

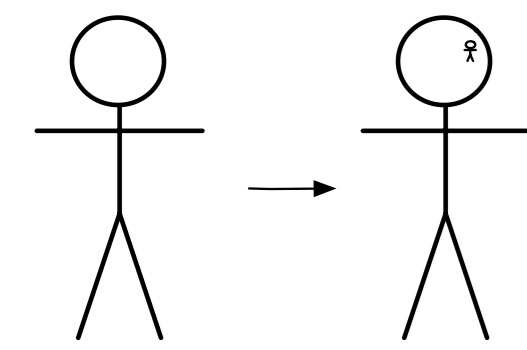
THE CONTAINERS APPROACH: AN INDUCTIVE METHOD TO LOOK AT CULTURAL DIFFERENCE IN A TECHNOLOGICAL ENVIRONMENT

What we call "culture" is usually divided into two fundamental aspects: a body of artifacts and a system of customs. In a similar way, cultural elements can be considered as located in two related platforms: artifacts and human beings. Their presence in these two types of "containers" results from inscription processes.

The Containers Approach is useful in that it makes us look at "cultural elements" in an inductive way, without the need to define or even consider them beforehand. It also blurs the frontiers between natural sciences, humanities and social sciences by looking at another frontier: the one between human beings and objects.

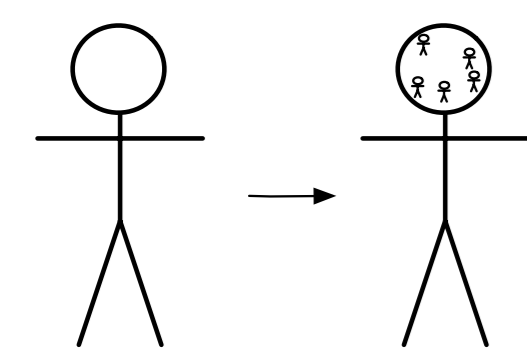
If human beings and objects are considered separately, their respective contents can be analysed in the exact same manner. *Comparative analysis between containers* is the tool that makes us see what is a "cultural difference" and what is not.

Inscription processes

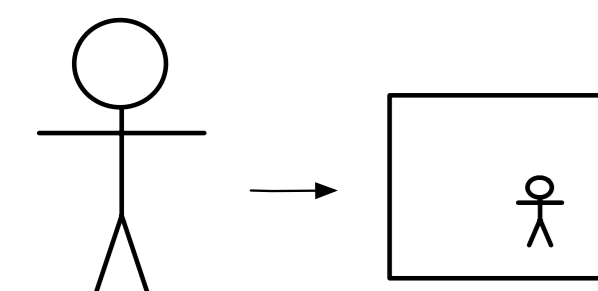


Human to human inscription

My mother speaks French --> I speak French too. Something has traveled from one human being to another one.

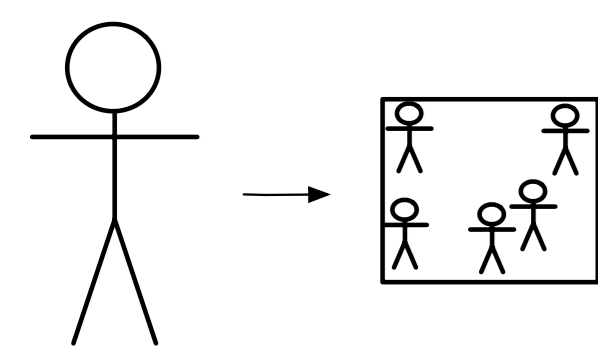


My teachers, my family, my friends influence me. Many thoughts, habits, ideas, "cultural elements" in me come from the people I have met in my life.

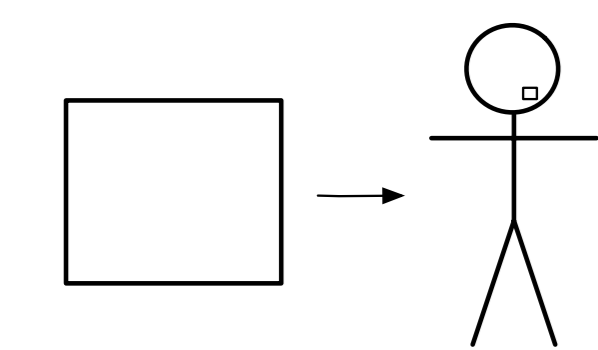


Human to object inscription

If I design an artifact (e.g. I write a piece of software, a book, build a machine, record music), some of my ideas, my choices, my thoughts go from me to the object.

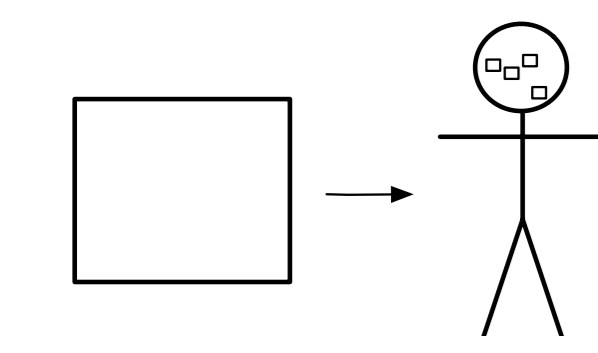


Most of today's technical objects are the result of the collaboration of many people. An airplane, for example, results from the collaborative work of engineers, directors, workers, etc. All the decisions, choices of these people are accumulated inside the final technical object.

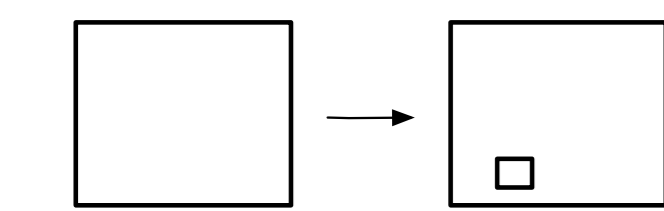


Object to human inscription

Ideas, choices, structures, also go from objects to people. When I read a book or watch a movie, I remember it. And I use the computer every day, even with my eyes closed, my fingers know where to find the keys; the keyboard structure is in my head.

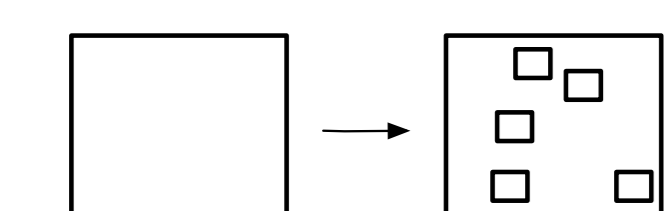


Human beings are confronted with artifacts and other material objects on a daily basis. Many "cultural elements" contained in objects get inscribed in people, and become part of them.

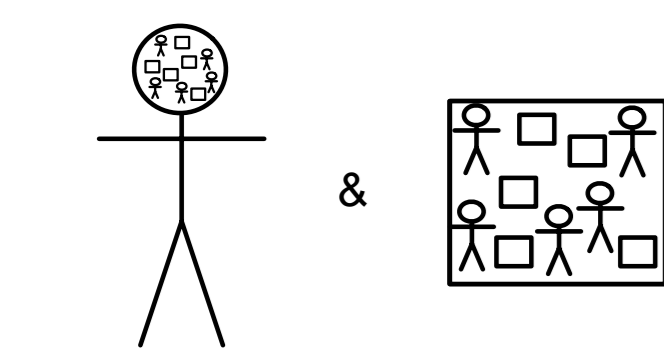


Object to object inscription

An artifact is usually composed of other artifacts, and new technologies rely on technologies from the past.



My computer is made of different parts which come from other objects. Parts of the software I use were copy-pasted from other software; hardware elements were implemented in my computer after they had been mass-produced in a factory.



The "Containers" viewpoint

What we call "cultural elements" is, in most cases, located inside two different kinds of containers: artifacts and human beings. They result from inscription processes.

Containers in the People's Republic of China in 2008

Discrepancies

CASE STUDY 1: USER VS COMPUTER INTERFACE

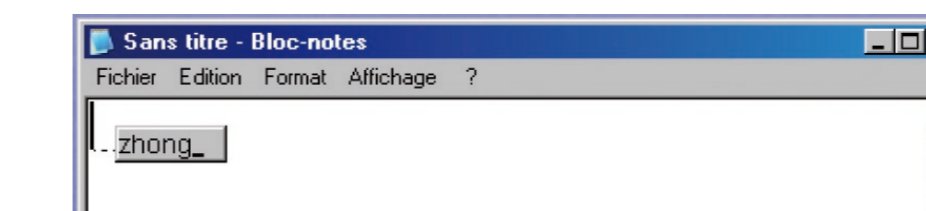


- Chinese user**
- flesh and bones
 - Chinese characters
 - nice suit



- Computer keyboard**
- plastic and wires
 - Roman-alphabet letters
 - gray sober design

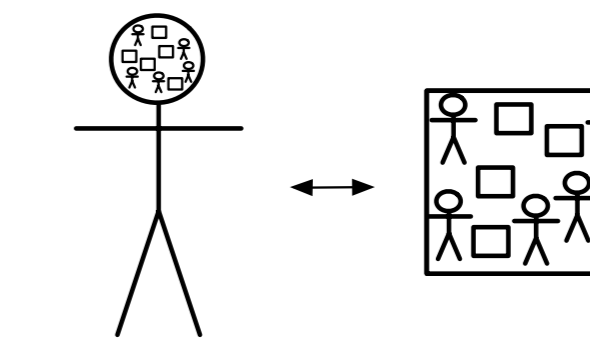
Since the ASCII keyboard that accompanies most personal computers in China is based on the Roman alphabet, Chinese users had to design a special software interface to be able to write in Chinese.



One first enters the phonetic Roman alphabet based transcription (here "zhong")



And then chooses among the possible characters that share the same pronunciation.



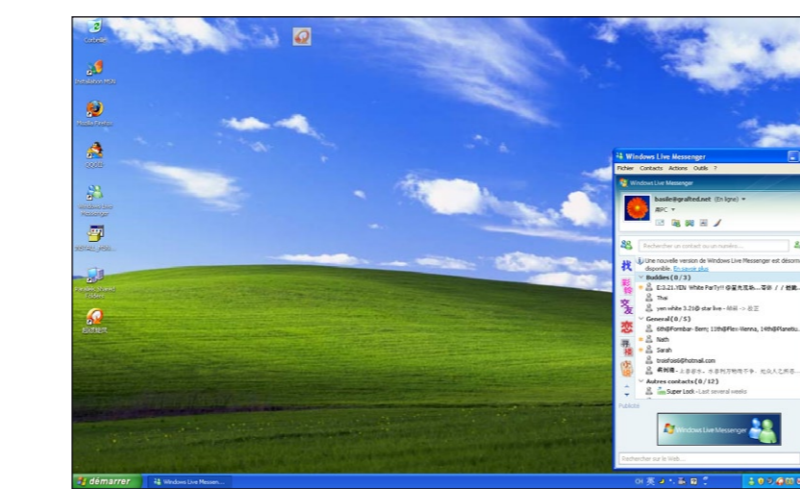
The input method works fine, but Chinese people who use the computer on a daily basis then have difficulties to write the characters by hand. Because knowledge of the strokes is not required by the software interface.

Similarities

CASE STUDY 2: INSTANT MESSAGING



- QQ**
- Run under Windows XP
 - Small window display, with icons for friends & contacts
 - Double click on an icon to display chat window

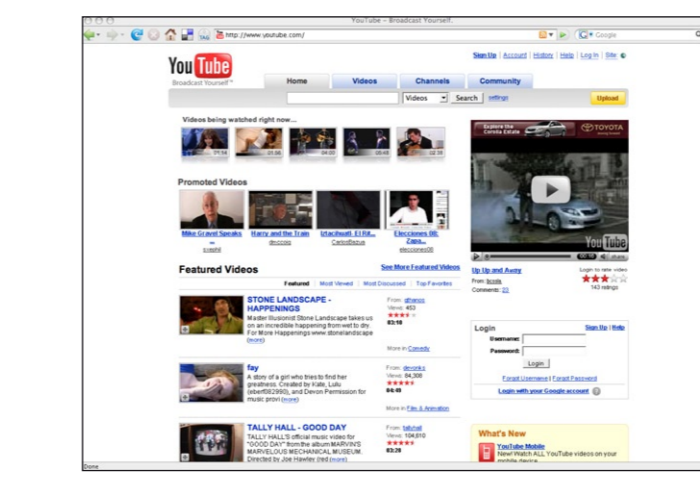


- MSN messenger**
- run under Windows XP
 - small window display, with icons for friends & contacts
 - double click on an icon to display chat window

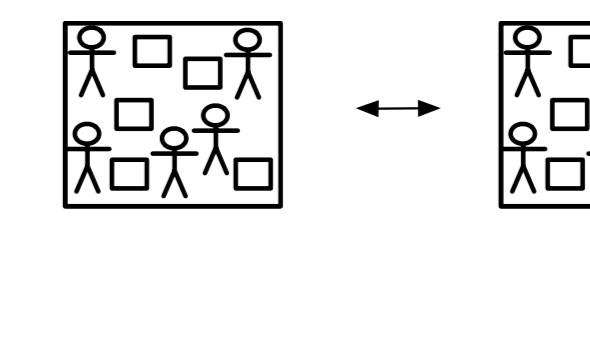
CASE STUDY 3: ONLINE VIDEOS



- Tudou.com**
- hosted in browser window
 - search tool at the top, advertisement on the right
 - popular videos listed in the middle



- YouTube.com**
- hosted in browser window
 - search tool at the top, advertisement on the right
 - popular videos listed in the middle



Some Chinese websites and web software can be seen as related to Western counterparts.

On the left Tencent QQ, generally referred to as QQ, the most popular free instant messaging computer software in China, and the world's third most popular IM service. On the right, Tudou.com, one of the largest video platforms in China, which claims to serve 100 million videos per day.

While the language and many other aspects of these software platforms are different, one cannot help but note the extent to which the Chinese and Western versions are similar in both their structure and their organization.

Discrepancies

CASE STUDY 4: SEARCH ENGINES



- Baidu.com**
- website URL in Chinese (Baidu.com)
 - the size of the English transcription (Baidu) and the Chinese version (百度) are equal
 - Baidu has a special meaning in Mandarin: «Perfection»



- Google.com**
- the name of the website (谷歌) is much smaller than the English one
 - the meaning of the Chinese characters for Google, «Valley/Grain-Song», is phonetic (Gu-Ge)

CASE STUDY 5: SOCIAL NETWORKS



- Kaixin001.com**
- the name of the website 开心网 «HappyNetwork», suggests the idea of having fun
 - the main window doesn't display a news-feed about the user but only information about his/her friends



- Facebook.com**
- the name of the website «Facebook», suggests self-presentation
 - the main window displays a news-feed about the user him/herself

Several Chinese websites and web software, while looking like clones of their Western equivalents, are actually strongly localized.

Baidu.com, the main search engine in the PRC, has a Chinese name that indicates «Hundred of times», which, according to his designers, represents persistent search for the ideal and is also a reference to an ancient Chinese poem. Its name is always displayed both in Roman-alphabet transcription as well as in Chinese characters, but the two names are the same size.

Google.com, which for now is failing on the Chinese market, keeps its main web address Google.com, which makes it very difficult to memorize for a Chinese-speaking net surfer (imagine an American net surfer

that has to memorize a Chinese website name). Moreover, its Chinese translation, Gu-Ge «Valley/Grain-Song», does not have a clear connection with the idea of a search engine (Google probably wants it to be understood as «harvesting song»), and is phonetic first.

开心网 «Happy-Network», a Chinese website similar to Facebook, displays mostly information about friends and visitors on the user's main page. The interface is oriented toward the others, and focuses on games and the possibilities to interact with other connected persons.

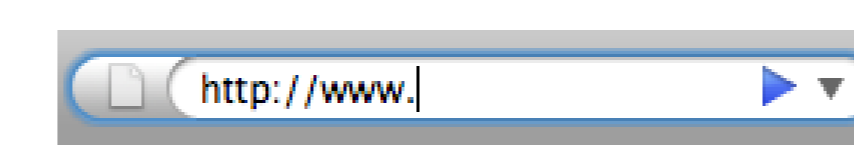
Facebook displays a news-feed about the user's own actions on his/her main page. The interface is oriented toward the presentation of oneself, in a similar way to a resume or a curriculum vitae.

Discrepancies

CASE STUDY 6: DNS TECHNOLOGY

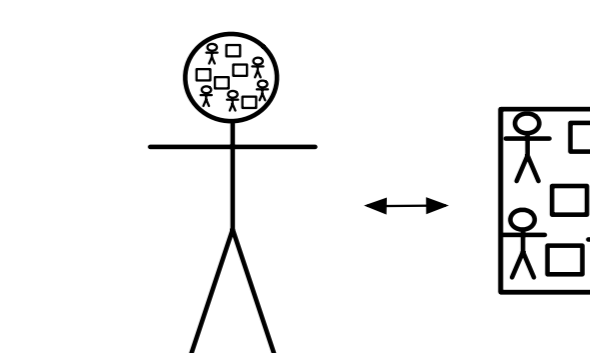


- Chinese user**
- flesh and bones
 - Chinese characters
 - nice suit



- DSN technology for web addresses**
- network of DNS servers
 - requires Roman alphabet input
 - nice Firefox gray design

Since the DNS technology that is used for websites names in China is based on the Roman alphabet, Chinese users need to use a phonetic transcription of the Chinese names for their web addresses. The illustrations below shows the main page of a company named 中国书画在线 (Chinese Painting and Calligraphy Online), followed by its advertisement in a street in Beijing.



As one can see on the pictures on the left, Chinese owners of the company 中国书画在线 'Chinese Painting and Calligraphy Online' had to find a romanisation for their company's name in order to have a website. The Roman transcription they chose ('zgshzx') stands quite obviously for '中 Zhong - 国 Guo - 书 Shu - 画 Hua - 在 Zai - 线 Xian', i.e. the first Roman-alphabet letter of each Chinese character's phonetic transcription.

While the website's name seems quite difficult to remember for potential net surfers who pass by the advertisement in the street, we also note that the phonetic transcription makes the characters disappear. Since many Chinese characters share similar pronunciation, it makes guesses pretty difficult. For example, the meaning of, say, <www.yi.com>, could be <www.衣.com> (= clothing +), <www.医.com> (= medical science +), <www.移.com> (= move +), or any other «sound mates».

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CONCLUSION

As I hope to have shown with the diagrams and illustrations above, the containers' approach is particularly useful whenever dealing with China and technology issues. Not because it brings new concepts, or new theoretical perspectives (the discussion above is anything but a demonstration), but because it provides us with a simple, graphical tool, to look at culture in an inductive way. And also because it's fun.