

## *Book Review*

### Mullaney, Thomas S. *The Chinese Typewriter: A History*. MIT Press, 2017.

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Historical studies on the Chinese language often consist of linguistic research on lexicography, morphology, and semantics. Chinese language learning and teaching methods for bilingual early childhood education have created new pathways for more rigorous instruction on second language acquisition of Chinese. Mullaney takes an integrative approach, combining these historico-linguistic methods, to form an analysis of the critical, technological, industrial, and cultural processes that influenced Chinese language implementation, and the development of the Chinese typewriter and typescript—distinct from the QWERTY keyboard. *The Chinese Typewriter* is a material culture and historical analysis of the Chinese typewriter and its entry into global technological vernaculars—first as an imagined object, and subsequently as the material product of pronationalist reform movements. Themes that are developed in *The Chinese Typewriter* are knowledge economies, ‘techno-colonialism,’ ontology and nationalism, cultural change, and technological innovation.

Mullaney’s “braided” history (p. 200) of the Chinese-language market shows that the development of Chinese techno-lingual script was rooted in regional and international politics, collective protest, and struggles to modernize the nation, and its bureaucratic machinery. He successfully identifies the factors leading to the development of the Chinese typewriter—like sociopolitical isolation from the West, and a growing clerical labor force comprised of young men and women, typist associations, and advertisement agencies. Typing schools in China and Japan were marketed, by job agencies, as attractive entryways into new technological professions. Mullaney notes that the emergence of these typewriter schools created a modern intellectual labor force in East Asia. Mullaney also emphasizes the multiple roles that social relations between elites and nonelites, power asymmetries, and literacy played in either negating or promoting industrial production networks in East Asia. The Chinese typewriter materializes as part of an ontological revolution in China to reconceptualize the cognitive and mechanic elements of the Chinese language and its significance in global markets.

In advancing Chinese-language typescript machinery, Chinese technocrats modernized and formalized the Chinese knowledge economy and its popular representations in the West. Mullaney uses cartoons

from Western newspapers to demonstrate how popular images concerning the Chinese language at the turn of the twentieth century were initially racist. The derisive image of ‘Tap-Key,’ for instance, typing away on a giant twelve-foot machine unfolded into the public consciousness in 1903. Photographer and journalist Louis John Stellman assigned the name ‘Tap-Key’ to the character behind the typewriter, as “a deft pun that played upon faux Cantonese and onomatopoeia” (p. 36). Mullaney contends that the racist imagery fostered popular beliefs in the West that the idea of a Chinese typewriter was ridiculous, and that the Chinese language itself was undeveloped. Chinese bureaucrats were compelled to reconfigure a distinct techno-linguistic world for China, not necessarily in “response” to ‘Tap-Key’ and other denigrating representations of China—but as a national effort to centralize the Chinese typewriting industry.

The notion of modernity at the start of the twentieth century partly meant overcoming a “technolinguistic crisis” in East Asia that was driven by pejorative representations of Chinese and Japanese typescript in the West (p. 211). Typewriter companies and engineers in the Chinese-Japanese language market rebranded a new form of “transnational culturalism” (p. 209) to appeal to literary and official elites interested in broadening their communications within the East Asia zone and overcoming colonial-imperialist discourses that excluded non-alphabetic languages from global markets. Consequently, the Superwriter by Japanese Business Machines Ltd. entered the Chinese-language market in the 1930s when other companies like Remington, Underwood, Olivetti, and Mergenthaler Linotype had failed or were unwilling to modify their typescript (p. 199).

The Maoist era was an important period for the development of Chinese techno-linguistics, as technocrats pursued other ways of mobilizing and educating people about the Chinese-language market and typescript to disseminate political tracts and other materials on reform movements. The development of pinyin in the 1950s as an alternative to Chinese character writing was an achievement of the Maoist era to demonstrate the importance of mass literacy campaigns for rural and urban populations. Mullaney explains that the distinction between alphabetization and literacy, meant a greater focus on promoting the Chinese language through pinyin. Additionally, market drivers like a growing number of Confucius Institutes and foreign education companies seeking exposure to Chinese as a second language studies helped systematize everyday usage of pinyin and typescript equipment (p. 14). Increased control over the chain of production in education and Chinese language markets also encouraged typesetting innovations like “predictive text” as an input technology during the Mao years. Around 1975, the Double Pigeon Chinese typewriter was invented by the Shanghai Calculator and Typewriter Factory for typists and officials. The Double Pigeon was a customizable, lever-operated typewriter with almost 2,500 type characters. The Double Pigeon, which was used for printing pamphlets in offices also evolved into a political statement. Mullaney describes acquiring a Double Pigeon Chinese typewriter in California in 2009 with a sticker attached to it that read “Pray for Free China” along with an image of the Nationalist Taiwanese flag (p. 195). For Mullaney, seeing the machine decorated with political stickers was symbolic—emblematic of an era where political party

leadership in China controlled laws on public speech and press. The Chinese typewriter in a Western setting decorated with stickers, could almost be called an artifact—simultaneously cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation.

Mullaney's book draws on archival sources, personal anecdotes, and monographs to ultimately show that by the mid twentieth century, the Chinese typewriter was no longer imaginary, but the output of market and political reforms in China during the Great Leap forward that reoriented resources and leadership to the development of East Asia. His work contextualizes historical artifacts, showing that histories on techno-linguistics are concurrently ethnolinguistic accounts that portray customs, attitudes, informal and formal mechanisms of sharing knowledge. In exploring the affective value that material and nonmaterial cultural symbols can generate, accumulate, or diminish as they circulate across geographies, *The Chinese Typewriter* is a vital addition to praxis on assessing value and value judgments in primary source research and object-oriented analysis.