

World of Knowledge

Digitalization: A Contemporary Opportunity for Bridging Historical Studies and Society

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In 1995, the fiftieth anniversary of the Republic of China's rule over Taiwan, two conferences were held to examine the development of historical scholarship in Taiwan since the end of the Japanese colonial period. The first was organized by Tunghai University and *New Historical Studies* (新史學), and catalogued studies of various time periods and forms of history. The second was held by the National Science Council of the Executive Yuan and Academia Sinica's Institute of History and Philology, and produced a quantitative analysis of papers on various time periods or forms of history over the past fifty years. At the same time, I published a paper entitled "Historical Studies and Society in Contemporary Taiwan", focusing on the gulf between the history profession and society. In that paper, I argued that many of Taiwan's problems could be related to this gulf.

More than ten years after writing that piece, I served as the president of Academia Historica (*Guoshiguan*) for two years and seven months between 2008 and 2010. During that time I was struck by the potential of digitalization for bridging the gap between historical scholarship and society. In a recent publication on this subject, I used the examples of Academia Historica's exhibitions, historical documentaries, databases of historical materials and promotion of historical research to show how digitalization can help bring historical studies closer to society.¹ The foregoing summarizes the key points of that publication and suggests that Academia Sinica set an example for universities by including projects such as exhibitions and documentaries that have used digitized resources in faculty research evaluations, in order to consolidate the position of digitalization within the humanities and social sciences.

1. Digitalization's Role in Uniting Historical Studies and Society

1) Quicker sharing of previously hard to access historical evidence

In April 2009, Academia Historica organized an exhibition to mark the centenary of Chiang Ching-kuo's birth, and was able to obtain documents from Russia pertaining to Chiang's time in the Soviet Union within two months thanks to the digitalization of

¹ Man-houng Lin, "Digitalization: A Contemporary Opportunity for Bridging Historical Studies and Society," in Xiang Jieh ed., *Digital Humanities: New Approaches to Historical Studies* (Taipei: National Taiwan University Press, 2011), pp.45-71.

Russian archives. Materials that were very difficult or impossible to access during the Cold War, including Chiang's enrollment in the Chinese Communist Party, were opened to the wider public in the exhibition and its catalog. Also from April 2009 onward, Academia Historica held an exhibition on the Taipei State Guest House. The digitalization of *Asahi shinbun*, *Yomiuri shinbun* and *Taiwan Nichinichi shinpo* made it possible for Academia Historica to find more than 74,000 characters of related information quickly enough to reconstruct, within half a year, the events at the Guest House during its time as the Japanese Governor-General's residence. In my experience, before the digitalization of such sources it could take two months to find only 500 characters worth of information. Through the display of historical documents and artifacts, the exhibition gave visitors a direct encounter with history. They could see, for example, the connections that developed between Korea and Taiwan under Japanese rule, as manifested in the stays of the son of Gojong, the last king of the Korean Joseon Dynasty, in the Governor-General's residence.

2) Quicker compilation of materials, and improved compilation projects.

In the past, a lot of Academia Historica employees' time was consumed with the production of compilations of difficult-to-locate archival materials in order to make them more accessible for scholars. Digitalization has allowed employees to produce databanks such as those on American aid and the introduction of nine years of compulsory education much more quickly. Printed compilations of documents took up a large amount of space. E-editions produced with digitalization technology allow selected passages to be conveniently reproduced for use in annotation. Because Academia Historica employees no longer have to spend as much time producing compilations of historical documents, they can spend more time on research. Between 2008 and 2010, employees published more articles, and Academia Historica's own journal changed from a biannual to a quarterly publication, increases partly due to digitalization. In 1993, the Legislative Yuan issued regulations for artifacts pertaining to presidents and vice-presidents, requiring Academia Historica to digitize three-dimensional artifacts in addition to paper documents. These objects include gifts from other countries to Taiwan's heads of state, which have been exhibited beginning October 2010 in a museum of presidential and vice-presidential artifacts. These exhibitions enhance visitors' understanding of the connections between Taiwan and other countries. Woven handicrafts from Oceania, for example, encourage them to reflect on the international horizons of Taiwan's indigenous communities.

3) Promotion of historical interpretation

Because historical documents are often hard to find, historians tend to produce narrowly focused descriptive research. Digitalized sources enable historians to use more evidence to develop broader and more solid interpretations. Academia Historica's 2008

exhibition on the history of the Presidential Office Building is an example of such an outcome. The exhibition used Taiwan Historica, a subordinate institute of Academia Historica's, digitized collections of documents from the building's time as office of the Governor-General to show that the high tower at the centre had not been included in the original plan of the architect who won the contest to design the building. The tower was constructed due to Japanese government's desire to use the building to demonstrate authority. Previously, historians portrayed 'de-Japanization' as a pervasive feature of early Republic of China rule in Taiwan. The presidential office exhibition demonstrated continuities between the colonial and post-1945 eras. A documentary about the Bai Group (*Bai-tuan*), produced by Academia Historica with digitized archival material at the end of 2010, also explored the military cooperation between Japan and the Republic of China between the 1950s and 1970s. Officers under the command of the China Expeditionary Force commander-in-chief Yasuji Okamura were employed by the Republic of China after the war in an advisory group outside the regular military structure—the Bai Group—which assisted in the development of plans for an attack on the Chinese Mainland.

4) Resolving controversy

The Treaty of Taipei between the Republic of China and Japan, signed in 1952 in the Taipei Guest House, is an important document in the long-running and troublesome saga of Taiwan's legal status. Other than the photo of the ratification of the Emperor of Japan, taken by Shen Huai-yü of the Institute of Modern History at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Academia Historica's exhibition was able to quickly locate digitized copies of Chiang Kai-shek's ratification as well as other documents relating to the treaty. Japanese archives provided digitized copies of documents from the Japanese parliament. The United Nations only recognizes treaties registered with it, so with the help of ambassador Ning Chi-k'un, we found the digitized edition of the registration record of this treaty at the United Nations. In addition to the documents on display, we also re-created the signing ceremony with statues of the participants. A large number of digitized documents were used in the production of the statues, in order to whittle the crowd in Picture 1 down to the five most important individuals, shown in Picture 2, and to gather enough images from different angles to allow our artists to faithfully recreate their posture and expressions.

5) Raising the profile of contemporary history in historical studies

The historical role of Academia Historica was not research on past dynasties, but the safekeeping and study of sources from the contemporary era. Before digitalization, there were relatively few studies of contemporary history that used substantial amounts of evidence to draw broad conclusions on important topics. Because of this, contemporary history had a relatively low status within academia. Thanks in part to the availability of digitalized sources the level of scholarship in contemporary history has improved, as is demonstrated by the series of works that have received Academia Historica's newly

established award in contemporary history. The number of Masters and PhD theses in contemporary history has also increased. According to Hsü Hsueh-chi (Academia Sinica), since 2002 there have been more Masters and PhD theses on contemporary Taiwanese history than on Taiwan in the Qing or Japanese colonial periods. The number of faculty members working on contemporary history at Taiwan universities has also increased from one or two ten years ago to around ten today.

2. Academia Sinica and Value-added Outcomes based on Digitalized Resources

The benefits of digitalization described above resulted from the work undertaken by the Academia Historica, but it relied as well on support from another institution also under the office of the president: Academia Sinica. The exhibition on Chiang Ching-kuo in the Soviet Union, for example, was based on research conducted by Yu Min-ling of the Institute of Modern History. As the president of Academia Historica, I was asked in 2008 to organize the exhibitions on the Presidential Office Building and the Taipei State Guesthouse, subjects relating to the Japanese colonial era. Academia Historica had previously not been strongly involved with this period. Vital for these exhibitions was the assistance of the Academia Sinica for my work on Taiwanese merchants in the Pacific during the Japanese colonial era in the Southeast Asia Project, Northeast Asia Project, the Pacific Projects, and others. In addition to exhibiting gifts from other countries, the exhibition on artifacts of the presidents and vice-presidents also introduced the historical development of the Republic of China's presidential system. For this, thanks are due to Academia Sinica's Institute of Modern History and the Chiang Ching-kuo foundation's assistance in my *Economic Documents from the Republic of China* (中華民國經濟檔案), which touched upon the various governmental organizations that have shaped the archives.

On May 7, 2009, I participated in a meeting on 'digital collections and study' held by the National Science Council. Academia Sinica's Ovid J.L. Tzeng, hosting the meeting as the Minister of Cultural Affairs, expressed disappointment with the level of value-added outcomes of digitalization. Value-added outcomes like documentaries, exhibitions and installations that use digital resources can be controversial because of their accessibility and visibility. However, they remain a key tool for achieving Academia Sinica's long-standing goal of engaging more with a broader public domestically and internationally. Academia Sinica's current work with digital resources is led by some researchers employed by the institution, but most is carried out by non-affiliated members. If documentaries and exhibitions that make use of digitized resources were included in Academia Sinica research fellows' performance evaluations, more research fellows would participate in their production. This would raise the standard of scholarship in such projects and the overall standard of Taiwan's creative and culture industries. If Academia Sinica can take the universities along with it, then the resources and many years of hard work

Taiwan has invested in digital humanities will bring even richer rewards.

Translated by Joseph Lawson



Picture 1



Picture 2