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# Small Tales about a Chinese Catalogue

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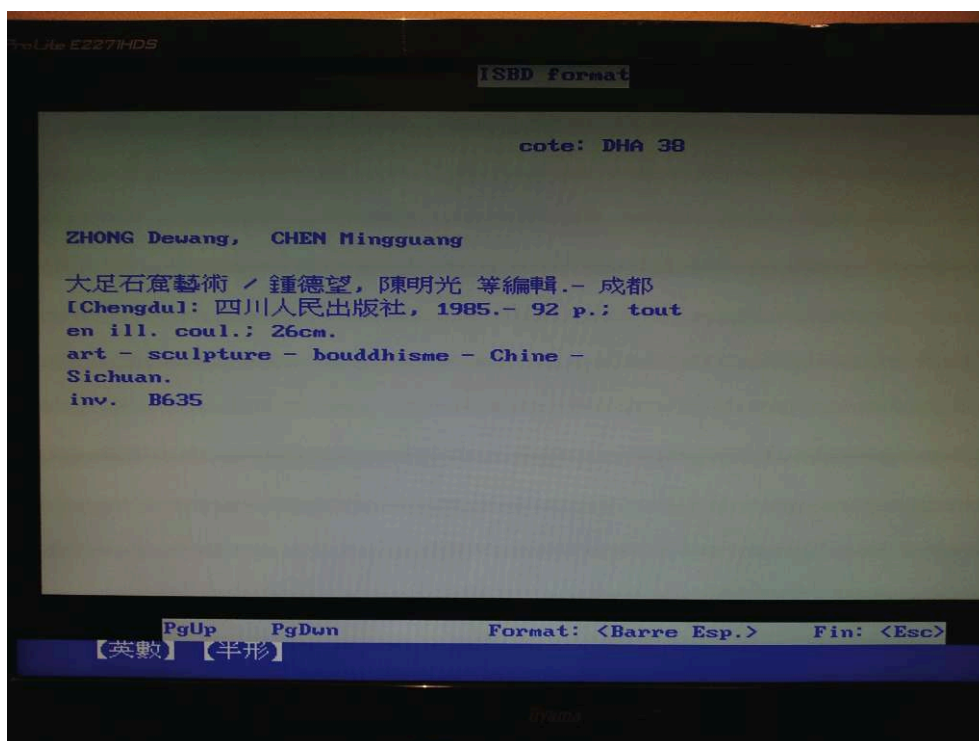
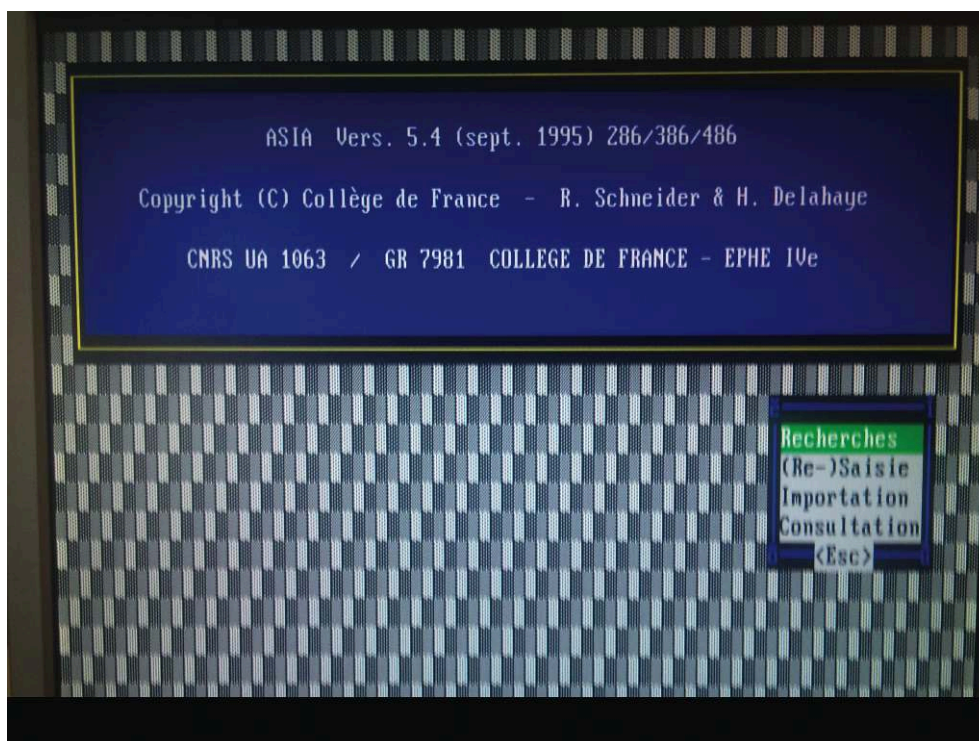
Hubert Delahaye

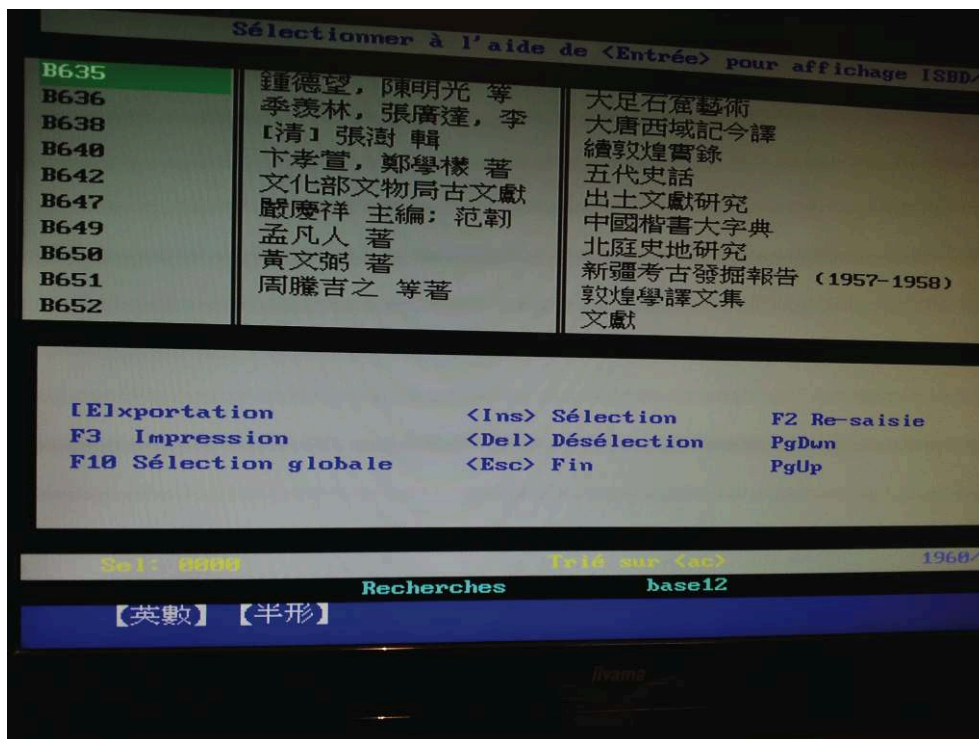
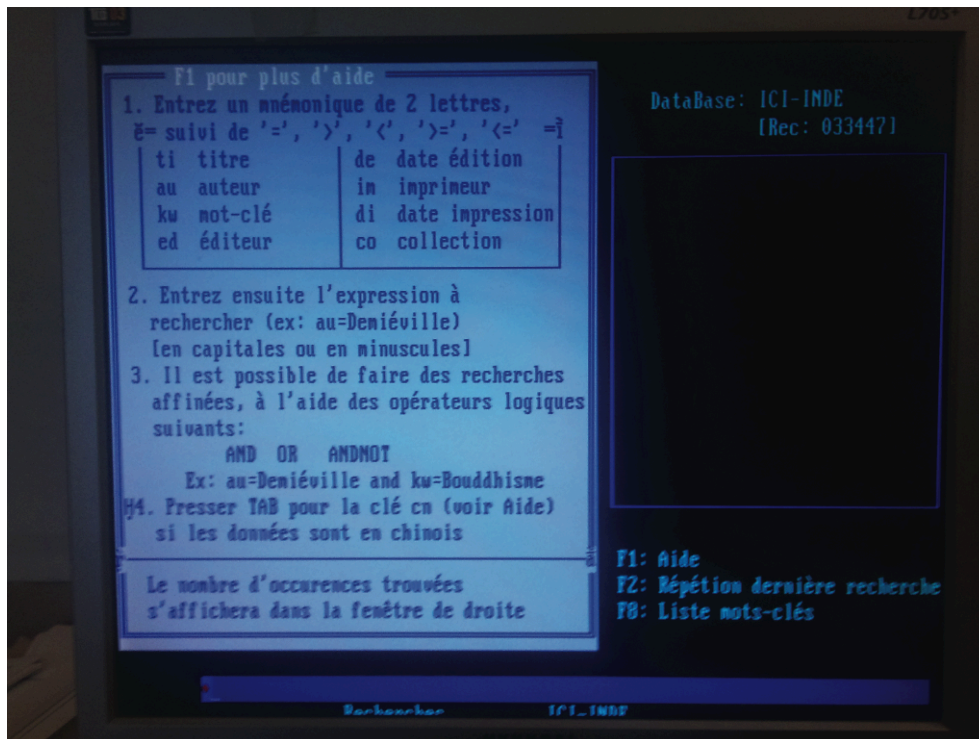
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## EDITOR'S NOTE

Source: La lettre, no. 38, June 2014

- 1 **Since the time of Enlightenment philosophers and missionaries, Chinese studies and books produced in China have been well received in Europe, including at the Collège de France, where Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat held the Chair of Chinese and Tartar-Manchu Language and Literature from 1814 until 1832.**
- 2 Interest in Chinese writings and documents at the Collège de France did not wane. In 1970, the Institute of Advanced Chinese Studies (IHEC), officially founded in 1920 and completed in 1927 by Paul Pelliot (another Collège de France sinologist who held the Chair of Language and History of Central Asia, between 1911 and 1945, and the sinologist Marcel Granet, naturally found its place alongside the four other institutes (Japan, Korea, India, Tibet) that make up the Far East Institutes (Instituts d'Études Orientales [IEO]). Throughout this glorious history many books and a few treasures were accumulated and recorded over the years in a bilingual catalogue on index cards. Some are adorned with beautiful writings; others, less so, probably the work of Westerners. These were often students, who transliterated the Chinese into Latin characters according to the rules of the École Française d'Extrême-Orient. This "narrative from the inside" (内傳, *neizhuan*) of a catalogue packed with adventures could be prolonged, but these few lines are only intended to present its penultimate developments.





When information technology started to be used seriously in the humanities during the eighties, the presentation of Chinese, Japanese and Korean (CJK) characters in the management of Western libraries and of scientific information raised a particular technical challenge. The market for the modernization of tools for research on the Far East was deemed “marginal”, and the issue aroused little empathy among computer experts and librarians used to previous practices, who were apprehensive about this new, perhaps exotic, environment. Problems included deciding between traditional Chinese characters and those simplified by the writing reform, between several

encoding standards for each of them, and several possible transcriptions and formats. Unicode was still just a project on paper and Internet was in limbo. A common denominator had to be found, and the most upgradeable, most sustainable and cheapest solution had to be adopted.

- 3 From autumn 1983, the US network RLIN in Stanford published its first bibliographies in CJK characters. The resources mobilized to do so, including human resources, were largely out of the reach of French libraries. The personal computer technology nevertheless made its way forwards: prices dropped and, shortly after 1985, it became possible to envisage that reduced engineering means, and technicians sufficiently well-versed in the oddities of these languages, would allow for a tailored application to be programmed at local level, and at a lower cost.
- 4 This was achieved, though not without a struggle. The first computerized bibliographical records that included *Chinese* characters – immediately printed out, just in case –, appeared in 1989 on a black and white screen at the IEO. This was owing to the Asia programme, which was to evolve through four versions during its twenty years in existence. Initially, it served only to record new entries in the IHEC catalogue, before it was adopted by the four other institutes.
- 5 Asia was full of disadvantages, and the earliest versions were at times temperamental. Users sometimes had to be crafty, and deal with bugs. Without a local network, the application could run only as a single-user version, which required coordination in the collection, reviewing and the compilation of the bibliographic records. Likewise, indexing fields based on the first word only soon raised issues. Since Chinese authors' surname often precedes their first name, Asia was programmed so that they would automatically be entered into the index in this way. However, given the reverse custom in Western books, the index search was falling upon the authors' first names. The index entry therefore had to be written in the Chinese way with the surname first, thus bending the rules used for indexing Western books. There were other deviations from the customs of the Unimarc cataloguing format, but on the whole this new programme was a revolution. We were becoming modern. On a European scale, we were among the very first to offer bibliographical records with their original scripts in addition to the *pinyin* transliterations. The 5,000-records mark was soon reached, but at least another 150,000, if not more, remained to be done, given the Chinese taste for text collation and collection. Some of these *collectanea* included hundreds of titles that all required content fields. This was dizzying and a little demoralizing.
- 6 Thus began a period of intense search for financial resources. *Audaces fortuna juvat!* They came from the CNRS project Catalogue Collectif des Ouvrages (CCO), and, of course, from the Collège de France too. Although this was nonetheless too little, the enterprise gained momentum during the nineties. Towards 2005, Asia was nearing 70,000 records *with Chinese*. There were as many in the other four catalogues, where Japanese *with Japanese characters* and Korean *with Korean characters* had made their appearance in 1993, the year in which records started to be derived from Japanese CD-ROMs – another modern technology.
- 7 In the meantime, the Internet had also gained momentum. Yet until 1995, still no European counterpart institution had uploaded their library catalogue. Then appeared the tool, the providential solution developed by the CCO: a server with the bibliographies of associated laboratories that would allow not only for full records to be displayed, but also for Latin, Chinese, Japanese and Korean characters all to be used for

querying. This was a European first, which caused a sensation at that year's symposium of the European Association of Sinological Librarians (EASL) in Zurich.

- 8 Those seem like distant times, and adventure seems to have somewhat disappeared from the picture. In 2009 the IEO catalogues were paired with another program, Aleph, which is networked and includes all the Collège de France Libraries. This is heavy-weight software, as refined, precise and reliable as an atomic clock, which can effortlessly and normatively process books in Tibetan or in Devanagari and, generally speaking, all the documents that were unsuited to Asia's rustic processing.
- 9 The IEO have contributed over 200,000 bibliographic records to the Collège de France general catalogue, and the retrospective catalogue of the IHEC is nearing completion. Some of its references are extremely rare, and few theses on classical sinology can be written without their authors having recourse to its services. These are the latest developments, but technology has yet not said its final word. There will be other changes. Sooner or later the IHEC catalogue will join another, vaster and more universal catalogue. We hope that younger librarians will find their share of adventure. A lot can still happen but for now, Asia has left and has taken a generation with it. It feels like being aboard an old sinking ship.

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