

“Though an Angel Should Write, Still 'tis Devils Must Print”: The Long life of Manuscript Culture in East Asia

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Manuscripts were an important part of book culture in East Asia up to the 19th century, but why was this so? Did the distinction between printed books and manuscripts, which we tend to take seriously, matter to contemporary readers? Why were people still laboriously making copies by hand of printed books in the late 19th century? What is the relationship between these two forms of book production? When the book culture of China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam is examined in the archives, it is clear that large numbers of manuscripts have survived, often in multiple copies, but this whole side of book production is a neglected field, particularly in the period when printed books were being produced in abundance and the titles of scholarly monographs betray a preoccupation with print. In this lecture I shall focus on the age of print and show what we miss by neglecting the manuscript dimension of book culture in pre-modern East Asia.

Scribal Technologies: New surfaces on which to write

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When the Buddhists in India learned to read and write, a new scribal tradition was born as a method of preserving and imparting information about the words and teachings of the founder and subsequent masters. Writing was a new technology and required supporting technologies to be developed for surfaces on which to write and instruments to be used for the action. The symbols used by these scribes were not fixed and they shifted from time to time and place to place. Paper technology introduced industrial process into the process that had depended on natural surfaces such as palm leaves, birch bark, and stone. With the arrival of paper production, came innovations, including reverse image wood block printing. In the 20th century, the technology shifted in a startling direction and information moved to the silicon surface, invisible and requiring a host of inventions to display, preserve, and copy. Manuscripts, prints, or digital formats all require specific methods of housing, accessing, referencing, and using. With the tools of the computer, we are witnessing an era where all forms of writing are being dealt

with in new ways. Manuscript images in the computer have a form that is not identical to the material object and as a result we can expand our knowledge of a document. There are many unsolved issues that have come into our study. For example, referencing digital data is both similar to and distinctly different from codex formats. We still struggle to describe the forms of digital data and thus have difficulty with traditional referencing. The past efforts to deal with the advent of new technology are potential aids to help us understand the needs of the contemporary world with digital examples.