

# *Woodblock Printing and Cultural Dissemination*

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**Abstract:** Printing has played an unparalleled key role in the transmission of culture and the advancement of human civilization. The woodblock printing technology of China during the Sui and Tang periods ignited an innovation in book replication and dissemination, facilitating an enhancement in cultural production capacity and the transmission of culture. During the Song dynasty, advancements in printing technology, whether directly or indirectly, influenced global culture dissemination and the progress of civilization during its overseas transmission, marking a brilliant period in the history of ancient Chinese book publishing and distribution.

**Keywords:** Printing, Woodblock Printing, Cultural Dissemination, Civilization Development

## 1. Introduction

From a historical perspective on communication, human communication can be roughly divided into four main stages: oral transmission, transmission of written symbols, transmission of printed materials, and electronic information communication. The transition between each of these stages holds great historical significance. The invention and development of paper and printing technology constitute the foundation of human society's transition from conveying messages through text to conveying them through printing. During the Song dynasty, the book trade and circulation industry flourished rapidly. Song dynasty books not only spread within the regions of Liao, Jin, and Xia but were also transported to countries such as Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, among others. This had a profound impact on the culture and publishing industry of neighboring regions and countries [1], [2]. Therefore, this article will delve into the progress of the printing industry during the Song dynasty and analyze its unique characteristics to further elucidate the significance of woodblock printing in cultural dissemination and interactive communication during the Song dynasty.

## 2. Development and Prosperity of Printing and Publishing During the Song Dynasty

The emergence of woodblock printing during the Sui-Tang period marked a significant turning point in book distribution and the dissemination of written language in China. During the Tang dynasty, the practice of carving books began to gain traction, although manuscript books were still the prevailing form of written communication. The appearance of woodblock printing during the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period signaled a new phase in book distribution and the means of spreading written characters in China. This included official woodblock printing, private woodblock printing, and industrial woodblock printing, which interacted and mutually reinforced each other [3].

This evolution persisted, and the woodblock printing book industry gradually developed into a flourishing emerging sector.

It is evident that the prosperity of the printing industry during the Song dynasty did not happen overnight. It was the result of a gradual process that had its roots in the Sui, Tang, and Five Dynasties periods. The establishment of printing institutions, innovation in book formats, and the elevation of Confucian culture all played essential roles in building the foundation of the printing industry [4], [5]. Simultaneously, throughout this process, continuous improvements and optimizations in printing media technology received widespread recognition and extensive use by the general public and government authorities.

The stable political climate and thriving socio-economic conditions during the Song dynasty provided the necessary material foundation for the flourishing publishing industry. A unified national spirit and harmonious social ethos, combined with the "emphasis on culture over military" policy, created a society that cherished scholarship and praised written language, which undoubtedly laid a solid academic foundation for the publishing industry. Hence, the publishing industry stood out during the Song dynasty, closely intertwined with its unique social, political, economic, cultural, and academic environment. During this time, the rulers of the Song dynasty held a high regard for the publication, collection, organization, and application of books. The freedom of academic discourse and the comprehensive development of academic culture significantly boosted the vibrant prosperity of editing and publishing during the Song dynasty.

The Song dynasty's liberal literary atmosphere and the prevailing culture of academic scholarship provided favorable conditions for numerous literary talents to create exceptional works. Su Shi, a literary giant of the Northern Song dynasty, left behind numerous acclaimed works. The prosperity of poetry and cultural development led to a substantial cultural demand that propelled the development and prosperity of the printing industry. The increasing popularity of woodblock printing allowed Su Shi's works to be widely reproduced and distributed, enabling their circulation within the Song dynasty, neighboring regions, and even overseas. This further expanded and deepened the scale and influence of their dissemination. It is evident that woodblock printing played a significant role in the dissemination of Su Shi's works. As Mr. Qian Cunxun emphasized in the past, "The development of printing technology led to an increase in book production, reduced costs, standardized formats, wide-ranging influence, and the ability to be inherited by future generations, among other benefits." Therefore, it is clear that the printing industry of the Song dynasty played an immensely important role in preserving and transmitting culture, serving as a key driver of the remarkable cultural prosperity of the Song dynasty [6].

### **3. Characteristics of Printing and Publishing in the Song Dynasty**

The rulers of the Song dynasty greatly emphasized the promotion of culture and attached importance to the book industry, providing a favorable environment for the development of book compilation. The establishment of the Song dynasty marked the end of nearly two centuries of warfare and fragmentation, thus creating a conducive atmosphere for growth. The development of the printing industry received support and impetus from the government, and one of the significant achievements of book compilation during the Song dynasty was the "Zizhi Tongjian," which was overseen by Sima Guang.

A focus on the publication and dissemination of religious and Confucian classics was paramount during this period. The "Diamond Sutra" from the Tang dynasty is the earliest surviving example of woodblock printing, and the Song dynasty, while also advocating Confucianism, promoted Neo-Confucianism and Buddhism. The propagation of Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism contributed to ideological unity and political stability. Consequently, there was a significant demand for Confucian classics and religious concepts, which received high praise from the government, various

regions, and private entities. This became a primary task for all printing institutions, and considerable effort was invested by all parties in carving Confucian classics, ultimately fostering diversity and multi-faceted development in Confucian classics during the Song dynasty [7].

The system of book carving became more refined, and the geographical scope of book carving expanded. Building upon the foundation of the Tang and Five Dynasties, the Song dynasty gradually developed official carving, private carving, neighborhood carving, temple and academy carving, creating multiple centers for book carving. The content of carving extended from Confucian classics to various forms including poetry, prose, and arithmetic. Folk bookshops also produced popular literary works such as novels and poems. The rapid development of folk printing during the Song dynasty more accurately reflected market demand, leading to a flourishing of art, literature, technology, and other fields, with profound implications for future generations.

Highly acclaimed by various demands and stakeholders, the art of printing evolved rapidly to meet the extensive market requirements. It exhibited a unique ability for mass replication and printing, expanding the realm of knowledge and culture dissemination, making knowledge more accessible, and promoting widespread education and the integration of knowledge. While strengthening mainstream Confucian culture, it also fostered the prosperity of various cultural domains and facilitated the dissemination and development of cultural exchange.

#### **4. Woodblock Printing and Cultural Dissemination**

The carving and printing industry in the Song dynasty experienced a remarkable flourishing, spanning virtually across the entire nation and giving rise to numerous centers for carving and printing. These centers served as hubs for the diffusion of culture and ideas, engraving knowledge and culture onto physical mediums, carrying with them the continuous transmission and divergence of labor and wisdom. To a significant extent, this phenomenon promoted cultural exchange and dissemination within mainland China, accelerated ethnic integration, and had a reciprocal effect on political unification, contributing to national development and ethnic cohesion [8]. The institutions, notably the academies stemming from this development, undoubtedly represented an unprecedented bedrock for societal and cultural education. They played pivotal roles in China's cultural history, educational history, intellectual history, and publishing history, fostering the prosperity of ancient education. Among them, the renowned Yuelu Academy stands out as one of the world's oldest seats of learning, radiating the humanistic spirit forged through the passage of time and serving as a symbol and embodiment of cultural heritage and transmission.

Not only did texts from the Song dynasty circulate widely across different regions of China, but they also spread in significant quantities to neighboring countries, including Liao, Jin, Xia, Goryeo, Japan, and Vietnam, through both unofficial and official channels, profoundly shaping the cultures and publishing industries of these regions. This expansion was a result of both grassroots initiatives and official endorsements. While the official stance on woodblock printing was primarily geared towards promoting national prestige and showcasing state power, it also objectively demonstrated China's maturity and advancement in printing technology. It disseminated ancient Chinese culture to neighboring nations, establishing a positive national image and showcasing the deep-seated cultural heritage. The spontaneous dissemination through unofficial channels played a more substantial role, benefiting not only the economic interests of merchants but also fostering subtle cultural exchanges. The fact that people from various backgrounds were familiar with the teachings of Confucius and could recite the poetry of Su Shi is a testament to the broad reach of this dissemination. The advent of woodblock printing technology facilitated the rapid global dissemination of Chinese imagery and texts, providing an opportunity for the spiritual values of the Tang and Song dynasties to influence the world [9]. Even today, whether in London, Paris, or New York, one can encounter the presence

of Chinatowns. This evokes thoughts of the enduring legacy of Chinese culture and its transcendent power across time and space.

## 5. Conclusion

Academic discourse serves as the literary foundation for the self-renewal of communication technology, while cultural dissemination heavily relies on the means of communication. With the maturation of woodblock printing technology, a peak in cultural dissemination and cultural exchange was ushered in. The publishing and printing industry of the Song dynasty has left a brilliant chapter in the annals of Chinese history. It was a period of intellectual blossoming and competition among various schools of thought, marking the second such era in Chinese history since the Spring and Autumn period and Warring States period. It was also a significant phase in the expansion of Chinese cultural spirit and its global outreach.

Although woodblock printing is a printing technology originating from China, from a human communication perspective, it has undeniably played a significant role in advancing human civilization. This printing technology represents a cultural treasure painstakingly cultivated by the diligent efforts of ancient Chinese labor over an extended period. The birth of woodblock printing technology brought about revolutionary changes in the history of global information dissemination, a transformation that took centuries to evolve into electronic communication. Like all innovative inventions, woodblock printing was not merely a medium for the visual transmission of information; it was also a primary avenue for the dissemination of culture and ideas.

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