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Radical Printing

Just like most other aspects of life, Eurocentrism has pervaded the art and history of printing. While most credit Johannes Gutenberg with the invention of the first printing press in 1450, Chinese printers were developing printed newspapers and movable type far earlier than that (Gunaratne 459). As printing was one of the most revolutionary inventions of the human race, the exclusion of Chinese accomplishments is unacceptable, though unsurprising. However, modern printers have the opportunity to create a more inclusive and radical community by educating themselves about the Eurocentrism present in the history of their craft. Letterpress can provide an artist with interdisciplinary skills, knowledge, and mindset that translate to a more just society. Aspects of letterpress printing can be drawn upon in order to place the art in a digital age; its subversive nature becomes clear when viewed through a historical lens.

Chinese printing inventions are mentioned historically as long ago as 255 BCE. Block printing and bronze casting, two predecessors of printing with movable type, come from China far before Gutenberg's "independent" invention (Gunaratne 465). They invented paper, used ink, and incorporated rubbing methods to create prints for larger productions. In addition, the "world's first official printed publications" (Temple qtd. in Gunaratne 466) were created in China between 932 and 953—the 11 Confucian classics. Many other religious texts, such as Buddhist sutras were printed around this time, as well (Gunaratne 466).

The most important invention out of this time period, however, was movable type, which led directly to the creation of the printing press. An alchemist named Bi Sheng invented it "between 1041 and 1049 when he experimented with type made of earthenware set in an iron form" (Gunaratne 467). However, many printers and society at large are unaware of Sheng's contribution to perhaps the most important invention in communication history. Most people credit Gutenberg with the invention of movable type along with the printing press. This is a shameful omission and blatant exclusion of Chinese invention in favor of a toxic European exceptionalism paradigm. Gutenberg's "invention" of movable type didn't come until thousands of years later, but his whiteness has pervaded the history of movable type and the printing press. While Gutenberg had some impact on modern printing and communication, "the premise of European exceptionalism resulted in bestowing on [him] more credit than he deserved, thereby denigrating the real inventors in the far East" (Gunaratne 473).

Another reason for the historical exclusion of Chinese inventions is a material one. While it has been established that many of the forerunners for printing en masse were invented in China, the Chinese alphabet "lends itself only poorly to the requirements of a typography" (*The New Encyclopedia Brittanica* qtd. in Gunaratne 474). The symbol-based language includes more than 80,000 characters, and it is difficult to create an all-inclusive character library of type. The 26-letter alphabet, however, can be easily moved to movable type. In addition, "mass production was not the intent of the block printers of China" (Gunaratne 474). While education, learning to read, and the creation of books were important to Chinese printers, they were not as focused on the capitalistic and/or revolutionary capabilities of printing. Instead, it "facilitated the continuity

and universality of the written language and thus became an important vehicle for sustaining the cultural tradition . . . in the printing of the Confucian classics" (Tsien qtd. in Gunaratne 474).

After movable type was invented, the printing press was the next logical step. The first presses were hand presses, which had to be inked and operated by hand for each print (Leuner). Gutenberg, of course, created a printing press and some form of movable type, though he was not the first to do either. After this 1450 display, others tinkered with his design, and William Janszoon Blaeu created the "new-fashioned" press in 1620. While it was "still mostly made of wood[,] it remained the standard for 150 years (Leuner).

The Industrial Revolution had great consequences on the printing industry. Due to increases in demand for printed items, hand presses were falling quickly out of favor because they were too slow and required a large amount of effort. In 1830, S.P. Ruggles invented the "Ruggles Job Press," which got its power from a foot treadle or steam power (Leuner). It was built for printing larger quantities of smaller items, like tickets, pamphlets, or cards. Of course, the invention of jobbing presses leads to the Chandler & Price Platen Jobbing Press. The "New Style" C&P press that is housed in the Edward M. Dowd Art and Art History Building at Santa Clara University was built in 1917, and features an 8x12" platen. It is powered by foot treadle and is the main press used for our Letterpress class.

Noting the Chandler & Price Platen Jobbing Press as a culmination of all invention before it has a striking effect on those who print on it. It leads to a greater appreciation of the incredible amount of human ingenuity it took to create something of this level of artistry, and an even greater appreciation for how far we've come from that press. Equally as important is recognizing the exclusionary history of printing. This allows printers to reflect upon their own ability to write

a new future with the press—one that champions inclusion, recognition, and collaboration. The type used for the press, as well, is loaded with historical significance. It took hundreds of years to get type to where it is today—it's almost unbelievable that it is sold as a niche hobby when it was once integral to an entire society's education and printing matters. However, it only took about a hundred years to rocket past movable type and printing presses to create the digitized versions. People today can type from their watch, and send messages instantly to anyone in the world, at any time. It takes almost no effort—you can even send texts with your voice while you're driving a car, going for a run, or shopping for groceries.

It feels subversive to be printing in a digital age. As printing has been used for radical movements, like Martin Luther's "95 Theses," it has a seemingly intrinsic political and radical sense to it. By slowing down and subverting laptops and and MacBooks and emails, letterpress allows for printers to engage in critical thinking and making. Mistakes happen constantly, and the troubleshooting necessary to fix everything takes patience and a good attitude. In this vein, I've recently gotten addicted to TikTok, and spending all day with that dopamine crush is terrible for me. I can feel it rewiring my brain and forcing me to have a minute attention span. Even while I'm watching the extremely short videos on my phone, I have to check the comments or open something else up to pass the time. Letterpress, by contrast, is extremely slow. It takes time to create a valuable idea that isn't corny or weird. It takes time to pull a classmate to grab a case with you, to locate the type you want to use, pick a font. You must choose wisely and make conscious creative decisions in every step of the process. You must pay attention to every detail, or else your print will be crooked or ugly. It is an incredible art form to combat certain ills of society.

Letterpress has an intrinsic communal nature, as well. It takes two to pull out a case of type, two to print safely, two to collaborate and share ideas on setting. I was astonished at the amount of teamwork required to create some of the pieces, and how much I wanted to collaborate with my neighbors. I am not a very social person, but I truly enjoyed working with those around me, and we all aided each other in creating the best pieces we could make. For example, with the final sonnet book project, many of the students in the class continued to get lost, fall behind, or get confused. I witnessed the entire class helping each other, fumbling along with our needles and awls, until we all finished two books. Other members of the class were genuinely happy for each other when they figured something out; Emmy, David, Cindy, and I worked together constantly to make the project as beautiful as we could. The teamwork that our table showed was unlike anything I have ever experienced. The artistic environment allowed us to feel free to make mistakes, and also help each other in any capacity that we can. This manner of kind, beautiful collaboration shifts away from the current American system of capitalism and individualism, and back towards the less productive printing times, reminiscent of the original Chinese vision. This movement away from the maximum yield culture of capitalism is refreshing and beneficial for all printers who practice this craft.

It is quite clear that letterpress has a place in the digital age. It provides a quietly radical solution to many of the issues that people face today that are direct effects of technology and capitalism. Printing, it seems, wasn't invented as the springboard for an exponentially growing, digitally-addicted society—it was always meant for us to slow down and create something beautiful.

Works Cited

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