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2024 Essay Award Winner

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If books are the jewels of human sophistication, then libraries must be the magnificent crowns the jewels sit on top of to be showcased to the public. However, with one glance at the directory of Central Library, the supposed grand depository of Hong Kong's books, one cannot help but notice that only five of the eleven stories are actually used to store paper 'books'.

Map scrolls taller than the most towering man; old newspapers aged finer than cheese of the best quality; and rare CDs more valuable than a similar-sized golden plate. These artefacts, scattered throughout the library, may not exactly be the 'books' one would expect, yet the information they store is evidently no less important.

Books are always evolving. Students of Confucius carved his sayings into strips cut from bamboo, while scribes of Levant scribbled the ancient stories of the Israelites onto the dried skins of lambs. Only after the invention of the printing press were the wise words printed into paper 'books'. Nowadays, more people read these ancient scriptures on their mobile phones than on their 'conventional' form of 'books' – yet they will not be stripped of their canon status just because they are available on other forms of media apart from 'books'.

The best novels of the 2010s come not from 'books', but often free websites in which anyone and everyone can publish their text. The masterpieces of online fiction are then printed back into 'books' of course, but the very decision of the contributors to publish their works online in the first place, reflects the fact that 'books' are no longer seen as paramount by aspiring authors themselves.

Despite the apparent trajectory to extinction the paper 'book' is being driven on, five of the eleven floors in the Central Library are still used to store these supposedly outdated relics. Given the great technological leap from 'books' to screens, a perfectly logical observer would actually expect humans to switch instantly to this convenient format, comparable to how Chinese scholars ditched bamboo slips after the invention of paper itself.

Yet paper 'books' persist for a reason. They are tangible, real object, which people can touch, feel and sense. The smell of fresh ink on untouched paper is irreproducible, and the satisfaction of flipping through pages and seeing the progress is irreplaceable. People love these sensations.

Thus, it is rather pointless to suggest that reading 'books' is unnecessary when we have online media, just as one would not claim that television is useless when we have streaming services. In fact, just like how streaming services become part of television, such media are not at all replacing paper 'books' – they themselves have become what is known as books.

The fact is, people are always reading. From the papyrus sheets of Egyptian secretaries, to the digital monitors of Japanese commuters, books are versatile, and they are always adapting. No matter what form they are to take, books are here to stay — because they are the best jewels of humanity.