Zhongguo guji yuanke fanke yu chuyin houyin yanjiu 中国古籍原刻翻刻与初印后印研究. 3 vols. Shanghai: Zhongxi shuju, 2015. 462 pp. (vol. 1), 255 pp. (vol. 2), 376 pp. (vol. 3). Hardcover ¥ 680.00, isbn 978-7-5475-0855-8

Scholarly interest in the study of ancient Chinese woodblock books has led to a number of monographs and articles appearing in the last few decades. It is certain that Zhongguo guji yuanke fanke yu chuyin houyin yanjiu by Guo Lixuan has become critically important in this field since it was published. It has contributed several bright spots to the traditional studies that several generations of scholars have devoted themselves to.

The book is divided into three volumes. The first volume is the main text divided into two parts: General (通論編) and Examples (實例編). The General has nine chapters. The first three chapters elaborate on and discuss issues pertaining to original engraved (原刻本) and re-engraved (翻刻本) books, providing definitions, highlighting differences between original engraved and re-engraved, and discussing popular fonts and mimicked fonts of re-engraved books, identification of re-engraved books, etc. The fourth to sixth chapters focus on issues of first impressions (初印本) and later impressions (後印本) including definitions, differences between first impressions and later impressions, gains and losses of later impressions, identification of retouching (修版), replacement (補版) and successive reparations (遞修), and discussions on first impressions with manuscript and collated editions (校本), etc. From the definition of special terms to comparison of different editions, and from text collation to graphic evidence, the content covered in the first six chapters is quite comprehensive and detailed. The seventh to ninth chapters discuss some issues associated with engraving and printing, summarizing both previous academic achievements, as well as the results of years of study by the author. The second part, Examples, includes 108 titles of Song, Yuan, and Ming engravings. Each title is annotated with a detailed Chinese traditional bibliography (書志), including title, number of juan (卷), author, edition, column and number of characters, size of the block frame, trademark of printer, block carver and writer, preface and postscript, abstract, critical note, stamp, collector, etc., followed by a discussion of re-engraved and later impressions. Misjudgments made by predecessors are listed under ‘Amendments’ (訂誤). At the end of the first volume, a list of cited books arranged by the Four-corner Number System and a bibliography used by the author to write the book are made available.

The second and third volumes consist of the Plates (圖版編). The second volume contains approximately a thousand plates from the 108 engraved books discussed in the General part. Imprint information is provided for each plate. The third volume contains about 1,200 plates from the 108 engraved books described in the Examples. Imprint information is also provided for each plate. Clarity of all plates is very high and the effect is excellent.

Several reasons have made this book into the definitive standard in this academic field: the efforts and achievements of several generations of scholars, the opportunities and experience to access numerous ancient Chinese woodblock books, and, of course, Guo’s unique research ability and perseverance. In the preface written by Chen Zhenghong, two points are indicated to explain this book’s contribution to the traditional academic field of ancient Chinese woodblock books. First, it is the first book to reveal and explain comprehensively and systematically the important results that emerge when comparing original engraved and re-engraved editions, as well as first printings and later impressions. Second, it is a study of the research methods applicable to ancient Chinese engravings and imprints.

To summarize the characteristics of this book is to emphasize the systematic structure, the comprehensive content, and the applicable function. On the structure of the three-volume set, the textual narrative in the General part is fully supported and illustrated by numerous plates, and each plate is tightly connected by a textual narrative both transversely and longitudinally. The content describing the various differences between original engravings and re-engravings, and between first impressions and later impressions, is comprehensively represented through clearly defined special terms, carefully compared editions, critically collated texts, and effective graphic evidence. Numerous plates, a rheological map of different engraved imprints, research tips, etc., all make the book quite practical and applicable, which has made it an important reference book for the identification of ancient Chinese editions.

From the user’s point of view, the structure of the book could be further improved. First, it is understandable that the author has separated the textual narratives and the plates for the General part, since each plate could only be embedded into related narratives partially. However, the way the books are discussed in the Examples part is title by title. Therefore, having the annotated text of each book followed by the relevant plates might have been a more convenient format to use. Second, for ease of use, the publisher might consider including in a subsequent edition a Pinyin index to frequently cited books and plates.