

## **Opening the Digital Gate in East Asia**

Rex How (Publisher, Net and Books)

I am an overseas-born Chinese. In 1949, my parents moved from China to South Korea, and in 1956 I was born there. When I was one year old, I contracted polio and lost the use of my legs. One of my elementary school teachers, taking note of my disability and an apparent flair I had for writing, urged me to plan on a career in publishing or as a writer. But that was something I didn't want to hear. Just because I was physically disabled, why should I be forced to sit at a desk looking at manuscripts for the rest of my life? I was so opposed to the idea that I swore, early on, that I would never become a writer or a publisher.

But life has a way of playing tricks on us. I attended a university in Taipei, Taiwan, and after graduating, the only job I could find was as a freelance translator. From there it was just a short step into the publishing world, where I found work as an editor. I worked hard at my job, but for a long time I felt bitter that, despite my vow, I had wound up in publishing after all.

Now, however, I feel I was extremely fortunate. First, I had the opportunity to learn the fundamentals of editing at the Long Bridge Publishing Co. Then I became editor in chief of the hi-tech magazine 2001, where I learned how to manage an editorial department. From there, I moved to the China Productivity Center, publisher of the monthly magazine Productivity. At Productivity I was responsible for all the magazine's business operations, and during my tenure I learned much about the business side of publishing. In 1988, I was hired as president of the China Times Publishing Co., where I gained my first experience managing a large publishing house.

In 1996, after eight years at China Times, I left to found my own publishing company, Locus. At the same time, I was asked to serve as president and editor in chief of the Taiwan Commercial Press, the most venerable publishing house in the Chinese-speaking world. This was an opportunity not to be passed up. I worked at Commercial Press for three years, and my time at that 100-year-old institution afforded me an invaluable wealth of experience and insights.

Looking back, I view my various publishing jobs as a series of unparalleled opportunities for learning and growth. Nevertheless, for much of that time, I had lingering misgivings about pursuing a publishing career. But on a single freezing cold

morning in 1995, I experienced a sudden change in outlook.

That year, Taipei was in the midst of an incredibly cold winter. One morning, awakened by the chill, I took a book from my bookcase and, still wrapped in my bedclothes, started reading. The book was the Han Fei Tzu, a classic work of political philosophy from the 3rd century B.C.E. written by the Chinese legalist scholar of the same name.

At the time, I had worked in publishing for 16 years, both as an editor and as an executive. The relevance of the Han Fei Tzu impressed me deeply. It seemed to be an excellent treatise on "right management." As I read, I found myself nodding in agreement with the old philosopher.

But the greatest gift this book gave me was not the wisdom of Han Fei Tzu but a sudden awareness of the inestimable value of the publishing profession. Without a publisher, how would this precious cultural treasure have ever come into my hands? If books did not exist, how could Han Fei Tzu's words have traveled through time and space and into the mind of one very cold, very sleepy individual living in a tenth-floor Taipei apartment some 2,200 years after Han's ideas were first recorded?

Publishing is truly a noble profession, I realized. Through publishing, the wisdom of the past can be transmitted to future generations and current knowledge can be widely shared among contemporaries. Indeed, publishing is an essential element in humanity's continuing evolution. I was, I now saw, deeply privileged to be part of this profession, the very profession I had disliked so intensely since my childhood. Publishing imbued my life with value, and now I felt free to devote myself to it without reservation.

### Combining Books and the Internet

The longer I work in the publishing industry, the more painfully aware I become of how poorly read I am. As a remedy for my own ignorance, I have in recent years developed an intense thirst for knowledge. Because of the explosive growth of the Internet and its related technologies during this same period, it sometimes looks as though reading itself is undergoing an inexorable shift from print to digital media. This combination of factors prompted in me a desire to explore, together with other avid readers, the changes taking place in our reading habits today.

In 2001, this desire gave birth to a new project, Net and Books. Briefly, the purpose of this project is to see how we can best enrich our minds through the concurrent use of books and digital technology, especially the Internet. My original plan was to publish Net and Books as a monthly magazine, but I came to realize that the magazine format was not exactly right for what I wanted to do. Instead, Net and Books is something of a cross between a book and a magazine. Each issue is devoted to a single theme, but we publish without the kind of time constraints on production and distribution to which conventional magazines are subject. So far we have published five issues, with the following subtitles: "Fashions of Reading," "Poetry," "Map of Wealth," "Colors of Love," and "A History of Dictionaries." Each issue features a multi-page reading map: a detailed timeline of the history, both Eastern and Western, of the topic being explored. The creation of these reading maps takes a lot of time and patience, but they may be the most significant component of the Net and Books series.

When I visited Japan in October 2002, I was right in the midst of editing the "Dictionaries" issue. Knowing that the evolution of modern Chinese dictionaries owes much to the Japanese, I thought that my trip would be an excellent opportunity to gather useful material. As it turned out, I was right.

For example, I had hoped to find out more about Kwong Ki-chiu, the Chinese lexicographer who, in 1868, compiled the first Chinese-edited English-Chinese dictionary. During China's past century of war and domestic upheaval, the works of Kwong have been either altered or destroyed. Aside from a few lexicographers, Kwong himself has been largely forgotten by his own countrymen, and the information about him available in Chinese is far from adequate. While in Tokyo, I went to the Jinbocho bookstore district and bought a used copy of *A History of the Development of Dutch-Japanese and English-Japanese Dictionaries*, by Nagashima Daisuke. In the appendix I found, to my joy, a list of works by Kwong published in Japan. Soon after, a friend in Japan searched the Net for Uchida Keiichi's *Research on Linguistic and Cultural Contacts between East and West in the Modern Age*, another excellent source of information about Kwong. This book, which I eventually obtained by writing directly to Professor Uchida, proved very useful for my research.

My experience in researching Kwong Ki-chiu is, I believe, an illustration of how we can benefit by combining the strengths of books and the Internet. In addition, for East Asians -- by which I mean those in the Chinese linguistic/cultural sphere, comprising China, Taiwan, Japan, and Korea -- it is an indication of the important role the Internet can play in linking us together. But no matter how sophisticated the Internet

becomes, it will still be a chore to search in a Romanized language, such as English, for information about a figure like Kwong Ki-chiu. Indeed, when I searched English-language sites for "Kwong Ki-chiu," I got only a few hits. Thus my experience searching for Kwong served to reinforce my belief that we East Asians must develop new and more effective means of sharing information via the Internet.

### New Publishing Challenges: Common and Uncommon

Today, traditional publishers around the globe continue to grapple with the ramifications of digital technology and the Internet. For East Asian publishers, like myself, many of the issues we confront are common to publishers everywhere, but we also face problems unique to our region.

First, I'd like to consider the problems shared by all. It is my observation that, whenever traditional and new media encounter one another, three major problems are bound to crop up. I like to refer to these as the Su Tungpo problem, the Gutenberg problem, and the Bill Gates problem.

Su Tungpo (1036-1101 C.E.) was a great Chinese poet of the Sung dynasty. Woodblock printing had emerged in China some four centuries earlier, during the Tang dynasty. By Su's time, printing was widespread and printed texts were readily available. Su was concerned about certain social phenomena that he believed were the result of the rise of printing. Before printing, the writing and distribution of texts required tremendous effort, which in turn inspired in readers tremendous devotion. But print afforded easy access to numerous texts and, in time, lamented Su, this led people to become lazy and neglectful in their reading habits.

The rise of digital technology, especially the Internet, has provided publishers with new and extremely convenient means for producing, marketing, and distributing their wares. And yet, like Su Tungpo, we see that this is no guarantee that people will cherish reading and publishing all the more. In our day, no less than in Su's, technology may appeal to the tendency toward intellectual laziness.

Then there is the Gutenberg problem. The German inventor Johannes Gutenberg developed letterpress printing in 1445. But the Gutenberg Revolution did not happen overnight. Letterpress printing encountered numerous drawbacks, obstacles and constraints, and it was another century before it fully usurped the position held so long by the handwritten manuscript. In other words, the arrival of clearly superior

new technology does not lead to the old technology's immediate disappearance. Both old and new continue to coexist for some time.

Last, we have the Bill Gates problem. Gates once stated that he prefers to print out any text longer than five pages. In the short time since the birth of the World Wide Web, the Internet has grown by leaps and bounds, but this growth has by no means been steady. It has been a cyclical process, one of ebb and flow. As Gates's comment implies, Internet publishing and Internet reading are, relatively speaking, still in the Stone Age. The greatest innovations are yet to come. And this is true of new technologies generally. They do not emerge fully formed; they take time to mature.

In addition to these three general problems, publishers in East Asia must deal with certain issues unique to their part of the world. First, there is the undeniably Western origin of the Internet and its attendant technologies. The inventors of these technologies paid little or no attention to the needs of Asian users, particularly those who use variants of the Chinese writing system. As a consequence, the Internet is not conveniently configured for East Asian languages.

The problem is worse in the area of content. Here, I am referring only to serious intellectual content. (I believe the "content" we speak of on the Internet should focus on knowledge, not entertainment.) The system of knowledge that drives the modern world has been, for the most part, developed, accumulated and transmitted by the West. Whether we are talking about political thought, moral philosophy, economics, or science, the modern world is generally viewed as the offspring of the West. Indeed, often the terms "modern" and "Western" are used synonymously.

In the West, this system of knowledge has developed over the past 500 years. The East Asian experience has been quite different. For millennia, East Asia's traditional knowledge system evolved quite separately from the West. But this all began to change in the middle of the 19th century, when West and East confronted each other on every cultural front. Since then, our East Asian culture and our knowledge system have undergone dramatic changes.

The West has had 500 years to integrate and adjust to the modern worldview to which it gave rise. In the East, we have had, at the most, 150 years. Of all East Asian countries, Japan has been the quickest to absorb the West's system of knowledge. But even in Japan the process remains incomplete. It is even less complete in China and Taiwan. War, political upheaval, ideological taboos, and other factors have been

stubborn obstacles to the exploration, accumulation and transmission of the new forms of knowledge. The result is the creation of a schism between the Chinese knowledge system of the past and the Western-influenced one of the present. We have become cut off from our own pool of knowledge, yet we are also estranged from the knowledge pool of the West. It is no wonder that Chinese culture finds itself burdened with all kinds of barriers to the knowledge content of the Internet Age.

### Questions of Culture

It is imperative that we East Asians address the distinctively East Asian problems associated with digital technology and the Internet. Westerners will not solve these problems for us. There are, it seems to me, at least two questions that we must answer.

First, how shall we share our experience and understanding of Western knowledge and culture? Certainly, we can continue to use the traditional medium of the book for this purpose. But we must also develop systematic new approaches -- including effective utilization of the Internet -- that will enable us to share knowledge with one another more actively than we have done in the past.

Second, how shall we share the legacy of our common Chinese-based writing culture? The traditions and values of this culture differ from those of the West. Sharing, through digital archives and the Internet, its treasures and artifacts will, of course, prove beneficial to historical researchers throughout the region. Just as importantly, it will give birth to new content for the online environment. A look at the myriad ways the Internet is used in its English-language sector shows how inadequate our efforts to date have been in East Asia.

For East Asian publishers, the question of how to effectively utilize the online environment is a pressing one, and for now, there is no pat answer. But I see at least two directions we should move in. One is to develop multiple and multidimensional archives for our rich store of knowledge and culture. These archives must also be capable of being linked to one another. The second direction we must pursue is the development of sophisticated interactive multimedia environments. These two approaches are complementary. If we only pursue multimedia interactivity without developing the knowledge and cultural content to go with it, the result will be devoid of value and culturally disastrous.

The Internet is transforming the reading habits of people everywhere, not just in East Asia. At the same time, we must acknowledge that we in East Asia face our own unique set of conditions and problems. That our current style and system of publishing will change to meet them is inevitable. To illustrate our situation, allow me to use the metaphor of a gate. In the past, the only gates we publishers found in our path were wooden. We knew how to open these gates, whether by pushing, pulling or sliding them. Today, however, we are faced with electronic gates, and these will not open for us unless we know the proper code or password. In other words, the gates themselves have not disappeared, but we have yet to figure out how this new kind opens. Therein lies the challenge.

---

Rex How is one of Taiwan's most prominent publishers. In the 1990s he served as publisher at China Times, Taiwan's leading newspaper and book publishing group, where he was credited with developing the company's reputation for hugely popular translations of foreign works. He then achieved similar success as president of the prestigious Commercial Press, and later at his own imprint, Locus Publishing. In 2001 he launched Net and Books, a printed quarterly magazine and Website that explores the redefinition of reading in the Internet age.

#### Related Articles

[A Realm of Infinite Possibilities: Redefining the Book in China](#)

[Envisioning a Nation of Readers: Voices from South Korean Publishing](#)

#### Related Sites

[Net and Books \(Chinese\)](#)

[Locus Publishing Co. \(Chinese\)](#)