Introduction: The Sibao Book
Trade and Qing Society

SIBAO TOWNSHIP 四堡鄉 today is a cluster of impoverished villages in the mountains of western Fujian (Minxi 闽西).1 With too many people for the available arable land and few alternative resources, the township has, despite efforts to start rural industries, failed to benefit from the freer economic structures that have recently enriched better-endowed villages on the Fujian coast. Sibao has no valuable mineral deposits, and the hills surrounding its villages have long since been deforested. Nor does it enjoy an advantageous location. Isolated in the poorest part of the province, Sibao is not a commercial center of any importance (although Wuge 霧閣, the administrative center, is the site of a periodic market). As in the old days, many of Sibao’s able-bodied men seek jobs as sojourning laborers elsewhere, while their wives work the fields or oversee shops at home; the ambitious young are eager to move away.

Yet Sibao has not always been this poor. Throughout most of the Qing, two of its villages, Wuge and Mawu 馬屋, were sites of a flourishing publishing industry, in the form of dozens of separate household-

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based publishing houses (shufang 書坊). Founded in the late seventeenth century—the first recorded publishing house was established in 1663—and continuing throughout the last dynasty and into the Republican era, this industry supplied much of south China, through itinerant booksellers and branch bookshops managed by Sibao natives, with educational texts, household guides, medical handbooks, and fortune-telling manuals. The industry reached a peak in the Qianlong (1736–95) and Jiaqing (1796–1820) eras; then, “the extremely wealthy lined up like beads on a string as far as the eye could see.”

Although the business peaked in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it survived into the early twentieth century. The 1854 Changting xianzhi 長汀縣志 (Changting county gazetteer) notes that Sibao made “not insignificant” profits from “printing books and selling them throughout half the empire.” And the industry enjoyed a considerable revival late in the century. Yang Lan 楊瀾 (jr 1789), writing in the Daoguang era (1821–50), praised the Sibao book industry not only for the benefits it brought to literati of the empire but also for the economic support, “the stable assets,” it provided the households of the township. “Great wealth is stored up, and [the publisher-booksellers] are able to nurture their ancestral legacy of virtue—they can do no greater service to their forbears.” The industry was snuffed out by a series of blows: the development of lithographic and letterpress printing in Shanghai in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the abolition of the examination system in 1905 (which made much of Sibao’s stock

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2. I translate shufang as “publishing house,” rather than the more literal “bookshop” or “printshop.” “Bookshop” in English suggests a shop that only sells books, a printshop, a factory that only prints books. Shufang, however, were book-producing and -selling units. “Publishing house,” although not ideal, at least encompasses both the publishing and the wholesale bookselling activities of the shufang. I use “publishing house” and shufang interchangeably throughout the manuscript. When I discuss the shubian (literally, “bookstore”) that the Sibao shufang established in Fujian and the surrounding provinces, I identify these as bookshops or bookstores to emphasize that they were established primarily as outlets for the sale of Sibao texts (although some did, indeed, engage in printing and publishing).

3. FYZSZP (1947), 33.99a.

4. Changting xianzhi (1854), 31.69b.

5. Yang Lan, Linting huikao (preface dated 1878), 4.8ab. A Changting native, Yang Lan was quite familiar with the Tingzhou area; see Changting xianzhi (1993), p. 962.
irrelevant), and the political and social disorders of the early twentieth century. The last publishing house stopped printing in the late 1940s, and the last Sibao bookstore closed in the mid-1950s (although by that time its link to Sibao was tenuous). The 1940 Changting xianzhi tersely notes, “Formerly Sibao township made book [production] its primary industry. [Residents] cut, printed, edited, and distributed texts rather widely. Now lithographic and lead- [movable]-type books have become popular, and the surviving blocks have been lost.”

But from the early eighteenth through the early twentieth centuries, the Zou and Ma lineages of Sibao ran one of the largest regional publishing and bookselling operations in south China. The literary scholar Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸 (1898–1958) ranked the township with Xu-wanzhen 漢灣鎮 (in Jiangxi), Hankou, and Beijing as one of the four largest publishing centers of the Qing. Sibao booksellers established routes and outlets in as many as ten different provinces—Fujian, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Hunan, Jiangxi, Guangdong, Guangxi, Yunnan, and Guizhou (although their most important bookselling networks were in Fujian, Jiangxi, Guangdong, and Guangxi). A tattered account book, surviving from the early twentieth century, records the wholesale distribution, over the course of one year, of more than 8,000 copies of roughly 250 titles. This volume of sales by just one publishing house, at a time when the industry had passed its peak, suggests something of the magnitude of the business.

Yet Sibao remains almost unknown in the Chinese book world. Few contemporary references to Sibao publishing (outside of the Zou and Ma genealogies and celebratory articles by lineage members and Sibao residents) survive—I have summarized above almost all the brief gazetteer references to the business. Modern scholars of the Chinese book have

6. Changting xianzhi (1940), 10.21a.
9. The 1922 Fujian tongji merely reproduces Yang Lan’s brief description of the industry, cited above; see vol. 3, “Banbenzhi” 本志, 44.
paid little attention to the subject; Zhang Xiumin, in his magisterial study of Chinese publishing, *Zhongguo yinshua shi* (History of Chinese printing; 1989), devotes one sentence to Sibao—and that consists largely of a citation of Yang Lan’s brief, Daoguang-era statement about Sibao publishing. Economic historians have touched on Sibao, using the Zou and Ma publishing industry as an example of a lineage merchant (zu-shang) group tied to “traditional” social and economic practices and thus ultimately unable to transcend the limits of a “natural economy.” Only recently, after the central government’s Press and Publication Bureau (Xinwen chubanju 新聞出版局) directed provincial bureaus to compile histories of publishing, have Chinese scholars of the book developed an interest in Sibao as a publishing center; Xie Shuishun and Li Ting’s *Fujian gudai keshu* (Traditional publishing in Fujian; 1997) includes a section on the industry.

Several factors explain the virtual neglect, in both contemporaneous commentary and secondary works on Chinese printing and book culture, of this large regional publishing center. First, Sibao today, as I have indicated above, bears only scant and faint marks of its earlier prosperity—a few crumbling mansions built by wealthy publishers, some small and scattered stores of rapidly decaying woodblocks, texts, printing tools, and so forth. Distant from the major highways through the Qing and most of the twentieth century, Sibao was also difficult of access from the cities of the southeast (only new road construction now makes it possible to travel from Xiamen to Wuge in one day). Until very recently, study of the industry was limited to local historians celebrating their native place.

Sibao suffers, too, from a larger scholarly neglect—of commercial woodblock publishing concerns generally and, more particularly, of commercial publishing in the Qing. Despite the early attention of men like Thomas Carter, Paul Pelliot, Denis Twitchett, Tsuen-hsuin Tsien,

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12. Xie Shuishun and Li Ting, *Fujian gudai keshu*, pp. 453–72. See also the report on Sibao by Wu Shideng, “Qingdai Sibao keshuye diaocha baogao.”
Sören Edgren, and Jean-Pierre Drège, there has been little sustained study of Chinese publishing and book history in the West. The recent work of Ellen Widmer, Lucille Chia, and Kai-wing Chow suggests that this might change, but it will certainly be some time before we have, in Western languages, a body of work that explores this topic in depth. Chinese and Japanese scholars have compiled extensive bibliographies of works on Chinese book culture, but these generally focus on technology or the study of editions (banbenxue 版本學): for example, the invention of printing in the late Tang, the transmission of fine and rare editions (often the products of official or private literati printing) in the Song, Yuan, and Ming; and the development of modern printing techniques in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Qing commercial publishing has received little attention. Commercial woodblock publishers of the Qing produced no technological innovations that we are aware of. Nor did they, generally speaking, produce many “fine” or “rare” editions (shanben 善本) in any sense of the term. Although the criteria for the identification of a book as “fine” or “rare” vary, works of Qing date do not arouse the excitement or enjoy the value of rare books from the Song, Yuan, or even the Ming. And Qing commercial imprints, especially those produced from the beginning of


15. One exception is the recent work of Inoue Susumu, Chūgoku shuppan bunkashi—shomotsu sekai to chi no fūkei (2002); this volume surveys the relationship between the circulation of texts, both as manuscript copies and as woodblock imprints, and Chinese intellectual life and reading patterns through the Ming. For a brief overview of the scholarship on Chinese book culture, see Brokaw, “On the History of the Book in China,” pp. 3–54; and Tsien, Paper and Printing, pp. 19–23. For bibliographies of works in all languages, see Tsien, Paper and Printing, pp. 389–450, and Tsien, “Zhongguo yinshua shi jianmu.”

16. For a discussion of the different criteria that might be considered in a definition of shanben, see Mao Chunxiang, Guilin shanben changtan, pp. 3–7.
the nineteenth century on, are often dismissed as specimens of declining skill and artistry in block cutting. For Tsien, the great achievements of Qing printing are the works produced by the Imperial Printing Office in the Wuying Palace 武英殿 and individual bibliophile-publishers. Generally, however, he comments that “the printing industry . . . degenerated in quality if not in quantity in both official and private sectors.”

It is certainly not surprising that scholars have preferred to focus on the high points of Chinese publishing and book culture. This preference, however, has led them to neglect technologically and aesthetically less remarkable, but still important, imprints and their producers. And it has encouraged a somewhat narrow focus on the publication and circulation of texts for the elites of late imperial China.

Why do Sibao imprints deserve notice? Even by the modest standards of commercial publishers in the mid- and late Qing, Sibao texts are not of compelling interest. Most surviving Sibao imprints are not particularly well produced; they tend to small formats and cheap paper, and—at least according to one nineteenth-century critic—a profusion of errors. And the Zou and Ma publishers, concerned first and foremost with profitability, wisely chose to publish “best-selling” texts of assured popularity rather than interestingly esoteric works of scholarship or literature. In short, Sibao imprints, being neither “rare” works nor fine examples of the block cutter’s art, are unlikely to attract the attention of either book collectors and bibliophiles or modern book scholars.

But it is precisely the ordinariness of the Zou and Ma operations’ booklists and the shabbiness of their imprints that makes them interesting and valuable for the study of the organization of commercial publishing, the commercial production process, and the geographical and social expansion of book culture in late imperial society. How rapidly did woodblock publishing spread after the publishing boom of the late Ming? How was the technology transmitted, and what forms did the publishing industry take? What impact did these forms—the structure and organization of publishing and bookselling in different locations—have on the production of texts and on the types of texts printed? How

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widely did texts circulate throughout the Chinese countryside, particularly in rural hinterlands distant from urban cultural, commercial, and administrative centers? How deeply did they penetrate socially in these areas—did they make it into peasant villages or stop at the level of the market town or county seat? What sorts of texts were sold, and what sort of knowledge and information did they disseminate? What impact did the widespread distribution of these texts have on cultural integration? What were the social implications of the broader and deeper circulation of texts achieved through the operation of businesses like those of the Zou and the Ma? What impact did this circulation have on the shape of Chinese book culture and on the spread of literacy?

This study, in attempting to answer these questions, addresses a level of publishing activity and book culture, as well as a period, that have heretofore received little attention from historians of the book: rural, lower-level publishing-bookselling operations at the end of the imperial period. Sibao, a hinterland site close to the bottom of the publishing-bookselling hierarchy, yet serving most of southern China throughout the Qing and Republican periods, provides an almost ideal subject for research. There are factors that make the Sibao industry distinctive. The Hakka identity of the Zou and Ma publisher-booksellers shaped the configuration of their distribution networks and even, to a much lesser extent, the nature of their publications. And the poverty and isolation of Sibao necessitated a bare-bones approach to publishing and bookselling, an approach reflected not only in the poor quality of most Sibao texts but also in the hard lives on the road of most Sibao booksellers.

In other important ways, however, I will argue that Sibao was by no means atypical of publishing trends in late seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century China. Sibao’s publishing industry reveals two major trends in Qing print culture: the geographical extension of commercial woodblock publishing concerns to rural hinterland and frontier

19. Evelyn Rawski’s pioneering study of popular literacy, *Education and Popular Literacy in Ch’ing China*, published in 1979, treats some of these questions but focuses not so much on the production of texts as on the availability of education. Lucille Chia’s study of the great Jianyang publishing industry of northwestern Fujian, *Printing for Profit*, treats a different period, ending with the decline of the Jianyang industry in the very early Qing, just around the time when the Sibao publishers were establishing themselves.
regions hitherto largely untouched by commercial book culture; and the related social penetration of texts to lower-status levels of the population in these regions.

The Expansion of Commercial Publishing in the Qing

In the most general and summary terms, woodblock publishing during the Qing might be seen simply as an extension of the publishing boom of the late Ming.\(^20\) In other words, the expansion in the commercial book trade that began in the sixteenth century simply continued, after a relatively brief downturn in the first decades after the dynastic transition, throughout the next dynasty. Certainly no one doubts the productivity of Qing publishers; Tsien notes that there was such a surge of printing in the Qing “that the products of no previous period can be compared with it for quantity and the magnitude of the works produced.”\(^21\)

But on closer inspection, Qing publishing was not simply a continuation or intensification of the Ming boom. The Qing-period diffusion of commercial printing into the hinterlands and through all social and educational strata, from highly literate elites to petty merchants and peasants, exhibits a pattern of production different from that of the late Ming. The boom in publishing from the sixteenth century to the fall of the Ming dynasty was dominated at the point of production, by just a handful of extremely important commercial publishing sites: the Jiang-
nan cities of Nanjing, Hangzhou, and Suzhou (and to some extent Yangzhou, Huzhou, and Huizhou); and Masha 麻沙 and Shufang 書坊 in Jianyang 建陽 county in northern Fujian. Although there were commercial printing establishments in almost all regions of China by the early seventeenth century,22 none came close to rivaling either Jianyang or Jiangnan, the two sites with the greatest concentrations of publishers. The imperial capital itself, Beijing, boasted only thirteen commercial publishing houses in the late Ming.23

The disorder attendant on the Manchu conquest of China in 1644 caused a depression in the publishing trade from which some of the late Ming centers never fully recovered. Most notable here is Jianyang, which for no obvious reason sank into obscurity in the early Qing.24 So too, at the high end of the publishing scale, Huizhou, famous for its production of expensive, illustrated, “art” editions in the late Ming, ceased to be a printing site of special importance.25 Nanjing and Hangzhou suffered at least temporary setbacks. Although they eventually recovered enough to become regional centers, they lost the leading position they had enjoyed, along with Jianyang. According to Zhang Xiumin’s admittedly preliminary figures, the number of publishing

23. If we look simply at numbers of shufang alone, as calculated by Zhang Xiumin, Nanjing ranked at the forefront of production, with ninety-three shops. Jianyang had eighty-four shops, and Suzhou thirty-seven (thirty-eight, if we count Mao Jin’s 毛晋 Jigu ge 及古閣, in Changshu, Suzhou prefecture), Hangzhou twenty-four, and Huizhou ten. Of course, numbers of shufang serve as only a crude indicator of publishing importance, since they do not reveal volume of output or significance in the market. But Zhang’s rough estimate of volume of production by commercial publishers approximates this general ranking of numbers of shufang, see Zhongguo yinshua shi 中國印刷史, pp. 343–48, 359–60, 369–66, 369–72, 378–83, 400–401, and 550–51.

None of the figures given here should be taken as definitive; future research will almost certainly revise Zhang’s count. (Chia, for example, has provided a count of surviving Jianyang imprints: 1,664. This suggests that Zhang’s figure of “roughly over a thousand” for Jianyang underestimates production; see Chia, “Counting and Recounting Chinese Imprints,” pp. 64–65.) Until more extensive research is done on Ming publishing, however, these figures, with the equally problematic estimates of output, can serve as a rough index of the relative importance of different regions.
houses in Nanjing fell from thirty-eight in the late Ming to seven in the early Qing, and in Hangzhou, from twenty-five to five.²⁶

The decline of these earlier centers did not signal a decline in commercial publishing or a decline in printing as a whole, however. The boom continued, but spread throughout the eighteen provinces of China Proper. To be sure, certain sites rose to genuine prominence—Beijing, for example, became the largest commercial publishing center in the empire. Zhang Xiumin lists 112 publishing houses for Qing Beijing, almost nine times the Ming figure of thirteen. And it was, of course, during this time that Liulichang 琉璃廠 in Beijing became the most famous symbol of the vitality of the Chinese book market.²⁷ Suzhou, too, among the cities of Jiangnan, managed to maintain and even increase its production.

But the rise to prominence of Beijing and the continuing importance of Suzhou did not bespeak a new centralization of the commercial book trade. A number of provincial capitals (usually important sites of government printing) as well as regional cities emerged as centers of commercial publishing. In Sichuan, for example, Chengdu, after recovering from the destruction of Zhang Xianzhong’s 張獻忠 (1605–47) rebellion in the late Ming and from the Manchu invasion, became in the late Kangxi (1662–1722) and early Qianlong eras the site of at least ten large commercial publishing houses.²⁸ Chongqing never rivaled Chengdu in numbers, but it was a site of several important publishing houses, most notably the Shancheng tang 善成堂, founded during the Kangxi era.²⁹ Guangzhou provides another example; it became a noted commercial publishing center in the mid-Qing and then flourished in the late Qing as a site for the production of local writings on statecraft.³⁰

During the peak of commercial publishing in Guangzhou, from the
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1850s through the first decade of the twentieth century, the city had at least twenty-three shops.31

With the spread of commercial publishing to the major provincial and regional centers came the rise of new intermediate-level publishing centers. The best two examples are Foshanzhen 佛山鎮 in Guangdong, one of the “four great market towns” of the Qing, and Xuwanzhen in Jiangxi. By the late nineteenth century, Foshanzhen was the site of twelve commercial publishing houses (two of which may have been branches of Guangzhou shops); by the dynasty’s end, there were over twenty, specializing in vernacular fiction and popular medical manuals.32 Xuwanzhen, a market town on the upper reaches of the Xu River 旴江, about twenty-five kilometers from Fuzhou 撫州, developed a publishing industry in the eighteenth century. At its peak, the two-street publishing district of Xuwanzhen had forty-seven different publishing houses; another thirteen shops were scattered throughout the town. These shops together produced, according to the estimate of one nineteenth-century scholar, more texts than any other woodblock publishing site (with the possible exception of Magang 馬崗, Guangdong, the home of a pool of female block cutters).33 Although this outward spread of publishing industries was most notable in south China, perhaps because of the greater accessibility of paper, examples can be found in north China as well. Ji’nan and Liaocheng 聊城, both in Shandong province, benefited, like Xuwanzhen, from their strategic location near an important waterway; their increasing importance during the Qing as printing and publishing centers owed a great deal to their access to the Grand Canal.34

Influential publishing industries could be found at even lower levels of the central-place hierarchy in the Qing, at times in places quite distant from major transport routes. In addition to Sibao, Yuechi 岳池 county in eastern Sichuan provides another example. Yuechi county

32. Ibid., p. 557.
33. Jin Wuxiang, Suxiang sanbi, 4.10b, cited in Nagasawa Kikuya, Wa Kan sho no insatsu to sono rekishi, p. 84.
seat and the villages around it developed block cutting as a subsidiary
craft in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Although most of
Yuechi’s block cutters supplied commercial publishers in Chengdu and
Chongqing, a local publishing industry also arose by taking advantage
of the local expertise.

Book trade networks also became more comprehensive at this time.
Even relatively minor publishing centers established surprisingly far-
reaching bookselling routes in the Qing. Sibao, as noted above, sent
book merchants to ten provinces in south China. Some of these mer-
cants were following well-worn trade routes, but others, advancing into
central and western Guangxi, Guizhou, and Yunnan, opened up new
book markets in what were essentially frontier regions in the early
and mid-Qing. It is, indeed, in this period that the Yunnan-Guizhou
region was finally incorporated into the empire-wide book trade.35

Provincial publishers also began to develop branch shops in several
locations—for example, the Shancheng tang eventually established
nineteen different branches, although its major publishing sites were
Chongqing, Chengdu, Beijing, and Liaocheng.36 The Xuwanzen publishers
sold their texts at outlets in Nanchang, several Yangzi port
cities—Jiujiang 九江, Wuhu 蘪湖, Anqing 安慶, Changsha, and
Nanjing—and the imperial capital.37 Sojourning booksellers from Bao-
quing 寶慶, Hunan, brought textbooks and folk prints (niambua 年畫) to
Guizhou 贵陽 and Anshun 安順, Guizhou, and some stayed to establish
bookstores. In the Guangxu era (1875–1908), He Youlian 何友蓮, for
example, founded the Baojing tang 抱經堂, a sales outlet for woodblock
texts published in Baoqing, his native place, and shipped by water to
Zhenyuan 鎮遠, Guizhou, and then by land to Guiyang.38 By the late
nineteenth century, then, all parts of China Proper were integrated into a

35. Block cutters from Sichuan and booksellers from Fujian and Jiangxi established
publishing houses and/or distribution routes in this heretofore isolated region, thus
drawing it into the national network. See Rawski, “Economic and Social Foundations,”
p. 24.
38. Interview 1 (Anshun, 9/1/04); see also He Mingyang, Guizhou banshi yanjiu, pp. 14–15.
comprehensive hierarchy of book-producing centers and bookselling markets and distribution routes.

Why this shift in the distribution of publishing industries and this proliferation of often interconnected industries at intermediate and lower levels of the central-place hierarchy? To some extent, as mentioned above, the expansion of publishing in the Qing is simply the natural progression of a trend begun in the late Ming. Crucial to this progression was the simplicity and portability of the dominant print technology, xylography. It is difficult to overstate the importance of this fact: had the tools of block cutting and printing been more complicated, cumbersome, or expensive, the spread of printing operations would not have been as rapid, thorough, and easy. Consider W. H. Medhurst’s assessment of Chinese print technology and the impact it had on the availability of books in the early decades of the nineteenth century:

The whole apparatus of a printer, in that country, consists of his gravers, blocks, and brushes; these he may shoulder and travel with, from place to place, purchasing paper and lamp-black, as he needs them; and borrowing a table anywhere, he may throw off his editions by the hundred or the score, as he is able to dispose of them. Their paper is thin, but cheap; ten sheets of demy-size, costing only one half-penny. This connected with the low price of labour, enables the Chinese to furnish books to each other, for next to nothing.39

By the mid-Qing, the simplicity and low costs of publishing technology had facilitated the spread of print culture beyond the larger centers of the late Ming.

Medhurst is, of course, stating an extreme case; he seems to be imagining an itinerant publisher. But the relatively low capital investment and limited skills required by xylography also facilitated the establishment of settled publishing operations more or less anywhere, as long as hardwood for the printing blocks and paper were readily available.

40. William Medhurst (“Typographus Sinensis”), in his comparison of the expenses of different kinds of publishing in the 1830s, remarks of xylographic publishing: “The expense of starting such an establishment is much less than would be required for either lithography or typography” (“Estimate of the Proportionate Expense of Xylography, Lithography, and Typography,” p. 248).
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Clearly the most expensive part of the publishing process was the labor of block cutting. On limited evidence, however, it appears that block cutting was not necessarily costly, particularly for cheap popular productions.41 Certainly the “machinery” required for cutting was negligible—just a set of easily portable cutting and scooping handtools. Nor, apparently, was great skill or literacy a prerequisite for block cutting. In the Southern Song (1127–1279), religious institutions engaged nonprofessional labor—“religious devotees, women and idle peasants”—to cut blocks for little or no pay;42 this practice suggests that intelligible, if not beautiful, characters could be cut by people with little or no training. For professional cutters, the training period varied considerably. Interviews of surviving cutters in Yuechi county, Sichuan, reveal that they might study for as little as three years and as many as four to five, beginning as early as ten sui.43

Moreover, although literacy may have been desirable in block cutters, since it enabled them to work with more confidence and to catch erroneous characters, it was not necessary: since the characters were first written on a sheet of thin paper, which was then pasted face-down on the block, leaving (once the paper was rubbed away) the ink impression of the characters on the block, the cutter had only to carve out the wood around the character-shape. William Milne, comparing the costs of European mechanized printing to those of xylography in 1820, claims that the wages of compositors, who had to be literate, would have to be much higher than those of “block cutters whose only business is to follow their copy.” He adds, “Of this latter sort there are many in China, females particularly (for they also cut as well as men),

41. Rawski, *Education and Popular Literacy*, pp. 120–22 and 237–38, no. 64–73. Although acknowledging that it is very difficult to get comprehensive evidence on this point, Joseph McDermott (“The Ascendance of the Imprint in China,” pp. 79–80) states that the payment for cutting one hundred characters in 1600 was about 35 wen, a relatively modest amount.
43. Interviews 6 and 11, 7/13/97, 7/17/97 (Yuechi); 17, 7/23/97 (Dash); 19 and 21, 7/24/97 (Zhenlongxiang [Yixingxiang]). Most informants identified three years as the typical period of apprenticeship, though an anonymous unpublished report on the Yuechi block-cutting craft states that four to five years was the norm (“Kanke hangye yuanqi he biange”).
who cannot read a single word; and yet they earn their daily bread at this work.”44 And the *Shunde xianzhi* 順德縣志 (Shunde county gazetteer) of 1835, referring to the female block cutters of Magang, notes dismissively that the skill required was so minimal that “all women and children could do it.”45 In Yongzhou 永州, Hunan, block cutting was practiced by men, women, and children as a subsidiary craft, done “while watching oxen at pasture, grasping a chisel and cutting while leaning against a tree.”46 To be sure, the very best carvers, like the famous craftsmen of the Huang 黃, Wang 汪, Qiu 仇, and Liu 劉 lineages of Huizhou, responsible for some of the most finely carved illustrated texts of the late Ming,47 might be both literate and highly skilled—and thus able to command high wages—but the production of a legible text did not require their degree of knowledge or skill. There was, in short, a considerable range in acceptable levels of block-cutting skill.

One other aspect of xylography made it easily adaptable to a variety of economic contexts: the publisher-printer’s ability to adjust print runs to demand. Once the blocks for a title were carved, the publisher could tailor the size of the run to his estimate of the market. When demand outstripped supply, new copies could simply be printed off the original blocks. This is one of the great advantages of woodblock printing; in letterpress publishing, a “reprinting” of a work meant that the entire text had to be retypeset from scratch, a considerable investment of labor. The Chinese publisher, unlike his Western counterpart, did not have to guess at the popularity of a new text, risking, if he overestimated, overstocking and a very slow return on his original investment;

45. *Shunde xianzhi* (1853), 3.50a, cited in Xu Dixin and Wu Chengming, eds., *Chinese Capitalism, 1522–1840*, p. 238. For a similar comment about block cutting in Xuwan, see *Jiangxi sheng* (Minguo era), cited in Zhao Shuiquan, “Xuwan yu muke yinshu,” p. 54: “The men and women of Xuwan, in Jinxian county, are all good at cutting characters. In former times most of the texts found throughout the province were produced there.”
46. Xu Ke, “Gongshu lei,” *Qingbei leichao*, 5: 2397. This entry explains that blocks cut in Magang were especially cheap because they were cut by young girls of age ten or so “who are paid little and work fast,” but whose blocks are not as accurately cut as those done by the Yongzhou cutters. Cited in Xu Dixin and Wu Chengming, eds., *Chinese Capitalism, 1522–1840*, p. 238.
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or, if he underestimated, the cost of a new, time-consuming, and labor-intensive setting of the text. Thus woodblock printing enabled Chinese publishers to keep capital costs down somewhat (although they still had to make the original investment in the cutting of the blocks) and to respond rapidly and sensitively to fluctuations in demand. It is this very flexibility that impressed Matteo Ricci in the early seventeenth century:

Their method of printing has one decided advantage, namely, that once these tablets are made, they can be preserved and used for making changes in the text as often as one wishes. . . . With this method, the printer and the author are not obliged to produce here and now an excessively large edition of a book, but are able to print a book in smaller or larger lots sufficient to meet the demand at the time. . . . The simplicity of Chinese printing is what accounts for the exceedingly large numbers of books in circulation here and the ridiculously low prices at which they are sold.48

Block-cutting costs were thus only occasional—unless, of course, the popularity of a text occasioned so many reprints that the first set of blocks wore out, in which case profits would probably defray the cost of touching up the original blocks or cutting a whole new set.49


49. There is debate over two relevant points here: the size of most woodblock print runs and the durability of the blocks. Estimates of the former range from a high of “hundreds” to a low of twenty-five; most likely the number of copies in a run varied considerably, a variation that doubtless depended on the resources of the publisher and his estimate of the demand for a given title. Some publishers just printed on demand, advertising this service in their imprints.

As for the durability of the blocks, the difference in estimates is astonishing. One scholar claims that a set of blocks could yield as many as 25,000 impressions (an initial 15,000, and another 10,000 after the blocks, made of pear wood, had been slightly “touched up”) (Tsien, Paper and Printing, p. 201). Contemporary block cutters put the figure much lower, at as few as 2,000 to 5,000 for the initial printing (Chia, Printing for Profit, p. 331, n. 37). Medhurst (“Typographus Sinensis”), in a communication to the Chinese Repository, states that after 10,000 impressions, blocks “are no longer capable of giving good impressions” (“Estimate of the Proportionate Expense of Xylography, Lithography, and Typography,” p. 249). In a study of Japanese publishing, Peter Kornicki (The Book in Japan, p. 137) suggests that 8,000 is a reasonable figure. Of course this variation can be explained by differences in the woods or other materials used for the blocks (unfortunately sources rarely indicate which material corresponded to which figure), the care taken in block preparation, and the quality of the cutting, but the range in
It also seems to have been quite easy to find at least minimally qualified block cutters and to engage them in a variety of different employment relationships. A small-scale publisher who could not afford to maintain a permanent crew of workers could simply turn to a local “character-cutting shop” (けじ店 keji dian  刻字店, keji pu  刻字舖) or to a band of itinerant carvers working on commission. Or he might cut costs by hiring distant peasants to cut blocks. Such workers, usually impoverished and practicing block cutting as a subsidiary craft, could be paid so little that it was worth the cost of transporting the blocks—often considerable distances—to employ them.50 Thus blocks cut by peasant craftsmen in Yuechi were often shipped down river to Chongqing or carried overland to Chengdu (a journey of over two hundred kilometers) for printing. Finally, the employment of female labor could very significantly reduce costs; Ye Dehui estimated that women cutters in Hunan, Jiangxi, and Guangdong were paid between one-fourth and one-third of the wages of male cutters in the late nineteenth century.51

If the costs of block cutting could be kept low, the costs of the other steps in the publishing process were even easier to limit. Printing and binding did not necessarily demand high skills or expensive materials; indeed, these tasks were commonly left to women and children (often family members who need not be paid),52 a sure sign that they were perceived as work requiring no or little skill. Access to a steady supply of cheap paper may have been the greatest constraint on the spread of commercial printing. But paper, which was made from a wide range of easily available materials, most notably bamboo but including mulberry tree bark, rattan, and other plant fibers, was relatively inexpensive in the numbers of impressions still seems remarkable. See Rawski, *Education and Popular Literacy*, p. 120.

50. Indeed, it seems that blocks were more commonly transported from cutter to publisher, and from publisher to publisher, than has previously been assumed. The recent work of Joseph Dennis on the production of gazetteers in the early Ming supports this conclusion; see, e.g., “The Production and Circulation of Early Ming Gazetteers.”


52. I do not mean to suggest that this labor was free to the publishers; the printing and binding work of the women in the household diverted their labor from other occupations. Yet, particularly within large households, this system was more cost efficient than hiring wage laborers from outside the family.
south. It is probably primarily for this reason that commercial publishing spread more rapidly and pervasively in south China, where bamboo paper was abundant and cheap, than in the north, where paper making was not as widespread. In sum, depending on the aesthetic aspirations and location of the publisher, neither the initial investment nor the continuing labor costs for publishing needed to be considerable, and thus it was possible for those with limited access to capital to imagine publishing—bookselling as a livelihood.

Thus the portability and relative cheapness of xylography shaped the geography of printing in China and allowed considerable mobility and decentralization. These characteristics in turn encouraged, first, a diffusion of printing operations throughout the empire and, second, the proliferation of operations of varying sizes and configurations, at different levels of the central-place hierarchy. These developments are not particularly surprising. Given the simplicity of the technology and the importance of books in Chinese society, both as aids to power, prestige, and wealth through the examination system and as emblems of elite culture, it is logical that the publishing “explosion” of the late Ming would continue and intensify.

But it was not simply the easiness and flexibility of Chinese print technology and the steady market for books that supported the spread of publishing. Other catalysts, distinctive to the Qing, were at work as well. The growing prosperity of China and the demographic explosion of the eighteenth century (just the time when most of the smaller publishing industries mentioned here got their start) spurred an expansion in publishing, creating greater demand and wider markets for texts. The population increased from 155 million in 1500 to 268 million in 1650, rising through the Qing to roughly 400 million by the 1840s. Surely it is

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54. See Chapter 5 for a description of how one Shao publisher, Ma Quanheng, established a business with very slender means—just twenty ounces (liang 両) of silver. See also Rawski, *Education and Popular Literacy*, pp. 119–23.
56. Martin Heijdra (“The Socio-economic Development of Rural China During the Ming,” p. 438) provides three sets of population figures in his study of population growth over the mid- to late Ming, and I have chosen the middle estimate.
no coincidence that the boom in publishing, begun in the sixteenth century and persisting, with only a brief interruption over the Ming-Qing transition, parallels this long-term expansion in population.

At the same time, the migrations of the early and high Qing diffused the demand for books, creating markets in newly settled areas; the opening of hinterland and frontier regions encouraged the wider distribution of publishing sites throughout the empire. Migration worked on the supply side as well, to spread block cutting, printing, and managerial skills throughout China Proper. The major Qing-era publishing houses of Chengdu were founded by immigrants from Jiangxi province. Similarly, block-cutting techniques were introduced to isolated Yuechi county by Jiangxi and Fujian migrants to eastern Sichuan. Yuechi carvers in search of higher wages in turn migrated to or sojourned in the frontier areas of Gansu, Yunnan, and Guizhou, where their skills were still rare, and passed along a craft previously learned from Jiangxi and Fujian immigrants.57

In sum, the expansion in geographical scope, the growth in number of publishing and bookselling sites, and the greater complexity of intra- and interregional links among these sites that characterize the Qing book trade, coupled with the increased prosperity and expanding population of the eighteenth century, made possible not only a broader but also a deeper dissemination of texts, socially as well as geographically. Many of the new publishing sites, like Sibao, served both the larger book market and a smaller, rural demand for relatively inexpensive texts. The expansion of bookselling networks made possible the distribution of printed texts to even quite isolated peasant communities, to members of the lower rungs of the social order heretofore largely excluded from printed book culture. It was in the context of these trends that the Sibao book industry unfolded.

57. Wang Gang, “Qingdai Sichuan de yinshuye,” pp. 62–63. For the sojourning and migration of Yuechi block cutters, see Interviews 6, 7/13/97 (Yuechi); 17, 7/23/97 (Dashi); 19 and 21, 7/24/97 (Zhenlongxiang [Yixingxiang]). As yet we do not understand the pattern of migration, or the degree to which links established through migration integrated commercial publishing concerns into regional or even national networks. This is clearly a question requiring further study if we are to understand the spread of Chinese publishing.
Introduction

Sources for the Study of Sibao

Publishing—Bookselling

Since full and detailed business records, accounts, and correspondence do not survive for the Sibao industry—as they do not for most Chinese business operations before the nineteenth century—it is necessary to draw on a wide range of other sources to reconstruct the history of Sibao publishing. The sources a Qing historian might first turn to—memorials, local gazetteers, and the writings (both the casual “jottings,” or biji, and the more polished literary collections, or wenji) of local literati and officials—provide little information about Sibao publishing, although of course they (especially the gazetteers) are useful sources of information about the context in which the industry evolved. These sources are used in this study primarily to describe the socio-economic and cultural development of western Fujian and the major market areas of the Zou and Ma booksellers in Guangdong, Guangxi, and Jiangxi.

The richest sources for the study of Sibao publishing are to be found on site, in Wuge and Mawu. Genealogies of several Zou branch lineages and one Ma branch lineage make possible the reconstruction of relationships among some of the most prominent publishers; they also provide relatively detailed information about the origins and development of the business and even, to some extent, about the titles the Zou and Ma published (and edited). They are virtually the only primary sources for the first century of the Sibao book trade. The genealogies also supply essential information about the migration patterns of lineage members and about the bookselling routes and bookselling outlets they established, often on the basis of these patterns. Biographies and commemorative essays in honor of the publishers, both by local Minxi

58. For a fuller discussion of the sources available in Sibao (and in some other sites) and their interpretation, see Brokaw, “Fieldwork on the Social and Economic History of Chinese Print Culture.”

59. In this case, the failure of the Zou and Ma to earn much distinction through the examination system works to the historian’s advantage, for it seems to have freed them to be more open and communicative about their business activities, at least in comparison with the Jianyang publishers studied by Chia.
literati and officials and by business contacts from surrounding provinces, reveal a great deal about the social networks publisher-booksellers developed. And, of course, the genealogies help us to trace the growth of the lineage and the scope of its educational and religious practices and to link these to the growth of the local publishing industry.

To be sure, the genealogies present many difficulties for interpretation. As texts designed to define membership in the lineage unit and to assert allegiance to approved ritual and ethical values, they do not present a clear or necessarily reliable account of family history—and they devote little attention to the evolution of the publishing-bookselling business. The biographies of leading lineage members are written not so much to convey the distinctive character of their subjects as to present a series of exemplary lives, both to exalt the lineage by demonstrating that its members conformed to accepted standards of good conduct and to provide models for future generations. Thus there is a sameness to many of the biographies: a strikingly high number of subjects (except, of course, for the virtuous women of the families, who were held to a different standard) were brilliant students in youth, devoted to the recitation of the Classics and poetry and the practice of calligraphy; filial sons and responsible and loving brothers, protectors of family harmony; selfless contributors to community charities; and recipients of rewards for their virtue in old age, not to mention the progenitors of many accomplished descendants. Of course, these ritual elements and rhetorical flourishes are in themselves useful historical evidence of a sort. Although they tell us little about the real behavior of specific individuals, they reveal much about the economic concerns and social and moral preoccupations of the Zou and Ma publisher-booksellers. But a reader must search hard for specific references to the business activities of lineage members, and such information, when included in a biography at all, is often delivered in an offhand and, for a historian, frustratingly vague fashion. The genealogies constitute, nonetheless, the most significant historical record of the Sibao industry; they provide, however spottily and accidentally, the only roughly contemporary narrative we have of the development of the Zou and Ma book trade in the Qing.

Valuable, too, are some scattered property-division documents (fen-guan 分閘 in the local parlance), dating from 1773 to the Guangxu era, recording the distribution of property (including woodblocks and print
rooms, *yinfang* 印房, where the blocks were printed) among a man’s sons (see Fig. 1.1). These records tell us something not only of the numbers but also of the works produced by Sibao publishing houses. They also explain one of the mechanisms by which publishing houses proliferated in Sibao—inheritance—and, in the rules they include for the sale and rental of blocks, some of the regulations that governed relations both within and between publishing houses. Since most of the extant property-division documents date from the nineteenth century, they are particularly useful for an overview of the industry at that time, providing what amount to publishing house inventories of titles available for printing.

Several valuable, but difficult-to-date, sources provide information about Sibao’s output and, in some cases, the prices of Sibao texts and bookselling strategies. The most extensive list of Sibao titles, with 860 separate entries, records the amount of paper required to print each text; there are a few duplicate titles with different trim sizes (“large,” “medium,” and “small”). This list was probably used by a group of publishing houses to calculate the amount of paper they needed to
Two ledgers survive as well from Wuge. The first is an account book kept by the manager of the Wenhai lou 文海樓, a Wuge concern that flourished in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (see Fig. 1.2). This ledger records sixty-seven different lots of texts to be distributed to different bookshops and lists, after abbreviated titles, the numbers of copies of each title per lot and the wholesale price for each; it also includes some information about the income of the various branch shops operating within the Wenhai lou bookselling chain. Unfortunately, like the two book lists mentioned above, this ledger is not dated. Since the paper in the ledger is a type not in common use until the early twentieth century, this source provides information about only the later years of the industry, at the earliest the first decade of the twentieth century. Another ledger records the activities of itinerant booksellers Zou Weinan 位南 (1860–1933), Zou Xiyao 希堯 (1866–1926), and Zou Xin-feng 新豐 (fl. late 19th c.), who peddled primers, correspondence guides, novels, geomancy manuals, stationery supplies, and simple medicines to lineage or village schools and bookstores in over forty different villages. There are also a few single-page documents recording transactions (the sale or purchase of woodblocks or texts) between Sibao shufang and other publishing houses in Foshan or Guangzhou; given what we know of Sibao publishing and bookselling history, these can be dated to the late Qing. Finally, there are a few contracts that record the pawning or mortgaging of woodblocks; the earliest are dated 1822, the latest 1863. The fragmentary nature of many of these sources—the Wenhai lou ledger in particular has been severely damaged by damp and worms—presents considerable challenges for interpretation. But the extreme rarity of such

60. This inventory is in the possession of a descendant of the family that operated the Cuiyun tang 萃蕓堂 publishing house (founded in 1816?); see FYZSZP (1996), shang, p. 180. It is possible that it lists all the titles published by this shop in a year, but 860 seems an extraordinary number of titles for one shop to have produced. The account book from the Wenhai lou lists 251 different titles (since many titles are illegible, the original number was probably higher); and the longest of the property-division documents lists only 107. Thus it seems likely that this list was a kind of reference, including all titles for which woodblocks had been cut and that thus might be produced either by a group of Wuge printshops or by the Cuiyun tang over several years. Two other much shorter book lists, untitled and undated, appear to be the inventories of the Sibao publishing houses.
sources for commercial woodblock publishing also makes them particularly precious, at least as evidence for roughly the last century of the Sibao industry. (Throughout I refer to all these sources collectively as the Sibao “book lists.”)

Surviving Sibao imprints are, of course, one of the most reliable and fruitful sources for this study, since they supply not only information about titles published but also material evidence about the production quality of Sibao texts. I have photocopied, photographed, or recorded as many Sibao editions as I could on site in Wuge and Mawu and, of course, visited library collections (and at least two private collectors) throughout south China in an effort to collect as much evidence as possible from Sibao imprints.

I should note here the difficulties in interpreting what at first glance might seem unassailably concrete sources. First, many of the cheaper Sibao editions do not record the name of the publishing house (tangming 堂名) or the date of publication (that is, the date the blocks were cut), making it difficult to date works or to associate them with a particular
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publishing house. In part because of these omissions, it has been impossible to develop a definitive list of Sibao publishing houses.61

Furthermore, many of the titles extant in Wuge and Mawu, because of the detrimental conditions in which they have been kept, survive only in part, as isolated volumes or even, sometimes, as loose, rotting, worm-eaten pages, without either fengmian 封面 (cover pages) or title pages (the first half-folio page of the first juan), much less prefaces or tables of contents. In these cases it is difficult to get a sense of the target audience for a text (often this is defined or suggested in a preface) or even the full extent of the text. As indicated above, Sibao productions are not, generally speaking, of fine quality and thus are often not to be found in libraries; the ephemeral nature of many Sibao publications, too, has limited their preservation. Finally, since the Zou and Ma publishers employed numerous block cutters, whose styles and techniques varied, it is difficult to identify their texts by a distinctive cutting style, a criterion that can be used, for example, to identify some late Ming Jianyang editions.

Nonetheless, a large enough store of Sibao imprints—roughly 160—has survived intact or sufficiently so to permit an analysis of their production quality, contents, prefaces, and format—and thence some conclusions about their intended audiences and often about their sources and circumstances of publication. In addition, we have records of Sibao publication of over eleven hundred additional titles from surviving property-division documents, book lists, and ledgers; although these are clearly not as useful as the surviving texts, they nonetheless help flesh out our picture of Sibao’s stock in the last century of its publishing history. In the discussion of Sibao’s output in Part II, when possible I restrict my comments to surviving titles known to have been produced by the Zou and Ma.62

61. Nor are publishing house names listed in the genealogies or other written primary documents. Contemporary residents of Wuge and Mawu have compiled lists of shufang names of variable reliability and completeness. Here I refer to publishing-house names only when the evidence seems to support the identification, but the reader should be aware that all identifications, except those drawn from Sibao imprints themselves, are tentative. See Appendix D.1 for a tentative list of Sibao shufang.

62. One problem I encountered in collecting texts on site is that many informants presented any old woodblock text (or lithographic text) in their possession as a Sibao
Other physical evidence of the publishing-bookselling business survives in Wuge and Mawu. It is still possible to find woodblocks (see Figs. 1.3a and b), although most of these have been destroyed or lost in the decades since the decline of the printing industry in the 1930s and 1940s. A large publishing house would have devoted several rooms to block storage, and once book publication ceased to be profitable, this was a waste of space. Poor households began to use woodblocks—bulky and by that time useless—for fuel. The Cultural Revolution also took its toll; in fearful anticipation of the arrival of the Red Guards, the residents of Wuge and Mawu incinerated many of the remaining woodblocks and imprints in a huge bonfire that burned, it is said, for over a month. The few blocks that remain do, however, provide visual evidence of the quality of cutting, of methods of repairing blocks, and of the efficient practice of cutting both sides of some blocks. Examples of printing and binding tools (brushes, ink basins, a book press) and other paraphernalia (book boxes, bamboo baskets for the transport of ink, and so forth) also survive. It is possible, too, to get some sense of the physical arrangement of the printing process by visiting the courtyard units that functioned as small printing factories within the larger mansions. And these mansions themselves, albeit now worn and crumbling, testify to the profits earned by the publishers.

Finally, oral histories have also provided much useful information, particularly about the sources of raw materials for printing, customary regulations governing relationships among the Zou and Ma publishing houses, the establishment of branch outlets, the relationships between branch outlets and the Sibao headquarters, transportation networks, texts published, and the nature of Sibao’s markets. Over the course of roughly eight months’ residence in Wuge (between 1993 and 2004) and visits to Zhangzhou (Fujian) and Nanning, Lingyun, and Bose (Guangxi), I conducted over ninety interviews with members of the Zou and Ma lineages, either those at one point directly involved in the imprint. The recently opened exhibition hall in Wuge includes in its display of Sibao imprints many texts that were not in fact produced in Sibao. See Appendix G for a list conflating all the titles from the property-division documents, account books, other book lists, and private collections; I have excluded doubtful texts from this list.
Fig. 1.3 (a, top) Sihao woodblocks. (b, bottom) A block containing the cover pages for two different texts: Xinke Siyan zuozhi 新刻四言雜字 (Newly published Four-Word Glossary) and Zengzhu Sanzi jing 增註三字經 (Three-Character Classic, with expanded commentary), both published by the Linlan tang 林蘭堂 in the Tongzhi era. Photographs by the author.
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early twentieth-century publishing industry and book trade or descendants of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century publishers and booksellers. Comparative information on other contemporary publishing sites was collected in part through interviews in Yuechi (Sichuan), Xuwan (Jiangxi), and Magang (Guangdong).63 The interview material varies widely in evidential quality and has to be carefully assessed. I have tried, whenever possible, to verify information by reference to printed sources; relied most heavily on reports for which there is a broad consensus (and have recorded divergences from the consensus in the notes); and weeded out clearly prejudiced or unlikely responses. Finally, I indicate where in the text I am relying primarily on interview materials, so that readers can recognize interpretations based on this kind of evidence. Notwithstanding the obvious problems inherent in this type of source, I found that the interviews and oral histories greatly illuminated my understanding of the operation of the Sibao publishing-bookselling trade.

Although the Zou and Ma genealogies provide information on the early development of the publishing industry, fuller sources are available beginning only in the Daoguang era—unfortunately just at the time the industry was beginning its slow (but by no means linear) decline. Thus the story of the last century of Sibao publishing-bookselling is inevitably more detailed than that of its first century and a half. And even for this portion of the story, readers in search of certitude and precision may be frustrated by my reluctance to provide statistics for the numbers of booksellers at work at any one time, the number (and names) of Sibao shufang, the number of titles they produced, and so forth. Awareness of the incompleteness of the sources has led me to be cautious about supplying figures that could easily mislead. As a result, this work presents more a general picture of the sorts of relationships and practices that shaped the Sibao book trade and of the texts the Zou and Ma publishers produced than an exact and detailed history.

63. The precise breakdown is: eighty-seven interviews with Sibao (Wuge and Mawu) residents; three with Changting residents with connections to Sibao; one with a Sibao bookseller in Zhangzhou; four with Sibao booksellers in Guangxi (two in Nanning, one in Lingyun, one in Bose); one with a papermaker in Shangchicun, Anjie, Changting; twenty-seven in Yuechi, Sichuan; five in Xuwan, Jinxi, Jiangxi; and four in Magang, Shundeshi, Guangdong.
This study is divided into two parts, the first ("The Business of Book Publishing and Bookselling in Sibao") on the structure and organization of the publishing-bookselling businesses of Sibao; the second ("Sibao Imprints") on the texts that these businesses printed and sold and their place in Qing and early Republican society. Understanding the role of the Sibao book trade in Chinese society and culture requires study both of the context and process of book production and sale and of the contents and material quality of the books produced. My goal is twofold: to describe and analyze the organization of the business of publishing in Sibao and the influence it had on what books were produced and how they were produced; and to characterize as fully as the evidence allows the products of Sibao publishing and the impact they had on Chinese book culture and society.64

Since the history of Sibao publishing is inextricably bound to the location of Wuge and Mawu in western Fujian, I begin Part I with a description of the environment, economy, culture, and society of Minxi and Sibao. Contemporary visitors to Sibao usually express astonishment

64. Western scholars have suggested a variety of strategies for studying the history of the book. Robert Darnton, in “What Is the History of the Book?,” an essay that established the early guidelines for the field, outlined a “communications circuit” that linked authors, publishers, printers and their suppliers, shippers, booksellers, and readers (in their appropriate intellectual, economic, social, political, and legal contexts), emphasizing the need to understand the relationships between all these factors and agents. In “A New Model for the Study of the Book,” Thomas Adams and Nicolas Barker challenge Darnton’s model, but their revision (which emphasizes the role of the book rather than that of people in the book trade) also emphasizes the interconnections among socioeconomic context; intellectual, political, and legal influences; and the publication, manufacture, distribution, reception, and survival of texts. Finally, William St Clair, in The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period (p. 449), suggests yet another model, “the commercial and political model,” which focuses on the strategies of publishers (and political, ecclesiastical, and commercial interest groups) in selecting and packaging texts and the impact their strategies have on authors and editors, the market, readers, and ultimately textual culture. My approach is closest to St Clair’s (after making allowances for the considerable differences between the British and the Chinese book worlds); I show how the socioeconomic organization of the Sibao publisher-booksellers and their business choices influenced the nature of Sibao’s imprints and then speculate about the impact that Sibao’s bestsellers had on Chinese society and book culture.
that so isolated and poor a place was once a publishing center. Chapter 2 ("The Setting: Minxi and Sibao"), by outlining Minxi’s long history of violence and poverty, serves to reinforce this astonishment. But, by describing the social and economic strategies developed by the Sibao lineages to survive in an inhospitable terrain, it also explains how the Zou and Ma created and maintained, “in the middle of nowhere,” a publishing industry that endured for at least two and a half centuries. Chapter 3 ("The Origins of Publishing and the Production of Books in Sibao") continues this explanation by discussing the origins of the publishing business, providing an overview of its history, and focusing on the physical production of texts in Sibao. Here I describe both the natural resources that supported the business and the organization of the book-manufacturing process.

The Sibao book trade was to a considerable extent shaped by the distinctive structure of the publishing operations and the mechanisms that governed shufang relationships. The next two chapters treat these topics: Chapter 4 ("The Structure of the Sibao Publishing Industry") describes and analyzes the structure of the Zou and Ma shufang. Chapter 5 ("'We are all brothers': Household Division, the Proliferation of Publishing Houses, and the Management of Competition") explains how shufang multiplied and how the publishers managed competition (both inter- and intralineage) among publishing houses as they proliferated in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

The Zou and Ma were, like most Chinese publishers of the day, booksellers as well as publishers. Chapters 6 and 7 deal with the bookselling aspect of their business and its interaction with the publishing industry. Chapter 6 ("Sibao Bookselling Routes") traces the elaborate sales networks that the Zou and Ma book merchants developed to market their texts in the surrounding provinces of southern China. Chapter 7 ("Sojourning Bookselling and the Operation of the Branch Shops") describes the life of itinerant book merchants and the series of branch shops established by booksellers in Fujian, Guangdong, Guangxi, Jiangxi, Zhejiang, Hunan, and Hubei. It ends with a brief account of the disintegration of the Sibao publishing-bookselling networks as the industry declined in the Republican era.

The conclusion to Part I, Chapter 8 ("Sibao’s ‘Confucian Merchants’ in Minxi Society and the Late Imperial Economy") places the Zou and
Ma publisher-booksellers in the context of late imperial society and economy, describing their own understanding of this place, assessing their social standing in the Minxi area, and, by comparing their operations to other businesses, pointing up what is distinctive about the Sibao concerns.

To understand the full social and cultural significance of the Sibao book trade, it is necessary to analyze, in some detail, the products of that trade. As the works of Western historians of the book such as D. F. McKenzie and Roger Chartier have shown, it is not enough to know generally what titles or types of books a publisher produced. Equally important is the presentation of the text—the prefatorial notes, editing, commentary, formatting, production quality, and so forth. Part II thus both describes the range of texts that the Sibao publishers produced and sold and analyzes the contents and paratexts of a selection of these texts. This material, together with scattered information about the prices of Sibao imprints, also provides some indication of the audience for Sibao’s products. After a brief discussion in Chapter 9 of the sources of Sibao’s imprints and the roles that the Zou and Ma publishers themselves played in compiling and editing these texts (“The Nature and Sources of Sibao Imprints”), I focus in Chapter 10 (“Educational Works”) on the texts that, throughout Sibao’s history, were the staples of the business: texts for education, including primers, editions of the Four Books and Five Classics, poetry and guwen 古文 (ancient-style prose) collections, model “eight-legged essays” (baguwen 八股文), and reference works. Although these were the works that brought the Zou and Ma publishers their initial success and, I would argue, sustained the industry through its long history, they were quickly supplemented with a wide range of other popular texts, the subjects of Chapters 11 (“Guides to Good Manners, Good Health, and Good Fortune”) and 12 (“Fiction and Belles-Lettres”)—practical guides for family management and correct ritual practice, rhymed-couplet and letter-writing manuals, household encyclopedias, medical handbooks, and fortune-telling guides as well as a large store of fiction and songbooks. Chapter 13

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(“Sibao’s Customers and Popular Textual Culture in the Qing”), the conclusion to Part II, presents a profile of the audience for Sibao imprints and constructs a “Sibao model” of popular textual culture.

Finally, in Chapter 14 (“The Diffusion of Print Culture in Qing China”), I return to a theme presented in this introductory chapter and discuss how Sibao fits into the general trends I have defined here for commercial publishing in the Qing: an extension of commercial operations outward geographically into hinterland and frontier areas, and a penetration socially downward in these areas to the lowest levels of the rural population. Here I draw in comparative material from fieldwork and library research on other Qing commercial publishing (or block cutting) sites—Xuwanzhen, Yuechi, and Magang. Finally, I suggest, very generally, what a preliminary analysis of the types of texts produced at all these sites—an analysis of what I would call the “book cultures” of the Qing—suggests about the relationship between print and the educational and social order, and what implications these various book cultures have for our understanding of the constitution of reading publics and literacy in late imperial China.

The unusual richness of the Sibao primary sources (no other woodblock commercial publishing site, to my knowledge, offers similar quantity and variety) makes possible an in-depth study of the structure and operations of an important commercial publishing industry in rural China in the Qing and Republican periods. They allow as well for a detailed survey and analysis of Sibao’s publications. My hope, then, is that this work can serve as a baseline or foundational reference for future research in the field of the social history of the Chinese book, a field still in its early stages.