Introduction

Its book is composed of cobbled-together fragments of the various histories along with various collections of apocryphal tales, and is quite full of oversights and inconsistencies, as, for example, when it says that Annam is an administrative subdivision of Zhancheng, though Zhancheng is really an administrative subdivision of Annam—such a text is decidedly not to be relied on as a source of information. In other instances its relation of events is also too cursory.

General Catalog to the Complete Library of the Four Treasuries, Qing dynasty

The above comment on the unreliable and bastardized nature of a book known as *Yiyu tuzhi* (Illustrated record of foreign lands) is found in the *General Catalog* accompanying the massive eighteenth-century *Siku quanshu* (Complete library of the four treasuries) compilation, the last and grandest of a succession of imperially sanctioned efforts to collect and account for the totality of worthwhile books in China. In the above passage, the *Siku* editor presents the rationale for concluding that the *Yiyu tuzhi* has no lasting value, and the text was accordingly excluded from the compilation. The attitude of the *Siku* editors toward the *Yiyu tuzhi* is typical of their general attitude toward a particular sort of “worthless” book that seemed to them to be closely associated with—indeed, typical of—the book culture of the preceding dynasty, the Ming (1368–1644). Again and again, Ming books and Ming editions were criticized, often in still harsher language, for sloppy editing and failure to properly cite sources, and for their crass
commercial orientation. Indeed, a generally critical or dismissive attitude toward Ming books was to become rather prevalent during the Qing (1644–1911) and, to some extent, afterward. Expressions such as “when the Ming people produced a book, then that book died” (Ming ren ke shu ze shu wang 明人刻書則書亡), or “Ming people did not know how to produce an imprint” (Ming ren buzhi keshu 明人不知刻書), first uttered by Qing bibliophiles, still enjoy a vigorous afterlife as part of the stock of quasi-proverbial catchphrases shared by Chinese bibliographical scholars up to the present day.\(^2\)

Such scorn of Ming book culture, reflected pervasively in comments by Siku editors, accords with a larger eighteenth-century and later critique of Ming culture as decadent and inferior in comparison with the Qing, and it reveals as much about the specifically Qing-era processes whereby these opinions were formed and articulated as it does about Ming books themselves.\(^3\) It was through these eighteenth-century processes that Ming encyclopedic compilations, for example, came to be criticized by Siku scholars as “absurd,” “made-up,” “stealing from the ancients to benefit oneself,” and as reflecting “Ming people’s habitual practice to plunder and steal, to delete and exaggerate at whim.”\(^4\) In short, Ming book producers, viewed from this developing eighteenth-century perspective, were a species of cultural hooligans and bandits. In a reversal of the suppressed narrative of Ming loyalists, who saw the Manchu Qing as a regime of violent barbarians that destroyed a civilized Chinese empire, the Siku scholars articulated a view of book history in which the Ming itself has become a barbarian other that must be controlled and excluded to maintain the order of the world of Chinese books.

Such a tendency to deny Ming books the status of “real” books would clearly stand in the way of any attempt to gain a closer understanding of those books on their own terms, and recent developments in Ming book history have begun to redress this entrenched dismissiveness.\(^5\) When the value judgments implicit in Qing invective against Ming books are set aside, however, these attacks themselves may provide helpful clues for an inquiry into the particular characteristics of Ming book culture. One of the most recurrent and colorful epithets used by Siku editors in reference to Ming texts is baifan 稗販, meaning roughly “hucksterish.” This phrase, deployed by the Siku scholars with great gusto, points to two problematic dimensions of Ming textual activity. Etymologically, bai
refers to rice-like grass that grows with and harms rice, and the traditional designation of “bai officials” (bai guan 稗官) refers to low-ranking officials tasked with collecting xiaoshuo, that is, “small talk” not deemed worthy of more serious consideration. In short, bai designates something that resembles the real thing but is not. The term thus warns of something that is, at best, light and trivial but that, if mistaken for the real thing it resembles, may prove positively harmful. The term fan 販, meaning “peddler” or “to peddle,” more directly points to the commercial and pecuniary aspect of the Ming publications given the epithet baifan. Thus when the Siku editors denounce a text as baifan zhi xue 稗販之學, they are calling it “bastardized peddler-learning”—or, to return to our rough one-word equivalent, “huckster-scholarship.”

These Qing scholars, editors, and bibliographers clearly used such language vituperatively. But when one’s perspective and aims in tracing a history of Ming books differ significantly from those of Qing critics, might even such vituperative language suggest directions for a reappraisal of Ming books—texts, pictures, pages, and volumes—and the role they played in the reading culture of the time? The broad direction of inquiry carried out in this book suggests an answer in the affirmative. Although one need not concur with the Siku editors in their condemnation of Ming book culture, or their judgment that many typical Ming books were not really “proper” books at all, one can acknowledge that the Qing critics did identify some of the habitual practices of Ming book producers and recurrent characteristics of Ming books. In the following chapters I will attempt a fresh look at some of these “hucksterish” Ming productions in terms of both dimensions suggested by the term baifan—first, in terms of a book culture that struck those eighteenth-century scholars as shockingly lax, cavalier, unscrupulous, and heterodox; and second, in the context of the motivations and strategies of production, promotion, and consumption driven by a burgeoning and unkempt marketplace for a bewildering variety of woodblock publications. In other words, I will explore the possibilities that arise when baifan is treated not as a term of dismissive invective, but rather as a point of departure for examining a historical moment in Chinese book culture that is worthy of exploration and appreciation on its own terms.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, particularly what is known as the late Ming (roughly 1570s–mid-1600s), explosive population
increases, rapid urbanization, expanded commercial networks, and volume of trade made the Ming a major force in the initial phase of a modern global economy. The accompanying transformations of social and economic life gave the late Ming Chinese themselves a sense of living in a special historical moment, and of sharing in a sophisticated and cosmopolitan vision of the world. In terms of the guiding position that commercial activity began to play in shaping both social structures and outlooks on the world, and of the expansion in range and volume of interaction with far-flung regions of the world, this is a period that has seemed a natural focus for exploration of the dynamics of China’s early modernity.

The late Ming was also the period when commercial woodblock print publications attained unprecedented diversity and popularity, and impacted Chinese cultural life in profound ways. The discussions in the following chapters often attempt to place developments in Ming printing culture in a larger historical framework, but it will become evident that the preponderance of our primary source material is centered in the late Ming period. The lives of many of the publishers, compilers, illustrators, and block carvers who were directly involved in creating and marketing the most distinctive Ming books are now datable only through the period of their surviving imprints, and the most common single period designation is that of the Wanli reign, extending from 1573 to 1620, and thus the reign period most squarely situated in what we term the “late Ming.”

Qing critics were not in fact the first to compare Ming book-makers to peddlers. The Ming scholar and historian Wang Shizhen 王世貞 (1526–90) drew the analogy between the production of certain sorts of Ming book and the peddling of consumer goods through a far-flung distribution network much earlier, and in a laudatory tone. For Wang, the ability of a good encyclopedia compiler to make rare or important texts available to a broad public rivals the business acumen of a successful trader. The very features that made many Ming books easy prey for critique under the standards of evidential scholarship, or for suppression by state censorship, are those that, if viewed afresh, offer insight into the texture of Ming printing culture. Where Qing scholars saw slipshod, irresponsible,
or even heretical treatment of the textual legacy of the past, others might enjoy irreverent wit, exuberant imagination, clever parody, and textual hybridity. What critics condemned as crass commercialism, others might appreciate as these books’ ability to vividly evoke their particular cultural moment—as exemplified by the phrases shishang 時尚 (the fashion of these days) or xinxing 新興 (newly in vogue) that so frequently adorn the often lengthy and exuberantly boastful titles of Ming publications.

Even what later came to be viewed as “hucksterish” books were in many instances quite authoritative in their own time, and they shaped the ways in which Ming Chinese viewed themselves and their world, as well as the ways in which readers in other regions of the world viewed Ming China. In fact, the difficulty of drawing clear lines of demarcation between “highbrow” authoritative books and “lowbrow” books for play or entertainment is a recurrent theme in Ming books. Like Student Zhang in the Story of the Western Wing, who, in one of the favorite moments of Ming theatergoers, readers, publishers, joke-tellers, and illustrators, perches astride the wall of his beloved Cui Yingying’s garden, Ming books seem perpetually to have one foot in the serious world of knowledge production and timeless cultural values and the other foot in the playful and ephemeral world of the marketplace. The very qualities that make these books unreliable as sources of ostensibly timeless knowledge about Chinese tradition may provide a window for us to see how actual human beings lived with, and within, that tradition at a distinctive and transformational historical moment.

The type of cultural mastery reflected and celebrated in many Ming woodblock books is not that of the rigorous and ascetic scholar, but rather that of the urbane city dweller with his savvy command of cosmopolitan fashions and entertainments of the time. Ming books offer a sort of “pulp scholarship” that is a protean hybrid of classical texts and traditional poetry, along with more popular lore such as dramatic literature and musical performance, drinking games, and witty repartee. To express this double-sidedness in terms of a pair of literary analogues, in Ming popular imprints the world of Chen Zuiliang 陳最良, the famous pedantic tutor in the preeminent late Ming play Peony Pavilion, is inextricably interwoven with the world of Ximen Qing 西門慶, the infamous merchant, libertine, and local power broker in the novel Plum in the Golden Vase.
Siku scholarship on Ming books remains a subject of heated debate, involving revered intellectual figures and even state leaders, and although modern scholars have revisited Qing assessments of Ming books, the eighteenth-century condemnation of Ming book culture has had undeniably real and lasting consequences. Several of the Ming books I have chosen for discussion in the following chapters have largely, if not completely, disappeared from the map of Chinese bibliographical tradition. This historical amnesia is partly due to the simple fact that Qing valuation of these texts has “stuck” in subsequent generations, albeit largely by default. A more fundamental factor underlying the forgetting of these books, however, is the fact that the very categories to which they belonged in the minds of Ming publishers and readers have also been lost. To these lost categories of publication, moreover, correspond not only lost niches in the Ming book market but, more basically, forgotten modes of consumption of books—that is, ways of using and interacting with books. Therefore, my basic approach will be to start from the books themselves to recapture the varieties of reader-consumer use and interaction they inspired. Each of the following chapters takes on a discrete aspect of this problem, beginning from a book or type of books and working outward to delineate the mechanisms of use and meaning-generation that correspond to each. Because these texts were so fluid, and because interpenetration among texts and categories of texts, as well as among kinds of knowledge, was so common, starting from case studies and moving outward in this way does in fact allow us to build a coherent general view of some of the distinctive ways in which books and their producers and readers interacted during the period.

The broad aim of this study, then, will be to suspend judgment about what Ming books are or ought to be, and to attend instead to the clues that these books offer about the historical contexts in which they were produced and used. In keeping with this aim, I will refrain from relying on various sorts of distinctions, such as that between poetry and musical drama or that between text and picture, that might be justified in other contexts. Many Ming book-makers themselves, including the most prominent figures such as Chen Hongshou 陳洪綬 (1598–1653) and Yu Wentai 余文台 (fl. Wanli reign), or somewhat lesser-known figures like Liu Ciquan 劉次泉 (fl. Wanli reign) and Zhu Dingchen 朱鼎臣 (fl. Wanli reign), all excelled in different areas of art and craftsmanship
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related to the world of books, including painting, woodblock engraving, fiction-writing, music, and theater. In reflecting on the range of readerly interactions with books, moreover, I will eschew any clear-cut distinction between literacy and illiteracy, or between reading and non-reading uses of books, in favor of a looser and broader notion of conversancy with the printed page that encompasses both high-level scholarly mastery of ancient and modern texts and various sorts of “knowing what to do with books” that might or might not include full reading mastery.

This approach also illuminates ways in which material dimensions of a book and the content of the book interact to create market appeal and cultural fashion. After all, in the Ming as in other ages, books might be objects of aspirational or prestige ownership just as easily as they could be a medium for communicating fixed written “content,” and as the circulation histories of many of the books to be discussed here bear out, it is useful to think of a spectrum or field of possible or projected uses or modes of consumption for a given book (even including “abuse” or other sorts of use not anticipated by the producers), rather than to imagine each book as having a narrowly specified audience or stable and definable use value. If the possibility of virtually limitless reproduction, and the accompanying risk of books falling into the “wrong” hands, was a central feature in the historical impact of printing technology in general, then the Ming culture of woodblock printing, which was also to a high degree a culture of promiscuous reprinting, recompilation, and recycling, would be the place in Chinese book history where these tendencies were played out to the greatest degree—to the great discomfort of many guardians of cultural authority and legitimacy.

Another reason for thinking in terms of “book conversancy” rather than “literacy” in a narrow sense when reflecting on Ming books is that the books themselves often invite us to interact with them in ways that go beyond straight reading of text. The interactions among text and illustrations, for example, or the preference for multi-register page layouts that bring together often widely disparate sorts of texts, along with the strong orientation toward active use rather than passive reading implicit in textual types such as riddles and drinking games with model solutions, all call for thinking in terms of multiple ways in which readers might engage with and appropriate the book, rather than simply in terms of correct or incorrect reading of textual content.
The inquiry into Ming “book conversancy” may also benefit by drawing on conceptual tools developed in recent work on the history of other print and book traditions, such as Robert Darnton’s notion of the “communication circuit” or Roger Chartier’s model of the “community of readers.” The notion of “communication circuit” aims to map out intellectual, socio-economic, and legal-political factors that impact the perpetual circuit of the making and consuming of books, involving both material and intellectual activities such as paper supply and publisher’s strategies, while the idea of “community of readers” draws attention to the specific mechanisms that distinguish the various communities of readers and traditions of reading, and to the ways in which communities are shaped by shared reading experiences that transcend classifications of social status.

By emphasizing that meaning-making is a dynamic process, such conceptual tools remind us that a wide range of economic, political, and symbolic factors constantly contribute to and reshape both the form and content of the book and the interpretive community encompassing both book-makers and readers, whose ongoing and interactive process of coding and decoding gives their books meaning. Studying these processes of coding and decoding by case and in detail may, in turn, allow us to understand how a text, picture, or book functioned for a group or groups of readers within its particular historical and cultural milieu. The categories of book-users and book-makers are especially fluid and overlapping in the case of the “hucksterish” Ming books to be studied here, where reuse and reappropriation is a particularly prominent mechanism in both the production and consumption of the texts and images that make up the book.

To see how books in the “hucksterish” Ming book world defy commonplace assumptions about texts, consider the case of the *Shanhai jing* (Classic of mountains and seas). When most people now think of the *Shanhai jing*, they are thinking of a notionally fixed and “correctly” collated text derived from a medieval recension of ancient cosmographic and religious traditions. This notionally “correct” text in turn serves as a standard authority for documenting early Chinese beliefs about various exotic creatures and localities. In the Ming, however, though the *Shanhai jing* was an important and authoritative reference text, several quite distinct versions of the book circulated under a variety of head-
ings or titles. The most widespread and influential version perhaps also qualifies as the most hucksterish: its text very frequently diverges from what is now recognized as the *Shanhai jing*, and it derived its influence and popularity not least from the fact that it was illustrated. It was also quite open and fluid, incorporating pictures and descriptions from other sources as well as providing material for a range of other titles. Thus for Ming readers, *Shanhai jing* was one designation among a protean web of pictures and descriptions of exotic lands and creatures, always subject to change in the context of use or appropriation in any given book.\(^\text{12}\)

Moreover, it was these open and fluid clusters of texts and images, and not the notionally fixed medieval text that the title connotes for us today, that impacted how early modern Europeans understood Chinese views on the cosmos and its inhabitants. The Jesuit missionary Gabriel de Magalhães (1609–77, Chinese name An Wensi 安文思) gave the following account based on Chinese records of Xiaoren guo 小人國 (Kingdom of little people): “Siao gin que [Xiaoren guo], or the Kingdom, the Inhabitants of which are all Dwarfs, and so little, that they are constrain’d to tie themselves several in a bunch together for fear of being carry’d away by the Eagles and Kites.”\(^\text{13}\) The detail that the inhabitants of Xiaoren guo often tie themselves in a bunch for fear of being snatched up by fierce birds appears nowhere in our familiar *Shanhai jing*. If we lose sight of the influence and popularity of the Ming *Shanhai jing*, and its permeability in relation to other books, we might fault the Europeans for relying on their own fantasies in reporting Chinese views of the world, though extant Ming materials do in fact describe and envision Xiaoren guo precisely as reported by Gabriel de Magalhães (fig. in.1).\(^\text{14}\) The *Shanhai jing* was a key cultural reference both within and without China during the Ming, and yet at that time its status as a reference did not mean that it required a carefully collated, fixed, and autonomous text as the guarantee of its authority.

The *Qian jia shi* 千家詩 (Poems by a thousand masters) is another example of how a text we may think is quite familiar was conceived of and handled in quite alien ways by Ming readers. Whatever preconceived notions one holds of what a poetry primer is or is for, looking at the specific form in which it circulated during the Ming (fig. in.2) forces us to reexamine what we think we know about this text. The page layout itself is an indication of a distinctive mode of interacting with the text:
Fig. 10.1. “The Country of Little People” (lower right corner) as seen in the late Ming encyclopedia *Wanyong zhengzong buqiuren* ('萬用正宗不求人'). By Yu Wentai 余文台. Jianyang, Fujian. From CNRS, vol. 10, p. 502.
the page is divided into a lower main register, where the poems are inter-
spersed with elucidations of each poem’s meaning, and a higher register
occupied by illustrations and response poems whose rhymes match those
of the anthologized works. These response poems, provided as a model
for the sort of imitative composition the reader should strive to produce,
indicate that this Ming version of the anthology is geared much more
toward particular kinds of interactive use rather than toward simple
reading. It is the elucidations, however, that offer the greatest surprise to
latter-day conceptions of poetry or the category of the “poetic” in the way
they gloss the poems’ meanings in terms of the Daoxue 道學 (Learning
of the Way) discourse on self-cultivation most closely associated with the
world of the eight-legged essay and the imperial examination system.
Taken together, these aspects of the Ming Qian jia shi reflect an orienta-
tion toward guiding the reader to reproduce poems in response, as well
as a set of implicit assumptions of what poetry is and what it is for that
appear far removed from our own.

One way of approaching this Ming book would be to treat it as
one exemplar of a notionally singular text titled “Qian jia shi” and to
collate the instances in which its texts of the anthologized poems deviate
from other sources. Such an approach would offer an intriguing look
at some of the variant readings and interpretations of these poems in
the Ming. But another approach would be to attempt to come to terms
imaginatively with the whole of the book, with its extra registers and
supplementary materials, as a way of envisioning how Ming readers used
the text. What distinctive idea of “poetry” was in play for readers who
were adept in the complex of reading practices (or, more generally, uses)
that this book, with its unique organization and layout, reflects? This
second approach, the effort to come to terms with the seemingly alien or
nonsensical aspects of Ming books on their own terms, is the one I will
pursue in the following chapters.

Working outward from Ming books themselves to map the webs of
historical practice through which they were produced, circulated, and put
to various uses is in some ways like attempting to reconstruct the rules
of a complexly intertwined set of games. In this sense, the Boxiao zhuji
博笑珠璣 (Pearls to evoke laughter) is a logical beginning point for the
studies undertaken here, since this book, with its highlighting of riddle
and game texts, often raises questions less about the texts’ meaning than
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about their range of intended use. Thus chapter 1 focuses on delineating the spaces of performance and use projected by the Boxiao zhuji. This line of inquiry reveals not only a constellation of canonical reference texts that is markedly different from the groupings that commanded authority in later periods, but also a brand of cultural practices that put those various sorts of canonical materials into play in displays of cultural mastery as well as in coded languages of pleasure and entertainment. The Boxiao zhuji contains vivid and often amusing examples of the ways in which Ming readers might have been encouraged to generate new meanings from long-established textual traditions; it also reflects some of the distinctive ways Ming readers categorized and prioritized the fields of verbal art and traditional knowledge as they conceived them.

Chapter 2 focuses on another print format in which the sorts of drinking games included in the Boxiao zhuji often appeared, namely,
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the distinctive Ming printing phenomenon now known as the “drama miscellany.” The drama miscellany was printed in a unique triple-register page layout, with the top and bottom registers filled with excerpts of plays and the narrower middle register displaying a variety of amusing, bawdy, or practical texts such as drinking games, riddles, jokes, and even instructions for brothel visitors. The above combination of format and content elicits such questions as, What kind of audience did these texts anticipate or create? Why and how did these books include what they did? What made them possible and profitable?

On one hand, the page layout of the drama miscellany seems to promote desultory, segmented browsing over linear, sustained reading, and to invite readers to claim individualized experience with the book through the spontaneous choice of order and emphasis in their reading. Such segmental reading encourages a sense of ownership (as the text becomes uniquely the reader’s text) and a taste for repeated viewing, a connoisseuristic gesture of appreciation (wanwei 玩味). On the other hand, the drama miscellany only became fully legible as a print genre through its complex associations with contemporary practices of private performance, encompassing both theatrical playacting and social gaming and role-play. In this sense, the triple-register format served as a textual analogue to the real linkages between fashionable modes of social behavior (modeled in its narrower middle register) and theatrical performance (represented by the dramatic excerpts in its top and bottom registers). In short, the page layout of this publication genre, both novel in its time and ephemeral within the broader trends of Chinese book history, reflects the ways in which social and theatrical performance merged in a new concept of the “performative self” whose central thrust was the ideal of being simultaneously at home and in the world. This ideal is reflected, for example, in the verbal and visual rhetoric of the drama miscellanies’ title pages, which present visions of private domestic entertainments shared among a small group of intimates, while simultaneously gesturing toward the reader, inviting him to vicariously participate in that intimate circle via the medium of the book and to “make himself at home” within this vision of genteel elegance and cosmopolitan sophistication.

Chapter 3 takes up several connections that emerge from the first two chapters in a study of the patterns of circulation and (re)production of Ming woodblock printing. Building from specific cases (such as the reuse of blocks and the reenactment of the famous “Student Zhang
Jumps over the Wall” episode in the Story of the Western Wing), this chapter examines a “poetics of error” through which the circulation and reappropriation of common motifs and imitable and reusable material becomes not merely a matter of convenience and cost-effectiveness in the business of book production, but also a distinctive generative technique in the production of new meaning.

Texts and pictures were repeatedly recycled and re-edited, each iteration aiming to capture a sense of novelty and freshness for the reader. Each local text, then, is to be situated in relation to other texts or books in the same family, and further to other works in a universe in which a diverse range of genres and registers of text participate. In the meantime, motifs and scenes were transposed throughout a wide spectrum of materials, both textual and visual, and formed a new system of signs and symbols that gained currency in the late Ming reading world. Particularly revealing of these universalizing signs and symbols is the process by which the pictorial depiction of the screen and the hall, emblems of comfortable living and domestic respectability, is transposed to pictorial imagination of the imperial court ceremonies, thus domesticating, both literally and figuratively, spaces, persons, and spectacles that were beyond the reach of commoner readers.

Chapter 4 looks at how some of the patterns of reproduction observed in chapter 3 operated to create one of the bestselling and most authoritative books about the broader global world to circulate in the Ming—the Luochong lu (Record of naked creatures)—a comprehensive pictorial on foreign lands and peoples. In many ways—in its spatial layout, its subversive humor, or in the sense it conveys of a fresh glimpse into a world of knowledge that is both deeply traditional and in step with the latest fashions—the Luochong lu is a typical Ming book, though in the centuries since the Ming it has fallen into almost total neglect. It is this very book, in fact, that, under its alternative title Yiyu tuzhi, was the object of the Siku editors’ vituperation in the epigraph with which this Introduction began. During the Ming, nonetheless, this odd text enjoyed very widespread popularity and exercised a tangible influence on both popular and elite imagination of the exotic.

From the fifteenth to the eighteenth century, the Luochong lu and its reprints in various types of publications were circulated widely both in China and throughout broader East Asia, extending even to global book markets. The creators of these pictorials and their critics included
emperors, princes, diplomats and local bureaucrats, literati, commercial publishers, and woodblock illustrators. This chapter first traces the production and circulation routes of these pictorials and then examines the changes in patterns of reading that accompanied and sustained this phenomenon. In bringing to light the lost history of this bibliographical niche, I hope to recover a sense of its specific relevance to the cultural and social world of late Ming China, as well as observe how, in going beyond China, these texts formed part of a global system of exchange involving not only material objects, but also forms of cultural fashioning.

What emerges in this chapter is a picture of a new book culture that provided a malleable yet enduring space for filing and disseminating fantastic ethnographical, zoological, and cosmological information, especially visual representations of exotic beings. In turn, these images and their accompanying descriptions became exotic collectibles in a milieu that valued the novel, the fascinating, and the “informative”—reflecting the flux and dynamism in the cognitive models for explaining and understanding one’s own place in the world via classifying and reflecting on the cultural and geographical Other. The printing history of these pictorials points to a period in which the book market valued text as a museum-like repository, creating a communication circuit in which pictures and descriptions of things beyond most readers’ immediate experience were gathered and displayed for convenient viewing. For the Ming reading public, the *Luochong lu* became a cabinet of curiosities housed in a book.

The *Luochong lu* is perhaps the most vivid example of the ways in which Ming books domesticated the broader world for Ming readers, but this dynamic may be seen at work throughout the range of popular Ming woodblock texts. These books often explicitly marketed themselves as counterparts to, or substitutes for, the material objects of luxurious consumption that carried cosmopolitan prestige but were probably beyond the reach of many readers. The books also persistently engaged the reader with fantasies of pleasure and cultural mastery on the grand stage of the city, whether in brothel manuals that modeled the style of the urbane and worldly wise playboy or in popular reenvisions of grand state rituals in which foreign tribute was submitted to the emperor. Often Ming woodblock texts show the imprint of particular regional
home affiliations and express mythologies of local pride within and against the frame of the broader cosmopolitan Ming imperial sphere. Popular imprints of this era afforded readers visions of feeling at home in the world, at ease or ill at ease as the case might be, by offering them the chance to create and inhabit texts, pictures, and books that reflect and give meaning to their own experience. The phrase “Glorious Ming” (Huang Ming 皇明) became a favorite touchstone in such visions of the Ming home-world. For Ming book-makers and users, such language could be employed with simple pride, but it was just as often tinted with a mockery or self-mockery that served less to debunk the imperial vision than to mark it as the particular possession of the ordinary book reader. For us, in turn, the term “Glorious Ming” and its like may come to stand as an emblem of the lost world of Ming reading, since Qing scholarship and politics would later erase the phrase from book titles, or simply destroy books whose titles contained such phraseology.

The mass production of woodblock texts from the sixteenth to seventeenth century drove, and was shaped by, corresponding changes in the habits and skills of readers. The books studied here, and the extended textual and visual families associated with them, are connected to one another in various ways: they appear in the same book or category of books, and they overlap with or borrow from one another, attesting to the so-called “copy and paste” compiling style that was to become a major complaint of Qing scholars. In their novelty—and, for the uninitiated reader, their opacity—these books presented to their readers a complex code of social and cultural meanings that could only be realized through a correspondingly complex constellation of interpretive skills. They stimulated new modes of readerly imagination and called forth new modes of social display and cultural dominance with their own strategies and sensitivities. By situating these books within the context of transmission and circulation in China and, next, to East Asia and beyond, this study interprets the ways in which they became culturally meaningful in a variety of period-specific contexts in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. By extension, it examines the rise of a particular type of book conversancy, a skill of reading and using books both as material objects and as linguistic and visual structures that enabled readers to bring grand and global visions into the ambit of their own domestic sphere.