QWERTY IS DEAD! LONG LIVE QWERTY!
The Birth of Input in Twentieth-Century China
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Ever since the mass manufacture of keyboard typewriters began in the United States, engineers, entrepreneurs, and everyday men and women around the world began to imagine a day when this new device would conquer the Chinese language.

It never did.

The dream was renewed in the age of computing and, by the 1990s, seemed to have come true: computers throughout China began to look "just like ours," even including the familiar QWERTY keyboard, which today is ubiquitous in the Chinese-speaking world. It would seem that the keyboard had finally conquered Chinese, the last major hold-out in a world otherwise dominated by alphanumeric information technologies.

The keyboard in China is not what it seems, however.

In contrast to "typing" in the rest of the world, where users assume a one-to-one correspondence between the symbols-upon-the-keys and the symbols-upon-the-screen, Chinese "input" assumes no such identity. Within input, the user stands "beside" the alphabet, to use the powerful concept by Brian Rotman, and exploits the vast space of possibility that opens up when one assumes a condition of non-identity, and then begins to play with it. The key marked 'Q' might be used in China to represent itself, but more likely to provide any number of instructions or criteria to a piece of software known as an "Input Method Editor" (IME), which will use these instructions to retrieve the desired character for the user. There is no single, standard way to manage this process, moreover, with users employing dozens of varieties and subvarieties of IMEs, wherein the symbol 'Q' might indicate structural features of the desired Chinese character, or phonetic ones, or some combination of the two.

It was not the keyboard that conquered Chinese, as preordained. Chinese conquered the keyboard. In China, the QWERTY keyboard and typing as we know it are dead, and have been reborn as something new.

Tom Mullaney will examine the conceptual and practical roots of Chinese input in the early twentieth century, as well as the machine that inaugurated the "age of input": the MingKwai Chinese Typewriter, an experimental prototype developed in the 1940s by linguist, author, and cultural critic Lin Yutang.

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