[Online talk | THOMAS S. MULLANEY (Stanford University) A typewriter with no keys: the letterpress-typewriter-computer transition in global, comparative perspective](#)

Announcement published by Vaibhav Singh on Wednesday, June 16, 2021
Type:
Lecture
Date:
July 14, 2021
Location:
United Kingdom
Subject Fields:
Art, Art History & Visual Studies, Asian History / Studies, Business History / Studies, Communication, East Asian History / Studies

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Upcoming talk • 14 July 2021

THOMAS S. MULLANEY (Stanford University)

A typewriter with no keys: the letterpress-typewriter-computer transition in global,

comparative perspective

The transition from movable type to typewriting, and then from typewriting to computing, was experienced in dramatically different ways depending on the language in question. For English, the transition from letterpress to typewriting was marked by a technological schism. With the introduction of the keyboard, and with metal typefaces being moved largely out of sight, and into the chassis of the machine, typewriting bore little resemblance to the act of movable type composition. The transition from typewriting to computing, by contrast, was a relatively seamless one for English speakers. Not only did the keyboard stay the same, but so did the logic of textual production: to produce the letter 'X' on an IBM PC monitor, one depressed the letter 'X' on the keyboard – just like one did in the age of Remington. What you type is what you get.

These same transitions were completely different in the context of Chinese. Chinese typewriters continued to feature metal character slugs, with the exact same dimensions as those found in Chinese movable type. There was no keyboard on a Chinese typewriter, moreover, with typists looking directly at a tray bed of approximately 2500 metallic slugs, each a Chinese character or symbol in mirror image. For Chinese, that is to say, the letterpress-typewriting transition was marked by continuity, so much so that some referred to Chinese typewriters as 'tabletop printing presses'. The transition from typewriting to computing, by contrast, was one of rupture for Chinese. Not only did Chinese computing introduce the mechanism of the keyboard for the first time, but it introduced an entirely new logic of textual production: input, where what you type is never what you get.

In this talk, Stanford historian Thomas S. Mullaney will provide an overview of the letterpress-typewriter-computer transition in global, comparative perspective.

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Thomas S. Mullaney is Professor of Chinese History of Stanford University, a Guggenheim Fellow, and the Kluge Chair in Technology and Society at the Library of Congress. He is the author or lead editor of six books, including *The Chinese typewriter: a history*, *Your computer is on fire*, and the forthcoming *The Chinese computer* – the first comprehensive history of Chinese-language computing. His writings have appeared in the *Journal of Asian Studies*, *Technology & Culture*, Aeon, Foreign Affairs, and Foreign Policy, and his work has been featured in the LA Times, The Atlantic, the BBC, and in invited lectures at Google, Microsoft, Adobe, and more. He directs Digital Humanities Asia (DHAsia), a program at Stanford University focused on East, South, Southeast, and Inner/Central Asia, and is also the Founder and Editor-in-Chief of Dissertation Reviews.

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Date: **14 July 2021**

Time: 6:00 pm to 7:00 pm (UK) | 13:00 EDT | 10:00 PDT | 22:30 IST

Registration: **£3** (students) | **£5** (regular)

Registration closes: **13 July 2021**

Event host and organiser: Vaibhav Singh

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