

The Historical Evolution of Song Type and the Mechanism of Its Cultural Semiotization

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Abstract: *Song type (commonly rendered as “Song typeface” or “Ming-style typeface”) is one of the most widely used and highly institutionalized typefaces in the contemporary Chinese printing system, yet its historical formation is far more complex than the popular account that it was “created in the Song dynasty.” Building on existing research in textual bibliography, printing history, and design studies, this paper traces the historical trajectory of Song type—from its germination in the block-printing conventions of the Song dynasty, through its technical consolidation by engravers in Suzhou during the mid-Ming period, to the official confirmation of its “naming rights” in the Qing dynasty, and finally to its standardization in modern computer font libraries. On this basis, the paper examines how Song type gradually acquired cultural meaning beyond its origins as a product of printing technology, evolving into a recognizable and appropriable “cultural symbol.” The study argues that Song type is no longer merely a tool for conveying information but has become a representative emblem of traditional Chinese culture, and that its semiotization was not the result of any single factor but rather the cumulative and interactive outcome of technology, institutional norms, and cross-cultural dissemination over an extended historical period.*

Keywords: Song typeface; Printing typeface; History of typography; Cultural symbol; Semiotization mechanism.

1. Introduction

In the development of contemporary social culture, Song type is currently the most commonly used printing typeface—ranging from the typesetting conventions of body text in printed publications to creative cultural advertising, Song type has been internalized as an almost “default” form of cultural expression. This “defaultness” itself merits inquiry: how did a product of block-printing technology, born under specific historical conditions, gradually acquire the normativity, authority, and even cultural symbolic connotations it holds today? Answering this question requires attention to both the technical history of the typeface’s formal evolution and a mechanistic analysis of how its socio-cultural meaning was generated—these are the two analytical threads this study seeks to develop.

2. The Historical Evolution of Song Type

The Song dynasty was a period of great prosperity for China’s block-printing industry. Some scholars have pointed out that the early Song rulers, out of a concern to consolidate their rule, promoted a policy of “favoring civil culture” (右文), which objectively promoted the development of the publishing and printing industry. However, the “Song-type” in widespread use today, despite being named after the Song dynasty, did not actually originate there. During the Northern and Southern Song periods, the

typefaces used in block-printed editions generally still took as their main aesthetic reference the imitation of the regular script (kaishu) of famous calligraphers—for example, editions printed in Zhejiang tended to follow the style of Ouyang Xun, those in Sichuan followed Yan Zhenqing, and those in Fujian were closer to Liu Gongquan. In other words, the “Song type” of this period in fact continued the forms of regular-script handwriting; it was essentially a transliteration of handwritten regular script into the medium of block printing, retaining a strong sense of calligraphic brushwork.

The true formal consolidation of Song type occurred in the mid-Ming dynasty, particularly during the Zhengde and Jiajing reign periods, which mark the key turning point. According to the study Suzhou Keshu Shi (*A History of Book Engraving in Suzhou*), edited by Professor Chen Zhenghong of the Institute for Ancient Books at Fudan University, Song type was gradually developed and invented through the long-term engraving practice of craftsmen in the Suzhou region around the Zhengde period of the Ming dynasty; its influence subsequently spread from Suzhou to Zhejiang and Fujian, and eventually throughout the country. Ming-dynasty literati and book collectors held “Song editions” in extremely high regard, viewing them as the finest items in book collecting. As a result, when Ming-dynasty commercial and official print shops reproduced Song editions, in order to balance efficiency with cost they often reproduced only the general outline of the Song-edition character forms rather than their original calligraphic brushwork, thereby giving rise to a simplified character form known as “superficial-outline characters”. The Qing-dynasty scholar Qian Daxian recorded in *Ming Wen Zai* that “in the late Ming period there began to be scribes who specialized in writing superficial-outline characters, which came to be called Song”—a record that illustrates the line of descent between the name “Song” and “superficial-outline characters.”

In terms of structural form, the Song type consolidated during this period exhibits features such as thin horizontal strokes paired with thick vertical strokes, horizontal and vertical strokes that are perfectly level and straight, and sharply angular stroke terminals. The formation of these features is related to the physical constraints of the block-printing process itself: Professor Chen Zhenghong has pointed out that ancient book blocks were typically cut longitudinally along the tree trunk, so that the direction of horizontal strokes aligned with the grain of the wood and was less prone to splitting, while vertical strokes ran perpendicular to the grain and were more prone to splitting—this may be one of the technical reasons why typefaces of editions printed around the Wanli period display the feature of “thin horizontal, thick vertical” strokes. In addition, some studies suggest that this variation in stroke thickness exploits the structural characteristic that Chinese characters generally contain more horizontal strokes than vertical ones, thickening the fewer vertical strokes to balance visual density and legibility. The bibliographers Qu Wanli and Chang Bide, in *Tushu Banbenxue Yaolue* (*An Outline of Textual Bibliography*), likewise describe this evolution—in which “engravers, for ease of exerting force, gradually shifted to lighter horizontals and heavier verticals”—citing as an example the Wanli-period edition of the *Nan Qi Shu* printed by the Imperial Academy in Beijing.

In fact, however, the establishment of the name “Song” itself was not a naturally evolving process of naming, but one that involved the intervention of official discourse. According to records, in the twelfth year of the Kangxi reign (1673), the court ordered court officials to complete the supplementary printing of the *Wenxian Tongkao* at the Classics Factory, and its preface stipulated that “henceforth, in book printing, all square-form characters shall be called Song, and all regular-script forms shall be called soft characters.” This was the first time an official document formally confirmed the name “Song type,” marking the elevation of Song from a craft choice made by folk engravers to a state-sanctioned official typeface. From this point on, the name “Song” was formally established and became the dominant typeface of the Chinese printing industry for the following three centuries.

As the mainstream typeface of the Chinese printing industry that has been passed down to the present day, Song type has become one of the most direct embodiments of the Chinese “national imprint.” Liu Jixing’s (2012) study “Why Mao Zedong Chose Song for the Founding Seal of the State” also supports this view: after the founding of the People’s Republic, Chairman Mao and Premier Zhou instructed that the typeface of official government seals be prescribed as a “flattened Song,” partly to distinguish the new government from the ruling bodies of previous dynasties, and partly to make it easier for ordinary people to recognize—an important indication of state discourse intervening in typeface production (Zhou Bo, 2019). This also demonstrates that Song type is no longer merely a tool of writing, but has gradually become an official visual language representing “public credibility,” a visual standard representing rationality, order, and national identity. It can thus be seen that Song type functions not only as a vehicle for the transmission of information but also as a visual manifestation of political order: it can be shaped by authority, and in turn can be used to construct—or even reinforce—ideology, forming an important component of Chinese cultural identity and the international dissemination of the national image. It follows that, since its emergence in Song-dynasty block-printed editions, Song type has consistently represented the official typeface of the Chinese national image, constituting the most continuous and authoritative core element within the visual matrix of Chinese civilization.

3. The Generative Mechanism of Song Type’s Cultural Semiotization

Song type is not merely a printing typeface; it is a visual gene sedimented within Chinese civilization since its entry into the age of print. It embodies the evolution from calligraphic aesthetics to industrial printing standards, constituting a “visual mother tongue” shared by the Chinese people across a millennium. Jan Middendorp, in his book *Dutch Type*, points out that typefaces themselves may be regarded as an early form of “cultural soft power,” capable of translating abstract political concepts into concrete, perceptible visual experience. Yet how did Song type manage to transcend its original function as a product of printing technology and gradually accumulate into a recognizable, appropriable, and reinterpretable “cultural symbol”? This paper argues that the process of Song’s semiotization involves at least the following interwoven mechanisms.

From the perspective of printing-technology development, the initial formal features of Song type—thin horizontal and thick vertical strokes, squared regularity, and decorative triangular stroke terminals—were essentially the product of a compromise among block-printing technique, the physical properties of wood grain, and the labor efficiency of engravers. However, once these formal features, originally shaped by technical constraints, came to be repeated on a large scale across regions and dynasties, their “technical traces” gradually detached from the specific conditions of production and were transformed into an independently recognizable visual schema. In other words, forms shaped by technical rationality, through long-term repeated reproduction, acquired in themselves the material basis for becoming a symbol—they no longer simply “are” something, but began to “mean” something.

From the perspective of the mechanism of naming and the construction of power discourse, the official confirmation of the name “Song” itself already bears the trace of an intervention by power discourse. Attaching the name “Song” to a typeface that in fact took shape in the Ming dynasty was, in a certain sense, a projection—onto the naming of the typeface—of Ming- and Qing-dynasty literati’s veneration for “Song editions” as artifacts and exemplars. Once such a naming was confirmed by imperial edict, it acquired an authority that went beyond a mere technical description. The bibliographer Zhang Xiumin and others’ criticism of this naming as “not matching the reality” in fact reveals, from the opposite direction, the constructive nature of the act of naming itself: the meaning of a symbol is not entirely determined by its technical origin, but is also shaped by the power structure within which the naming subject is situated.

From the perspective of the hierarchical-institutional confirmation mechanism, the further consolidation of Song type's cultural meaning benefited from its incorporation into the standardization system of the modern state. National standards such as the Format for Official Documents of Party and Government Organs (GB/T 9704—2012), by clearly stipulating the role and status of different typefaces within the official-document system—for instance, designating the “small heading Song” (小标宋体) to mark the issuing authority, an element carrying authoritative connotations—have objectively reinforced the association between Song type and meanings such as “solemnity,” “formality,” and “authority.” This association is not an attribute inherent to the typeface's form itself, but rather the result of repeated institutional practice and continual internalization by users—a process typical, in semiotic terms, of the generation of “conventional meaning.”

In the contemporary period, with the revival of traditional Chinese culture and the rise of the “Guochao” (national trend) design movement, the design of Chinese-character typefaces as a whole is undergoing a new round of reinterpretation of cultural meaning. The design scholar Chen Nan has noted in interviews that, over the past two decades or so, as national cultural confidence has grown, an increasing number of young designers have begun to actively pay attention to, study, and design Chinese-character typefaces—a phenomenon he regards as an expression of the vitality of national culture. Against this backdrop, Songi type, as one of the oldest and most widely used printing typefaces, has to some extent also been drawn into this process of cultural reinterpretation, giving rise to numerous variant forms such as imitation Song (仿宋), New Song (新宋), Bold Song (粗宋), Elongated Song (长宋), and Italic Song (斜宋), so as to meet the differentiated demands of different media and communication contexts for “cultural texture.”

Taken together, the foregoing analysis shows that Song type's development from a technical solution serving printing efficiency into a cultural symbol carrying multiple connotations such as “normativity,” “authority,” and “tradition” was not the result of any single, linear determining factor, but rather the outcome of technical conditions, power discourse, institutional norms, and cross-cultural interaction taking turns to operate—and accumulating with one another—across different historical stages. This process also echoes the general understanding in the academic community regarding the generation of cultural symbols: the meaning of a cultural symbol is not inherent in the thing itself, but is jointly conferred by specific social groups through historical practice, and is continually confirmed and reproduced through repeated institutionalized use.

4. Conclusion

Surveying the question of “the historical evolution of Song type and the mechanism of its cultural semiotization,” and proceeding from the four historical stages of germination in the Song dynasty, formal consolidation in the Ming dynasty, official naming in the Qing dynasty, and standardization in the modern era, this paper has attempted to examine, from the five dimensions of technical rationality, power discourse, institutional norms, cross-cultural dissemination, and contemporary proliferation of meaning, the mechanism by which Song type was transformed from a product of printing craftsmanship into a cultural symbol. It can be seen that the development of Song type at every stage has been connected to the socio-cultural background of a given historical period, and that it carries rich socio-cultural value. Song type's elevation from an engraver's craft to a cultural gene reflects both the evolution of the aesthetic paradigm of Chinese characters and the deep cultural vitality generated by the ongoing dialogue and coexistence between traditional craftsmanship and modern civilization.

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