Preface to From History of the Book to History of Reading: Theories and Methods for Historical Studies of Reading

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Ann Blair, Preface

The history of the book has benefitted enormously from its growth far beyond the focus on the early modern European context which first inspired it. The historians who helped found the field were fascinated by the development of printing in mid-15th century Europe and its impacts, including Fevre and Martin in 1958 then Eisenstein and Darnton in 1979-80. In literature Shakespeare was at the center of the most sophistical bibliographical studies, including for example Charlton Hinman’s comparison of each page of fifty surviving copies of Shakespeare’s first folio, to track the way in which errors were corrected during printing.¹ But book history addresses questions which apply to the production, distribution, reception, and survival of texts across all media and formats, scripts and languages, literary genres and historical contexts. The expansion of the chronological and geographic range of book history in recent decades has enhanced our understanding both of features specific to a given time and place and of book historical themes that recur regularly across different contexts. For example studies of the nature and history of printing have highlighted the different rhythms at which printing spread depending on multiple cultural, economic, and technical factors. The history of reading is a large and growing subfield within the history of the book, but also a particularly challenging one. The further growth of the history of reading in the East Asian field will be beneficial not only to our understanding of the East Asian contexts but also in creating new possibilities for comparison with other cultures.

Lianbin Dai offers a thoughtful and well-informed survey of the literary and historical studies of reading in the West. He traces successive schools of literary criticism, including New Criticism, Reader Response theory, and New Historicism. An increasing focus on actual readers, as opposed to the ideal readers that authors have in mind, has emphasized the multiple and changing meanings of a literary text, formed by readers who each bring to it their own concerns and backgrounds. Historians have also developed different approaches to reading since the first attempts in the 1950s to define a popular "mentalité" from the surviving examples of cheap print in early modern Europe. Historians have used many other kinds of evidence from which they have problematized those early interpretations and have investigated reading practices in a variety of social contexts --e.g. among women and workers, learners and the learned, from antiquity to the 21st century. Recent work has also pointed out that books were used in other ways than to be read.² Although literary scholars and historians approach reading with different tools and questions stemming from their discipline, they are working together fruitfully on large collaborative projects such as the Reading Experience Database on-line which collects the isolated bits of evidence scattered in texts from which we can form a broader pictures of reading.

Reading will always prove elusive, given that it is an internal experience the full impact of which likely escapes even the most self-conscious reader and that
most reading leaves no written record for historians or literary critics to analyze. Even from a period when the annotation of books was not uncommon only around 50% of extant copies are annotated (and not necessarily as the result of reading that text).\(^3\) Annotations are most common in learned books whereas cheap, ephemeral, and widely distributed genres were rarely annotated; reading notes also survive in freestanding notebooks which resemble in some way the Chinese \textit{biji}. Lianbin Dai devotes special care to the range of sources which historians of reading in the West have used-- from lists of books owned or for sale, to the depictions of readers and reading in paintings or novels, to evidence about how reading what taught. Every kind of source requires careful interpretation; for example, as Dai points out, instruction manuals can be used as evidence both of what is advocated there and of its opposite, since the advice seemed necessary to issue in the first place, which suggests the prevalence of a different practice. One of the special challenges in the history of reading is to find sources from which to answer questions about the who, what, when, where, and especially the how and why of reading. Lianbin Dai pays special attention to the sources that could be exploited in researching the history of Chinese reading. These range from materials directly generated by reading, such as marginalia and reading notes, correspondence and the records of literary societies, to sources that represent reading, including depictions in images and in fiction, writings on ideal libraries, and instruction manuals. Bibliographies and book catalogs of various kinds can straddle these categories. In early modern Europe some book lists idealized or satirized real collections of books, while others were generated by the practical need to keep track of books owned or to assign value to them after the owner’s death.\(^4\)

The study of the history of reading in the West, which is still very much underway, has brought us many vivid vignettes and new insights but only a few strong generalizations because of the difficulty of moving from such varied individual experiences to larger patterns. The shifts from shared reading aloud to private and silent reading (during the middle ages) or from an intensive focus on a few texts to an extensive perusal of many (during the early modern period) must be tempered with reminders that multiple kinds of readings coexisted in the same context, and even within the habits of the same individual, as tailored to the circumstances. Literacy rates too were highly variable--Sweden reached near universal literacy by 1700 due to religious regulations requiring young people wishing to be married to be literate, while in Russia literacy rates remained under 10% until the 19th century; until the modern period general patterns in European literacy include higher rates in urban than in rural settings and for men than for women. The contributions of the history of reading will likely lie less in sociological statistics than in fine-grained analyses of how texts were given meaning by specific readers on the one hand and through shared cultural practices, e.g. in instructional, collaborative or other group settings on the other. We are increasingly aware today of the subtle transformations in the experience of reading from new forms of sociability and new technologies associated with digital media. Similarly social, cultural and technological changes in the past have constantly affected reading. These include changes in the layout of libraries, the furnishings of homes, but also in forms of lighting and transportation-- the introduction of electricity and train travel
are especially associated with rises in reading rates. Reading remains at the heart of a vast array of cultural activities, from religion and to art, and of information-gathering from the news to how-to manuals, and of all the intellectual disciplines. By seeking to understand how reading has operated across differences of time and place we can enrich our understanding of so many aspects of human experience in historical and cross-cultural context. May Lianbin Dai’s excellent survey of literary and historical approaches to the history of reading in the West inspire many more specialists of China to pursue these lines of inquiry.