

# Columbia University in the City of New York

DEPARTMENT OF FRENCH  
AND ROMANCE PHILOLOGY

Hamilton Hall

New York, N. Y. 10027

235 Forest Ave.,  
Glen Ridge, N.J., 07028,  
March 8, 1971.

Mrs. Marguerite A. Hart,  
Troy Public Library,  
5044 Rochester Road,  
Troy, Mich., 48084.

Dear Mrs. Hart:

It is a pleasure to comply with your request, which gives me an opportunity to repay some of the debt I owe to libraries and librarians.

The enclosed message is in part excerpted from Chapter 17 of my book "What's in a Word?", published by Hawthorn (a Universal paperback has just appeared). This chapter, "Books and Language", was originally composed for J.B. Lippincott, publishers of others of my books. The copyright is mine, so don't hesitate to use it.

Best wishes for the success of your new facilities.

Cordially,

*Mario Pei*

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Books represent the accumulated wisdom of the human race. They are the repositories of mankind's experience, in the six thousand and more years that have elapsed since it first occurred to man to record that experience in permanent form.

Ever since its inception, man has considered his gift of writing so precious and unique that many of the nations of antiquity created legends to the effect that it had been bestowed upon them by the gods. The name of the Sanskrit alphabet, still used today by Hindi, Bengali, and most of the other languages of India, is Devanagari, which literally means "pertaining to the city of the gods." The hieroglyphic system used by the ancient Egyptians means, in Greek, "sacred stone writing"; the Egyptians believed that the art of writing had been devised by Thoth, god of wisdom; their own expression for writing, literally translated, is "the speech of the gods." The Assyrians and Babylonians thought their cuneiform (wedge-shaped) characters had been given to man by the god Nebo, who held sway over human destiny. The Mayas attributed their writing system to their most important deity, Itzamna. The lost prehistoric writing of Japan, replaced about 300 A.D. by the Chinese characters, was styled kami no moji, "divine characters". Even today, backward groups that receive from missionaries their new code of belief and behavior receive from them also the gift of literacy. To many of these groups, writing and religion are inextricably intertwined.

While the ancients immortalized their thoughts on stone and bricks of clay, wax tablets and rolls of papyrus, our own most important and permanent form of writing is books. It is books that give us access to all the varied forms of thought of the past and present - religious, philosophical, artistic, poetic, fictional, scientific. The burning of books is a favorite practice of those totalitarian regimes that wish to stifle free thought. Destroying books goes hand in hand with slaughtering human beings, because the book is capable of pointing an accusing finger at a wrongdoer with the same precision with which a man says: "I accuse!"

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This writer can still recall the days when there was neither radio nor

television. There were fewer books then than there are now, but more were read.

Books were a precious possession. I can still remember how I treasured the few books I had brought with me, at the age of seven, from my native Italy, and how until I had mastered my new language I read those books over and over again. They were more than friends. They were guides and counselors. They were signposts, pointing the way to self-improvement and achievement.

I was about ten when I avowed to one of my school friends that I wanted to read more books than the few we had in school. He volunteered to lead me to a branch of the New York Public Library, where children as well as adults could take out cards and receive the privilege of borrowing books for home use. It was a marvelous discovery, and I felt like a man who has come across a buried treasure. The librarians were kind and helpful. In a couple of years I had graduated from the Children's Room of the library to the adult division, where there were books on all topics and in many languages. I tried my hand at reading a Spanish book on ancient Egypt, and found to my delight that my native Italian made the reading of Spanish quite easy.

I can truthfully say that I read thousands of library books in my early years. Their contribution to my education cannot be over-estimated. Even now, at seventy and retired, I continue to make use of the excellent library facilities of Columbia University, where I taught for over thirty years. The subject matter is different, and the books are more specialized. The basic process is the same. The librarians are still kind and helpful, always ready to assist, suggest, look up references bearing on any research problem.

Despite all recent developments in radio and television, books are still first as sources of information. The library is still the best place in which to attack and solve your intellectual problems. It is good, it is fully available, it is free. By all means use it!

Mario Pei

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