THE INHERITANCE AND DEVELOPMENT OF 
WOOD LETTER PRINTING CULTURE 
IN THE ZHEJIANG GENEALOGIES

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ABSTRACT

Based on a survey of more than 9,300 existing titles of wood letter printing gene-
alogies in the Zhejiang Province, the author analyses the changes in quantity and 
the local features of wood letter printing of the Zhejiang genealogies in different 
periods of the Ming (1368–1644 A.D.), Qing (1644–1911 A.D.), Republic of 
China (1911–1949 A.D.) and the People’s Republic of China (1949–). It indicates 
great significance of wood letter printing in compiling genealogy and more 
than 100 titles of rare books in the Jinhua, Zhejiang Province, in the Long Qing 
Emperor Period (1567–1572 A.D.) and the first year of the Wan Li Emperor (1572 
A.D.) in the Ming Dynasty. This paper also discusses the socialized service in the 
genealogy compilation procedure such as compiling, printing and papermaking in 
the modern Wenzhou area, which had an effect on inheriting and developing the 
wood letter printing culture. From the special position of the genealogy serial pub-
lication, this paper also discusses the historical position of genealogy in Zhejiang 
in China’s wood letter printing culture development. The author believes that the 
endless vitality of contemporary wood letter printing has a close relationship with 
the market system of compiling genealogies.

KEY WORDS

Wood Letter Printing 
Printing Culture 
Genealogy 
Jinhua 
Wenzhou 
Zhejiang

INTRODUCTION

Among Chinese printing books remaining from ancient China, the sum books 
printed from wood blocks is much larger than the printing from wood letters.
While printing from wood blocks came into being in the early Tang Dynasty, the wood letter printing technology was widely used in the Jiangnan area in the late Ming and early Qing Dynasty. Its development influenced the central part of China. In the Chong Zhen Emperor Period (1628–1644 A.D.), it was used in printing Chao Bao (court paper) by the government, and in Qian Long Emperor Period (1736–1795 A.D.), it was used in printing “Wuyingdian Juzhenban Congshu” (Series of Wuying Dian Collecting Editions) by the court, which further extended its influence. When did the earliest wood letter printed books in existence appear? How did the wood letter printing culture rise and fall afterwards? What historical and regional features did it have? What about its condition of inheritance and prospect of development? Naturally, all these questions became our concern.

Therefore, when modern printing ways, such as offset printing, photo-offset printing and computer printing are disseminated all over the world, in the Wenzhou area, wood letter printing the genealogy compilation still has its own position with a bright prospect, and old papermaking is still widespread. All of these make us feel distant and unfamiliar.

With the compilation of the book-formed Zhejiang Jiapu Zongmu Tiyao (Zhejiang Genealogies Bibliography) and the establishment of its database which provides us with an information carrier, it is accessible for us to carry out some objective and rational discussion on the questions relevant to the wood letter printing culture during 400 years, such as its rise, the move of its center, its representative books in existence, and the condition of its inheritance and development.

1. WOOD LETTER PRINTING IS THE MAIN EDITION FORM OF THE ZHEJIANG GENEALOGIES

1.1 The Changes in Quantity of the Zhejiang Genealogies Printed with Wood Letters in the Ming, Qing, Republic of China, and the People’s Republic of China

Although wood letter printing used in China rather early, it is hard to tell which book printed with wood letters in existence is the earliest one in the Han nationality regions, for distinguishing wood letter printed books from metal letter printing is difficult. Nowadays, because of the dissemination of typographic printing, offset printing, photo-offset printing and computer printing, many people would think that wood letter printing has died.

However, the condition seems totally opposite to this imagination, which reflected by Zhejiang Jiapu Zongmu Tiyao (An Annotated Zhejiang Genealogy Bibliography) published by Zhejiang Library in 2005, which was totally recording 12,775 titles of the existing genealogies of Zhejiang Province. Though these records could not represent the actual appearance of Zhejiang genealogies surviving
now, not to say the whole appearance of genealogies in history. However, combined with the research on the Chinese printing culture and ancient book editions by other scholars, we could discuss the position that the Zhejiang genealogies play in the history of Chinese wood letter printing culture, from the unique view that genealogies are a kind of serial printing and publishing material.

According to the various edition forms of genealogy recorded in *Zhejiang Jiapu Zongmu Tiyao* (An Annotated Zhejiang Genealogies Bibliography), we count out that among 12,775 titles of existing Zhejiang genealogies, there are 9,303 titles of wood letter printed books, being 72%, which shows that wood letter printing is the main printing technology used in Zhejiang genealogies.

These Zhejiang wood letter printed genealogies manifest a different historical appearance and distinct regional features in different periods of the Ming, Qing, Republic of China and the People’s Republic of China.

1.1.1 *Ming Dynasty (1368–1644 A.D.)*

Now, there are 103 titles of Zhejiang genealogies printed in the Ming Dynasty, and thirteen titles printed with wood letters. The earliest one is *Dongyang Lushi Jiacheng* (Genealogy of Lu’s Family in Dongyang, printed in Long Qing Emperor Period (1567–1572 A.D.), 4 volumes remained), which was collected National Library of China. 1

1.1.2 *Qing Dynasty (1644–1911 A.D.)*

Compared with the Ming Dynasty, the sum of books printed with wood letters of the Qing Dynasty is much more. Since the middle and late years of Emperor Qianlong, wood letters have been widely used in printing Zhejiang genealogies. There are 6,430 titles of Zhejiang genealogies of the Qing Dynasty still in existence, and about 5,100 titles are wood letter printed edition.

1.1.3 *Republic of China (1911–1949 A.D.)*

There are 4,498 titles of existing Zhejiang Genealogies compiled in the Republic of China, though typographic printing began to flourish at that time, wood letter printed editions still hold 3,700 titles.

1.1.4 *The People’s Republic of China (1949 –)*

After the founding of the People’s Republic of China, only 123 titles of the Zhejiang genealogies compiled before the Reform and Open Policy in 1979, which are still in existence, and wood letter printed ones are less than 100. Since 1979 until now, there have 1,475 titles of Zhejiang genealogies compiled, among which more than 430 titles were printed with wood letters.

According to the referred distributing features of Zhejiang genealogies in different periods, we can conclude that genealogies compiled in the Qing Dynasty
and Republic of China took the majority in the whole, and wood letter printing is the main edition form of them.

1.2 The Immigrant of Wood Letter Printing of the Zhejiang Genealogies in Ming, Qing, the Republic of China and the People’s Republic of China

Among the Zhejiang genealogies, there are 3,465 titles, which native places belong to the Jinhua area. And 3,163 of them are wood letters printing editions, which occupied 91% in total. Over 99% of these wood letters printing genealogies were compiled in the Ming, Qing and Republic of China, only a small portion were compiled in the People Republic of China.

There are 4,822 titles of Genealogies from Hangzhou, Ningbo and Shaoxing, which the wood letters printing take over 67%. The same situation in Jinhua area, 99% of wood letters printing genealogies were compiled in the Ming, Qing and Republic of China, but the editions of the People’s Republic of China are rare.

The distribution of existing wood letters printing genealogies in Wenzhou area is contrary to that of Jinhua, Hangzhou, Ningbo and Shaoxing etc. in different periods of the Ming, Qing Dynasty, Republic of China and the People’s Republic of China. Among 1,122 titles of Wenzhou area genealogies, there’s no wood letters printing edition of the Ming Dynasty, and 59 wood letters printing editions in the Qing Dynasty, 73 in Republic of China, and 488 in the People’s Republic of China. Over 87% of the genealogies compiled and printed in the People’s Republic of China were after the country carried out the Reform and Open Policy in 1979.

According to the regional distribution of existing Zhejiang genealogies stated above, the genealogies compiled before 1949, in the middle and eastern parts of Zhejiang Province took its center in Jinhua, and the genealogies after 1949 in the southern parts as its center of Wenzhou, were mostly the wood letter printing.

Thus, on the issue of printing genealogies with wood letters in Zhejiang, there’re obvious historical and regional differences between the middle and eastern parts and the southern parts separately represented by Jinhua and Wenzhou.

Therefore, what position should these Zhejiang wood letter printing genealogies take up in Chinese printing history?

2 THE SOCIAL POSITION OF THE ZHEJIANG GENEALOGIES PRINTED WITH WOOD LETTERS IN CHINESE PRINTING HISTORY

2.1 The Great Significant of Wood Letter Printing in Compiling Genealogy and More Then 100 Titles of Rare Books in the Jinhua Area

Genealogy “Dongyang Lushi Jiacheng” (Genealogy of Lu’s Family in Dongyang, wood letters printing in Long Qing Emperor Period, 4 vols. survived, and the gene-
alogy of Jinhua Lianchi Zhangshi Zongpu (Genealogy of Zhang’s Family in Lianchi Jinhua area, wood letters printing in the 1st year of Wan Li Emperor (1573), 4 Juang (chapters) were all printed in Zhejiang Province in Ming Dynasty. They have the same value of other 100 titles of rare books of wood letters printing edition, which were printed at the same time. All of them have the same significant in Chinese printing history.3

Since the letters printing technology was invented by Mr. Bi Sheng in Qing Li Emperor Period (1041–1048 A.D.), the North Song Dynasty to the first year of the Wan Li Emperor (1573 A.D.), of Ming Dynasty, round 530 years, there always had somebody been using and improving this technology from time to time. For example, Wangzhen and Ma Chende in the Yuan Dynasty and Lv Fu in the Qing Dynasty self-practiced the technology of “creating wood letters for printing”, “engraving letters block for printing” and “creating clay block of letters for printing.” However, these ancient books printed in wood letters remain no real object now. The sum of the letters printing books in existence is very limited. Based on the statistics of Zhongguo Guji Shanben Shumu (Chinese Rare Books Catalogue), among the recorded 56,787 titles of ancient and rare books printed in the Qing Dynasty and before, only 340 titles are wood letters printing books. The ratio between letters printing books and others is 1 and 167, which indicates that letters printing did not become the main way of printing books in ancient time.

Archaeological finds in recent years show that the earliest wood letters printing books were mostly in ethnic minority areas, indicating that the technology of wood letters printing was passed to the Xi Xia and Uyghur regions during the 12th century to 14th century. Most of the letters printing books in the Han Nationality regions were printed with copper letters.

So when and where and by which form did the wood letters printing technology come to prevail?

Zhang Xiumin conducted research showing that Wangzhen had printed books with wood letters in the Yuan Dynasty, while the prevailing technology was in the Ming Dynasty, especially around the Wanli Emperor Period. According to the words by Zhou Shutao and Zhao Yuanfang quoted by Xu Yinong in the “Huozi Ben (Wood Letters Printing Book),4 we can consider the two paragraphs of quotation not only reflected the social and economical reasons of copper letters printing books rising and falling before the Emperor Hongzhi Period (1488–1505 A.D.) and Emperor Wan Li Period (1573–1620 A.D.), but also explained the scale transition of letters printing from copper to wood which was pushed forward by the government, and actually it was happened in a short time from the last year of Jia Jin Emperor (1566 A.D.) to the first year of Wan Li Emperor (1573 A.D.).

Provided the conclusion stated above is credible, the two titles of wood letters printing genealogies Dongyang Lushi Jiacheng (Genealogy of Lu’s Family in Dongyang) printed in the Long Qing Emperor Period (1567–1572 A.D.), and Jinhua Lianchi Zhangshi Zongpu (Genealogy of Zhang’s Family in Lianchi Jinhua area) printed in the first year of Wan Li Emperor (1573 A.D.), could be regarded
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together with more than 100 titles of wood letters printing books of the Ming Dynasty.

At the same time, in other places in this region, like Pujiang, Yiwu, Yongkang and Dongyang, wood letters were used in printing genealogies too, which indicated that it was commonplace to print genealogies with wood letters in Jinhua area such as Pujiang, Yiwu, Yongkang and Dongyang in the period of the Emperor Long Qing to the Emperor Wan Li. Besides, Hangzhou, Ningbo, Shaoxing etc. These were also the places where wood letters were used in printing the genealogies comparatively early. There are still real objects printed in those places surviving now. These real objects of Zhejiang wood letters printed genealogies are the best evidence that the wood letters printing technology was generally used in printing books in Zhejiang Province in the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644 A.D.).

2.2 Wood Letter Printing Technology Meets the Needs of the Special Literary Style of Genealogies

In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, compiling genealogies became a common practice in Zhejiang Province, and various genealogies were compiled over and over again. To meet the needs of printing numerous genealogies became the basic of wood letters printing technology to inherit and develop. Wood letters printing technology which characterized by easy to brought along in tools, convenient and quickly in use, inexpensive and practical in price, naturally met the social needs. Types used in genealogies’ text were limited in amount, generally speaking, 20,000 words were enough. A large part of genealogy contents were taken up by genealogical trees, which did not need many characters in each page, whereas the words and lines should be in a great diversity, large and small, long and short, horizontal and vertical. Laid and printed as will, folded and bound flexible, are just the advantages of wood letters printing technology. The cycle of sequent compilation of genealogies was very short, and there’s no need to preserve the primary sheets, which is the exact point that wood letters printing fitting to the need of genealogy’s special literary style.

2.3 Jinhua Wood Letter Printing Genealogies Almost Disappeared After 1949

After 1949, because of the changes that happened in the social system and ideology, the compilation of genealogies in Jinhua and many other places of Zhejiang Province ceased. Wood letters of genealogy printing were almost burnt down, as well as the tools that accompanied them. There are only about 20,000 words of wood letters that survived in the whole Jinhua area.5
3. STIMULATED BY THE MARKET SYSTEM, MODERN GENEALOGY IN THE WENZHOU AREA CONTRIBUTED AN EFFECTIVE ROLE OF INHERITING AND DEVELOPING WOOD LETTER PRINTING CULTURE.

Today, many people would think that traditional wood letters printing technology has already retreated from the historical stage. However, in Rui’an, Pingyang and Cangnan in Wenzhou area, Zhejiang Province, there has been a strong socialized service team still printing genealogies with wood letters. This condition allows the traditional wood letters printing technology to gain a quick development once more, and many excellent genealogies were printed out with wood letters. From the 1950s to 2001, there were 488 titles of wood letters printed genealogies in Wenzhou, taking 43% of the total existing genealogies, and the great amount is rarely seen nationwide. Wenzhou modern genealogies inherit the wood letters printing culture, for all the procedure of its compiling, printing and paper-making followed the same pattern of the descriptions in ancient books.

3.1 Socialized Service of Genealogy Compilation

The reason that wood letter printing inherited in the Wenzhou area is complicated is mainly related to the existence of the prosperous socialized service of genealogy compilation in Rui’an, Pingyang and Cangnan.

(1) There is an artisan team of scale printing genealogies with wood letters. The great sum of existing wood letters printed genealogies reflected that in the early years of the People’s Republic of China. An artisan team of scale who used wood letters in printed genealogies had formed in Wenzhou society. It shows that prompted by the impetus of the market system, the action of using wood letters to print genealogies had become a sort of socialized service quite early in Wenzhou. Since the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the number of unofficial genealogy compiling artisans in Wenzhou has increased from very few to near 100. At present only in the Dongyuan Village, Pingyangken Town, Rui’an City, there are over seventy genealogy compiling artisans.

(2) Genealogy compiling artisans worked hard even under the pressure of the special political atmosphere. From the 1950s to the end of 1970s, with political movements following one after another, these artisans still worked unflaggingly. For example, there were the periods of Agrarian Reform and eradicating feudal patriarchal clan system from 1950 to 1952, Anti-Rightist Campaign in 1957, Implementation of General Line, the Great Leap Forward and People’s Commune in 1959, three years of natural disasters in 1960–1962, and the Cultural Revolution in 1966–1976 and “Wenzhou-style capitalism criticism” in 1973. It is thus clear that the genealogy compilation artisans in Wenzhou were professional and unflagging in the sensitive years of Chinese modern history.
without fearing the pressure of political atmospheres, which is hard to imagine if there is no impetus of market profits. The second reason might be the cultural policy implemented in Wenzhou was comparatively relaxed at that time.

(3) The names of genealogy compiling artisans’ households are used as the publishers’, therefore it became the representative names of artisans business halls and shops. Most Wenzhou genealogies are printed by the family households who own the same family names as the employers, whereas some new genealogies were printed by the family households, whose names are different. Because of the market profit, it appeared that a few family households provide genealogy printing service for different family names in different districts. Names of genealogy compiling artisans’ households are used as publishers’ names, therefore it became the representative of technicians’ business halls and shops, which bring some commercial color to the family household name which marks blood relationship, history and reputation of a family. It is seldom in other places to use the family household names in printing genealogies.

(4) Shops opened that specialized in printing genealogies. Besides using the family household names in wood letters printing genealogies, there were some shops that specialized in printing genealogies being opened. Some of them were new, and some had nearly 60 years experience.

3.2 The Live Testimony of Wood Letter Printing in Modern Inheritance District

The author of this paper made a survey in the autumn of 2005 in Dongyuan village, Pingyangken town, Rui’an city in Wenzhou, the hometown of modern wood letters printing. In the Dongyang village, there are more than 450 families with over 2,000 people, and over seventy genealogy compilation artisans. These genealogy compiling artisans not only have the ability to compile, but also to print, thereby they form many workshops where wood movable type printing genealogies are completely operated by hand, which is very suitable for the people who are willing to compile genealogies while living in the places in south of Zhejiang inconvenient in traffic. In these workshops, there are no modern tools, all the procedure from engraving letters to binding the genealogies is operated by hand. We specially visited a professional genealogy printing family, the head of the household was named Wang Chaohui. The title page of genealogies printed by him was carved with the word “Published By the Wang Family, Jiu Zheng House, Dong’ao, Pingyangken, Rui’an.” In March of 2004, the Rui’an government purchased and repaired the house with a courtyard owned by the Wang’s family for 400 years, and opened an exhibiting house showing wood letters printed genealogies. This exhibiting house not only shows many texts and pictures, but also invites Mr. Wang to make genealogies in it, which allows visitors to watch the whole process of printing genealogies with wood letters directly. After being reported by the mass media, the house attracts more and more people to visit, further
promoting the influence of Dongyuan village in the whole province and then in the whole country. This situation highlights Wenzhou, as the modern inheritance district, is a live testimony of movable type printing as one of the Four Great Inventions of Ancient China.

3.3 New Highlights of this Primitive Printing Technology

(1) From the ancient to the present, Wenzhou genealogies printed with wood letters always kept old letters since the Song Dynasty and the original complex Chinese characters. Employing the original complex Chinese characters in printed genealogies, inherits the official character of Chinese traditional culture.

(2) The procedure of printing genealogies with wood letters is complete and exquisite. The process of making letters consists of attaining the material, writing (reversed), carving characters and making types. The process of printing consists of typesetting, editing, printing, printing the separated circle-carved types (on the right side of characters in order to highlight that part of content), printing the red lines (among the names of different branches in order to show the relationship of them), filling the letters in. The process of binding consists of dividing genealogy pages, folding pages, pre-binding (drilling holes, nailing paper spills), cutting pages (cutting the edge of the paper), binding thread and making covers. Hard and tensile wood of Birchleaf pear is selected as the material of the letters for printing.

(3) The letters plate of Wenzhou is different neither from the letters case of Wuying Dian, nor from the circled-plate created by Wangzhen. In their long working experience, genealogy compiling artisans continued to improve the order of the type plate so as to make the typesetting good and fast. They divided the letter plate into a common type plate and a rare type plate, which also named as inside type plate and outside type plate. The types put in the inside plate are the titles of emperors, Heavenly Stems and Earthly Branches etc. The letters in the outside plate are put in the way in some eccentric words, it is very quick to find letters when needed. This kind of letters plate is different neither from the letters case of Wuying Dian, nor from the circled-plate created by Wangzhen.

(4) Small sheets of letters “combine” and form a whole printing sheet. For those sheets following some regularity, typesetting is not operated one type after another, instead, artisans make use of combining separated types with small typesheets. Especially when typesetting the lineage of a family and the birth or death years of a man, the whole printing sheet is commonly “combined” by small typesheets that must appear in one’s biography, such as “Ming, Zi, Sheng, Zu, Qu, Pei, Zu, Zang” (the name, the style name, rank in the family, birth, marry, death and burial). Afterwards, separated letters are filled in the sheet in accordance with the content.
(5) Collate the genealogy set on the letters plate with the draft of the genealogy. When printing genealogies with wood letters, the artisans also changed the process of collation, using the genealogy set on the type plate collated with the draft of genealogy, instead of the complicated procedure of first printing red or blue items, economical both in time and money.

(6) The technique of chromatograph in red and black is widely used in printing the diagrams of pedigrees, by which generations are linked with red lines making the stretch of each branch very clear. The piece of innovation in wood movable type printing not only promotes the speed of printing, but also makes the appearance of books more artistic than it used to be.

3.4 The Paper Made of Bamboo in the Old Papermaking Method Is the Main Material Factor Inherited by Wood Letter Printing

In Zeya town of Ouhai, Wenzhou, the old papermaking workshops still in existence amply satisfy the need for paper used in printing wood letter genealogies in Wenzhou. Just the continuous supply of paper produced by the old papermaking methods allows the wood letter printing technology to gain its main material factor of inheritance.

4 CONCLUSION

In order to adapt the social need as well as the scientific and technical condition and productive force, innovation in the material, procedure and method of printing was made unceasingly from wood block printing technology invented by the Chinese in the Tang Dynasty of early 7th century. In the Song, Yuan and Ming Dynasties, new printing technologies such as printing with clay letters, wood letters and metal letters were invented. Among them, in late the Ming and early Qing Dynasties, wood letter printing became the secondary main printing technology next to wood block printing, with the encouragement of the Emperor Wan Li and the Emperor Qian Long. However, in the late Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China, along with the rising of typographic printing passed from Western Europe, wood letter printing technology gradually declined.

In the People’s Republic of China, wood letter printing technology nearly disappeared on other cultural carriers, whereas in modern genealogies printed in Wenzhou, traditional technology of wood letter printing and the process of paper-making have been perfectly preserved.

In Chinese traditional printing culture, although wood letter printing rose later than others, it was wide spread and used with deep influence. Its invention and application had an effect on disseminating, developing and preserving Chinese traditional culture.
Genealogies printed with wood letters in the mid-east Zhejiang Province, which is represented by *Dongyang Lushi Jiacheng* (Genealogy of Lu’s Family in Dongyang, wood letter printing in Long Qing Emperor Period) and *Jinhua Lianchi Zhangshi Zongpu* (Genealogy of Zhang’s Family in Lianchi Jinhua area, wood letter printing the 1st year of Wan Li Emperor [1573]) had the clear in names and printers. Among the more than 100 titles of wood letter printed books of the Ming Dynasty, the names could be examined, and became an important coordinate in Chinese printing culture.

Modern Wenzhou genealogies printed in the original complex Chinese characters on bamboo-made paper with wood letters, not only respected the Chinese traditional culture, but also make an ineffaceable contribution to inherit and develop wood letter printing culture.

The movable letters printing technique is one of the most important contributions of the Chinese people to human civilization, and its influence should never be underestimated. Zhejiang Province is one of the earliest places where genealogies were printed with wood letters, and the technique spanned a long period and covered a broad area, which took up the leading position in the whole country all the time. Prompted by the impetus of the market system, modern Wenzhou genealogies have an effect on inheriting ancient wood letter printing technology. Therefore, coherent with the effort and brilliance of the Chinese people, wood letter printing technology though always playing an auxiliary role in Chinese printing history, has manifested its unique fascination and vitality in printing genealogies in the Zhejiang Province.

NOTES


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