

East Meets West: Printed and Bound Objects as Tangible Evidence of The Evolution of The Hybrid Culture of Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

Hong Kong is a unique city where Chinese tradition meets with the West; having previously been a colony of the United Kingdom, the city is heavily influenced by Western culture. Using the Tung Wah Group of Hospitals archives collection as references, this paper examines printed and bound objects of Hong Kong during its colonial period and how social changes transform printing and bookbinding technologies. With their fluid style, these somewhat monstrous, hybrid objects reflect their use, functionality, and value of their time. They manifest themselves in a physical form which is subject to the development of the culture of Hong Kong and offers insights into our past.

INTRODUCTION

The physical structure in which a book has taken form is subject to its historical context, geographical location and intended usage. It therefore reflects both the economic and cultural circumstances of its creation through variations in the techniques and materials used. This paper examines printed and bound objects of the Tung Wah Museum Archives of Hong Kong during its colonial period under British Crown rule from 1841 to 1997, a period that saw a remarkable transformation of both printing and bookbinding style. Contradicting characteristics of Eastern and Western printing and binding techniques collided within these objects, leaving physical representations of the development of the culture of Hong Kong. Through closely examining the archaeology of the collection as physical objects, we can gain a greater and more sophisticated understanding of how the printing and binding industries worked. With their fluid style, these somewhat

monstrous, hybrid objects not only reflect their use, functionality, and value of their time, but also cultural conflicts, social attitudes and political circumstances.

BACKGROUND: The Tung Wah Museum Archives

The Tung Wah Museum Archives preserves primary source documents of the Tung Wah Group of Hospitals, a charitable institution established in 1870 in response to the colonisation (Tung Wah, 2016). The archive preserves a relatively complete chronological collection of objects. These records which were created as products of regular administrative, commercial, legal, or social activities were selected for permanent preservation for their historical, cultural, or evidential value. They were meant to be temporary and ephemeral: to be discarded at the end of events. As such, their process of making and material choice emphasise functionality and cost-effectiveness rather than aesthetics or quality. This means that in contrast to rare

book collections found in museums and libraries which employed high quality materials and more standard binding structures, the most economical and accessible techniques and materials at the time were used to create these objects.

TRANSFORMATION OF STYLE

Two collections within the archive are of particular interest: *Zhenxinlu* 東華醫院徵信錄 (Annual Reports)(1873-1910) and *Kwong Wah Hospital Registers* 廣華醫院出入院總冊 (1917-1993). The collections belonged to different departments within the institute (home office and hospital) and served different purposes (Tung Wah, 2016). Therefore, they progressed differently in their adaption of Western technologies.

Printing Techniques and Materials

As an annual printed publication of limited edition produced for internal use, *Zhenxinlu* was printed with a combination of Chinese woodblock printing and Western letterpress printing up until its 1904-1905 report (reports after this year

were printed entirely in letterpress). General rules and guidelines for various departments and staffs were printed with woodblock printing and water-based Chinese ink, while the list of donors and board of directors of the year were printed with movable lead type in oil-based relief ink. The woodblocks were reused annually, and new printing blocks were carved as new rules and guidelines developed. In the Chinese woodblock printing method, pages were carved as individual blocks. Although the carving of the blocks is relatively more time-consuming, it does not require the complicated process of assembling, proofreading, and returning of type each time as it does in Chinese letterpress printing. Contrary to the rules and guidelines which remained the same, the list of donors and board of directors changed every year. The relatively quick assembling of text and reusability of type thus makes letterpress the most efficient printing method for these texts at the time.

Some of the features which characterised woodblock and letterpress printing are as follows:

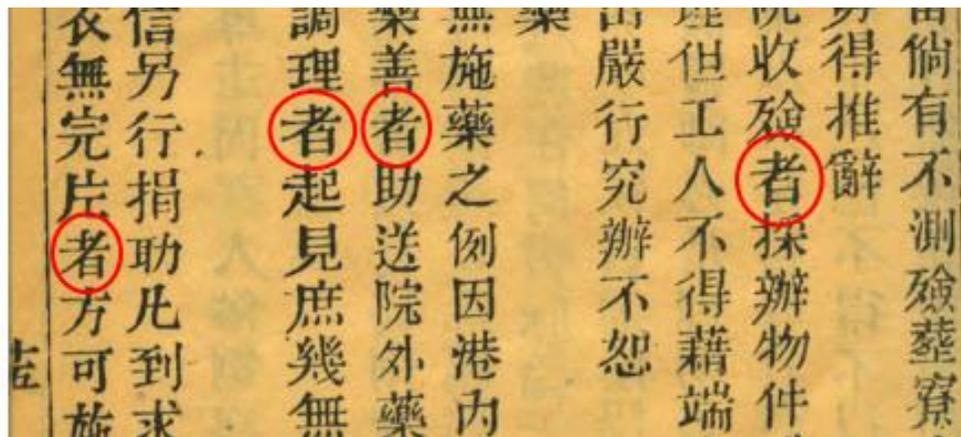


Figure 1 In woodblock printing, the carver will view the text as a whole and employ his aesthetic judgment to adjust the font (such as font size, thickness of the brush stroke etc.) in relation to the surrounding text. Therefore, as opposed to letterpress printing where the same characters are identical, the same character in woodblock printing will be slightly different in order for the text to achieve harmony as a whole. ©Tung Wah Museum.

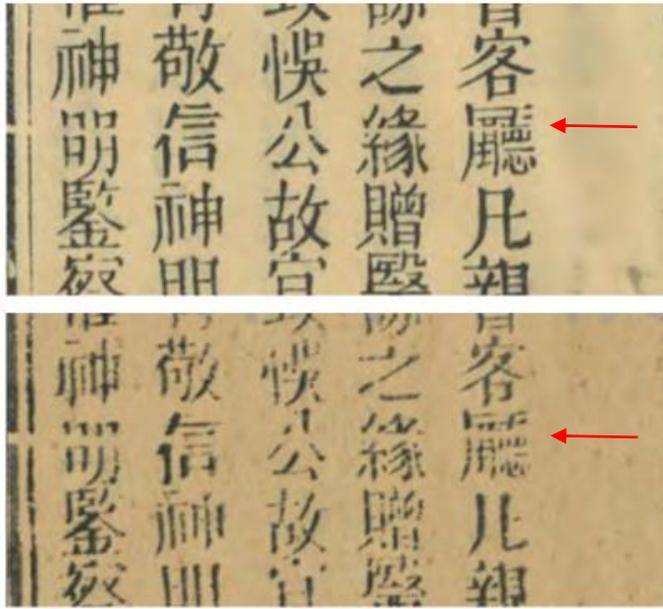


Figure 2 Same woodblock used for the printing of 1885 (top) and 1904 (bottom) copy. Note the decreased clarity in the text caused by the wearing of wood, and the increased breakage of the woodblock caused by the swelling of wood in its repeating contact to water-based Chinese ink. This breakage across the text is characteristic of woodblock printing where the page is carved as a whole, whereas blemish in letterpress printing will be limited to individual characters. ©Tung Wah Museum.

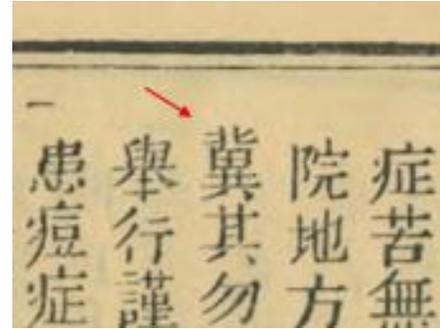


Figure 3 Note the difference in height between characters. This is uncommon in letterpress printing where empty space must be filled with leading which requires the types to be the same size. ©Tung Wah Museum.



Figure 4 Another feature which characterised woodblock printing is the overlap of strokes between characters. This is uncommon in letterpress printing where the characters are cast individually. ©Tung Wah Museum.



Figure 5 Examples of different fonts by different carvers. ©Tung Wah Museum.

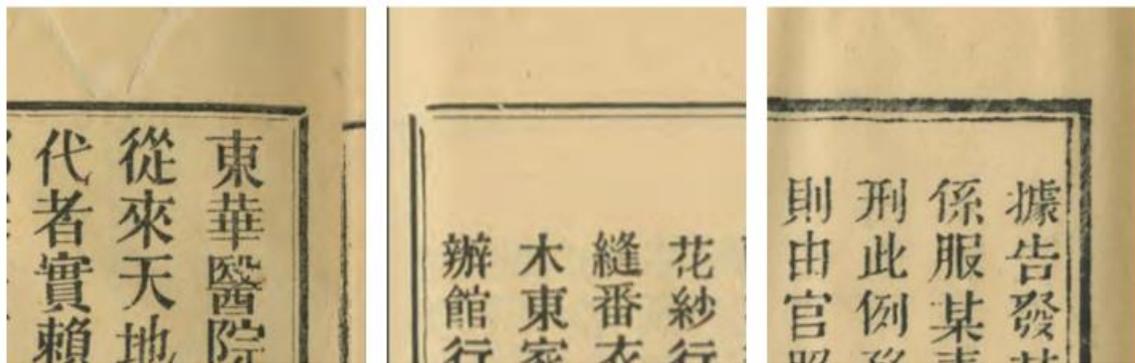


Figure 6 In letterpress printing there is always a slight gap in the corners of the boarder where two lead strips meet (left and middle), whereas in woodblock printing the boarder is carved as a continuous piece and therefore has no gaps (right). ©Tung Wah Museum.

Conversely, the *Kwong Wah Hospital Registers* were forms to be filled in as internal records; every printed page is identical. It was printed with Chinese woodblock printing in red dye up until 1940. Registers between 1941 and 1944 were letterpress printed. A range of style occurred in a total of seven registers (one was lost) created between 1944 and 1945, where the printing method of these registers oscillated between Chinese woodblock printing and Western letterpress printing. The registers were

printed entirely with letterpress printing after 1946. Rather than a response to the strengths and weaknesses of printing technology like the printing of *Zhenxinlu*, the *Registers*' methods of creation were a response to social changes, cultural influences, and political conflicts at the time. In 1941 during WWII, Hong Kong was attacked and occupied by Imperial Japanese forces, until British control was restored in Hong Kong in 1945. With limited resources, the hospital continued to provide a limited service to those in

need. The consistency of use of Chinese style before 1941, the change to Western style between 1941 and 1944, a mix of styles between 1944 and 1945, and settling on a consistent Westernised style after 1945, therefore, reflect the lack of interaction between the Chinese community and colonial authorities before 1941, the social unrest during WWII, and the shifting relations between Chinese and foreigners post-war.

On another note, although the printing method of the *Registers* from 1917 to 1940 was entirely Chinese, the red synthetic dye used in these objects suggested an earlier exchange with the West. Traditionally, mineral pigment (such as cinnabar 硃砂) and plant-based pigment (such as rouge 瑪瑙) were the common red used in China. However, mineral pigment is expensive and a traditional natural supply became difficult to obtain. The reds were later replaced by cochineal 洋紅 (literally “foreign red”), which was imported in the late Qing dynasty. Although these colourants continued to be used in Chinese art, they were soon replaced by cheaper but lower quality synthetic colourants imported from the West in the late nineteenth century for industries (Cheng et al., 2018; Liu, 2019).

Binding Style and Materials

The original binding of *Zhenxinlu* were entirely of Chinese origin; it employed Chinese bamboo paper, folded into drum-

leaves and stab-bound with four sewing stations. With a lost understanding of traditional binding structure and materials, the collection was rebound into Western case binding in the 1990s. This was a common practice in restoration of Eastern books not only in Hong Kong but worldwide either to accord the idea of what a book should look like at the time, or in an attempt to improve the preservation of these books. The result is a drum-leaf stab bound Chinese textblock with Western tipped-in endpapers, stuck-on endbands, and a stiff case covered in maroon buckram and gold-tooled title. The replacement of a soft paper cover with a stiff case cover not only interrupts the flow of the opening of the textblock in traditional stab binding structure and cause damage at the joint, but also changed its storage method from horizontal to vertical.



Figure 7 interrupted spine opening of the rebound book.
©Tung Wah Museum.



Figure 8 Example of original binding of Zhenxinlu. ©Tung Wah Museum.

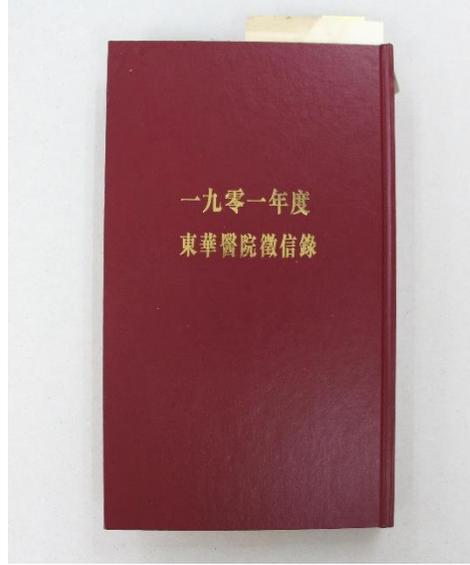


Figure 9 Example of rebound Zhenxinlu. ©Tung Wah Museum.

Printed with the traditional woodblock printing method, the early *Kwong Wah Hospital Registers* between 1917-1940 were bound in a common format for registers and account books in the Pearl River Delta region in the 20th century. The registers were bound in six-hole Chinese stab binding style with linen thread and indigo linen cover wrap around

the spine (Liu, 2014 & 2016). The Chinese lunar calendar date in Chinese ink is written on the bottom edge of each register, and a piece of linen cloth with the solar calendar date was stapled on the bottom edge of the cloth cover. This is commonly done in the horizontal storage system where the bottom edge faces outwards on a shelf.



Figure 8 Example of Chinese style Registers. ©Tung Wah Museum.



Figure 9 Example of bottom edge titling. ©Tung Wah Museum.



Figure 10 Example of Chinese woodblock printing. ©Tung Wah Museum.

Registers created between 1941 and 1944 and those after 1945 were letterpress printed on conqueror paper and bound in a Western account book style. The books continued to be written with Chinese ink until it was changed to

fountain pen writing in 1943. These registers, however, continued the practice of titling on the bottom edges which indicates a continuous horizontal storage system.

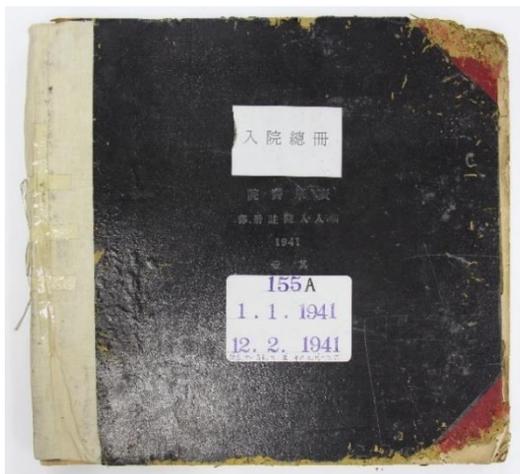


Figure 11 Example of Western style Register. ©Tung Wah Museum.

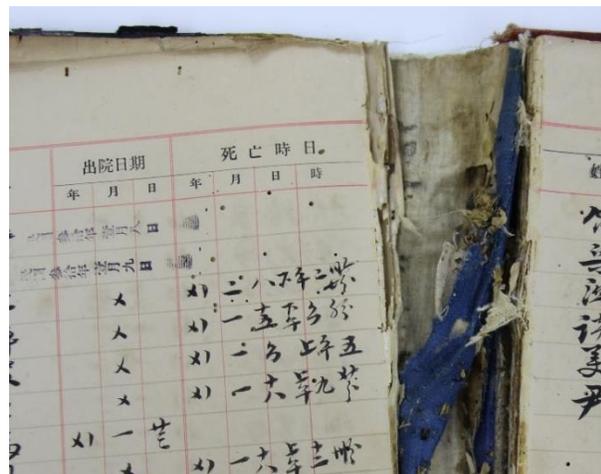


Figure 12 Example of letterpress printing and Chinese ink writing. ©Tung Wah Museum.



Figure 13 Example of printer's label. ©Tung Wah Museum.



Figure 14 Example of bottom edge titling. ©Tung Wah Museum.

An amalgamation of style occurred in seven *Registers* created between 1941 and 1945 (one missing) further demonstrates the social unrest during Japanese occupation. With no chronological order, one was letterpress printed on Conqueror paper and bound in Western account book style identical to those after 1945; two were printed with

Chinese woodblock on bamboo paper and bound in Chinese account book style identical to those between 1917 to 1940; three were letterpress printed on bamboo paper and bound in Chinese account book style, their content mainly hand-written in fountain pen and occasionally blue ball pen and Chinese brush and ink, and bottom edge titled with blue ball pen.



Figure 15 1944 Register. Note the right-to-left opening. ©Tung Wah Museum.

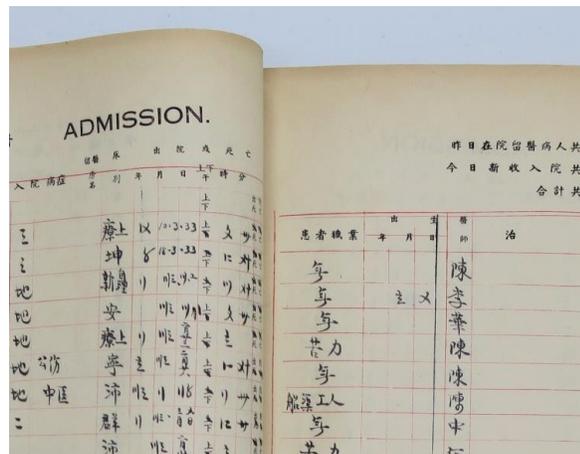


Figure 16 Example of letterpress printing on Chinese bamboo paper. ©Tung Wah Museum.

The tangible evidence of progressing Western influence not only reveals the political circumstances, material and technology available at the time, but also social attitude towards the foreign. As working objects, there were less thought involved in their creation; the choices and decision making are much more direct and immediate, and therefore, faithfully reflect the norm in daily life. Parallel to its medical content which shows a gradual acceptance of Western medicine, the physicality of the *Registers* offers a rich source of insight into a dialogue of cooperation and antagonism between two vastly different cultures through its structure and materialism.

Text Orientation - Relationship Between the Text and the Bindings

Traditionally, Chinese text reads vertically from top to bottom and right to left, and books are thus turned from left to right as the text ends on the left-hand side of a page. The occasional horizontal text would follow the same right-to-left orientation and later changed to the Western left-to-right orientation. This transition, however, was not always followed by the Western right-to-left page turning orientation in the binding and caused interruption in its flow of writing and reading. This lack of understanding of the function of these norms is particularly conspicuous in the *Kwong Wah Hospital Registers*. In the early Chinese bindings, the content was written in Western orientation (i.e. horizontally from left to right), but the book followed Chinese opening orientation (i.e. left to right opening) and the bottom edge horizontal titling followed traditional right-to-left orientation (which is opposite to the

content). This means that when the scribe or reader reach the end of the text on the bottom right-hand corner, rather than turning the page where it ends, they will have to return to the left in order to access the following content. The later Western bindings followed the Western horizontal left-to-right text and right-to-left opening of the book. This, however, caused much confusion when the *Registers* briefly returned to Chinese structure during war time. As opposed to the Western binding where the gold-tooled title suggested a front cover and thus a right-to-left opening to its scribe, the blank Chinese binding bore no titling on its cover and its bottom edge titling was added by the scribe at the end of its use, the opening orientation of the book thus depends entirely on the decision of its scribe. Therefore, both left and right opening occurred within the seven *Registers* created during war time as it depended on what each individual scribe was accustomed to.

CONCLUSIONS

The volume of material surviving in the Tung Wah Museum collection provides a wealth of material information through which our understanding of Hong Kong book production can be increased. The tangible evidence preserved in the collection offers a unique window to the ways in which cultural conflicts, social attitudes and political circumstances shaped the idea of the function, appearance, and usage of a book. As well as providing an insightful example of how traditional book technologies had been misunderstood as something non-functional not only by foreigners but also by its people under alien rule.

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