

## **Writing-Mediated Interaction Face-to-Face: Sinitic Brushtalk (漢文筆談) as an Age-Old Lingua-Cultural Practice in Premodern East Asian Cross-Border Communication**

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### **Abstract**

In Western societies, speaking is construed as an interactive social activity while writing is widely perceived as a solo or private endeavor. Such a functional dichotomy did not apply to the “Sinographic Cosmopolis” in premodern East Asia, however. Based on selected documented examples of writing-mediated cross-border communication spanning over a thousand years from the Sui dynasty to the late Ming dynasty, this paper demonstrates that *Hanzi* 漢字, a morphographic, non-phonographic script, was commonly used by literati of classical Chinese or Literary Sinitic to engage in “silent conversation” as a substitute for speech. Except for a “drifting” record co-constructed by Korean maritime officials and Chinese “boat people,” all the other examples featured Chinese–Japanese interaction. While synchronous cross-border communication in written Chinese has been reported in scholarly works in East Asian studies (published more commonly in East Asian languages than in English or other Western languages), to our knowledge no attempt has been made to examine such writing-mediated interaction from a linguistic or discourse-pragmatic point of view. Writing-mediated interaction enacted through Sinitic brushtalk (漢文筆談) is compatible with transactional and interactional language functions as in speech. In premodern and early modern East Asia, it was most commonly conducted using brush, ink, and paper, but it could also take place using a pointed object and a flat surface covered with a fluid substance like sand, finger-drawing using water or tea on a table, and so forth. Such an interactional pattern appears to be unparalleled in other regional lingua francas written with a phonographic script such as Latin and Arabic. To facilitate research into the extent to which this interactional pattern is script-specific to morphographic sinograms, a “morphographic hypothesis” is proposed. The theoretical significance of writing-mediated synchronous interaction as a third known modality of communication—after speech and (tactile) sign language—will be briefly discussed.

**Keywords:** writing-mediated interaction face-to-face, pragmatics, Sinitic brushtalk (漢文筆談), drifting brushtalk (漂流筆談), early modern East Asia

The writer [unlike the speaker] may look over what he has already written, pause between each word with no fear of his interlocutor interrupting him, take his time in choosing a particular word, even looking it up in the dictionary if necessary, check his progress with his notes, reorder what he has written, and even change his mind about what he wants to say. Whereas the speaker is under considerable pressure to keep on talking during the period allotted to him, the writer is characteristically under no such pressure. Whereas the speaker knows that any words which pass his lips will be heard by his interlocutor and, if they are not what he intends, he will have to undertake active, public “repair,” the writer can cross out and rewrite in the privacy of his study.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

This excerpt, adapted from Gillian Brown and George Yule’s seminal work, *Discourse Analysis* (Cambridge University Press, 1983), epitomizes the characterization of the fundamental functional differences between speaking and writing in the Western world.<sup>2</sup> Speech-based communication, synchronous and face-to-face, is widely perceived as an interactive and social, if mundane, activity involving two or more interlocutors that requires moment-by-moment management of interpreting what one hears (the message) and, often in no time, deciding *what* one wants to say (be it initiating, responding, or repairing) and *how* to say it, but also attending to the maintenance of mutual relations in keeping with context-specific speaker roles. Such interactional dynamics make speaking a mentally more taxing and emotionally more tiring modality of communication compared with writing. Writing, by contrast, is quintessentially viewed as a solo, private,

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<sup>1</sup> Gillian Brown and George Yule, *Discourse Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Following Eric Alfred Havelock, a classical scholar who based his literacy theory and “Platonic” arguments on the emergence and spread of writing through the invention and use of the Greek alphabet around the fourth century BCE, Walter Ong characterizes the historical development of literacy as nothing short of transformative, psychologically and culturally speaking. See Eric A. Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), *The Literate Revolution in Greece and its Cultural Consequences* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019 [1982]), and *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 2002 [1982]). Havelock asserts that “the invention of the Greek alphabet, as opposed to all previous systems, including the Phoenician, constituted an event in the history of human culture, the importance of which has not as yet been fully grasped. Its appearance divides all pre-Greek civilisations from those that are post-Greek”; “The Preliteracy of the Greeks,” in “Oral Cultures and Oral Performances,” special issue, *New Literary History* 8, no. 3 (1977): 369. The emergence of writing was hailed as a material condition that allowed for self-reflexivity, thereby enabling spatio-temporally bound oral cultures to evolve into literate cultures whose influence acquired the potential to be extended across space and time. The “technologizing of the word,” in turn, sowed the seeds of modernity in early civilization—Western institutions, thoughts and cultural practices that later blossomed into modern society. For a critique of Havelock’s literacy theory, see John Halverson, “Havelock on Greek Orality and Literacy,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 53, no. 1 (1992): 148–163.

and pensive endeavor that allows the writer to select the right word, look up the lexicon where necessary, change one's mind by rewriting at will and, amidst all this, be free from any interruption as there is no one to interact with. Such a contrastive, dichotomous worldview of language use—roughly “speaking is social” versus “writing is solo”—is grounded in an age-old belief about traditional spoken as opposed to written language functions in Western societies.

While speaking may sometimes be a solo activity embedded in a larger event (e.g., giving a speech during an award ceremony or performing a soliloquy as part of a dramatic performance), in Western literature and language studies to my knowledge there is rarely any mention of writing being used in face-to-face interaction interpersonally like speaking. This is especially striking in cross-border communication contexts where no shared spoken language could be found between interlocutors from distinct language backgrounds, despite knowledge of literacy in a regional lingua franca like Medieval Latin or Classical Arabic. The same is not true of premodern and early modern East Asia,<sup>3</sup> however, where, for well over a thousand years from the Sui dynasty (581–618 CE) until the 1900s, literati from today's China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam with no shared spoken language could mobilize their knowledge of classical Chinese (*wenyan* 文言) or Literary Sinitic (*Hanwen* 漢文, Jap: *kanbun*, Kor: *hanmun* 한문, Viet.: *hán văn*)<sup>4</sup> to improvise and make meaning through writing, interactively and face-to-face. As speech plays a minimal role in such cross-border encounters, that writing-mediated modality of communication, most probably accompanied by facial expressions, gestures, and other non-verbal body language, may be characterized pragmatically as “silent conversation” in lexico-grammatical elements in classical Chinese or Literary Sinitic, the latter being “a synonym for ‘literary Chinese’ [*wenyan*] but one that avoids associating it necessarily with China or Chinese”<sup>5</sup> (hereafter, Sinitic).

Echoing earlier scholarly works written more widely in Japanese and Korean than in Chinese and Vietnamese, still less in English and other European languages, this paper presents selected documented evidence of Sinitic being used in writing-mediated cross-border communication in premodern and early modern East Asia historically. We will first illustrate this possibly *sui generis* script-specific modality of communication<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> On the debate concerning the periodization of “early modern” in European as opposed to East Asian historiography, see Rebekah Clements, *A Cultural History of Translation in Early Modern Japan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 4–5.

<sup>4</sup> In Chinese–Japanese cross-border encounters, while sinograms were improvised in brushtalk, it might not always have been apparent to the Chinese brushtalkers which elements written by their Japanese counterparts belonged to classical Chinese, as opposed to those from indigenized Japanese *kanbun*.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Francis Kornicki, *Languages, Scripts, and Chinese Texts in East Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018): 19; cf. Victor H. Mair, “Buddhism and the Rise of the Written Vernacular in East Asia: The Making of National Languages,” *Journal of Asian Studies*, no. 53 (1994): 707–751.

<sup>6</sup> While to my knowledge no parallel examples of writing-mediated interaction in cross-border face-to-face encounters have been reported in other ancient civilizations, this possibility cannot be ruled out, especially where a (partial) logographic script was employed for writing multiple languages over many millennia, such as in the “Babylonian Cosmopolis,” see Marc Van de Mieroop, “A Babylonian Cosmopolis,” in *Canonicity and Identity Formation: In Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia*, ed. Kim Ryholt and Gojko Barjamovic (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2016), 259–270. It would be interesting to conduct a comparative study of the use of sinograms in Sinographic East Asia and the (partially) logographic cuneiform scripts in ancient Mesopotamia. This may help, among other objectives,

with examples of Chinese–Japanese face-to-face interaction that took place in China during the Sui, Tang, and Song dynasties, and in Japan during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. This will be supplemented with one example of Sinitic being used in brush-assisted conversation between Chinese “boat people” and Korean maritime officials in what may be termed “drifting brushtalk” (漂流筆談) in the late Ming dynasty.<sup>7</sup> In light of extensive evidence of writing-mediated face-to-face interaction in Sinitic over a time depth of over a thousand years in Sinographic East Asia, it would be interesting to investigate the extent to which writing was similarly used face-to-face, synchronously and interactively, in other phonographic societies.

## Research on Sinitic Brushtalk: A Brief Review of the Relevant Literature

Being a vibrant lingua-cultural practice in cross-border communication within the “Sinographic Cosmopolis”<sup>8</sup> until around the 1900s, Sinitic brushtalk has understandably been the subject of in-depth historiographic research by East Asian scholars. There is no shortage of scholarly works published in Japanese and Korean; less so in Chinese and Vietnamese. Li, Aoyama, and Wong have previously provided an overview of the relevant literature written in these three East Asian languages. The brief literature review below will focus on leading works published in English.<sup>9</sup>

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to ascertain the degree to which writing-mediated interaction face-to-face, enacted by synchronous brushtalking as exemplified in this and other earlier studies, was unique to Sinographic East Asia. Cf. Zev Handel, *Sinography: The Borrowing and Adaptation of the Chinese Script* (Leiden: Brill, 2019). (I am most grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.)

<sup>7</sup> David C. S. Li, Aoyama Reijiro, and Wong Tak-Sum, “Silent Conversation Through Brushtalk (筆談): The Use of Sinitic as a Scripta Franca in Early Modern East Asia,” *Global Chinese* 6, no. 1 (2020), 1–24. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1515/glochi-2019-0027>; Tak-sum Wong 黃得森, “Hanwen bitan wenxian yu Zhong-Ri-Han-Yue zhi zhengli huibian gaikuang” 漢文筆談文獻於中日韓越之整理匯編概況 (An overview of the collocation and compilation of Sinitic brushtalk documents in Sinographic East Asia), *Journal of the Classical Literature Association of Yon Min* 淵民學志 32 (2019): 285–319; Matsuura Akira 松浦章, “Qian jindai Dongya haiyu de bitan xingtai” 前近代東亞海域的筆談形態 (Forms of Sinitic Brushtalk in Pre- and Early Modern East Asian Waters), in *Dongya de bitan yanjiu* 東亞的筆談研究 (Studies on Brushtalk in East Asia), ed. Wang Yong 王勇 and Xie Yong 謝詠 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang gongshang daxue chubanshe, 2015), 19–32; Matsuura Akira, Aoyama Reijiro, and David C. S. Li, “Brush Conversation between Maritime Officials and Foreign Seafarers in ‘Drifting Brushtalk’ Records in 18th and 19th Century East Asia,” in *Brush Conversation in the Sinographic Cosmopolis: Interactional Cross-Border Communication in Literary Sinitic in Early Modern East Asia*, ed. David C. S. Li, Aoyama Reijiro, and Wong Tak-Sum (London and New York: Routledge, forthcoming).

<sup>8</sup> Koh Chong-sök and Ross King, *Infected Korean Language, Purity versus Hybridity: From the Sinographic Cosmopolis to Japanese Colonialism to Global English* (New York: Cambria Press, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Li, Aoyama, and Wong, “Silent Conversation.” Not referenced in Li, Aoyama and Wong are several Sinitic brushtalk monographs written in Chinese, each comprising historiographic compilations of brush conversations in earlier publications (high-resolution photocopies), their thoroughly edited and typeset versions, and in-depth analysis supplemented with historically relevant contextual details. They were published in 2018 by Shanghai Jiaotong University Press. Under the auspices of the Thirteenth Five-Year Publication Plan of the National Key Books project (十三五國家重點圖書出版規劃項目, 2016–2020), the brushtalk monographs project was supervised by Wang Yong 王勇 and his research associates at the Japanese Culture Institute 日本文化研究所 of Zhejiang University 浙江大學. Of particular relevance in this study is Zhu Zihao 朱子昊 and Wang Yong 王勇, *Zhu Shunshui bitan wenxian yanjiu* 朱舜水筆談文獻研究 (Research on the Literature Concerning Zhu Shunshui’s Brush Conversations) (Shanghai: Shanghai Jiaotong daxue chubanshe, 2018).

There is strong evidence of Sinitic brushtalk being an age-old lingua-cultural practice in cross-border communication. In his 2009 book, *Beyond Brushtalk: Sino-Japanese Literary Exchange in the Interwar Period*, Keaveney points out that in an early diplomatic encounter between the Japanese host and the visiting delegation from the kingdom of Parhae 渤海國 (Kor.: 발해국) in 883 CE, the welcoming ceremony was marked by a formal exchange of poems modeled on classical Chinese between the Japanese courtiers, led by the statesman Sugawara no Michizane 菅原道真 (845–903 CE), and the dignitaries from Parhae. The ritualistic significance accorded to Sinitic brushtalk may be gauged by the fact that “only when Chinese poetry had been exchanged could formal negotiations begin.”<sup>10</sup> On its historical spread and use in premodern East Asia, Keaveney comments that Sinitic brushtalk

was the vehicle through which ideas, both profound and mundane, were exchanged during the Chinese dynastic period among Chinese of different regions and between Chinese and visitors from their tributary and neighbor states including Koguryo, Paekche and Silla on the Korean Peninsula, Vietnam and Japan. . . . The phenomenon of brush talk was already quite well established by the fourth century when Paekche, the dominant power on the Korean Peninsula in that period, began to send embassies to the Chinese court. . . . Written classical Chinese served as the true language of exchange between the Japanese visitors and their Chinese hosts. Thus, the ability to read and write *kanbun* [漢文] and the ability to write a passable Chinese poem, *kanshi* [漢詩], were considered indispensable skills for the Heian courtier.<sup>11</sup>

Similar diplomatic exchange where brushtalk played a ceremonial role continued to take place about a thousand years later, between Japanese and Chosŏn missions from Korea. Based on surviving “records of dialogues” between Korean and Japanese medical practitioners in twelve Korean missions to Tokugawa Japan between 1607 and 1811, Trambaiolo gives a succinct account of how such periodical visits were eagerly awaited by Japanese doctors as golden opportunities to update or confirm their medical knowledge. In addition to a few doctors who would look after the well-being of over four hundred delegates over a period of about six months, from 1682 onwards, a Korean medical expert would join the mission for the explicit purpose of facilitating cultural exchange on matters related to medicine and its applications. Since speech as a modality of communication was rarely an option, their give-and-take was conducted almost entirely in Sinitic brushtalk using brush, ink, and paper. Whereas both sides would have recourse referring to well-known medical canons imported from China, all too often conviviality would give way to frustration or even irritation as when what transpired on paper was perceived by the other side as withholding information, questioning the interlocutor’s authority, asserting one’s superiority, or any combination of these. According to Trambaiolo, part of the miscommunication may be accounted for by mismatch of expectations, as well as covert differences in cultural values and

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<sup>10</sup> Christopher T. Keaveney, *Beyond Brushtalk: Sino-Japanese Literary Exchange in the Interwar Period* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009), 7.

<sup>11</sup> Keaveney, *Beyond Brushtalk*, 3, 5.

practices.<sup>12</sup>

Clements analyzes personal diaries and official records of members of the Chosŏn missions to Japan from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, and concludes that apart from allowing the literati on both sides to showcase their poetic and literary talents in Sinitic interactively, brush-talk was also a vital means for displaying erudite knowledge, debating divergent viewpoints, asserting but also negotiating and managing sometimes radical shifts in identities.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, with the intensifying of Sino-Japanese diplomatic relationships following the dispatch of the first Chinese embassy to Tokyo in the 1870s, plenty of brush-talk artifacts were generated by the Chinese legation staff and their Japanese acquaintances. Commenting on the brush-talk exchange between Lord Ōkōchi Teruna 大河内輝聲 (1848–1882) and the first Chinese ambassador, He Ruzhang 何如璋 (1838–1891), Howland observes that as a lingua-cultural practice brush-talk played an instrumental role by helping both sides “to gather with some of the literary figures of the day, to show off one’s erudition and poetry composition, and, as guest in a foreign land or host to visitors from abroad, to share one’s everyday experiences and impressions of the changing times.”<sup>14</sup>

William Pore’s interesting study investigates Sinitic brush-talk between two envoys to Peking—Yi Su-gwang 李晔光 (1563–1628) from Korea, and Phùng Khắc Khoan 馮克寬 (1528–1613) from Vietnam.<sup>15</sup> Pore shows how Phùng took that valuable opportunity to inquire into various facets of Vietnam—from history to the political system to geography. As neither side knew the other’s native language, brush conversation in Sinitic allowed them not only to raise fairly sophisticated questions (mainly by Yi) and provide meaningful responses (mainly by Phùng), but also helped them to make identity claims by alluding to their respective positions in the procession before the Ming emperor, suggesting that “competition for imperial favor” was in evidence.<sup>16</sup> Such intellectual give-and-take would not have been possible without a sound understanding and deep knowledge of Sinitic. This is not surprising given that Korea and Vietnam, like China, had long institutionalized civil service examinations as the means for selecting national talents. A crucial criterion in the selection process was familiarity with the Confucian canon and literary works written in Sinitic, as well as the ability to compose fine prose and poetic verses in accordance with prevailing literary conventions.<sup>17</sup> According to Yi, their brush conversation ended with the convivial exchange of poems. Phùng’s penta-syllabic quatrain (五言絕句, verses made up of four

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<sup>12</sup> Daniel Trambaiolo, “Diplomatic Journeys and Medical Brush Talks: Eighteenth-Century Dialogues Between Korean and Japanese Medicine,” in *Motion and Knowledge in the Changing Early Modern World: Orbits, Routes and Vessels*, ed. Ofer Gal and Yi Zheng (Dordrecht: Springer Verlag, 2014), 93–113.

<sup>13</sup> Rebekah Clements, “Brush Talk as the ‘Lingua Franca’ of East Asian Diplomacy in Japanese-Korean Encounters, c.1600–1868,” *The Historical Journal* 62, no. 2 (2019): 289–309.

<sup>14</sup> Douglas R. Howland, *Borders of Chinese Civilization: Geography and History at Empire’s End* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), 44.

<sup>15</sup> William Pore, “The Inquiring Literatus: Yi Su-gwang’s ‘Brush-talks’ with Phung Khac Khoan in Beijing in 1598,” *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society – Korea Branch*, no. 83 (2008): 1–26.

<sup>16</sup> Pore, “Inquiring Literatus,” 18.

<sup>17</sup> Benjamin A. Elman, “Unintended Consequences of Classical Literacies for the Early Modern Chinese Civil Examinations,” in *Rethinking East Asian Languages, Vernaculars, and Literacies, 1000–1919*, ed. Benjamin A. Elman (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 198–219.

five-syllable lines) is as follows:<sup>18</sup>

The Kingly Way has its conformity and universalism,  
But in the emperor's realm, the compilation of annals,  
The writing of poetry, and even the writings of envoys,  
Are as the radiance of a sunset, sea clouds and mist.

王道車書共  
皇朝志紀編  
詩成聊使寫  
霞燦海雲煙

Sinitic brushtalk has also left its mark in the history of diplomacy between Japan and the United States. Tao De-min gives an informative account of the significant role played by Sinitic brushtalk in early Japanese–US diplomatic negotiations in the mid-1850s.<sup>19</sup>

Writing-mediated interaction through brushtalking in Sinitic clearly helped literati from different parts of premodern East Asia overcome the problem of their language barrier in speech. Unlike a vernacular-based lingua franca, however, the bridging function of brushtalk was mediated by writing in Sinitic rather than speaking. Such a function is therefore more appropriately characterized as a “scripta franca”<sup>20</sup>—a term that is increasingly accepted.<sup>21</sup> Denecke observes that, thanks to the time-honored function of “character scripts” in premodern East Asia, those who were literate in Sinitic could engage in intellectual exchange through brush, ink, and paper, thus turning the premodern East Asian Sinosphere into “worlds without translation.”<sup>22</sup> Kornicki points out that the history of the fundamental role of Sinitic brushtalk as a substitute for or complement to oral communication in “Sinographic East Asia” for well over a thousand years has yet to be written.<sup>23</sup>

Probably out of technical difficulties displaying characters or sinograms<sup>24</sup> on the computer, whether the brushtalk output is poetic or literary, intellectually rich or mundane, earlier works on Sinitic brushtalk in English tended to rely on English translation while the *Hanzi* 漢字 original was omitted in the main texts. Well into the new millennium, where original sinograms are included in Western publications it is a common typographic practice to include them only in a separate glossary, indexed by the romanized forms mentioned in the main body of the text, typically listed

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<sup>18</sup> Pore, “Inquiring Literatus,” 22.

<sup>19</sup> Tao De-min 陶德民, “Negotiating Language in the Opening of Japan: Luo Sen’s Journal of Perry’s 1854 Expedition,” *Japan Review*, no. 17 (2005): 91–119; see also Aoyama Reijiro, this volume.

<sup>20</sup> Wiebke Denecke, “Worlds without Translation: Premodern East Asia and the Power of Character Scripts,” in *A Companion to Translation Studies*, ed. Sandra Bermann and Catherine Porter (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, Inc., 2014), 209. Cf. “written linguistic code” in Howland, *Borders of Chinese Civilization*, 45.

<sup>21</sup> See Clements, *Cultural History of Translation*, 21; Li, Aoyama, and Wong, “Silent Conversation.”

<sup>22</sup> Denecke, “Worlds without Translation.”

<sup>23</sup> Kornicki, *Languages, Scripts*, 100–102.

<sup>24</sup> The term “sinograph” is also sometimes encountered; “sinogram” will be used in this paper.

alphabetically.<sup>25</sup> If content analysis is the main focus or purpose (see, for example, Trambaiolo's aforementioned study), little is lost by not making the sinograms used in the original source directly available to the reader. As this study has a language focus, however, the sinograms used in the original brushtalk examples will be cited below, supplemented with idiomatic English translation. The purpose is to illustrate how Sinitic functioned *inter-subjectively* as a written nexus connecting literati from different parts of Sinographic East Asia, in that they could engage in intellectual meaning-making or performative literary improvisation completely in abstraction of how the sinograms they improvised were pronounced in their brushtalk partners' spoken language(s).

## Early Records of Sino-Japanese Writing-Mediated “Silent Conversation”

*Sui dynasty (581–618 CE)*

Among the earliest writing-mediated “silent conversation” records involving Japanese visitors in China was an anecdote documented during the Sui dynasty. According to an account by Fusōryakuki 扶桑畧記 written in year 1094 CE,<sup>26</sup> minister Ono no Imoko 小野妹子 (ca. 565–625) was dispatched by the Japanese Prince Shōtoku 聖德太子 (572–621) as an envoy to Sui China. One of the purposes of his voyage across the East Sea was to collect Buddhist sutras. In one encounter with three old monks, their mode of communication—partly in narrative, partly reconstructed “dialogue”—was described vividly in some detail. It began thus:

An old monk came out, walking with the help of a staff, followed by two other old monks, smiling to one another. Imoko paid respect to them, bowing three times. As no vernacular was shared, they “spoke” by composing Chinese characters on the ground using a staff. Imoko presented each monk with a robe. 有一老僧，策杖而出。又有二老僧，相續而出，相顧含歡。妹子三拜。言語不通，書地而語，各贈法服。<sup>27</sup>

The rest of their writing-mediated interaction was re-constructed and documented as follows:<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Gari Ledyard, “Hong Taeyong and His ‘Peking Memoir’,” *Korean Studies*, no. 6 (1982): 63–103; Howland, *Borders of Chinese Civilization*, 43–53; Liam C. Kelly, *Beyond the Bronze Pillars. Envoy Poetry and the Sino-Vietnamese Relationship* (Honolulu: Association for Asian Studies and University of Hawai'i Press, 2005). By contrast, in William Pore's 2008 study of Sinitic brushtalk interaction between Korean envoy Yi Su-gwang and Vietnamese envoy Phùng Khắc Khoan in Peking, their brushtalk improvisations are first listed in free English translation followed by sinograms used in the original source; see Pore, “Inquiring Literatus.”

<sup>26</sup> Ajyari Kōen 阿闍梨皇圓, “Fusou ryakuki” 扶桑畧記, in *Kokushi taikai* 國史大系, ed. Taguchi Ukichi 田口卯吉, vol. 6 (Tokyo: Keizai Zasshi Sha 經濟雜誌社, 1901), 501. Printed version downloadable from the Library of the Japanese Diet at <https://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/991096/258>; text version accessible at <https://miko.org/%7Euraki/kuon/furu/text/kiryaku/fs04.htm>.

<sup>27</sup> Note that the verb 書 here, and elsewhere in this paper, means “to write.”

<sup>28</sup> The English translation below has benefited from the expert advice of Prof. Liang Xiaohong 梁曉虹 of Nanzan University 南山大学, Nagoya, Japan. Her kind assistance is hereby gratefully acknowledged. Any inaccuracies that remain are my sole responsibility.



老僧書地曰：「念禪法師，於彼何號？」

妹子答曰：「我日本國，元倭國也。在東海中，相去三年行矣。今有聖德太子，无念禪法師，崇尊佛道，流通妙義。自說諸經，兼製義疏。承其令有，取昔身所持複法華經一卷，餘无異事。」

老僧等大歡，命沙彌取之。須臾取經，納一漆篋而來，

語妹子曰：「是經并篋，念禪法師之所持也。念禪在此，墮倦讀經，睡而燒經，有一點處。」

僧等授經，竟指南峯上一石塔云：「彼念禪師遷化骸骨之塔也。于今卅六歲矣。」

妹子受辭，拜而別去。三老僧各裹物一篋，答而贈之，并有封書一函。

The old monk wrote on the ground, “What is the appellation of [the incarnation of] Master Nianchan in your country?”

Imoko responded, “Our country Japan, also called Wa, is in the middle of East Sea. It takes three years to walk from Japan to here. Now there is only Prince Shōtoku but no Master Nianchan. He is a devout Buddhist, spreading Buddha’s ingenious teaching to the masses. He studied several sutras and made personal notes and annotations. Upon his instruction, I come here to fetch the *Lotus Sutra* belonging to him in the previous incarnation, nothing else.”

The old monks were elated and asked the acolyte to get it. After a while, the acolyte fetched a lacquered box with sutras inside.

An old monk said to Imoko, “These sutras and the lacquered box belonged to Master Nianchan. Master Nianchan was here reading the sutras but did not take it seriously. Sometimes he was so tired that he slept while reading the sutras. Some pages were thus burnt [by candle flame], and you can see some holes.”

The monks presented the sutras to Imoko, and then they pointed at a stone stupa on top of Nanfeng Hill and said, “that stupa is where the remains of Master Nianchan were kept; it has been thirty-six years since then.”

Imoko listened to their words, bowed, and was about to bid farewell. The three old monks each wrapped the items in cloth, put them in a lacquered box, thanked Imoko and presented it to him along with a sealed letter.

This encounter between a Japanese minister—probably the first from the Japanese archipelago—and three monks in Sui China over 1,400 years ago provides documented evidence of their face-to-face “silent conversation,” albeit writing-mediated due to the absence of a shared spoken language. Of particular interest is the fact that, whatever Chinese characters or sinograms they improvised inside the Buddhist monastery, they were composed on a flat surface presumably covered with sand. This was unquestionably true of the first few sinograms produced by the staff-wielding old monk (see the phrase 老僧書地曰, or “the old monk said by writing on the ground”), although it is not clear whether their subsequent interaction took place in some other modality such as brush, ink, or paper. What is further remarkable is that the give-and-take in their sinogram-based verbal exchange appeared to be problem-free, apparently allowing both sides to make meaning adequately and effectively.

*Tang dynasty (618–907 CE)*

Early Japanese visitors to Sui China were evidently deeply impressed by what they saw, learned, and experienced. This point is corroborated by widely documented accounts of their taking box-loads of classical Chinese canons, literary works, and compendia on sundry topics back with them to Japan.<sup>29</sup> This helps explain a burgeoning period of about three hundred years when multiple delegations each led by an ambassador (遣唐使) were dispatched to Tang China. Many other students and monks who were eager to study or update themselves on Chinese literary canons and culture or Buddhist teaching and wisdom were also attracted to make their journey. One of the influential Japanese visitors was Ennin 圓仁[円仁], whose legacy includes a detailed diary-like account of his travels and encounters. For instance, in 838 CE, as a member of the nineteenth Japanese delegation to Tang China, Ennin reported meeting thirteen Buddhist monks<sup>30</sup> and being engaged with some of his Chinese hosts in brush conversation:<sup>31</sup>

十月十四日……筆書云：「並閑閑無繫，雲遊山水，從此五峯，下游楚、泗。今到此郡，殊喜頂禮，大奇大奇，歡之甚也。今欲往天台，告辭便別，珍重珍重。」

爰筆書報云：「日本僧等昔有大因，今遇和尚等，定知必遊，法性寂空，大幸大幸。若有到天台，必將相見，珍重珍重。」<sup>32</sup>

On the fourteenth day of the tenth lunar month . . . I wrote with a brush: “Feeling unrestrained, I visited mountains and rivers leisurely, from the five peaks here down to rivers Chu and Si. Arriving at this prefecture, I am most delighted and prostrated myself in admiration. The things I saw are extraordinary; I am very pleased indeed. I wish to visit Tiantai Mountain now and bid farewell to you. Take good care.”

He then wrote with a brush and replied: “Japanese and China have been connected through karma since the distant past. Today we meet eventually. I was sure that you are predestined to come someday. There is great happiness in the emptiness of karma. If you visit Tiantai Mountain, we will definitely see each other. Take good care.”

Although it is impossible to tell whether the words recorded in Ennin’s diary were produced by the interlocutors verbatim or based on his own recollection, what is certain

<sup>29</sup> David B. Lurie, *Realms of Literacy. Early Japan and the History of Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

<sup>30</sup> 「齋後，禪門宗僧等十三人來相看。長安千福寺天台宗惠雲，禪門宗學人僧弘鑒、法端、誓實、行全、常密、法寂、法真、惠深、全古、從實、仲詮、曇幽。」 Source: Ajyari Kōen, “Fusou ryakuki,” 500.

<sup>31</sup> The English translation has benefited from the expert advice of the aforementioned Prof. Liang. Any inaccuracies that remain are my sole responsibility.

<sup>32</sup> 「承和五年，即西元八三八年《入唐求法巡禮行記》卷一載日僧圓仁隨第十九次遣唐使團入唐，於十月十四日之筆談對話。」 Source: Ennin 圓仁, *Ru Tang qiufa xunli xingji* 入唐求法巡禮行記 (The Record of a Pilgrimage to China in Search of the Law), ed. and ann. Gu Chengfu 顧承甫 and He Chuanda 何全達 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1986), 16. Cf. Ennin 円仁. *Nittō guhō junreikōki* 入唐求法巡礼行記 (The Record of a Pilgrimage to China in Search of the Law). 1926 [838 CE]. Digital Collection of National Diet Library, Japan.

is that the silent conversation that took place in writing was “written by a brush” (筆書云 or 筆書報云).

### *Song dynasty (960–1279 CE)*

Owing to sustained political instability toward the end of the Tang dynasty but also due to successive Japanese leaders’ reluctance to accept the political role of a tributary state, the policy of periodically dispatching official envoys to China was discontinued during the Song dynasty. That, however, did not stop enthusiastic students and monks from visiting Song China individually, although their numbers dwindled drastically by comparison. Among them, the most prominent was Chōnen (裔然, Chi: Diaoran, 938–1016 CE). He was among the first “student monks” (學問僧) to study Buddhism in Song China. While Chōnen was clearly not an official envoy of the Japanese government,<sup>33</sup> he was treated like an ambassador paying tribute to the Emperor Taizong 太宗 and was received by the emperor in person. As Chōnen had no knowledge of spoken Chinese, the emperor’s questions were composed in writing, possibly by a courtier, whereupon communication problems seemed to disappear instantly. Apart from demonstrating a good grasp of the questions phrased in Sinitic, the enlightening responses that Chōnen improvised with a brush impressed the emperor tremendously. As recalled in the personal memoir of Prime Minister Yang Yi 楊億 (974–1020), who was also present at the first royal reception, Chōnen’s responses to the emperor’s questions about Japan were awe-inspiring to say the least:<sup>34</sup>

雍熙初，日本僧裔然來朝，獻其國《職員令》、《年代記》[sic]。裔然依錄自云，姓藤原氏，為真連，國五品官也。裔然善筆札而不通華

At the beginning of the Yongxi era, the Japanese monk Diaoran [Chōnen] paid tribute and presented two volumes he brought from Japan—*Administrative Personnel* and *Chronology* [sic]—to the emperor. Diaoran went on to say his original Japanese surname, Fujiwara. He was a *shinren*, which was the title of a hereditary fifth-rank government

<sup>33</sup> Rather than a Japanese vessel, Chōnen took a Chinese commercial junk for his journey across the East Sea, with no official gifts from the Japanese government.

<sup>34</sup> Source: Yang Yi 楊億 and Chen Sidao 陳師道, *Yang Wengong tanyuan—houshan tancong* 楊文公談苑——後山談叢 (Yang Wengong’s Observations and Anecdotes), ed. Li Yumin 李裕民 and Li Weiguo 李偉國 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2012), 16. A more formal record of this anecdote may be found in Song Zhenzong 宋真宗, *Songshi: Riben zhuan* 宋史·日本國傳 (Standard History of the Song: Annals of Japan), scroll 491 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1977), 14131. Cf.: 「雍熙元年，日本國僧裔然與其徒五六人浮海而至，獻銅器十餘事，並本國《職員令》、《王年代紀》各一卷。裔然衣綠，自云姓藤原氏，父為真連；真連，其國五品品官也。裔然善隸書，而不通華言，問其風土，但書以對云：「國中有《五經》書及佛經、《白居易集》七十卷，並得自中國。土宜五穀而少麥。交易用銅錢，文曰『乾文大寶』。畜有水牛、驢、羊，多犀、象。產絲蠶，多織絹，薄致可愛。樂有中國、高麗二部。四時寒暑，大類中國。國之東境接海島，夷人所居，身面皆有毛。東奧州產黃金，西別島出白銀，以為貢賦。國王以王為姓，傳襲至今王六十四世，文武僚吏皆世官。」 Much of Prime Minister Yang’s recollection cited above was attested, except two omissions: (i) instead of 為真連 “was a *shinren*,” it should have been 父為真連 “his father was a *shinren*,” (ii) Yang’s citing of one Japanese text, *Chronology* (年代記), was probably inaccurate and should have been *Chronology of the Kings* (王年代紀).

言，有所問，書以對之。國有《五經》及釋氏經教，並得於中國，有《白居易集》七十卷。第管州六十八，土曠而人少，率長壽，多百餘歲。國王一姓，相傳六十四世，文武僚吏皆世官。

official. Diaoran was good at writing but had no knowledge of spoken Chinese. When questions were put to him, he would respond in writing. [According to Diaoran,] Japan had the *Five Classics*, Shakyamuni's sutras and teachings, and a seventy-volume *Bai Juyi Collection*, all obtained from China. There were sixty-eight administrative units; the territory was vast but sparsely populated. People lived long lives; centenarians were not rare. The family of the king had prevailed for sixty-four reigns; civil and military officials were all succeeded through hereditary appointment. [Author's translation]

That Chōnen's written responses to the emperor's questions were well articulated and understood by his Chinese hosts, with neither side having recourse to a single utterance in speech for comprehension, may be gauged by Emperor Taizong's enlightening remarks, as described in Yang Yi's memoir. The emperor was portrayed as giving a long sigh followed by a reflective observation that he found it difficult to believe how a distant barbarian tribe had managed to establish and sustain such an enviable tradition—namely a family-based lineage of government coupled with a system of hereditary appointments in both the civil service and the military. This was in stark contrast with the Middle Kingdom where, owing to civil war, political instability, and division since the end of the Tang dynasty, such an ideal system that would allow a father to pass his political appointment to a well-groomed and worthy son was simply out of the question. On that note, Emperor Taizong appealed to Yang Yi and other courtiers for conducive suggestions on how the Song dynasty under the Zhao family reign would not be outdone by that barbarian tribe across the East Sea.<sup>35</sup>

Several decades later, another monk, Jakushō 寂照 (Ch.: Jizhao) (962–1034) led a group of eight Buddhists to visit Song China. They were similarly well received as delegates of a tributary from Japan by Emperor Zhenzong 真宗 in person. Like the face-to-face interaction pattern with Chōnen, both sides relied on brush, ink, and paper for communication. Emperor Zhenzong was reportedly no less impressed by the Japanese monks' erudite knowledge of and versatility in Sinitic writing, so much so that fine details of their brush conversations on multiple occasions were formally recorded in the "Annals of Japan" under *Riben guo zhuan* 日本國傳 in the *Song shi* 宋史 (Standard History of the Song). Below is an excerpt giving strong evidence of Chinese–Japanese writing-mediated communication in that context.<sup>36</sup>

During the first year of the Jingde era [the period of the reign of Emperor Zhenzong], the Japanese state monk Jizhao [Jakushō] headed a group of eight

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<sup>35</sup> Yang Yi's original wording is as follows: 帝聞之嘆息，謂宰相[楊億]曰：「此蠻夷耳，而嗣世長久，臣下亦世官，頗有古道。中國自唐季，海內分裂，五代世數尤促。又大臣子孫鮮能繼述父祖基業。朕雖德不及往聖，然而孜孜求治，未嘗敢自暇逸，深以畋游聲色為戒。所冀上穹降鑒，亦為子孫長久計，使皇家使運祚永久，而臣僚世襲祿位。卿等各思盡心輔朕，無使遠夷獨享斯美。」. Source: Yang Yi and Chen Sidao, *Yang Wengong tanyuan*, 34.

<sup>36</sup> Source: Song Zhenzong, *Songshi: Riben guo zhuan*, scroll 40, 14136.

delegates to pay tribute to the Song emperor. Jizhao did not speak Chinese, but he knew written Chinese well, and his writing was ingenious. Whatever questions were put to him, he was able to provide a response using his brush. He was conferred the title of Master Yuantong and a purple robe.<sup>37</sup>  
景德元年，其國僧寂照等八人來朝。寂照不曉華言，而識文字，繕寫甚妙，凡問答并以筆札。詔號圓通大師，賜紫方袍。

The total number of attested Japanese monks visiting Song China was much smaller than during the Tang dynasty. For instance, during the Northern Song period (960–1127), no more than twenty Japanese visiting monks were documented, although maritime trading activities continued sporadically, with records of Japan-bound Chinese vessels numbering only about seventy throughout the 167-year Northern Song era.<sup>38</sup> The scale of Sino-Japanese transcultural contact and communication during the Northern and Southern Song periods was therefore miniscule compared with before; it further ground to a halt after Song China yielded to the Mongols and gave way to the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368). Animosity arose when successive military expeditions were dispatched by the Mongol army across the East Sea, the ambition being to conquer the island kingdom and extend the transcontinental empire eastwards to the Japanese archipelago.

#### *Ming dynasty (1368–1644 CE)*

Under the Tokugawa government, Japan proclaimed a closed-door (*sakoku* 鎖國) policy. Except for Dutch traders and Chinese merchants, no foreigners could enter Japan, while outbound travel of Japanese people was also banned. For 221 years, from 1633 to 1854, the only port city that remained accessible to foreigners was Nagasaki. Therefore, during the Ming dynasty, very few if any Japanese travelers were able to visit China. On the other hand, in the tumultuous decades leading to the eventual demise of the Ming dynasty in 1644, many intellectuals, being staunch opponents of Manchu “barbarians,” considered Japan an ideal refuge or haven for their lives in exile. Very few Chinese refugees were granted permission to stay, however.

One notable exception was Zhu Shunshui 朱舜水 (1600–1682), a highly esteemed and well-respected Confucian scholar who was utterly opposed to both the corrupt Ming and “barbarian” Qing regimes. After refusing the call of duty to serve in the “despicable” Ming government four times from 1638 to 1645, he was outlawed and had to flee for his life. In the next fifteen years, he led the life of a drifter, shuttling by sea many times between Zhoushan 舟山 (an island off Shanghai), Nagasaki 長崎 in Japan, Hoi An 會安 (Annam), and Xiamen 廈門 in Fujian province.<sup>39</sup> In 1658–1659,

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<sup>37</sup> Author’s translation.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. the title of the online essay “Ru Song seng Diaoran: Yige rencheng qile banbu ‘*Song shi · Riben guo zhuan*’ 入宋僧齋然：一個人撐起了半部《宋史·日本國傳》 (Japanese Monk Diaoran: A Single Person Fills up Half the Space of the “Annals of Japan” in the *Standard History of the Song*), *Headline Daily* 每日頭條, September 2, 2019. <https://kknews.cc/history/nllzyk5.html>.

<sup>39</sup> Pan Chao-Yang 潘朝陽, “Zhu Shunshui de minzu zhijie jiqi haishang piaobo” 朱舜水的民族志節及其海上漂泊 (Zhu Shunshui’s National-Moral Integrity and his Overseas Journey), *Taiwan Dongya wenming yanjiu xuekan* 臺灣東亞文明研究學刊 (*Taiwan Journal of East Asian Studies*) 9, no. 1

he joined an expeditionary force to fight the Qing army in the hope of creating a new sociopolitical order under a resurrected and reformed Ming, but in vain.

While in Hôi An from February 1657, Zhu had to put up with a fifty-day imprisonment ordeal. The Hôi An government was looking for a highly literate person to perform secretarial duties. Zhu was conscripted to serve but he rejected resolutely. His arrogance and resistance irritated the officials and the king, who threatened to have him beheaded in front of courtiers and royal guards. Still, Zhu was adamant and refused to yield. The king, impressed by his iron-clad determination and impregnable courage, offered to appoint him as a government official, but Zhu's will remained unshakable. He was then imprisoned for fifty days before being finally set free. Amidst this three-month episode, details of which were elaborated in a diary, *Annan gongyi jishi* 安南供役紀事 (Memoirs of Service in Hôi An), of relevance and particular interest to us is a rather dramatic illustration of effective writing-mediated interaction through Sinitic, given that speech was not an option. Upon being shown the sinogram 拜 (“to bow”) by a courtier, who gestured that he should get on his knees before the king, Zhu responded by composing the sinogram 不 on top of 拜, forming 不拜, “not bow.”<sup>40</sup> This is an instructive example demonstrating the semiotic potential of writing-based Sinitic in conveying the writer's meaning interactively and unambiguously.

In 1660, Zhu Shunshui fled to Japan and, despite having been turned away several times before, was finally permitted to live in Nagasaki thanks to the concerted efforts of his Japanese admirers. Zhu's erudite insights on Confucianism, advocacy for an effective model of good governance and an ideal state where Confucian values would prevail, and his profound knowledge of various facets of not only the finer aspects of Chinese culture but also agriculture and craftsmanship made him popular and widely sought after among Japanese intellectuals, officials, and courtiers of the upper samurai class, who all wanted to study with him or become his students. For seventeen years from 1665 until his death in 1682, Zhu served as a guest teacher<sup>41</sup> of the *daimyō* of the Mito 水戸 domain and an advisor to Tokugawa Mitsukuni 德川光圀 (1628–1701). During his two-decade-long twilight years in exile, Zhu inspired several key new institutions<sup>42</sup> and exerted tremendous influence on successive generations of not only Japanese political leaders, intellectuals, and scholars, but also craftsmen and farmers. Whether officially or in a private capacity, these future leaders were enamored by Zhu's unorthodox Confucian philosophy and envisioned sociopolitical order characterized by benevolence, pragmatism, and tangible social merits, and sought his teaching and advice eagerly like dehydrating mortals imbibing water from a spring. Indeed, Zhu's influence was clearly felt nearly two hundred years later, when

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(2012): 79–136.

<sup>40</sup> 「話語不通の差官寫一‘拜’字，命他下跪，舜水在拜字上寫一‘不’字，堅不下拜。」 Source: Qian Ming 錢明, *Shengguo binshi—Zhu Shunshui zhuan* 胜国宾师——朱舜水传 (Guest Teacher of a Vanquished Nation: A Biography of Zhu Shunshui) (Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 2008), 66.

<sup>41</sup> This esteemed status is aptly captured by the title of Qian Ming's 2008 book *Guest Teacher of a Vanquished Nation* (see footnote 40, above), 131–133; 296.

<sup>42</sup> Among the most influential institutions were the philosophy of the Mito school 水戸學派, and the establishment of *Mito shōkō-kan* 水戸彰考館 to collect historical documents, the purpose being to compile study materials for government officials' easy reference. The first president of this research institute, Azumi Kaku 安積覺, was one of Zhu's students.

“Tokugawa Yoshinobu 德川慶喜, a descendent of Prince Tokugawa Mitsukuni, encouraged the unification of Japan by transferring his power to the central government.”<sup>43</sup> This enlightened move triggered critical changes in 1867, the dawn of a suite of sociopolitical reforms during the Meiji era (1868–1912) that were conceived to emulate modern institutions of leading Western powers. There is general consensus among scholars of Sino-Japanese cultural exchange that the roots of the momentous Meiji reforms could be traced back to Zhu’s teachings, notably his envisioned sociopolitical order, the cornerstone of effective governance in a modern state.<sup>44</sup> According to Liang Qichao 梁啟超, Zhu Shunshui should be credited as the greatest driving force behind the induction of the entire Japanese population into veritable Confucianist teaching during the two centuries of the Tokugawa period prior to the Meiji Restoration.<sup>45</sup>

Given that Zhu was non-conversant in Japanese after he settled in Japan at age sixty, how did he and his Japanese admirers communicate?<sup>46</sup> To answer this question, we are fortunate to have a good variety of carefully conducted scholarly works, including multiple-volume anthologies of Zhu’s writings, personal letters, biographies, and critical commentaries, but also records of bona fide brush conversations conducted interactively face-to-face. One of the biographies, Qian Ming’s *Shengguo binshi—Zhu Zhunshui zhuan* 胜国宾师——朱舜水传 (Guest Teacher of a Vanquished Nation: A Biography of Zhu Shunshui), contains details of the extent to which Zhu was dependent on, or even at the mercy of, interpreters who were invariably early migrants from China during the first five years of his life in Nagasaki, a port city famous for fishing and trading activities.<sup>47</sup> While there is evidence of the presence of a Chinese–Japanese interpreter in some encounters, communication was not always smooth and the quality of interpretation often left much to be desired.<sup>48</sup> Probably for these reasons, there are

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<sup>43</sup> C. Y. Wang 王清源, “Chu Shun-Shui: His Contributions to and Influence on Japan,” *Chinese Culture* 35, no. 3 (1994): 22.

<sup>44</sup> Qian Ming, *Shengguo binshi*, 15–16.

<sup>45</sup> 「德川兩百年，日本整個變成儒教的國民，最大的動力實在舜水。」 Source: Liang Qichao 梁啟超, *Zhongguo jin sanbai nian xueshu shi* 中國近三百年學術史 (Academic History of China in the Past Three Hundred Years) (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 2009), 94. Also cited in Zhu Zihao, “Zhu Shunshui ‘bitan’ ziliaochuyi” 朱舜水“筆談”資料芻議 (My Humble Opinion on Zhu Shunshui’s Brush Conversation Material), in *Tihang ji: Ricang Hanji Zhong Ri xueshu duihua* 梯航集: 日藏漢籍中日學術對話錄 (Tihang Collection: Kanji-based Sino-Japanese academic dialogue in Japan), ed. Zha Pingqiu 查屏球 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2018), 382.

<sup>46</sup> Qian Ming echoes Shyu Shing-ching’s 徐興慶 observation that despite living in Japan for over two decades, Zhu Shunshui’s understanding of Japan and its people was essentially based on and limited to his interactions with Japanese intellectuals and members of the upper samurai class or aristocracy, who tended to be literate and able to interact with him via Sinitic brushtalk. Such a level of Sinitic literacy being unavailable to commoners and samurais in lower social strata, Zhu was naturally unable to see things from the perspectives of their lifeworld. See Qian Ming, *Shengguo binshi*, 86; Shyu Shing-Ching 徐興慶, *Zhu Shunshui ji nianpu* 朱舜水集補遺 (Addendum to the Collection of Zhu Shunshui’s Writings). (Taipei: Taiwan xuesheng shuju, 1992), 123.

<sup>47</sup> Qian Ming, *Shengguo binshi*, 161, 177.

<sup>48</sup> The quality of interpretation by interpreters (*tongyan* 通言) in Chinese–Vietnamese communication was also a perennial problem during the premodern and early modern period. See Nguyễn Hoàng-Thân [阮黃申] and Nguyễn Tuấn-Cường [阮俊強], “Yuenan yu zhuguo bitan gailun” 越南與諸國筆談概論 (An Outline of Brushtalk between Vietnam and Other Countries), in *Yuenan Hannan wenxian yu Dongya*

quite a few records of Zhu brushtalking interactively with his Japanese hosts, visitors, or students using brush, ink, and paper.<sup>49</sup> In the anthology compiled by Zhu Qianzhi 朱謙之, Zhu Shunshui's writings are categorized into twenty sub-genres, including original essays (議), letters (書 or 書簡), critiques of literary works (批評), inscriptions (銘 or 碑銘), but also two sub-genres called “question and answer” (問答) and “question and answer (brushtalk)” (問答[筆談]).<sup>50</sup>

After analyzing the content of the latter two sub-genres listed in that anthology, Zhu Zihao 朱子昊 concludes that only the contents of the last-mentioned sub-genre should be characterized as brushtalks—since the response (invariably from Zhu Shunshui) tended to be more spontaneous and succinct, occasionally using elements of colloquial or vernacular style.<sup>51</sup> These observations led him to believe that the interactions in these cases took place synchronously, hence being veritable brushtalks (see examples below). By contrast, the responses listed under “question and answer” (問答) tended to be longer, and the writing style and diction being more formal, suggesting that the interaction was asynchronous, much like email correspondence today.

In the above-mentioned anthology compiled by Zhu Qianzi 朱謙之, a total of 167 items of “question and answer (brushtalk),” spanning over 44 pages (approx. 17,000 sinograms), are listed. They involve 12 interlocutors, including Oyake Seijun 小宅生順 (61 brushtalks), Andō Shuyaku 安東守約 (34 brushtalks) and Yasetsu 野節 (33 brushtalks). Topic-wise, 87 questions were more formal—regarding specific literary works or figures of historical significance; the remaining 80 varied, ranging from Chinese cultural practices (e.g., kinship terms) to geographical information about foreign countries (e.g., Cochinchina). Based on the surviving, carefully edited brushtalk manuscripts, where the names of the brushtalkers along with 問 “question” and 答 “answer” are clearly indicated, I concur with Zhu Zihao that brushtalking between Zhu and his Japanese interlocutors took place synchronously. Little is known, however, about the actual contexts in which these brush conversations took place—for example, whether the brushtalkers were standing or seated, next to or facing each other or whether co-articulating nonverbal signals like facial expressions and hand gestures were used.

Below are three examples extracted from Zhu Shunshui's brush conversation with Oyake Seijun, a Confucian scholar and disciple of Tokugawa Mitsukuni 德川光圀 (1628–1701). The *daimyō* had heard about the academic stature of Zhu Shunshui, and asked Oyake to meet with him with the explicit purpose of finding out whether he would be suitable for a “guest teacher” (賓師) appointment in his domain. Interestingly, as Oyake's goal was to verify Zhu's credentials as a scholar-teacher, their “silent

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*Hanzi zhengli yanjiu* 越南汉喃文献与东亚汉字整理研究 (Research on Vietnamese Classical Texts and East Asian Sinograms), ed. He Huazhen 何华珍 and Nguyễn Tuấn-Cường 阮俊强 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2019), 103.

<sup>49</sup> Zhu Shunshui 朱舜水, *Zhu Shunshui ji* 朱舜水集 (A Collection of Zhu Shunshui's Writings), ed. Zhu Qianzi 朱謙之, vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), 381–424.

<sup>50</sup> *Zhu Shunshui ji*, vol. 1, 381–424.

<sup>51</sup> Zhu Zihao, “Zhu Shunshui ‘bitan’ ziliaochuyi,” 388. Cf. Zhu Zihao and Wang Yong, *Zhu Shunshui bitan wenxian yanjiu*.



conversation” took on the characteristic of a job interview or oral test in the modern sense. It was probably against this background that Oyake’s sixty-one questions were raised and, for that reason, their brush-talk manuscripts thus produced were carefully preserved.

The first example (below) is concerned with kinship terms; specifically, Oyake inquired about how certain kinship relations were called in Chinese.<sup>52</sup>

問	父之姊妹何稱？	Sisters of one’s father, how are they called?
答	姊曰姑媽，妹曰姑娘，總曰姑。兄曰伯父，弟曰叔父，又曰季父。	Elder sister is called “ <i>gu ma</i> ”; youngster sister “ <i>gu niang</i> ”; in general, “ <i>gu</i> .” Elder brother is called “ <i>bo fu</i> ,” younger brother, “ <i>shu fu</i> ” or “ <i>ji fu</i> .”
問	父之兄弟之妻何稱？	Father’s brothers’ wives, how are they called?
答	父之兄弟曰伯母，弟妻曰叔母。	The wives of one’s father’s elder brothers are called “ <i>bo mu</i> ,” the wives of one’s father’s younger brothers, “ <i>shu mu</i> .”
問	姨。	<i>Yi</i> .
答	有二：母之姊妹曰母姨，有曰季母，又曰孀，又曰孀娘。	There are two types: mother’s sisters are called “ <i>mu yi</i> ,” also called “ <i>ji mu</i> ,” “ <i>shen</i> ” or “ <i>shen niang</i> .”
問	姑。	<i>Gu</i> .
答	父之姊妹曰姑，婦謂舅之妻，亦曰姑。	Father’s sisters are called “ <i>gu</i> ”; one’s father-in-law’s wife is also called “ <i>gu</i> .”

問: Question raised by Oyake Seijun 答: Zhu Shunshui’s response

It can be seen in this four-turn exchange that Oyake was very systematic in his questions, beginning with Chinese kinship terms of one’s father’s sisters, followed by those of one’s father’s brothers. This suggests that he came to the meeting with Zhu well prepared. Then, probably seeing no mention of 姨 in Zhu’s response in turns one and two, a Chinese kinship term of address that in his view clearly belonged somewhere, he asked Zhu for clarification in his third turn. From the discourse-pragmatic point of view, of linguistic interest is that the single sinogram 姨 was enough to convey his further question unambiguously, as evidenced in Zhu’s elaborate response in turn three. The same analysis applies to Oyake’s question in turn four: 姑, suggesting that in terms of communicative effectiveness, deep ellipsis was working well for both brush-talkers in their writing-mediated interaction, not unlike in speech.<sup>53</sup>

In the example below, Oyake highlighted a couple of vocabulary problems in Sinitic and asked Zhu explicitly to help fill those lexical gaps on his part.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>52</sup> *Zhu Shunshui ji*, vol. 1, 416.

<sup>53</sup> A caveat is in order: this analysis is premised on the assumption that the published version was exactly the same as what actually transpired during the brush conversation. As with all edited volumes, however, the brush conversations in the original manuscripts clearly had undergone rigorous editing before publication, and so such an assumption may or may not be valid.

<sup>54</sup> *Zhu Shunshui ji*, vol. 1, 418.

- 問 淪字義如何，六安何謂也？ The character *yue* 淪, what does it mean, and what is meant by *Lu An*?
- 答 淪者，泡也。入半湯入茶，又加湯注滿為淪。六安，地名，產茶甚佳，能消積滯油膩，故需久煮而味足耳。 *Yue* means to brew. By filling a pot of tea half-full with hot water, then pouring hot water into the teapot until it is full, that is called *yue*. *Lu An* is the name of a place; it is famous for its high-quality tea which is good for digestion after eating oily food; so to get the right taste, *Lu An* tea requires simmering and takes longer to prepare.

Immediately before this exchange, Oyake drew attention to Chinese poets famous for their use of tea-related imagery in their poetry, which brought him to a question concerning the technical distinction between two ways of processing tea: *jian cha* 煎茶 and *dian cha* 點茶. The word *yue* 淪 was embedded in Zhu's response on the immediately preceding turn, which triggered Oyake's further question above. This example provides a good illustration of the semiotic potential of writing-mediated communication using Sinitic-based morphographic sinograms, in that specific questions concerning the meaning of particular sinograms could be clarified meta-linguistically through writing, apparently completely in abstraction of speech.

The final example below touches upon geographical facts, specifically concerning the distance between Japan and China, and that between Japan and Cochinchina 交趾 (Fre.: Cochinchine, today's southern Vietnam), the location of Cochinchina relative to Japan, as well as the numbers of islands and mountains between the two nations.<sup>55</sup> This question suggests Oyake's awareness of Zhu's prior experience traveling to Hôi An (today's Vietnam).

- 問 貴國去我邦幾千里？交趾去日本幾千里？來日本向何方？人人曰交趾在日本西南，其間有幾島有幾山否？ From your esteemed country to our land, how many thousands of *li* must one travel? From Cochinchina to Japan, how many thousands of *li* must one travel, and in which direction? Everyone says that Cochinchina lies to the southwest of Japan; how many islands and mountains are there in between?
- 答 中國去貴國水道一千六七百里。交趾去貴國八九千里。來則向東北方行，交趾故宜在西南也。其間幾島幾山，僕見之尚不能識；況能知其數，標其名乎？ Traveling from China to your esteemed country by sea, it is about 1,600 to 1,700 *li*. Traveling from Cochinchina to your esteemed country, it is about 8,000 to 9,000 *li* heading northeast, so Cochinchina lies in the southwest. How many islands and mountains are there in between, I have no way of knowing even if I see them with my own eyes, how would I be able to tell their names and numbers?

<sup>55</sup> *Zhu Shunshui ji*, vol. 1, 410.

This extract is instructive in terms of the kinds of linguistic resources employed by the brushtalkers to make meaning in Sinitic interactively. First, as a correlate of their communication being writing-mediated rather than vernacular-driven, they would naturally turn to Sinitic, which was most commonly encountered throughout their literary training and actual use. This is borne out by the use of the following classical Chinese elements:

- the verb “to say” 曰 (e.g., 人人曰交趾在日本西南)
- the object pronoun 之<sup>56</sup> (e.g., 僕見之尚不能識)
- the sentence-final particles 乎 (e.g., 況能知其數，標其名乎?) and 也 (e.g., 交趾故宜在西南也)
- the negative particle or negation marker 否, here used in sentence-final position (e.g., 其間有幾島有幾山否?)<sup>57</sup>

That Sinitic was used by both brushtalkers is further evidenced by the non-use of classifiers, which is a salient vernacular feature of the noun phrase of any Chinese “dialect” grammar. For example, instead of, in Mandarin or Cantonese, 幾座山, “how many **units of** mountains,” and 幾座島 or 幾個島 “how many **units of** islands,” neither brushtalkers used any classifiers (i.e., 幾島幾山).

Even though Sinitic brushtalk between Zhu Shunshui and his Japanese hosts and students principally drew on Sinitic elements, their brush conversations were sometimes mixed with vernacular elements such as the first-person pronoun 我 (e.g., 我邦 “my country”), the verb 在 (functionally akin to a preposition in that a locative phrase is formed when it is followed by a noun, e.g., 交趾故宜在西南也). Of further interest is the system of politeness: for instance, the reference to “your [i.e., the interlocutor’s] esteemed country” 貴國 (e.g., 貴國去我邦幾千里? 中國去貴國水道一千六七百里); and Zhu’s linguistic accommodation by adopting the Japanese self-referential pronoun 僕 (“my humble self”) when referring to himself (e.g., 僕見之尚不能識). The self-referential pronoun 僕 was also attested in classical Chinese texts, but it was not so commonly used in China. As shown in transcultural brushtalk data reported elsewhere, such a mix of Sinitic and vernacular elements, to different degrees depending on the context, was rather common in Chinese–Japanese interaction, especially during the last decades of the Qing dynasty. Similar writing-mediated communication may also be found in Korean–Chinese transcultural encounters, to which we now turn.

### Early Records of Brushtalk Between Korean Officials and Chinese Seafarers

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<sup>56</sup> 之 may also be used to mark nominalization; see Edwin George Pulleyblank [蒲立本], *Outline of Classical Chinese Grammar* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1995), 64.

<sup>57</sup> The classical Chinese sentence-final particle 否 is normally either embedded in a yes–no question or signaling a negative answer to a yes–no question; it may also be used by itself to negate a whole clause in the preceding question; Pulleyblank, *Classical Chinese Grammar*, 103–104.

Since Korean and Chinese, like Chinese and Japanese, are typologically very different and mutually unintelligible languages, face-to-face interaction in speech was rarely possible in the absence of an interpreter. Historical evidence of writing-mediated interaction between Chinese and Korean literati abounds, however, with the intensity of interaction depending on the types of interactional context and data source.

Following Brown and Yule, it is useful to distinguish functionally between “transactional” and “interactional” communication:

That function which language serves in the expression of “content” we will describe as transactional, and that function involved in expressing social relations and personal attitudes we will describe as interactional.<sup>58</sup>

Brown and Yule made it clear that such a functional distinction is an “analytic convenience” and should not be construed as water-tight or mutually exclusive. Transactional communication typically involves short, quick, message-oriented exchange of information between strangers (e.g., buying a ticket or booking a table) or colleagues (e.g., a doctor giving a prescription to a nurse; an usher of a restaurant informing a fellow waiter which table to assign to incoming customers). In transactional communication, the accuracy of the message’s content is crucial; serious consequences may entail if the message is misconstrued (imagine, e.g., a medical practitioner administering an overdose of medicine due to a misunderstanding). Interactional communication, on the other hand, typically takes place between acquaintances who, in addition to monitoring the accuracy of content in verbal exchange and seeking clarification or making repair where necessary, are expected to use the kind of language characterized by the marking of the right level of politeness in accordance with their respective social roles (consider, e.g., the choice of honorific markers like pronouns and verb forms by Japanese or Korean interlocutors depending on who they are interacting with).

One recurrent historical context of transactional communication involves shipwreck and rescue. There is no shortage of historical records of such cross-border communication along the boundary regions adjacent to the coastal waters of China and Korea. When Chinese fishing or trading boats were blown off course and drifted ashore in Korean waters, Korean maritime officials (coastguards in today’s terminology) were duty-bound to find out from the surviving “boat people” the answers to a host of questions before they could decide what action to take. Likewise, when Korean boats adrift ended up in Chinese waters after succumbing to strong winds, Chinese maritime officials would need to sort out the identities of all those on board, find out and ascertain what happened leading to the wreck, file a report (to the emperor in serious cases), and recommend fairly detailed action including a plan for repatriation. On the Korean side, Korean–Chinese interpreters were known to exist in the capital, but not necessarily in maritime offices. In situations in which a translator was not available, how did the maritime officials communicate with Chinese boat people, with whom no shared spoken language could be found? Extant Sinitic records of shipwreck incidents show that both sides would resort to writing, typically using brush, ink, and paper to get

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<sup>58</sup> Brown and Yule, *Discourse Analysis*, 1. See also the adoption of this dualism in Li, Aoyama, and Wong, “Silent Conversation.”

their meanings across, with or without guarantee of success, of course.

One such documented record of transactional exchange between Korean maritime officials and Chinese boat people may be found in a shipwreck incident in 1617 (Appendix 1). The details of the incident were recorded in the form of “drifting brushtalk” and documented in the *Bibyeonsa deungnok* 備邊司謄錄 (Records of the Border Defense Council of Joseon). The record was clearly co-constructed by at least one Joseon Korean interpreter (通事官) who was reasonably literate in Sinitic and two Ming Chinese boat people who were probably speakers of the Wu dialect. The record may be divided into two parts. The first part is a testimony collected from the fifty-five-year-old seaman Xue Wanchun 薛萬春. It outlines the sequence of events leading to the drifting of a Chinese trading boat into Korean waters, before being picked up by Korean maritime officials:

We departed Hanhaixian of Ningbo prefecture; while we were about to land at Shacheng, we encountered many pirates, who looted all our money and merchandise, totaling about 2,000-odd taels, leaving us with clothes and herbal ingredients. So we packed what remained, and set sail again. On the nineteenth day of that month, we were caught by strong winds, losing directions in the middle of the sea. On the twenty-seventh day of that month, we docked at the bay of a port,<sup>59</sup> not knowing where we were at first. Then we were surrounded by three boats with lots of naval officers on board. We wrote the three Chinese characters for “superior country people” [上國人] on paper to show the naval officers. The captain of this boat then urged us to board this boat, and treated us to wine and food, and gave us rice and other foodstuffs.

自寧波府寒海縣，開使將到沙埕地面，遇賊多人，將帶銀貨二千餘兩，併被抄搶，遺下衣服藥料，收拾裝載，十九日在洋內，忽遇颶風陟作，[在]海中，東漂西轉，二十七日到浦口灣泊，初不知是何處地面，隨有兩屬板屋船三隻，上載許多軍兵，來繞僮船，俺等書上國人三字於紙面，揭示軍兵，本船長官，就許俺等替上兵船，饋以酒食，兼濟米糧。

The second part of the testimony is a long list of forty names—twenty-eight passengers and eleven other seamen—each stating their place of origin and affirming that the facts testified by Xue Wanchun were truthful. For example:

Huang Qing, age thirty, resident of Nanpingxian of Yanping prefecture, gave the same testimony as Xue Wanchun and declared all the facts were all true

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<sup>59</sup> The Chinese boatpeople were cast ashore at a coastal port whose name was obscure to them. In Korean, 浦口 (포구) refers to a port or an inlet (灣, 만). As reference was made to Gyeongsangdo Provincial Military Commission 慶尙道統制使營 (경상도 통제사영), and the Maritime Military Headquarters of three provinces was located in Tongyong 統營 (통영), that port (浦口灣) was probably referring to one of the following: 河東 (하동), 統營 (통영), 三千浦 (삼천포), 馬山 (마산) or 鎭海 (진해). (I am indebted to Dr. Oh Sunyoung of Monash University and Dr. Jang Jinyoup of Yonsei University for this clarification; any inaccuracy would be my sole responsibility.)

一名黃擎，年三十歲，係延平府南平縣民人，供與薛萬春相同，所供是實

Details of the last person, Zhou Song 周松, were incomplete; apparently because he was reported sick and so personal information could not be elicited from him:

Zhou Song, unable to give testimony due to sickness

一名周松，病未捧招，際<sup>60</sup>

In terms of linguistic resources, the record was manifestly written using orality-based elements in Chinese, probably the Wu dialect, for example, the self-referential pronouns 俺 “I, me” and 俺等 “we, us,” the copula verb 係 “to be”; the use of classifiers for boats (一隻, 三隻); the quantifier 許多 “lots of”; the verb 在; and modern concepts like 水手 “seaman” and 執照 “license”:

One is called Xue Wanchun, age fifty-five, a sailor from Fuqing county, Fuzhou province

一名薛萬春，年五十五歲，係福州府福清縣水手

[we] acquired a locally licensed boat and hired Lin Chenghai as the captain . . . then we were surrounded by three boats with lots of naval officers on board.  
頒給船田執照雇駕船戶林成海船一隻……隨有兩屬板屋船三隻，上載許多軍兵，來繞僮船。

On the nineteenth day of that month, we were caught by strong winds, losing direction in the middle of the sea.

十九日在洋內，忽遇颶風陟作，[在]海中，東漂西轉

From a discourse-pragmatic point of view, this drifting record was clearly a product of co-construction. First, the use of proper nouns unknown to the interlocutor, such as Chinese personal names (41 altogether), place names (e.g., 沙埕 “Shacheng”), and administrative units (e.g., 寧波府寒海縣 “Hanhaixian of Ningbo prefecture”) in China. Second, the last few clauses in the narrative are marked by a clear shift in perspective, from the Chinese self-referential first-person plural pronoun 俺等 “we” (four instances) to the Korean self-referential 本國 “our country,” along with the use of Korean place names (*Kyōngsangdo t'ongjesagwan* 慶尙道統制使營, “Gyeongsangdo Provincial Military Commission”) and the formulaic closing words 所供是實 (“the facts above are all true”):

They also transported our merchandise to the Gyeongsangdo Provincial Military Commission. Thanks to the graciousness of Your Honorable King, the interpreter was brought over here. The facts above are all true.

仍搬俺等在船物件，帶面本國慶尙道統制使營安歇，間蒙國王，差委通事

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<sup>60</sup> A caveat of this analysis is that writing errors cannot be ruled out, as shown in missing sinograms due probably to carelessness or oversight.

官前去帶來，所供是實。

The elaborate amount of detail, from events prior to the vessel's losing course to the generous and gracious treatment of Korean maritime officers as well as specific personal and place names as part of what may be termed the "boat-drifting protocol" suggests that all the information was collected through speech, with the Korean–Chinese interpreter(s) playing a crucial role in their verbal exchange. On the other hand, it is clear that the transactional communication culminating in this written record was at least partly writing-mediated, and therefore it was also in part a literacy event in that what could not be made out in speech—for example, homophones of personal and place names—had to be disambiguated in writing. Of particular interest is the explicit mention of the mode of Chinese–Korean communication in their initial contact:

Then we were surrounded by three boats with lots of naval officers on board. We wrote the three Chinese characters for "superior country people" [上國人] on paper to show the naval officers.

隨有兩屬板屋船三隻，上載許多軍兵，來繞僮船，俺等書上國人三字於紙面。

The context of this writing-mediated transactional communication on board a Chinese boat thus provides additional evidence that brushtalking on paper, albeit limited to three sinograms, 上國人 ("superior country people") in this case, was an effective modality of communication that allowed the Chinese boat people—through a literatus as their representative—to convince the Korean maritime officers of their national identity. The Chinese resorted to writing evidently because speech was not an option in their initial verbal interaction due to a lack of a shared spoken language. What is interesting is that the Chinese boat people were rather well treated (being given food and wine, but also rice and other foodstuffs), presumably after ascertaining their national identity by other ancillary evidence (e.g., their remaining merchandise on board, constituting clothes and herbal ingredients after having been looted by pirates):

we encountered many pirates, who looted all our money and merchandise totaling about 2,000-odd taels, leaving us with clothes and herbal ingredients  
遇賊多人，將帶銀貨二千餘兩，併被抄搶，遺下衣服藥料

Traveling by sea along the coastal regions of East Asian nations being vulnerable to strong winds and typhoons in summer, similar "drifting brushtalk" records during the premodern and early modern eras may also be found in Japan, Vietnam, and Okinawa (the former Ryukyu kingdom). In terms of the role played by Sinitic brushtalk in the process of finding out the answers to a host of questions raised by local maritime officials to the boat people, there are similarities but also marked differences in their interaction patterns depending on the locality (i.e., shipwrecks in Japan, Korea, Ryukyu, and Vietnam).<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> There is no shortage of historiographic compilation of such data sources. For more details, see

## Discussion and Conclusion

Whether he communicated verbally or with his brush, Hong's conversations [with Chinese scholars] were smooth and natural. Even though the medium in which Hong transcribed these conversations, classical Chinese, cannot represent actual speech, the illusion and freshness of actual speech make themselves easily felt.<sup>62</sup>

With this commentary, Ledyard sums up his analysis of the quality of verbal and writing-mediated interaction between Hong Taeyong 洪大容 (1731–1783), a Korean envoy who took part in the annual winter solstice embassy to Peking (燕行) during the five-and-a-half month expedition from mid-December 1765 to late May 1766. He stayed in the capital of Qing China for over two months (February 6 to April 9) before making his way back to Seoul. In four volumes and eighty-one sections,<sup>63</sup> Hong's *Peking Memoir* was compiled based on the notes he took during his "diplomatic travel diary," where he gave elaborate details of keen observations of sundry things he saw and places he visited (e.g., street scenes of crowds and markets; sewers and sanitation; archery contests and firework displays; and palaces, temples, factories, schools, theatres, Catholic churches, monasteries, and Islamic mosques), as well as thoughtful impressions of the people he met (e.g., a Manchu prince, a customs officer, merchants, monks, musicians, and foreigners like Mongols, Ryukyuan, and Jesuit priests) and institutions that he had the opportunity to acquaint himself with (e.g., Moon Festival, pawnshops, Peking opera, and a police station). The brush talks with three Chinese scholars from Hangzhou (Lu Fei 陸飛, Pan Tingyun 潘庭筠, and Yan Cheng 嚴誠), embedded in a separate section in the two volumes, took place in a neighborhood called Ganjingtong 乾淨衞, which is why the artifacts of their "silent conversations" came to be called *Kanjǒng p'iltam* 乾淨筆談, more commonly known in China as *Ganjingtong bitan* 乾淨衞筆談.<sup>64</sup> As it was a "once-in-a-lifetime" opportunity to visit China, Hong started making careful preparation for the expedition one year beforehand.<sup>65</sup> Apart from familiarizing himself with the Chinese language by studying interpreters' glossaries and

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Matsuura, Aoyama, and Li, "Brush Conversation."

<sup>62</sup> Ledyard, "Hong Taeyong," 66.

<sup>63</sup> Ledyard divided the 81 sections into six parts according to commonality of their content: people and conversations (27); sights and scenes along the road (8) and of Peking (20); events and happenings (9); various topics from food, houses and dwellings to manufactures and machinery to entertainment (11); and Korean entourage (6); Ledyard, "Hong Taeyong," 64–69.

<sup>64</sup> Ledyard, "Hong Taeyong," 63. In a footnote (3), Ledyard points out his disagreement with the usual written form of *Kǒnjǒng* in Korean references, which he considers "technically inaccurate"; Ledyard, "Hong Taeyong," 96–97. Instead, he considers *kan* to be the correct pronunciation, hence *Kanjǒng* in Korean. As noted by Ledyard, 乾 has two pronunciations in Mandarin: *gan* (Kor.: *kan*) and *qian* (as in the era name of Qianlong 乾隆; Kor.: *kǒn*). Ledyard believed the Peking neighborhood was called *Ganjing* rather than *Qianjing*, hence he favors *Kanjǒng*. This is in line with the majority of references consulted, not without exceptions though. In one recent publication authored by a Korean researcher, Hong's brush talk volume was referred to as *Qianjingtong bitan*. See Jamie Jungmin Yoo, "Social Authorship and the Production of Texts in Late Chosŏn: An Analytical Bibliography," *East Asian Publishing and Society* 8, no. 1 (2018): 1–33. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/22106286-12341315>.

<sup>65</sup> Ledyard, "Hong Taeyong," 63, 66.



phrase books, he also hired a local carriage driver after crossing the boundary into Qing China, the purpose being to engage him in conversation like a language informant, and to take part in other driver-initiated conversations with local people naturally. These efforts proved effective, in that he managed to make himself understood when conversing with Chinese people he encountered on the way. The three Chinese brushtalkers he befriended, however, were scholars from Hangzhou, a “dialect” area in the south, which is why he felt “deaf and dumb all over again” when talking to them.<sup>66</sup> No wonder both sides quickly settled for Sinitic brushtalk, which was clearly more efficient and effective when making meaning synchronously and interactively.

Carefully laid out and edited with hardly any trace of false-start or correction of unintended sinograms, the published version of their brush conversation gives the impression—albeit deceptive—that the intellectual exchange embedded in their silent conversation was orderly, seamless, neat, and tidy. Hong’s first-hand account of the process of editing and compilation for publication reveals a rather different picture, however:

In our “talks” we would each hold on to paper and brush, writing on this piece or that, our hands hardly stopping. In one day we would surely have written more than ten thousand words . . . both sides at any given moment were mainly concerned with exchanging remarks, so that much of what we wrote got mixed up or fell out of order. For this reason, even the notes I still have contain questions with no answers, or answers with no questions, or remarks with no beginning or end. If in such cases I could no longer recall the conversation, I discarded the notes. When I could still remember, I added a few words to the remarks of the three friends to fill them out. . . . Where there was no obstacle, we tried to preserve the original wording, but places can also be found where we did not hesitate to polish the prose in the interests of truth or sincerity.<sup>67</sup>

Hong’s meticulous description of the brushtalk context provides fine details of the nuts and bolts of the brushtalking process. From individual brushtalkers’ point of view, attending to meaning-making interactively on the spur of the moment is one thing; what to do with the artifacts thus produced is quite another. What is clear is that much of the incoherence and many of the (requests for) clarification, non-sequiturs, or even misunderstandings of brushtalk—as is true of natural conversation in speech—may be obscured by the seamless and orderly layout of an edited monograph.<sup>68</sup> The compilation of loose sheets collected by Hong and his compatriot P’yongjung 平仲

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<sup>66</sup> Ledyard, “Hong Taeyong,” 66.

<sup>67</sup> Ledyard, “Hong Taeyong,” 95–96.

<sup>68</sup> To appreciate such a contrast, the reader may refer to the photocopied reproduction of original manuscripts collected by a brushtalk enthusiast, Lord Ōkōchi Teruna of Meiji Japan; see Wang Baoping 王宝平, *Riben cang Wanqing Zhong Ri chao bitan ziliao: Dahe neiwenshu* 日本藏晚清中日朝筆談資料：大河內文書 (Late Qing Brushtalk Data between Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans in Japan: Ōkōchi Documents) (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 2016). See also an edited version of brush conversations between the staff of the first Qing embassy to Japan and Japanese scholar-officials and friends; Liu Yuzhen 劉雨珍, *Qingdai shoujie zhuri gongshiguanyuan bitan ziliao huibian* 清代首屆駐日公使館員筆談資料彙編 (A Collection of Brush Conversations by the Staff of the First Qing Embassy to Japan) (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 2010).

arising from their brushtalking with the three Chinese scholars is an instructive case in point. Similarly, commenting on the intellectual and poetic exchange between Lord Ōkōchi Teruna, He Ruzhang, and their friends in Tokyo, Howland underscores the loose structure of brushtalking as a speech event as well as the written artifacts thus generated—again, not unlike speech in this regard:

Because they are such peculiar and unique phenomena, the brushtalks challenge our usual categories of language activity. To begin with, they are a form of writing that works like speech; that is, they lack the self-enclosure and deliberate continuity that is a property of most written texts. They start with a formal greeting to a friend, they stop for a newcomer or for a trip to a certain tea house or drinking establishment across the Sumida River; they break off and begin again according to unwritten social principles, as in spoken interaction. Like statements uttered in the service of some collective activity, they were disposable once the activity was completed.<sup>69</sup>

In light of massive evidence of morphographic sinograms being used spontaneously for writing-mediated interaction for well over a thousand years between literati with no shared spoken language, what implication does it have on the function of writing in Sinographic East Asia as opposed to speaking, the default modality of communication between hearing speakers? In Western societies, the language functions of speaking and writing are traditionally characterized as dichotomous, in that speaking is construed as a social activity, while writing is conceptualized as a solo, private endeavor.<sup>70</sup> In this article, I hope to have demonstrated that such a notional demarcation was only partially true of the Sinographic Cosmopolis in premodern East Asia, in that writing in Sinitic could well serve as a substitute for speaking—interactively, synchronously, and face-to-face. As evidenced in our documented examples of Chinese–Japanese and Chinese–Korean cross-border communication spanning over a thousand years since the sixth century and elsewhere within Sinographic East Asia, there was a time-honored tradition of using Sinitic for transcultural interaction, albeit writing-mediated due to a lack of a shared spoken language. From possibly the first attested example dating back to the Sui dynasty to the more recent ones in late Ming and early Qing dynasties, literati from different parts of Sinographic East Asia could bypass speaking and resort to composing Chinese characters or sinograms as the carrier of their intended meanings, with a fairly good chance of making themselves understood. For those literati who had little or no knowledge of one another’s vernaculars, how deeply they could engage in intellectual exchange would depend on the level of their literacy and familiarity with literary canons and classical literature, including poetic genres (e.g., recall Zhu Shunshui’s worldview of Tokugawa Japan, which was limited to the lifeworld of his brushtalk interlocutors, namely aristocrats, courtiers, intellectuals, and members of the upper samurai class, who tended to be well-off and literate in Sinitic).

With regard to Brown and Yule’s functional distinction between transactional and interactional communication, our analysis of historical data sources shows that the writing-mediated modality was compatible with both. The Chinese–Japanese

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<sup>69</sup> Howland, *Borders of Chinese Civilization*, 44–45.

<sup>70</sup> Brown and Yule, *Discourse Analysis*.

writing-mediated communication records exemplified above, from the Sui dynasty (between minister Ono no Imoko and Chinese monks) and the Tang dynasty (Ennin and Chinese monks), to the Song dynasty (Japanese “student monks” Chōnen and Jakushō responding to separate Song Emperors’ questions in court) and the Ming dynasty (Zhu Shunshui brushtalking with his Japanese hosts), were clearly functionally more interactional than transactional. In all of these cases, the “writers” attended to not only transmitting factual information, but also maintaining social relations and personal attitudes vis-à-vis their interlocutors. They only differed by degree, with social relations being more marked in more recent instances, as shown in the use of honorific expressions such as “your esteemed country” and the (possibly induced) use of “my humble self” by Zhu Shunshui. By contrast, the “drifting” report produced by the Korean interpreter, co-constructed with the help of at least one literate Chinese passenger on board, was clearly more transactional than interactional, as it focused essentially on factual information.

In terms of linguistic resources, the limited number of documented cases of transcultural writing-mediated communication until the Song dynasty essentially drew on classical Chinese lexico-grammar and exhibited few vernacular-based “dialect” elements. Such a trend began to change in more recent examples of writing-mediated communication, as shown in our analysis of Zhu Shunshui’s Sinitic brushtalk with Oyake Seijun 小宅生順 and the “drifting brushtalk” record co-constructed by Korean maritime officials and Chinese boat people above. The increasing presence of vernacular-based lexico-grammatical elements such as personal pronouns and classifiers may be explained by the spread of vernacular novels in which the writing was modeled on regional spoken Chinese norms of, for example, the Wu dialect region of Shanghai and the adjacent provinces of Jiangsu and Zhejiang. In other words, from Song dynasty onwards, parallel to the traditional use of classical Chinese for formal writing purposes, there emerged new genres of vernacular-based literature that succeeded in commanding a huge readership in China. Through trade and cultural contact, some of these works intended for popular consumption became accessible to avid literate readers elsewhere within Sinographic East Asia.<sup>71</sup> It is therefore not surprising that literati from different parts of the Sinographic Cosmopolis who had prior exposure to vernacular writing in Sinitic would be in a position to include regional vernacular elements (of Chinese origin) in their transcultural cross-border communication with the locals. This is probably why such a trend of mixing classical and vernacular elements became apparent during the Ming dynasty, as evidenced in the examples of Chinese–Japanese “silent conversation” and Chinese–Korean brush-assisted verbal interaction discussed above. Over time, the trend of vernacularization culminated in China in the *baihua* 白話 (“plain speech”) movement in the early twentieth century, while a similar trend became unstoppable amidst the rise of nationalistic sentiments elsewhere in East Asia, resulting in the gradual “domain loss” and eventual demise of Sinitic as a medium for formal writing purposes within the Sinographic Cosmopolis, an irrevocable process that began around the turn of the twentieth century, thus ending the era when Literary Sinitic—in the sense that Kornicki employs it<sup>72</sup>—stopped functioning as the regional scripta

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<sup>71</sup> See Clements, *Cultural History of Translation*.

<sup>72</sup> Kornicki, *Languages, Scripts*.

franca.<sup>73</sup>

As for the choice of writing medium or tools, brush, ink, and paper tended to be preferred in more recent Sinitic brushtalk data sources, but earlier records also indicated that a pointed instrument like a staff and a flat surface covered with fluid material such as sand were equally amenable for facilitating meaning-making through the composition of morphographic, non-phonographic sinograms. Here again, the only constraint would seem to be the interlocutors' level of literacy in Sinitic.

Finally, at the theoretical level, what is the linguistic significance of writing-mediated, face-to-face interaction as a once vibrant modality of communication in different parts of the Sinographic Cosmopolis? Two lines of further research are conceivable. The first one concerns the systematic study of writing-mediated interaction—of which Sinitic brushtalk is one widely attested, historically conditioned pattern—as a modality of communication per se, possibly the third known modality of synchronous face-to-face communication after speech and (tactile) sign language. Before the advent of the internet, synchronous written communication seemed uncommon or almost unheard of in the Western world. Speech is the default modality between the absolute majority of hearing speakers in the world, whatever their preferred language(s), while (tactile) sign language is a modality at the disposal of hearing-impaired and/or sight-impaired persons provided that a (local) sign language exists and that they have the opportunity to acquire its affordance or semiotic potential through engaging in social interaction with other sign language users especially from a young age. To my knowledge, occasional instances of synchronous written communication cited in the literature of applied linguistics to date tend to be marked, typically when speaking is physically prevented (e.g., speakers diving under water or finding themselves in an extremely noisy environment) or deemed socially inappropriate (e.g., in the middle of a solemn ceremony or formal lecture). To avoid attracting undue attention, a robber instructing a bank employee to comply with action during office hours is more likely to do it in writing than in speech (e.g., handing a note that says, “Robbery!” or its semantic equivalent in other speech communities).<sup>74</sup> I believe Sinitic brushtalk, practiced on such a vast scale across a time-depth of over a thousand years, will have its rightful place in what eventually will emerge as a taxonomy of writing-mediated interaction, the third modality of synchronous face-to-face communication between humans.<sup>75</sup>

Second, does the choice between a phonographic and morphographic script have any influence on its affordance or semiotic potential in enacting or facilitating writing-mediated, synchronous interaction in face-to-face encounters? Typologically, classical Chinese is famous for being extremely parsimonious in its morphological type and grammar, hence its characterization as “isolating” in the study of linguistic typology.<sup>76</sup> Further, this prototypical isolating language is written with a

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<sup>73</sup> Denecke, “Worlds Without Translation,” 204–216.

<sup>74</sup> I am indebted to Hartmut Haberland for this recurrent if not universal example.

<sup>75</sup> As an intermediate goal, researching a taxonomy of writing-mediated face-to-face interaction between hearing and non-hearing speakers on one hand, in lingua franca contexts versus within the same (written) language on the other, was also inspired by Hartmut Haberland—hereby gratefully acknowledged.

<sup>76</sup> See, for example, Bernard Comrie, “Linguistic Typology,” *Annual Review of Anthropology*, no. 17 (1988): 145–159. doi: 10.1146/annurev.an.17.100188.001045. On classical Chinese grammar, see Pulleyblank, *Classical Chinese Grammar*.

morphographic, non-phonographic script (*Hanzi*), in that the absolute majority of sinograms are morphemes with little or no clue about pronunciation (i.e., their pronunciation in speech cannot be deduced directly from their written forms). Are these two linguistic characteristics incidental or related, and how are they related to language change diachronically? I believe these questions may be investigated comparatively by examining whether similar examples of spontaneous writing-mediated interaction are also found in other ancient civilizations, for example, where a regional lingua franca like Latin or Arabic was used. It would be interesting to investigate whether such a writing-mediated interactional pattern was also practiced by literate speakers of a regional lingua franca written with some other morphographic script (e.g., the Babylonian Cosmopolis mentioned above) or phonographic script (e.g., the Roman alphabet and abjad **in Arabic and Hebrew**, respectively), and if so, how. The goal of this line of research will be to ascertain to what extent sinogram-based writing-mediated face-to-face communication is a script-specific interactional phenomenon.

As of now, comparable instances of writing-mediated, synchronous interaction in face-to-face settings by literate speakers of phonographic languages do not seem to be as common. The relative paucity of such examples is of course no proof of its non-existence. *Prima facie* (absence of) evidence, however, seems to support the following null hypothesis:

For a written language to function as a modality of interactive communication between humans, it must be written with a morphographic script despite being phonetically intersubjective and mutually unintelligible in speech.

This empirically verifiable “morphographic hypothesis” holds that writing-mediated synchronous communication is premised on the semiotic affordance of a morphographic script such as sinograms in modern Chinese or Japanese *kanji*, which is not shared by the writing systems of phonographic languages. It will be falsified if documented evidence of writing-based face-to-face communication between literate users of languages written with a phonographic script is attested, but the hypothesis will remain valid until counter-evidence is found.

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## **Appendix 1.** Testimony of a Shipwreck Incident Collected by Korean Maritime Officials from Ming Chinese “Boat People”<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Source: “Pibyōnsa Tūngnok” 備邊司謄錄, *Kyujanggak Wōnmun Kōmsaek Sōpisū* 奎章閣原文檢索 서비스 (Kyujanggak Original Text Searching Service), Kyujanggak Institute for Korean Studies 奎章閣韓國學研究會.  
[http://kyudb.snu.ac.kr/pf01/rendererImg.do?item\\_cd=VBS&book\\_cd=GK15044\\_00&vol\\_no=0001&page\\_no=079a](http://kyudb.snu.ac.kr/pf01/rendererImg.do?item_cd=VBS&book_cd=GK15044_00&vol_no=0001&page_no=079a).

<p>一名薛萬春，年五十五歲，係福州府福清縣水手，俺等一顆四十一人，委於本年七月十二日，討得(...)船田執照雇駕船戶林成海船一隻，自寧波府寒海縣，開使將到沙埕地面，遇賊多人，將帶銀貨二千餘兩，併被抄搶，遺下衣服藥料，收拾裝載，十九日在洋內，忽遇颶風陟作，(在)海中，東漂西轉，二十七日到浦口灣泊，初不知是何處地面，隨有兩屬板屋船三隻，上載許多軍兵，來繞僮船，俺等書上國人三字於紙面，揭示軍兵，本船長官，就許俺等替上兵船，饋以酒食，兼濟米糧，仍搬俺等在船物件，帶面本國慶尚道統制使營安歇，間蒙國王，差委通事官前去帶來，所供是實，</p> <p>一名葉如欽，年五十五歲，係福州府閩縣民人，供與薛萬春相同，所供是實，</p> <p>一名黃擎，年三十歲，係延平府南平縣民人，供與薛萬春相同，所供是實</p> <p>[.....]</p>	<p>Xue Wanchun, age fifty-five, is a sailor from Fuqing county, Fuzhou province. We are altogether forty-one people. On the twelfth day of the seventh lunar month, we acquired a locally licensed boat and hired Lin Chenghai's ship. We departed Hanhaixian of Ningbo prefecture; while we were about to land at Shacheng, we encountered many pirates, who looted all our money and merchandise totaling about 2,000-odd taels, leaving us with clothes and herbal ingredients. So we packed what remained, and set sail again. On the nineteenth day of that month, we were caught by strong winds, losing directions in the middle of the sea. On the twenty-seventh day of that month, we docked at Pukou Bay, not knowing where we were at first. Then we were surrounded by three boats with lots of naval officers on board. We wrote three Chinese characters for "superior country people" [上國人] on paper to show the naval officers. The captain of this boat then urged us to board this boat, and treated us to wine and food, and gave us rice and other foodstuffs. They also transported our merchandise to the Gyeongsangdo Provincial Military Commission. Thanks to the graciousness of the Honorable King, the interpreter was brought over here. The facts above were all true.</p> <p>Ye Ruchin, age fifty-five, resident of Min county of Fuzhou prefecture, gave the same testimony as Xue Wanchun and declared all the facts were all true.</p> <p>Huang Qing, age thirty, resident of Nanping county of Yanping prefecture, gave the same testimony as Xue Wanchun and declared all the facts were all true.</p> <p>[... 38 others gave their testimonies].</p>
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