WITTERN — Multiple

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Multiple Views and Modes of Engagement with a Repository of Digital Texts

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Digital representations of texts depend on a specific interface that exposes them to the reader. These interfaces are what enables the reader to interact with the text, but at the same time they do limit these interactions to the specific functions that the designers implemented.

While working on a digital repository of premodern Chinese texts (described most recently in Wittern, 2014), some of our most pressing questions were, ‘To what requirements of the readers do we want to cater?’ and ‘How can we design the interaction with the repository in a way that allows all users to feel comfortable and do what they want?’, or ‘How can the repository enable and support the research questions of its users?’ and ‘How can we enable the researchers to collaborate and cooperate?’

It was quite clear that no one interface would be able to accommodate all these needs. We therefore designed the system from the beginning as a house with many windows, all of which allow peeks into different, sometimes overlapping parts of its interior, that is, our repository of texts. At the moment, three windows to different rooms have been realized and will be discussed below.

1. The stack room, the place where the collection is held; the material held here is open access.

2. The reading room, a place where items from the collection can be requested and read; this room is open to the general public.

3. The researchers’ office (of which every researcher has its own separate one)—items here include those checked out from the stacks and additional items acquired privately by the researcher; access is limited to the owner (and administrative staff).

The poster will show how the functionality of these rooms is mapped to different interfaces/applications to access the digital repository.

# The Researchers’ Office

The office of a researcher is where interaction with the texts happens in long, uninterrupted stretches of time (ideally); this is the place for close reading, annotating the texts, or writing a commentary to the text and possibly translating it.

To support this mode of work, a specialized mode of the versatile editor Emacs has been developed. It offers not only access to the digital repository but includes a wide range of additional tools for working with the text, including reference works, note-taking, publication, and analysis, as well as support for reproducible research and research notebooks.

A researcher can also bring his own texts and tools into interaction with the digital archive, and this in fact blurs the line between working with texts in the archive and texts available locally to the researcher: a digital copy of the text is available to the researcher with all of the same possible interactions that are available to the researcher with his own texts. Furthermore, access to the archive being merely one of the many functions of the interface to be called upon when necessary, it allows a much tighter integration with the workflow of the researcher than a separate dedicated desktop application or even a web application.

# The Reading Room

The reading room is open for visitors and used for quick lookup in material that might not be central to the task at hand; it is also used for the discovery of new material.

For the digital repository, this is realized as a web application that provides basic search and discovery functionality and allows the browsing of catalogs and texts. Over time, more tools will be added, and a transition path (or a dual-use scenario) to the desktop-based Emacs environment will be developed. However, the exact development path has not yet been determined and will depend on the experience of the users interacting with the current system. The reading room is accessible at http://www.kanripo.org.

The reading room also serves as a reception room for visitors who might advance to the researchers’ office. It allows them to see what kind of material and tools are available, and thus to gauge if the necessary investment of time is likely to pay off.

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# The Stack Rooms

This is where the material available in the reading room and researchers’ office is held. The stack room is the repository of the texts held in https://github.com/kanripo.

Researchers may also donate texts curated by themselves to the repository, or fork and branch existing texts to gain write access to them. Interaction with the stack room is possible through Emacs or through a dedicated web front-end.

# References

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