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Knowledge on the Assembly Line: Industrial Publishing and the Shaping of Modern Chinese Knowledge Culture

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Abstract: This review essay examines Robert Culp's *The Power of Print in Modern China: Intellectuals and Industrial Publishing from the End of Empire to Maoist State Socialism* and explores how the book contributes to the study of modern Chinese cultural and intellectual history by shifting attention from authors, works, and ideas to the industrial organization of publishing. Centering the concept of *print industrialism*, the essay shows how Culp reorients the history of knowledge toward editorial departments, labor organization, workflow rationalization, and the institutional production of textual forms. It highlights the book's account of how editors emerged as a new intellectual stratum and how industrial publishing reshaped the making of textbooks, dictionaries, photolithographic reprints of ancient books, and book series. In doing so, the essay argues that publishing was not merely a vehicle for the dissemination of ideas but an infrastructure that organized knowledge, standardized language, structured readerships, and redefined the relationship between writing and management. The review further emphasizes the book's contribution to debates on continuity and rupture across the 1949 divide by showing that the logic of industrial publishing persisted, in transformed form, under state socialism and within the framework of the pedagogical state. It also identifies several avenues for further inquiry, including regional comparison beyond Shanghai, fuller attention to reader reception, and a more sustained analysis of the material and technological conditions of print production. Finally, the

essay underscores the book's contemporary relevance by linking its analysis of project-based production, editorial coordination, and the discipline of performance metrics to the organizational logics of today's content industries and academic publishing.

Keywords: Robert Culp; print industrialism; industrial publishing; modern Chinese knowledge culture; publishing history

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标题: 当知识进入流水线：工业化出版与现代中国知识文化的塑造

摘要: 罗伯特·卡尔普的《出版的力量：清末至新中国初期的知识分子与工业化出版》（商务印书馆，2025年）将出版史的关注点从作者、作品和思想转向出版的工业组织，为现代中国文化史与思想史研究做出了重要贡献。该书以“印刷工业主义”为核心概念，将出版史重新导向编辑部门、劳动组织、工作流程理性化以及文本形式的制度化生产，并着重讨论了编辑作为新兴知识阶层的崛起，以及工业化出版如何重塑教科书、词典、古籍影印和丛书的制作过程。在卡尔普看来，出版不仅是传播思想的工具，更是一种组织知识、规范语言、构建读者群体并重新界定写作与管理关系的基础设施。同时，该书对1949年前后出版的断裂与延续的论争做出了重要推进，揭示了工业化出版的逻辑在国家社会主义和教育型国家的框架内以变体形式延续了下来。另外，该书亦为后续研究打开了若干值得探索的方向：如突破上海中心视域的区域比较、读者接受的系统性实证考察，以及印刷生产物质技术条件的深度历史化分析。最后，该书将项目制生产、编辑协调与绩效考核的规训机制与今天内容产业和学术出版的组织逻辑加以衔接，凸显了其对当代知识生产的镜鉴意义。

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Introduction

First published by Columbia University Press in 2019 and issued in Chinese by The Commercial Press in September 2025, Robert Culp's *The Power of Print in Modern China: Intellectuals and Industrial Publishing from the End of Empire to Maoist State Socialism* is much more than a contribution to publishing history. Covering the period from the late Qing to the early years of the People's Republic, the book shifts attention away from the familiar triad of author, work, and idea and toward a different historical problem: what happened to knowledge once publishing ceased to be primarily a craft and became an industrial system

organized around editorial offices, routinized labor, and standardized print products? Culp's answer is ambitious. Industrial publishing did not simply transmit knowledge more efficiently. It reorganized the labor through which knowledge was made, the categories through which it was ordered, and the publics and intellectual types to which it gave shape. In that sense, the book is as much a study of modern Chinese knowledge production as it is a history of industrial publishing.

That larger ambition gives the study its force. Culp is not merely filling in a neglected corner of modern Chinese cultural history. He is asking what becomes of knowledge once it passes through the institutions, workflows, and economies of industrial production. Who counts as a producer of knowledge, and who becomes its organizer, manager, or mediator? How do textbooks, dictionaries, reprint projects, and book series turn knowledge into forms that can circulate through classrooms, bookstores, and everyday life? These questions form the analytical backbone of the book, unifying its diverse case studies and making it something more than a descriptive survey of discrete publishing enterprises. What emerges instead is a sustained account of how modern China's knowledge culture is materially organized.

1. Print Capitalism and Print Industrialism

The book's central conceptual intervention is its formulation of *print industrialism*. Culp begins with Benedict Anderson's print capitalism, but he does so in order to redirect the discussion rather than simply to restate it. Anderson, as Culp notes, was primarily concerned with the consumption of print and with the shared temporal experience of reading through which imagined communities came into being. Culp's question lies elsewhere. Instead of focusing on how readers were shaped by print, he asks how print itself was produced. The point of *print industrialism* is therefore to recover the production side of modern print culture: mechanization, centralized management, division of labor, and the rationalization of workflow all become integral to the making of knowledge.

This conceptual shift is inseparable from a methodological one. Great thinkers and individual authors no longer occupy the narrative by default. Instead, editorial workers—editors, compilers, proofreaders, project heads, and managers—move to the center of the story. By foregrounding their daily practices, Culp relocates the making of knowledge in concrete institutional settings: the editorial department, the publishing house, the printing workflow, the meeting room, the classroom, and the book market. Knowledge, in this account, is not detached from social and material life; it is produced within it.

The argument unfolds across three broad layers: the recruitment and organization of labor, the creation of culture through specific textual forms, and the legacies of industrialized cultural production under state socialism. That tripartite structure is revealing in itself. Publishing appears here not as a subordinate mechanism for transmitting ideas already formed elsewhere, but as an infrastructure capable of connecting talent, institutions, market demand, and state power. It produces not only texts but also occupational roles and social relations.

2. Making Knowledge into Products

One of the book's most effective moves is to bring editors from the margins to the center of historical explanation. China, Culp reminds us, had long possessed a vibrant publishing market and a well-established tradition of scholar-literati participation in cultural production. What changed in the late Qing and early Republican period was not simply the arrival of new ideas. Educational reform, foreign intellectual imports, and changing market demand together forced publishers to reorganize labor in unprecedented ways. The decisive shift, as Culp presents it, was that labor organization changed first. Only then could ideas be disseminated, standardized, and popularized on a new scale.

This argument also allows him to recover aspects of early editorial culture that broader narratives often leave out. Editors were not abstract intermediaries suspended between authors and readers. They had identifiable social lives, networks of association, and professional ethics, and they still moved within worlds marked by older forms of literati sociability. By tracing clubs, gatherings, publishing ventures, and circulation networks, Culp shows that modern publishing did not simply break with the past. Rather, it absorbed older cultural resources and recoded them within new institutional forms.

At the intellectual center of the book stands Culp's reconstruction of two competing visions of publishing in the early Republican period. In 1921, Hu Shi, serving as a consultant to The Commercial Press, imagined a publishing house that would resemble a university or research institute, equipped with research resources, laboratories, and a degree of intellectual autonomy for editors. Wang Yunwu, by contrast, articulated a model much closer to manufacturing. In his scheme, texts could be decomposed into parts, stored, recombined, and produced through a rational division of labor. Textbooks, reference works, and encyclopedic texts would no longer depend primarily on solitary authorship; they would emerge from a managed process of coordinated production.

Culp's discussion of collective compilation is especially strong here. Although Wang Yunwu spoke through the organic metaphor of the "organism," the structure he designed already resembled an assembly line. Modern knowledge texts were increasingly produced through centralized planning, distributed research and drafting, and layered processes of review and integration. This organizational logic also generated a new social position: the editor class. These workers were educated, intellectually ambitious, and eager for cultural participation, yet burdened by modest incomes and Shanghai's high cost of living. They belonged neither to industrial labor in the narrow sense nor to the world of elite scholarship. Their historical significance lies precisely in that intermediate position. Culp uses this liminal status to recast the figure of "the intellectual," not as a purely moral or political actor, but as someone shaped by wage structures, institutional hierarchies, professional discipline, and prestige economies. Seen from that angle, the separation of writing from management in modern cultural production no longer looks accidental. It appears structurally produced.

The contemporary resonance of this argument is difficult to miss. Project-based management, editorial review, segmented labor, and performance evaluation all feel uncannily familiar. Much that is often taken to be distinctive of contemporary academic and content industries was already visible, in embryonic form, in the editorial departments of major Republican-era publishing houses.

The same analytical strength appears in Culp's treatment of textbooks and vernacular education. He refuses to treat publishing simply as a neutral vehicle for the spread of ideas. Instead, he asks how specific print forms created an order of knowledge. The Commercial Press's launch of vernacular textbooks in 1919, and the rapid expansion of that line after 1920, did far more than simply align with the linguistic reform movement. Frequent curricular change compelled publishers to build stable internal mechanisms for drafting, revising, and updating educational materials. By 1921, the press had even created a dedicated Chinese Language Department for that purpose.

The implication is sharp. The Vernacular Language Movement is often told as a story of elite intellectual liberation and stylistic revolution. Culp shows that its social efficacy depended just as much on the industrial production of textbooks. Only through large-scale supply and standardized pedagogical use could the vernacular become an everyday linguistic reality. Textbooks did not merely spread a new style of writing; they tacitly defined what counted as proper modern prose and what could be taught as legitimate knowledge.

Dictionaries extended this logic. If textbooks addressed how people learned to read and write, dictionaries addressed the concepts through which they learned to understand the world. Culp's discussion of *Ciyuan* (*Sources of Words*) and *Cihai* (*Sea of Words*) is persuasive precisely because he treats dictionary compilation not only as scholarship but also as organization and labor. *Ciyuan* was imagined as a kind of compass for navigating new learning. *Cihai*, meanwhile, embodied a more explicitly modern epistemic logic: new terms were to be gathered from current publications, and recent historical events incorporated into the lexicon. Under such conditions, the dictionary became a machine for assembling new concepts, new institutions, and new histories into public language.

Scale is crucial here. As dictionary and textbook projects expanded, compilation teams grew dramatically, reaching about fifty members by the mid-1930s. Editing and proofreading were divided into teams and procedures; later revisions made visible specialized groups, work meetings, and representatives of the municipal publishing bureau. Knowledge was no longer simply intellectual content. It had become the output of an industrial system sustained by positions, workflows, meetings, and something akin to version management.

Culp's chapter on photolithographic reprints of ancient books is equally important because it complicates the entrenched binary opposition between modernity and tradition. Projects such as the reprinting of *Gujin Tushu Jicheng* (*Complete Collection of Illustrations and Writings from the Earliest to Current Times*) show

that tradition was not displaced by industrial modernity. It was remade within it. In order to replace missing fascicles, ensure typographic consistency, and control costs, Zhonghua Book Company relied on both the book market and literati networks while redesigning format and layout for economy. The recovery of tradition, in other words, depended on the dual mobilization of both market and social network.

Culp is especially effective in reconstructing the labor scene of such projects. Participants recalled workflows in which editing, mounting, proofreading, repairing, photographing, proof-checking, plate-making, printing, and binding proceeded simultaneously. Temporary teams and continuous shifts were organized to keep the process moving. What this makes visible is not the disappearance of tradition but its recoding into a reproducible and circulable industrial product. That, Culp suggests, was one of the key mechanisms through which Chinese tradition was widely reproduced in modern times.

The discussion of book series opens yet another route into the problem. Here the issue is not formal education, but the popularization of knowledge outside it. The World Book Company's *ABC Series* is exemplary in this regard. Its aim was mass education, but its significance lay equally in form. Short, categorized pieces written by experts broke specialized knowledge into manageable units for ordinary readers. The shift was subtle but consequential: away from the one-time purchase of heavy scholarly works and toward serial products that could be bought selectively, read incrementally, and fitted to the needs and preferences of individual readers. In this respect, the book series became an important instrument for broadening the social reach of knowledge.

Culp also insists on the political implications of these projects. Because they remained relatively independent of universities and the state, such series gave educated elites an alternative route for exercising leadership in society. Before the state and the university system had fully absorbed the work of knowledge dissemination, industrial publishing took on a quasi-public educational role by combining market organization with product design.

The final chapters place this history within the state socialist transformation of the early People's Republic. Here again, Culp resists a crude narrative of rupture. The move toward public-private joint operation and, later, state socialist reorganization unquestionably changed the institutional landscape. Campaigns such as the Five-Anti Campaign of 1952 shook the industry, and by June 1954 Shanghai's publishing industry had entered a new phase of public-private joint operation, marked by a banquet attended by Premier Zhou Enlai and by the conversion of major houses into joint public-private enterprises. But Culp is more interested in what persisted through transformation. The state did not abolish the logic of industrial publishing; it inherited and intensified many of its core imperatives, especially those of efficiency, scale, and service to a mass readership.

This is where the concept of the *pedagogical state* becomes especially useful. Under state socialism, publishing became one of the means through which the state sought to educate and guide society. Yet cultural production did not thereby become a simple one-way command structure. The expertise of editors and scholars remained indispensable; readers still mattered; negotiation persisted. Culp's example of the later revision of *Cihai* makes the point clearly. Representatives of the municipal publishing bureau assumed roles analogous to those of earlier executive editors, while professional expertise continued to set limits on what could be done. The result is a much more nuanced account of socialist cultural production than either a pure rupture thesis or a pure continuity thesis can provide.

3. Reframing the History of Intellectuals

Taken together, these arguments make the book important on at least three fronts. First, it re-socializes and re-professionalizes the intellectual. Through editorial labor, wage structures, costs of living, promotion patterns, institutional discipline, and prestige economies, intellectuals appear not as naturally elevated inhabitants of a realm of ideas, but as historically constituted social actors. The history of intellectuals therefore cannot be confined to cataloguing ideas. It must also ask under what institutional conditions particular knowledge-producing roles became possible.

Second, the book clarifies modern Chinese knowledge culture by examining it through the dual lenses of textual form and production process. Textbooks, dictionaries, book series, and reprint projects were not neutral vessels. Each segmented knowledge differently, standardized it to different degrees, and imagined different publics. Textbooks and dictionaries helped establish new prose norms and vocabularies; book series reorganized the supply of knowledge and created new channels through which elites could exert influence. By bringing media form and production logic into the same frame, Culp makes it easier to see why modern knowledge took the shapes it did.

Third, the book offers a more fine-grained basis for thinking about the relationship between the Republican and socialist periods. Social and economic institutions changed dramatically after 1949, but industrial publishing's need for scale, efficiency, and procedural regularity did not disappear. A limited but real space for adjustment remained even under new forms of governance. In that respect, Culp's preferred explanatory model—structural continuity combined with institutional reorganization—fits the historical record better than a simple insistence on either absolute rupture or unbroken continuity.

4. Limitations and Future Avenues for Scholarly Inquiry

The book is strong enough that its limitations are best understood as openings. Its empirical center lies overwhelmingly in large Shanghai publishing institutions. That focus is well justified: Shanghai provides the clearest view of industrial publishing in its most developed form. Yet the emphasis also risks minimizing the

role of regional publishing, local educational systems, and smaller book workshops in the diffusion of knowledge. A broader comparison incorporating North China, Central China, and frontier regions might further clarify how industrial publishing interacted with state-building and local society.

A second limitation concerns readers. Culp is right to treat readers as one side of a negotiated relationship, but the empirical center of gravity remains within institutions: editorial departments, project organization, and managerial systems. Readers usually enter the narrative through market demand or audience positioning rather than through thickly described social experience or archival evidence of reader reception. Letters from readers, borrowing records, bookstore sales data, and school procurement archives would further illuminate how different knowledge products were understood, misinterpreted, or reappropriated by specific groups.

A third issue concerns technology. Culp vividly describes how industrial organization reshaped knowledge production, especially in the case of large reprint projects. But technology often remains a background condition rather than a fully developed analytical object. One would like to know more about how printing equipment, plate-making techniques, and paper supply chains constrained page design, text length, illustration, and collation. Had that material dimension been drawn out more fully, *print industrialism* might have emerged not only as an organizational concept but also as the basis for a more developed material history of publishing.

None of these limitations diminish the book's value. On the contrary, they testify to the extensibility of its framework. Subsequent researchers can readily carry its questions into new regions, richer archives, and more fine-grained histories of technology.

Conclusion: A Historical Mirror of Contemporary Knowledge Production

It is difficult to finish this book without thinking about the present. Project-based management, standardized workflows, divided labor, and performance evaluation—many of the organizational logics often treated as peculiar to the digital age were already taking shape in the editorial offices of Republican-era publishing houses. The model Culp reconstructs, in which texts are broken into components for reassembly, bears an obvious resemblance to today's modular content, standardized curricula, and reusable knowledge units.

More important still, the book reminds us that the power of knowledge culture resides not only in grand ideas but also in apparently neutral formats, procedures, and product design. Textbooks define standards of writing. Dictionaries establish conceptual boundaries. Book series slice knowledge into manageable and consumable segments. In that sense, the power of publishing lies in its capacity to convert ideas into forms that can be reproduced, distributed, and used for training.

What makes *The Power of Print in Modern China* especially compelling is that it restores to the center of modern Chinese cultural history those figures so often left at the margins: editors, compilers, proofreaders, and publishing managers. Through the framework of *print industrialism*, Culp shows how they collectively shaped not just the circulation of knowledge but its very form and distribution. Modernity, in this account,

was not simply the triumph of ideas or of great thinkers. It was also the triumph of organizational capacity—and of the countless intellectual workers who met deadlines, proofread manuscripts, and lived under the discipline of performance metrics.

If older forms of intellectual history often imagined knowledge as something lofty and distant, Culp turns our attention downward: to workstations, workflows, meetings, divisions of labor, and ledgers. It is there, on the ground, that abstract knowledge is transformed into something durable, portable, and socially usable. By the end of the book, one sees clearly that publishing is not merely a vehicle through which culture appears in public. It is one of the mechanisms through which culture itself is made.

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