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SLOW READING AND FAST REFERENCE

 Geremie R. Barmé

The launch of the digital *East Asian History* offers an occasion for reflection on the nature of academic work, scholastic publications and writing in the online era.

Some years ago Lindsay Waters of Harvard University Press was one of a number of writers and publishers concerned to bring concepts originating with the “slow movement” into the realm of the written word with added immediacy. Many people have become familiar with the ramifications of this movement in its gustatory dimension: “slow food”. “Slow food” was a revivalist challenge to the world of “fast food”, a movement that emphasizes traditional foodstuffs and cuisines that relate to local ecosystems and sustainability. An extension of this ethos into the realm of book culture celebrates a different type of tradition, one that is concerned with a feast for the eyes. It is called “slow reading”. It is a movement whose disparate participants can find “time for reading”. This is a kind of reading that, once common fare, has in the age of cultural and intellectual instant gratification and information supersizing become an arcane and easily derided pursuit.

Slow reading is a conscious effort to return the reader, or the “consumer of the written”, to a more deliberate pace, allowing for a considered appreciation of what is being read, of authorial intent, with the structure and style of what is written, all with the express hope of increasing an understanding and the enjoyment of the text. In a time when many writing professionals approach the act of reading rather as one of data mining, “slow reading” is an anathema, risibly antediluvian, or at least eschewed in the “day job”.

In pursuing reading lives online, and not just in libraries and bookstores, we are faced with what Umberto Eco calls “overwhelm”. As Eco observes: “There’s a difference between the ‘moderate’ overwhelm of a great bookshop and the infinite overwhelm of the Internet.”¹ *East Asian History* is being re-launched at a time of just such information overwhelm.

In 1990, in concert with my colleagues Mark Elvin and Helen Lo, *Papers on Far Eastern History*, a publication founded in 1970, was re-conceptualized. As the newly appointed editor of an academic journal that had rightly been

This essay was commissioned by the editors to celebrate the relaunch of *East Asian History* as an e-journal.

1. Umberto Eco in Jean-Claude Carrière and Umberto Eco, *This is Not the End of the Book: A Conversation Curated by Jean-Philippe de Tonnac*, trans. Polly McLean) London: Harvill Secker, 2011), p.315.

2 See Simon Head, “The Grim Threat to British Universities,” *The New York Review of Books*, 13 January 2011, <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2011/jan/13/grim-threat-british-universities/>>.

3 Richard Baggaley “How the RAE is Smothering ‘Big Idea’ Books,” *Times Higher Education*, 25 May 2007.

4 Carrière and Eco, *This is Not the End of the Book*, p.16.

5 Now accessible at <www.tsquare.tv>.

6 <<http://www.tsquare.tv/tour/>>.

primarily concerned with the quality of its contents, I was interested in bringing some of the experiences gleaned from years spent straddling the worlds of academe and publishing to the task. Much of my earlier work was engaged with the visual aspects of history and culture; I hoped that the previously rather functional publication—*Papers*—could be recast so that while continuing to support scholastically worthy work, in its approach and style it would also challenge and expand the purview of historical writing in the broad area of East Asia.

We would continue to produce a peer-refereed academic journal to appear twice a year, but, along with Mark and Helen, I hoped that under a new name and through a more imaginative design and style we would create a publication that better reflected our own aesthetics. In content the renamed journal, *East Asian History*, would allow, indeed encourage, longer articles. Its pages would not be limited to the “one idea per article” approach that was even then, two decades ago, becoming the norm in all too many scholastic publications. But those were the early days of the “audit culture” that subsequently subsumed much academic “knowledge production”. We now live with a bureaucratization of scholarship, a corporate takeover described by Simon Head as “a ‘quality control’ exercise imposed on academics by politicians”.²

In 1990, our hope was to launch a journal that both in content and in appearance was more intellectually generous, sometimes more idiosyncratic and definitely more expansive in terms of the visual and the stylistic than its fellow publications. It would encourage new approaches to scholarship and its presentation; it would entice authors to essay new approaches in incorporating the visual with their texts, to considering the footnote (configured as side-notes in our new format) as being integral to the text and not something to be sequestered in dungeon-like endnotes. Our intent was in contrast to the “short-termism” and narrowness that have increasingly become the hallmarks of measurable and accountable intellectual work. As Richard Baggaley has commented on this phenomenon, there has been an increasing tendency

to not threaten the status quo in the discipline, to be risk-averse and less innovative, to concentrate on small incremental steps and to avoid big-picture interdisciplinary work.³

At a time when the CD-ROM was becoming a new form of digital production, in launching *East Asian History* in the early 1990s we also hoped that our format might eventually allow for the inclusion of moving images and sound. A veritable (or at least virtual) age has passed since then. The “long-term media format” of the CD-ROM, one that promised such excitement for publishers and authors alike, is now but a faint digital memory. As Jean-Claude Carrière wryly notes: “there is nothing more ephemeral than long-term media formats”.⁴ Today it is uncertain whether this version of the online journal—the e-journal—is itself but an incunabulum, one that like the defunct technologies of the earlier post-codex world, may soon give way to another format or storage vehicle.

As *East Asian History* developed I was also working with an independent documentary film-making company in Boston, the Long Bow Group. When, in 1995, we released our film *The Gate of Heavenly Peace* we launched a related archival website.⁵ It was during the early days of online scholarship, but with little money and just a few ideas we included on our site such things as a virtual tour of Tiananmen Square,⁶ and a modest archive of related scholastic and media materials.⁷ Although still used by teachers and

students—the film often features in courses on modern China, its politics, society and culture—the site is now a “period piece”, something of a quaint historical artifact.

Long Bow’s next major work appeared in 2003. It was the two-hour film *Morning Sun*, an account of the Cultural Revolution era. Again, we launched an accompanying archival site for the use of scholars, teachers, students and interested viewers of the film.⁸ Reflecting many of the developments in online culture, this site included sequences from our lengthy filmed interviews (only precious seconds or minutes of multiple-hour interviews were used in the final film), excerpts from feature films and TV news reports, music, a gallery of art works, as well as bilingual materials related, for instance, to how zealots in the past would seek guidance from Mao Zedong Thought by consulting *The Little Red Book* as an oracle.⁹

Thereafter, while editor of *East Asian History*, a journal that was still bound to the expensive and painstaking traditions of print publication, I also had the opportunity to create, with my then colleague Dr Bruce Doar, an e-journal. Launched in March 2005 under the name *China Heritage Newsletter*, this modest publication was intended to be a continuation of *China Archaeology and Art Digest*, an ambitious print journal that Bruce had produced for some years in Beijing with his partner Susan Dewar before the Chinese authorities made it too difficult for them to continue publication. Our Canberra-based e-journal was soon renamed *China Heritage Quarterly* (www.chinaheritagequarterly.org) and when, in late 2007, I assumed sole editorship, I decided to incorporate some ideas related to the audio, the visual and textual (in particular translation) that had originally been envisaged for *East Asian History*.

It was at this juncture that my colleague Dr Benjamin Penny graciously assumed the editorship of *East Asian History*—I say graciously since anyone familiar with the demands of academic journal production (the correspondence, review processes, editorial decisions, deadlines, proofreading and so on) will know that grace is an essential, although not necessarily universal, virtue in an editor. While maintaining the standards as well as the guise and style of the journal, Ben joined in creative collaboration with Remco Breuker of the Leiden University Institute of Area Studies. They are scholars and editors who are mindful of the changes unfolding in the field of academic publications, as well as being pressingly aware of the budgetary realities of producing a specialist print journal. For his part, Ben has reminded me that long before Lindsay Waters championed “slow reading”, Roman Jakobson declared that “philology is the art of reading slowly”.

The online *East Asian History* realizes some of the original hopes for the print version of the journal as well as engaging with the expanded possibilities of online scholarship—including an ANU–Leiden partnership. The intercontinental potential of virtual journal production complements the hyper-textuality of the Internet—the blending of text with image and sound. In production and potential this new journal, its third *nirmānakāya/sprul sku*—to take a term from the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition—enables new annexes of scholarship, although like all overly enabled forms of media it can also deprive the reader of imaginative headspace. To many, the “craving for interactivity” made possible by the digital age offers a flat earth of information. For others, however, an electronic text can liberate the reader from the physical restrictions of the immutable, sequestered nature of the print. The balance between print text and interactivity envisaged for the new *East Asian History* thus seems particularly felicitous.

7 <<http://www.tsquare.tv/links/>>.

8 <www.morningsun.org>.

9 <<http://www.morningsun.org/multi-media/index.html#>>.

10 Alberto Manguel, "No Technology is Innocent", a review of Robert Darnton's *The Case for Books: Past, Present and Future*, in *The Australian Literary Review*, 5.5 (June 2010):24.

11 Clive James, *Cultural Amnesia, Necessary Memories from History and the Arts* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007, pp.xxi-xxii).

While the plethora of history becomes more readily accessible, however, the history of the printed may be elided. But, ironically, there is another potential for the screen: as a *tabula rasa*. As the writer and editor Alberto Manguel remarks,

... the electronic screen lends the text within its frame the eternally pristine appearance of a newly cut page, and this produces in me a distancing feeling that, like Brecht's dramatic techniques, allows me a freer reading, uncluttered by the sense of labouring under previous perusals by myself and others. The electronic book allows for a kind of satori impossible (for me at least) in traditional paper codices that flow endlessly in cultural and personal currents.¹⁰

Manguel goes on to observe that: "Belief in the greater value of one or another technology, in the old testament of print or the new testament of the web, elicits not only vehement flocks of faithful, both orthodox and heretical, but also prophets crying out in anything but the wilderness the ills of their perceived opponents ... Depending on the occasion, one technology is better suited than another, and not every text is best served by the latest device." Manguel, and indeed Robert Darnton, whose *The Case for Books* he was reviewing when writing these words, has in his imagination room for "a number of co-existent representations of reality, material and virtual". For those who have spent a reading and writing life involved with what is known in Chinese as "the fragrance of the book" (*shuxiang* 書香), the physical presence of a cloth-bound volume, and the styles of printed *hanzi/kanji* 漢字 also generate a longing different perhaps in temper from those limited to modern European traditions. Our reading imagination, and one that is envisaged for *East Asian History*, should generously allow for the co-existence of a number of realities, as well as of virtual realms.

As I made notes for this short essay, I was reading (be it at daybreak or in the gloaming, hard copy open, pen in hand, delighted scribbling in margins) Clive James's record of a reading life, *Cultural Amnesia, Necessary Memories from History and the Arts* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007). In the introduction to that monumental (both in size and in import) book, James writes,

Technology not only has given us a permanent present, but has given it the furniture of eternity. We can cocoon ourselves, if we wish, in a new provincialism more powerful than any of the past empires. English is this new world's lingua franca, not because it was once spoken in the British Empire but because it is spoken now in the American international cultural hegemony. Born to speak it, we can view the whole world as a dubbed movie, and not even have to bother with subtitles. Should we wish, we can even savour the tang of alien tongues: a translation will be provided on a separate page, to be dialled up at a touch. We can be world citizens without leaving home. If that seems too static, we can travel without leaving home. The world is prepared to receive us, with all its fruits laid out for our consumption and wrapped in clingfilm to meet our sanitary standards. Gresham's law, that the bad drives out the good, has acquired a counter-law, that the bad draws in the good: there are British football hooligans who can sing Puccini's "*Nessun dorma*". It would be a desirable and enviable existence just to earn a decent wage at a worthwhile job and spend all one's leisure hours improving one's aesthetic appreciation. There is so much to appreciate, and it is all available for peanuts

It is, then, here in the balance of "gains and losses" (*deshi* 得失) of online publication that we are reminded of a reflection made by one of the leading mentors in Sinology and Chinese Studies at The Australian National Univer-

sity, Pierre Ryckmans (Simon Leys). In his 1986 George E Morrison Lecture, “The Chinese Attitude Towards the Past”, Pierre remarked:

... we must lament the grievous losses that were inflicted upon the cultural heritage of China—and of mankind—and yet, we may wonder if there was perhaps not some relation between the inexhaustible creativity displayed by Chinese culture through the ages, and the periodic tabula rasa that prevented this culture from becoming clogged up, inhibited and crushed under the weight of the treasures accumulated by earlier ages. Like individuals, civilisations do need a certain amount of creative forgetfulness. Too many memories can hinder intellectual and spiritual activity, as it is suggested in a well-known tale by Jorge Luis Borges, describing the ordeal of a man who cannot forget anything. A total, perfect, infallible memory is a curse: the mind of Borges’ character is turned into a huge garbage heap from which nothing can be subtracted, and where, as a result, no imaginative or thinking process can take place any more—for to think is to discard.¹²

The creation of academic knowledge, a cumulative knowledge that many hope feeds a broader understanding and intellectual wealth of engaged minds—through the enterprise of pedagogy, the involvement of informed writers and thoughtful journalists—is a particular undertaking. Its preserve is often that of the rarified world of journal articles, learned monographs and research notes. The development of online culture, and the easy accessibility made possible by the Internet, as Clive James points out, offers academic writers a near-universal audience that in an earlier time of access to universities, costly library subscriptions and limited print runs was unimaginable. Of course, the plethora of information means too readily that the “furniture of eternity” jostles in a junkyard of information. We are all living in an age in which one has to learn how “to handle information whose authenticity we can no longer trust”.¹³

As the online world provides seemingly limitless and timeless access to all that is, it equally levels out all that has been; promising access it collapses hierarchies, be it for the weal or bane of all readers. The online world of academic journal production also makes “open review” (a process in which the identity of the reviewer is not privileged), a challenge for the practice of anonymous peer review. Will such a “democracy” of evaluation allow for greater selectivity for the reader? Or is such an outsourcing of assessment the harbinger of a mass democracy in which quality is sacrificed on the altar of participation?

Clive James also observes that, “It has always been part of the definition of humanism that true learning has no end in view except its own furtherance”. It is an endeavour that encourages a tireless appetite. In this context a favourite aphorism comes to mind. It is from the brush of the Qing-dynasty poet Xia Hongzuo 項鴻祚:

不為無益之事，何以遣有涯之生

How should we pass our limited days, if not in the pursuit of worthless things?

The value of the “worthless” (*wu yi zhi shi* 無益之事) is something that the writer, every reader and each scholar must discover during a lifetime of reading for him- or herself. Some favour the ideal as being that of a “curiosity-driven scholarship”, a somewhat slight and dismissive description of what amounts to a profound decades-long undertaking. It is an enterprise that creatively builds on itself but one that nonetheless is fundamentally threatened by a contemporary system in which the critical criterion is measure-

12 *China Heritage Quarterly* 14 (June 2008). Online at: <http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/articles.php?searchterm=014_chineseAttitude.inc&issue=014>.

13 Umberto Eco in Carrière and Eco, *This is Not the End of the Book*, p.66.

14 Simon Head, “The Grim Threat”.

15 Li Qingzhao, “Epilogue to *Records on Metal and Stone*”, translated by Stephen Owen in his *An Anthology of Chinese Literature, Beginnings to 1911*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1996, p.596.

16 Umberto Eco in Carrière and Eco, *This is Not the End of the Book*, p.307.

ment; it is an ephemeral institutional form of production that has “relegated the scholar to the lower echelons of a corporate hierarchy, surrounding him or her with hordes of managerial busybodies bristling with benchmarks, incentives, and penalties”.¹⁴

At the end of her “Epilogue to *Records on Metal and Stone*” (*Jinshi lu bouxu* 金石錄後序), composed in 1132, the Song-dynasty poet Li Qingzhao 李清照 offers a meditation on the fate of the unique collection of books, manuscripts and inscriptions that she and her husband had amassed. This precious hoard was lost bit by bit in the heartbreaking chaos of war:

然有有必有無，有聚必有散，乃理之常。人亡弓，人得之，又胡足道。所以區區記其終始者，亦欲為後世好古博雅者之戒云。

When there is possession, there must be loss of possession; when there is gathering together, there must be a scattering—this is the constant principle in things. Someone loses a bow; another person finds a bow; what’s so special in that? The reason why I have recorded this story from beginning to end in such detail is to let it serve as a warning for scholars and collectors in later generations.¹⁵

As possession is so fleeting, we all search for permanence in ideas and their transmission. The reader of these virtual pages will have to decide for themselves whether to read online—the evanescent traces of scholarship—or to print out material so that the paperless journal will become reified and clutter up one’s study or office, the home or the briefcase with the burdens of scholarship. Or to quote Umberto Eco one last time:

Either you print things out, and find yourself oppressed by piles of documents you’ll never read, or you read online, but as soon as you click onto the next page you forget what you’ve just read, the very thing that has brought you to the page now on your screen.¹⁶

This too may then be the uncertain fate of this essay.

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