THE CHINESE ARE AGAINST INDEXES

H. D. TALBOT

[From Hong Kong University, where he is Lecturer in Geography and also the Society of Indexers’ Hon. Corresponding Member for the Far East, Mr. H. D. Talbot, B.Sc., writes under date January 23 (in reply to a New Year’s message from Mr. Norman Knight):]

I was doubly pleased to be called a Founder member because I can remember going to the preliminary meeting before the Society was actually formally founded and then, for some reason, I could not attend the first meeting.* At the back of my mind I have always felt that that somehow disqualified me from being designated a ‘Founder Member’.

I do indeed agree that the Society has made great strides and I am proud to have been there at its birth.

My pen has been the reverse of ‘facile’ in the years since I have been in the Far East and the reason is quite directly connected with indexing. My purpose in coming to Hong Kong was to learn Chinese well, but most important to understand Chinese people, or, to put it more accurately to understand traditional Chinese culture or civilization. One of the first things I discovered was that traditional Chinese scholarship and scholars are ‘Anti-indexes’ on the whole. That is, that indexes as an aid to scholarship are disliked and even in a gentle way derided. Obviously the whole matter is a very fundamental one and bound up with the nature of traditional Chinese scholarship. The result of the shock of this discovery (and of others like it) was to produce the mild mental break-down known so well to Cultural Anthropologists as ‘Culture Shock’. Anyway, as this letter now testifies, my ability to communicate has returned to me. Apart from my chosen field of research I now owe everyone an article on ‘The Nature of Chinese Scholarship’ apart from anything else.

Even modern publications which have an index tend to have a poor Chinese index. As an example I would quote *A Gazetteer of Place Names in Hong Kong, Kowloon and the New Territories*. Hong Kong Government Printer, No date [1960?] (Code No.: 0573200). This is strictly a description of the whole Colony, which is divided up into 58 zones for the purpose. The alphabetical index to the romanized form of the names is, as one would expect, to the pages of the text. The Chinese index, which is by the number of strokes, refers only to the zone number. The analogy would be an index to a book which blithely referred the reader to the chapter rather than the page!

*A New Guide to Transliteration*

My space is running out and there is one publication I want to mention that follows on from my article: ‘The Indexing of Chinese Names’ in *The Indexer*, Vol. 2, p. 99. This is *A Guide to Transliterated Chinese in the Modern Peking Dialect* (3 volumes). Compiled by Ireneus László Legeza. Leiden: Brill, 1968. The first volume, the only one published so far, costs 32 Dutch guilders. It is a guide to the 40 odd systems of romanizing ‘Mandarin’ Chinese, which is the type of Chinese almost invariably referred to in European books on China.

The guide will be invaluable for ensuring consistency in indexing names in any system and should make it possible for the indexer to point out the not infrequent mixing of systems of romanization that occurs in books based on secondary sources.

---

* Mr. Talbot is certainly a Founder member. What he refers to as ‘the preliminary meeting’ was in fact the Society’s Inaugural Meeting held on March 30th, 1957, and what he calls ‘the first meeting’ was a Special General Meeting at which the constitution and Rules were adopted.—Editor.