the population, such as actors or courtesans, ought also to be considered in the scope of urban residents with considerable disposable income, perhaps with vulgar literary tastes, but with deep interest in vernacular arts. Even middle-income urban residents may have been occasional purchasers of novels in limited quantities. Such questions await further exploration and discussion.

2. Late Qing Book Prices.

From the mid-nineteenth century onward, the price of books was universally lower when compared with previous periods, and this greatly promoted the dissemination of novels.

This was first and foremost the result of the introduction of modern Western printing techniques, especially lithography, which resulted in a massive fall in book prices. Almost all the newly established

newspaper houses and publishers of the period brought out catalogs with prices listed, reflecting the massive impact Western printing techniques had on book prices. The *Shanghai Report Co. Catalog*, compiled by Ernest Major [the British founder and publisher of the *Shanghai Report*], was one of China's earliest subscription catalogs, consisting of all the new letterpress publications put out by the Shanghai Report Company before the Dragon Boat festival of 1877. This catalog was brought out entirely for marketing purposes and showed little influence of traditional literary values: it ignored the traditional fourfold categorization of contemporary official publishers and traditional bibliographies. Instead, the catalog was divided into sections on "Amazing Tales" and "Chapter Novels," both with extremely economical prices.

In the late nineteenth century, the official publishers of each province expanded in line with this newfound purchasing power, offering books mostly at low prices, demonstrating the Qing government's plans to resume cultural development in the wake of the Taiping Rebellion. In 1878, the capital region government issued an order: "Use capital region books to solicit funds with which to purchase the official printings of the governments of all the southern provinces, and have them transported here, for the benefit of local scholars." The *Jiangnan Publishers' Catalog* of 1890 states, "Jiangnan originally established a publishing house for the benefit of scholars, and this cannot be compared with those seeking a livelihood in market stalls, so that if one compares our house's paper and prices to those of the bookshops, they are both exquisite and inexpensive." In 1893, the cabinet secretary Yun Bingsun and others requested "an approved reduction in book prices, for the benefit of scholars." The chief administrators of Nanjing and other places in Jiangnan discussed the issue, and declared, "All books upon completion shall base prices upon the cost of production calculated by number of pages required, until the end of the print run.....". Government publishers made considerable efforts to lower the price of books.

Taking the *Shanghai Report Catalog* (1877) and the Hubei Government Publishers' catalog (1881) as examples, the following table lists the prices of all the novels on offer.

Table 3 *Shanghai Report Catalog*

Book Title	Set Price	Price in Traditional Currency
<i>Notes at Snowprint Balustrade, 4 juan</i>	4 vols., 20 cents	1 mace, 5 candareens
<i>Notes from the Studio of Ordinary Leisure, 8 juan</i>	4 vols., 25 cents	1 mace, 8 candareens
<i>Advice from a Grotto, 12 juan</i>	4 vols., 40 cents	2 mace, 9 candareens
<i>Talks from the Travelers' Windows, the Authorized Continuation, 16 juan</i>	8 vols., 40 cents	2 mace, 9 candareens
<i>Odd Grasses from the Glowworm Window, 4 juan</i>	4 vols., 20 cents	1 mace, 5 candareens
<i>Shadow Talks, 2 juan</i>	2 vols., 15 cents	1 mace, 1 candareen
<i>Jottings From Across the World, 20 juan</i>	8 vols., 40 cents	2 mace, 9 candareens
<i>Continued Tales of the Odd, 8 juan</i>	8 vols., 35 cents	2 mace, 6 candareens
<i>Record of the Insects' Chirps, 2 juan</i>	2 vols., 15 cents	1 mace, 1 candareen
<i>The Scholars, 56 juan</i>	8 vols., 50 cents	3 mace, 7 candareens
<i>Dream of the Red Chambers, Supplemented, 48 juan</i>	10 vols., 50 cents	3 mace, 7 candareens
<i>Later Water Margin</i>	10 vols., 50 cents	3 mace, 7 candareens

<i>Journey to the West</i> , 2 vols., 20 cents	1 mace, 5 candareens
<i>Supplemented</i> , 16 juan	
<i>Happy Heart Collections 1-3</i> , 32 vols., 50 cents	3 mace, 7 candareens
<i>juan</i>	
<i>Chats at Dusk and Dawn</i> , 3 juan	2 mace, 9 candareens

Table 4 Hubei Government Publishers' catalog

Title	Set Price	
<i>Garden of Discourses</i>	4 vols. Zhulian	360¢ 5 mace 3 candareens
	edition	
	Guandui	324¢ 4 mace 8 candareens
	edition	
<i>Recollected Records</i>	1 vol. Zhulian	123¢ 1 mace 8 candareens
	edition	
	Guandui	117¢ 1 mace 7 candareens
	edition	
<i>Classic of Divine Strangeness/Record of All the Lands/Record of the Cave's Dark</i>	All in 1 Zhulian	101¢ 1 mace 5 candareens
	vol. edition	
	Guandui	91¢ 1 mace 4 candareens
	edition	
<i>Tale of Mutianzi/Record of the Search for the Gods</i>	2 vols. Zhulian	203¢ 3 mace
	edition	
	Guandui	183¢ 2 mace 7 candareens
	edition	
<i>Later Search for the Gods</i>	1 vol Zhulian	64¢ 9.5 candareens

		edition			
		Guandui	54¢		8 candareens
		edition			
<i>Record of Many Things</i>	1 vol.	Zhulian	81¢		1 mace 2 candareens
		edition			
		Guandui	72¢		1 mace
		edition			
<i>Record of Many Things, Continued</i>	1 vol.	Zhulian	88¢		1 mace 3 candareens
		edition			
		Guandui	81¢		1 mace 2 candareens
		edition			
<i>Record of Odd Narratives</i>	1 vol.	Zhulian	54¢		8 candareens
		edition			
		Guandui	36¢		5 candareens
		edition			
<i>Master of Holding Simplicity</i>	4 vols.	Zhulian	480¢		7 mace 1 candareen
		edition			
		Guandui	360¢		5 mace 3 candareens
		edition			
<i>Lives of Noble Knights</i>	1 vol.	Zhulian	66¢		9.8 candareens
		edition			
		Guandui	58¢		8.6 candareens
		edition			
<i>Lives of Ancient Women</i>	4 vols.	Zhulian	225¢		3 mace 3 candareens
		edition			

		Guandui	199¢	3 mace
		edition		
<i>Mixed Scraps from Youyang</i>	4 vols.	Zhulian	273¢	4 mace
		edition		
		Guandui	242¢	3 mace 6 candareens
		edition		
<i>Mixed Scraps from Youyang,</i>	2 vols.	Zhulian	139¢	2 mace
<i>Continued</i>		edition		
		Guandui	125¢	1 mace 9 candareens
		edition		
<i>Mixed Scraps from Youyang,</i>	2 vols.	Zhulian	139¢	2 mace
<i>Continued</i>		edition		
		Guandui	125¢	1 mace 9 candareens
		edition		
<i>New Tales of the Age</i>	4 vols.	Zhulian	361¢	5 mace 4 candareens
		edition		
		Guandui	324¢	4 mace 8 candareens
		edition		

From the above prices it is possible to see that the average book price from a government publisher was one mace per volume, a decline from the early Qing. Book prices from the Shanghai Report Company were even more inexpensive, averaging half of the former, at five cents per volume. At the same time, after comparing the two catalogs, it is apparent that the government publisher is more expensive than the newly established publishing house, for two reasons. First, the government publishers primarily used traditional woodblock printing techniques, while using movable type for a

smaller portion of the books. The latter used more lithography and letterpress printing, revealing a technical advantage. Secondly, the government publishers set their prices in copper coinage. Just as in the early Qing, from 1871 onwards, the relation between silver and copper coinage was such that copper was expensive, and silver devalued. With the fall of silver and inflation in bronze prices, the number of copper coins which could be gotten in exchange for silver taels gradually fell. In 1872, one tael of silver was equal to 1,856 copper farthings; by 1890 this had fallen to 1,473 farthings, and by 1905 1,089 farthings. The government publishers “sold books exclusively in copper currency, but with the exorbitant value of the copper coin, the book prices were naturally objectionably high.”

This period saw instability in book prices. The *Complete Catalog of the Capital Region Government Publishers* of 1903 notes, “Among the booksellers of Shanghai, there is occasional inflation and deflation in book prices.” Hence some government booksellers which did not print their own books but acted as retailers found it necessary to adjust prices. Compare the *Shanghai Report Company Catalog* of 1878 with the *Catalog of Prosperity Book Hall* of 1894:

Table 5

Title	<i>Shanghai Report Company Catalog</i> Price	<i>Catalog of Prosperity Book Hall</i> Price
<i>Notes at Snowprint Balustrade</i>	20 cents	50 cents
<i>Odd Grasses from the Glowworm Window</i>	20 cents	40 cents
<i>Talks from the Travelers' Windows</i>	40 cents	70 cents
<i>Later Water Margin</i>	50 cents	1 yuan, 20 cents
<i>Dream of the Red Chambers, Supplemented</i>	50 cents	80 cents
<i>The Scholars</i>	50 cents	1 yuan, 40 cents

These are the same books, in similar pulp editions, but the prices are higher from the government bookseller. In this period, the price of rice was also on the rise. In 1878, a stone's-weight of rice cost 2,991 farthings; by 1894 it cost 3,449 farthings. This reflects the fact that books were commodities whose price at any given period could rise and fall in tandem with other commodity prices.

The relatively low cost of books in the late Qing can also be compared with incomes at different class levels. In Shanghai, the prevailing wage for a male garment worker was 25 cents daily, 22 cents for a female worker. Masons' and carpenters' wages were 40 cents per day, while a skilled boatwright's wages were 60 to 85 cents per day. In the late Qing, a class of journeymen printers in the south had a monthly wage of 10 silver dollars. (Zhang 757) The price of a book was roughly equal to one or two days' wages for a low-level worker: urban residents of slightly higher incomes, such as literati and officials, could afford to buy books. Wang Tao's draft *Covered Garden Diaries* noted his yearly pay, including "instructional fees at Shizhai, 480 dollars, instructional fees at Gezhi institute 200 dollars, sinecure at the Merchants' Hall, 80 dollars," while the late Qing Tongwen Press reprint of the palace edition of the *Complete Twenty-Four Dynastic Histories* was only 100 dollars. Wu Yinsun (born early to mid-19th century), born into an impoverished family, loved to read but was deterred by the high cost of books; after attaining officialdom he became an avid collector. He received an appointment in 1883; by 1893 he was in a position to compile the *Catalog of Prosperity Book Hall*. This catalog records the contents of 487 boxes of books, totaling 8,529 works in 247,000 fascicles. After thirty years of labor, Hu Yinglin [1551-1602] had not managed to collect 200,000 fascicles, but Mr. Wu was able to do so in only ten years; and though he was not in the market for rare printings of Song or Yuan editions, his experience nonetheless reflects the low prices of book prices at that period.

A Ying's *Catalog of Late Qing Drama and Fiction* lists 1,145 novels published in the period 1898-1911, a number greater than the total of all novels published in the preceding 250 years. Examples such as *Flowers on the Sea of Sin*, "whose influence at the time was so great, that in only a year or two it had

reached fifteen printings, and sold over 50,000 copies,” (Ouyang 25) indicate the flourishing condition of the fiction market. According to the statistics in Xu Nianci’s *Tables of Fiction Works Published in 1907*, “Ninety percent [of new fiction purchasers] had been trained in classical learning but were turning to modern theories... ninety percent came from the average class of people.” Incorporating urban residents’ reading interests and readers of traditional novels into the scope of such statistics, the proportion of urban readers ought to be somewhat higher. At the same time, owing to the revolution in the world of fiction, the literary status of fiction was on the rise, moving from the margins of the literary system to its center: vernacular and classical language fiction were both becoming unprecedentedly rich in content as well as form, and relatively low prices made literati even more enthusiastic in their purchases. The *Catalog of Prosperity Book Hall* shows that Wu Yinsun bought and collected most novels in circulation at the time. Other public and private catalogs of the period likewise reflect that the literati no longer felt obliged to conceal an interest in fiction following the change in literary conceptions, so that their purchases and reading of novels greatly surpassed in number those of earlier readers.

2. Examination of Several Factors Influencing Fiction Prices

Books are commodities, so that in theory book prices ought to move roughly in concert with other goods on the market, reflecting the purchasing power of the currency at any given time. But in fact this does not hold completely true. In the Qing dynasty, from the mid-seventeenth to the late nineteenth century, inflation caused the price of rice to rise fivefold, moving in the opposite direction to book prices. This is due to many factors influencing book prices, several of which have no direct relationship with currency fluctuations.

i. Editions and Book Prices

Ming dynasty author Hu Yinglin (1551-1602) offered a detailed theory on standards for the price of books:

The entire difference in the value of books can be seen from the edition, the engraving, the paper, the binding, the printing, the speed of production, and the availability. In the edition one must look at the copying and engraving, in the copying one must look at the error-correction, in the engraving one must look at the fineness or coarseness, in the paper one must look at the beauty or ugliness, in the binding one must look at its sturdiness or slipshodness, in the printing one must look at the completeness of the impression, in the speed of production one must look at the time it took. And then one must also look at the book's usefulness, the era from which it came, and its place. Taking all of these into consideration, one can set the value of any book on earth.

These seven aspects of value are fairly universal principles in the setting of book prices. Of the inexpensive old standbys of Buddhist classics, Ming author Lang Ying (1487-1566) said, "As I have served at Taiping for many years, more and more old books have come out, and this is a fortunate thing—I only regret the awfulness of the Fujian bookshops. In the whole province they only consider the profit of the goods, so that whenever they find some expensive edition from another province, they republish it, keeping the table of contents the same, but excising a great deal from each chapter, so that no-one would ever know of the absence. So they sell an inferior product for half the price, and people rush to buy it." The marketing of Fujianese editions was apparently based solely on price. In order to lower the price, booksellers often used thin cardboard and cheap printing materials—a practice frequently commented on by people of the Ming and Qing and noted by contemporary scholars such as Zhang Xiumin, Yang Shengxin, Fan Jixing, and others.

As for fiction, details of the relationship between the classical-language novel and edition prices is revealed in two aspects: first, because they were early productions, prices of classical-language novels are related to the problems with Song and Yuan editions; second, because classical-language novels primarily circulated in hand-copied editions, there are vast disparities in price standards with common engraved editions. As to these price standards, Mao Yi's *Bibliography of Special Collections at Jigu Pavilion* says:

With hand-copied editions, one must look at the craftsmanship of the characters, the nobility of the brushwork, the thickness of the volume, and the obscurity of the book, and only then set a price. As to Song and Yuan dynasty print editions, one must look at the craftsmanship of the printing, the fineness of the paper, the completeness of the impression, and the obscurity of the book—one cannot treat them all the same. Thus one has the differences between the extremely dear and the extremely cheap. (Huang, "Courteous Home")

Starting from the Ming dynasty, Song and Yuan dynasty print editions began to receive careful attention, and by the Qing, acclamations of the Song grew more and more intense, so that from the Ming to the Qing their prices were constantly on the rise. At the end of the Ming, Mao Jin's (1599-1659) *Jigu Pavilion* contained many Song editions, as well as books from the Jin and Yuan dynasties: he did not stick at buying books at high prices, posting an advertisement outside his door, saying, "Those who inquire with Song print editions, will be recompensed by the owner at 200 per page. Those who inquire with old copied editions, at 40 per page. Those who inquire with editions currently rare, will be recompensed 1,200 for those for which others pay 1,000." (Luo 342-3) At these prices, a Song edition of a hundred-page book would be valued at twenty taels of silver, and an old copied edition at four taels – at least ten times the average book price of the period. At the beginning of the Qing, Mao Jin's son Mao Yi sold these books to Li Zhenyi and edited the *Bibliography of Special Collections at Jigu Pavilion*. To make the Song

and Yuan print editions more prominent, before the titles Mao added the era of publication or information on the copyist of the Song work:

Table 6

Title	Edition	Price
<i>Silent Record</i> , 1 vol.	Linen paper hand-copied from Song edition	8 mace
<i>Tales of the Age, Continued</i> , 10 vols.	Linen paper hand-copied from Song edition	6 taels
<i>Song-Edition Notes from Jieyin</i> , 1 vol.	(unspecified)	1 tael 2 mace
<i>Northern Household Records</i> , in 3 juan, 1 vol.	Hand-copied from a Song edition	6 mace
<i>Story of the Lonesome Cart</i>	Hand-copied from a Song edition by Liu Anyu	8 mace
<i>Song-Edition Three Brushes of the Containing Study, Partial Edition from Juan 7 to Juan 16</i> , 4 vols.	(unspecified)	1 tael 6 mace
<i>Various Records of the Pure Waves</i> , in 12 juan, with <i>Excursuses in 3 juan</i> , 4 vols.	Traced from a Song edition	2 taels 4 mace
<i>Print Errors of Li Fu</i> , 1 vol.	Traced from a Song edition	5 mace
<i>Yun Lu Copies</i> , in 15 juan, 6 vols.	Line-traced from a Song edition	3 taels 6 mace
<i>Records of Shi Tui</i> , in 10 juan, 2 vols.	Collected Books Hall edition, hand-copied from Song edition	1 tael
<i>Northern Song Edition of Record</i>	Has a postface different from the	4 taels

of Many Things, in 10 juan, 2 vols. Southern Song edition,
connected to the large-print
Sichuan edition, a really amazing
object

Records of Can-Change Study, 16 vols. This book is hand-copied from 8 taels
the Song “inner pavilion” edition

Records of the Conversation of “Drunkard” Ouyang Xiu Exquisitely hand-traced from a 1 tael 2 mace
Song edition

The above table shows that the price of hand-copied editions is higher than that of print editions and the price of Song and Yuan editions is higher than that of hand-copied editions. In this list, set prices for printed editions and average hand-copied editions are three mace, those traced from Song editions range from five to eight mace, the Song-edition *Notes from Jieyin* one tael and two mace, and the Song-edition *Record of Many Things* as high as four taels. The list includes several copies of rare works and some hand-copied by famous writers, all higher in price than the average copied book. For example:

More Overheard by an Old Man, in 10 juan, 1 vol. Old, hand-copied, unavailable anywhere else 8
mace

Reflections from a Hand-Mirror, in 8 juan, 2 vols. Unavailable anywhere else 1 tael 6 mace

Records of the Wild, 1 vol. Old, hand-copied, seller claimed that it was the personal handwriting of
Zhishan, was asking 6 taels of gold, bought it for half-price 2 taels

It must be noted that the prices set by Mao Yi are on the low side for the period, as he was forced by his straitened circumstances to sell at a discount: “As for these exquisitely copied volumes, each was purchased for over four taels. But now I do not dare ask so much—as they say, ‘the tailor’s fee is not

worth the cost of the satin.' How could we have known then that this day would come!" By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, prices had risen still more. Huang Pilie (1763-1825), a great collector and cataloger of the period, was particularly fond of Song editions, calling himself "Master Discriminator of the Song." His notes to the prefatory matter in his catalogs give some indication of prices:

Volume 20 of Song-edition *Garden of Fiction*: gotten in exchange for 30 gold

Fiction collection *Tales of the Kaiyuan and Tianbao Periods*, from the study of Mr. Gu: acquired by a literary friend for three gold coins.

Old copied edition of *Records of the Millet God* in six fascicles, and the *Supplements* in two fascicles, traded for five stars of white gold, from literary friend Mr. Yu

Old copied edition of *Master of Grasping Simplicity*, 20 fascicles of inner chapters and 20 fascicles of outer chapters, gotten for three bucks in gold (Huang, "Courteous Home Preface")

Copied edition of *Traveler's Remarks from the Thatched Pavilion*, gotten for 50 in gold, then later sold for 18 taels of white gold (Huang, "Additional")

Prices had clearly risen since the beginning of the Qing.

By the end of the Qing, prices for Song and Yuan editions had further risen a hundredfold, preventing purchase by all but the most wealthy. In his *Preface to the "Bibliography of Song Edition Origins"* Ye Dehui (1864-1927) wrote:

[Huang Pilie] began collecting Song editions with the *Record of Rites, Dai De Edition*, and in his afterword noted the date as November 1792, when he would have been thirty. In 1805, when his *Ode on the Hundred Song Books in One Storefront* was published, he was already forty-four. So in twenty years he had acquired almost 200 Song editions, and at that time of multi-generational peace in the country, wealthy merchants and great households of the Suzhou region, such as Wang Langyuan, Yuan Youkai, and Zhou

Xiangyan all joined the fad for collecting Song editions. Thus at that time the more expensive books were valued at over 100 gold taels, and the cheaper ones at just a few taels, but collectors would read them, and readers would collect them—they weren't just antiques for playing with. But now elite playboys sell them to each other, and happy-go-lucky nobles compete in wasting their money to collect them, making a vassal of actual refinement. The value of a single book reaches several thousand in gold, so that if Huang, Wang, Yuan, or Zhou were alive today, they too would have to stand far off and "sigh at the sea."

This reflects the universal esteem in which Qing readers held Song editions, causing them to rise constantly in value, revealing the significance of the edition as an essential element in book price. Wu Yinsun's *Catalogue of Books Held at Measuring-the-Sea Tower* makes a similar complaint: "The miraculous editions and lost volumes of the Song and Yuan, and earlier, are world treasures; they are sought for at elevated prices, as anything one could find would be rare, so that from the Ming onward the exquisitely printed and finely engraved, even the government publications of every last court are difficult to buy at amazingly high prices." In sum, with Song and Yuan edition price levels rising daily, and the prices for copied editions hardly low, they were for the most part becoming objects of amusement rather than being valued as actual reading material, and the scope of their circulation grew more and more restricted.

Before the late Qing, vernacular fiction primarily circulated in woodblock-print editions, and the principles behind their pricing echoed the seven factors mentioned by Hu Yinglin, with the choice of printing materials and the fineness or coarseness of the engraving and binding being the most essential elements. The "Ideas on Discriminating Among Novels" in fascicle seven of Li Guijing's (1788-?) *Drafts of Collected Arguments on Misprints from Across the World*, record that in 1755, the assistant commandant of Yongcheng, Shen Sui, sent his chief messenger, Li Chen, to purchase a copy of the *Plum in the Golden*

Vase, Continued, one volume of which cost one silver tael: the twenty volume set, at 20 taels, far exceeded the average cost of a book during the period. The reason for this was that the 1661 first print edition was of exquisite workmanship, with calligraphy by Hu Nianyi and carving by Huang Shunjie and Li Xiaoxian, all famous craftsmen. At the same time, hand-copying had always been an important method of transmission for novels. Before print editions were in general distribution, the copies were considered prize editions, and their prices were considerable. For a time after its publication, *Dream of the Red Chamber* circulated only in copied editions, and its enthusiastic reception made it difficult to get hold of. “Whenever an enthusiast made a copy, if it were put on sale in the market, the price would go as high as several dozen gold taels.” (Cheng) Later, however, as more and more printed copies became available, the price tumbled to under two taels. This is exactly what Hu Yinglin meant by the “speed of production, and the availability.” Chen Sen, author of *Treasure-Mirror for the Ranking of Flowers*, brought a copy of his book with him in travels across Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces, and everywhere received a warm welcome from officials and literati. *Notes from Naluoyan* records: “In the middle years of the nineteenth century, before *Treasure-Mirror for the Ranking of Flowers* was published, Chen Sen took a copy of his book, and with letters of introduction from the great elders of the capital, traveled around among the officials of Jiangsu and Zhejiang, stopping at each place for ten days. When he had finished giving a reading, he moved on. Every place he went, he was given at least twenty in gold, not counting expenses. When Banlong was young, he went with his father who took up responsibility for grain routes in Zhejiang; Chen arrived, and stayed for ten days, and they gave him twenty-four in gold, but he still worried that this was ungenerous treatment of him.” (quoted in Jiang 244)

Most literati would pay close attention to the quality of an edition when buying or collecting books, but at the height of the Ming-Qing fad for book-collecting, collectors placed even more emphasis upon this factor. Hence there was the closest of relations between editions and book prices, causing concomitant effects for many readers.

2. Movable type and lithography

The invention of movable type was a great revolution in the history of printing. Because each printing no longer required the re-carving of board after board, not only did it increase efficiency and save on labor, it also raised the speed of production for books, and greatly lowered the cost of books. Wooden movable type was most prevalent. Wooden typesets were carved from pear wood, date wood, elm or willow. In his 1777 memorial to the throne, *Processes for the Imperial Edition of the Collected Treasures of Wuying Palace*, Jin Jian wrote that woodblock printing “would not only use voluminous amounts of boards, but also the carving of each work would require much time...[use of] date-wood movable type would be best...the printing of each type of book would result in great savings of effort and material.” According to his calculations, the carving of a complete typeset would require over 1400 taels of silver, while for woodblock printing, the expense of carving the *Records of the Historian* alone would reach over 1450 taels: the cost of wooden movable type was clearly much cheaper. In the case of the *Romance of the Twenty-One Histories* of Lü Fu (fl. early 18th century), “before the four large illustrations had been cut, they wanted to put this book before the public, but because of the heavy labor costs were as yet unable. So it was just kept in a chest for almost thirty years.” Later this author experimented with self-publishing using a movable-type press, and “the price was extremely cheap and the workmanship excellent.” Originally this book had 685 chapters in 242 fascicles, and when the author calculated paper and other costs, “one could not make a copy for less than two gold taels.” So he “cut back much to little, keeping only twenty to thirty percent of the *Desolate History* and five to ten percent of the rest.” What now remains of this book is only forty-four chapters in 22 fascicles, or about 350,000 characters, so at a conservative estimate the original must have been five times this length: if the original cost two gold taels, then the abridged version would only have cost about four mace. Such an inexpensive price could not have been matched by woodblock printing. The price advantage of movable-type novels can also be

seen from the circulation of *Dream of the Red Chambers*. The author of the *Later Dream of the Red Chambers*, “Mr. Free Spirit” (late 18th-early 19th c.) wrote in his preface, “Cao Xueqin’s book, *Dream of the Red Chambers*, has long since been a literary delicacy, with every purchase of a hand-copied edition costing many dozen gold taels. Ever since the work was completed by Gao E, it has become so popular in a generation that almost every household possesses a copy.” Mao Qingzhen’s *Notes from the One Pavilion* records, “Just after Emperor Qianlong’s eightieth birthday jubilee, the capital edition of *Dream of the Red Chambers* was popular in Jiangsu and Zhejiang, and cost several dozen gold taels per copy. But with more reprintings by the day, the price has dropped to two taels.”

From extant publications, it appears that movable-type novels were mostly printed after the early seventeenth century. Those that survive are from the late Ming and early Qing, such as the wood-carved movable type *Cutting of Raw Silk, A Novel, With Criticism and Illustrations* by Hua Manlou, of Huang Zihe and Ye Yaohui, the 1736 clay movable-type edition of *Popular Romances of the Complete Twenty-One Histories, Handsomely Bound*, the 1791 and 1792 wooden movable-type printings of *Dream of the Red Chambers*, the wooden movable-type *Complete Appended Water Margin* of 1851, and the 1869 wooden movable-type Gathered-Jade Study edition of *The Scholars*. In a catalog appended to the eighth volume of Gathered-Treasures Hall’s 1881 *Wondrous Tales from Elysium*, sixteen novel titles were included, such as *Dream of the Red Chamber, With Annotations* by Xiu Xiangwang; *The History of the Duke of Qi; Boy and Girl Heroes, With Annotations*; *Reflected Dream of the Red Chambers*; *Tales of Loyal and Just Knights*; *Dream of the Red Chamber, Continued*; and so on.

The spread of lithography in the late Qing had an even more obvious influence on book prices, effecting a radical change in readers’ purchasing power, so that people of more class levels had the ability to access novels. Lithography is an early form of offset printing using the principle of the oil’s hydrophobia and the naturally porous surfaces of stone to create a print. During the printing, water is first used to wet the printing surface so that the intended blank surfaces will not absorb oil, and then

only the portions with text or illustration receive the oil-based inks. Starting in late 1832, a Chinese-owned lithographic print shop opened in Guangzhou, and lithographic businesses gradually grew, eventually rolling out over the country, greatly advancing the print industry.

Inexpensive prices and the ease of carrying pocket editions caused lithographic-print books to gain great favor. Small-print editions of the *Kangxi Dictionary* were sold for just one to three dollars, so that “the first printing of 40,000 was sold out in a few months; then the second printing of 60,000 was bought by every civil-service examinee traveling northward through Shanghai, each one buying five or six, both for himself and to give as gifts, so that this printing was also sold out in a few months.” (Yao 90) Wu Yinsun’s *Happiness Book Emporium* records many cheap lithographically printed novels such as *Romance of the Investiture of the Gods* in 100 fascicles for two dollars, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* in 120 fascicles, for two dollars fifty cents, *Story of the Stone* in 120 fascicles, for three dollars, *Tales of the Strange from the Leisurely Studio* in 16 fascicles, for two dollars, and *Casual Records of Evening Talks* in twelve fascicles, for fifty cents.

Because lithography was even simpler than movable type, saving the extremely irksome labor of first carving a typeset, the savings in labor and time caused a massive discount to book prices. If the invention of movable type printing was a revolutionary advance in print history, then the spread of lithography must be counted another great leap in falling book prices.

The circulation of novels is determined not only by their literary qualities, but is also controlled by the normal rules of commodity circulation. Following the rise of printing houses, and the importation of modern Western printing techniques, fiction prices in the Ming and Qing trended gradually downward, with fiction circulating more and more broadly, with the social classes of readers constantly expanding, from the special preserve of the elite few to a true mass pastime. However, Song and Yuan editions and hand-copied editions went up in price almost daily, with book-collecting becoming like any other form of antique collection, restricting their circulation. What must be pointed out is that the

purchasers and readers of books were not necessarily the same people, because there were still methods of circulation such as borrowing, copying, and renting, and vernacular-language fiction also attained great social influence through storytelling performances. The dissemination of books was not wholly determined by purchasing power, but was also related to literacy rates, levels of universal education, the literary values of readers, and so on. It cannot, however, be denied that reading through purchasing was the most direct and most common route for the circulation of Ming-Qing era fiction. Hence, a careful consideration of book prices is absolutely essential.

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