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Chapter 12

Sociocultural Functions of Chinese Characters and Writing: Transnational Brush-talk Encounters in Mid-nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century East Asia

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Abstract

Written characters are not mere tools of communication and their value has been aesthetically appreciated in the art form of calligraphy in many locales throughout history. Depending on whether characters are phonographic or logographic, however, the sorts of values and functions attached to the characters' written forms differ fundamentally. Focusing on cross-border interactions of historical figures from China, Vietnam and Japan in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth century, this chapter explores the manners in which actors involved in these encounters assigned socio-cultural values to Chinese characters, or sinograms, that transcended their linguistic functions, and how they made the most of Sinitic writing as a resource for establishing rapport with foreigners in transcultural scenarios. Thanks to their rich potential to convey both linguistic and cultural meanings, sinograms and Sinitic writing in general allowed strangers who did not share a spoken language to forge meaningful relationships centered on interactive, face-to-face inscribing of Chinese characters, furthering their embeddedness in the literary and cultural tradition of Sinographic East Asia.

Keywords

Chinese characters, Chinese writing, literacy, transnational communication, Sinographic East Asia

Introduction

When asked about the purpose of writing, our immediate answer is likely going to be reading. We learn both at the same time early on in our education and it is hard not to think about one without the other. A text is written to be read primarily for its linguistic value, making comprehension a key criterion in examining literacy as the original function of writing. The more we think about various types of texts, however, the more we realize that the relationship between writing and language is not always as clear-cut as when it is viewed only through the prism of legible literacy. Written characters are not mere tools of language-based communication, something that can be observed in a contemporary context when we think of Chinese character tattoos on people who do not read Chinese or when we leaf through the pages of Japanese lifestyle magazines routinely featuring paragraphs interspersed with English and French phrases inserted in the headings. Going back in time to societies' early applications of writing, written symbols were often used for their talismanic power, such as the sinogram-like marks on earthenware pottery from the Yayoi 弥生 (c. 300 BCE–250 CE) and Tomb 古墳 (c. 250–600 CE) periods in Japan, whose role likely involved warding off evil or bringing good fortune (Hirakawa 1999). Earlier still, the original function of oracle bone script as it emerged in China during the late Shang Dynasty (c. 1200–1050 BCE) was to facilitate pyromantic divination (Keightley 1996: 71–72; 2006: 185–191). Examples like these underscore that the value of written characters—whether logographic or phonographic—has been aesthetically appreciated in the art form of calligraphy or typography in many locales throughout history, or, as in many early societies, that written symbols held magical power over people through their ritualistic functions. In China, where the handwriting of powerful individuals has been historically endowed with special honor and significance, calligraphy could be harnessed for political ends given its augmented magical and ideological effect on people, as demonstrated by Richard Curt Kraus (1991) in his exploration of the relationship between this art form and Chinese politics. Kraus even argues that the belief in mysterious power of sinograms in China continued into the modern times and was reflected in the superstitions surrounding written objects and writing tools. He references anecdotes according to which Zhou Jianren 周建人 (1888–1984) had to burn any papers bearing sinograms in big iron basins rather than ordinary stoves as a gesture of respect, and Zhou's brother, the great modern writer Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936), helped their father drink a dose of old writing ink as remedy for bleeding (Kraus 1991: 4–5).

While the use of sinograms originated in China, it is hard to overstate their overwhelming influence on the linguistic and cultural landscape of neighboring societies including Japan. Following their introduction in Japan as early as the first century of our era, they were first used to write Chinese as a foreign language, but in time became adapted to allow residents of the Japanese archipelago to express their own spoken language in a written form for the first time. They have continued in this function until this day and constitute one component of the modern Japanese mixed-script writing system along with the two *kana* syllabaries whose origins, too, can be traced back to Chinese characters. Just like their Chinese neighbors, the Japanese developed a complex and emotional relationship with the characters, ranging at various historical times from profound reverence to outspoken advocacy for abolition of the logographic script as an obstacle to the advancement of universal literacy (Gottlieb 1995).

Drawing on David Lurie's (2011) concept of *alegible* texts, this chapter explores Japanese interactions with writing in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth century to shed light on the various ways in which different social groups simultaneously used sinograms in sometimes radically distinctive ways. I focus on transnational encounters conducted via brush-talk to outline the class of relations to sinograms and sinogram-based texts that did not necessarily involve reading in the conventional sense and argue that such non-linguistic meaning-making functions of Sinitic writing—including the action of writing and the production of written objects—formed an essential component of Japanese literacy accorded by the sociocultural conditions of Sinographic East Asia or the Sinographic cosmopolis (King 2015).[1]

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[1] In this chapter I generally use 'Sinograms' and 'Sinitic' when referring to historical transnational use of Chinese characters and Literary Chinese as distinct from contemporary use of Chinese characters in China and *kanji* in Japan. For terminological differences between Sinitic and Literary Chinese, see Kornicki (2018: 19) and Handel (2019a).

Heterogeneous values of *alegible* texts

Chinese characters are logograms that record the Chinese language, with each character or sinogram corresponding to one morpheme or meaningful unit in the language.[2] They developed as a means of writing the Chinese language starting as early as the late Shang (Norman 1988: 77; Handel 2019b). For centuries, the characters functioned as a vehicle of content-based communicative practice essential to transmitting ideas and storing information, facilitating what is commonly understood as literacy; however, the earliest known artifacts inscribed with the characters' ancestral scripts were not necessarily produced for their normative literacy values. As previously noted, the original function of oracle bone script, a script ancestral to all subsequent forms of Chinese characters, was for fortune telling rituals (Keightley 1985).

Chinese characters were also used to record non-Chinese languages including Korean, Vietnamese, Zhuang 僮族, Khitan 契丹, and Jurchen 女眞, and have remained a key component of the Japanese writing system. While the exact time when sinograms arrived in the Japanese archipelago is unclear, coins and mirrors carrying short inscriptions in Chinese script were found inside tombs dating from as early as the first century BCE.[3] The subsequent reception of sinograms in the archipelago during the period from their arrival to the seventh century when domestic literacies emerged has been a major topic of scholarly speculation centered on the relationship between the inscribed artifacts and the production of writing.

In his book *Realms of Literacy: Early Japan and the History of Writing*, Lurie (2011) considers whether Japanese attached the same meanings to objects inscribed with Chinese characters as when these writings circulated in the Chinese contexts. With this query, he questions the privileged role of 'comprehension' as the only criterion for examining the uses of writing. He illustrates his point by citing a passage from the classic in the genre of anthropological memoir, *Tristes Tropiques*, written by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1973/1955) and recounting the anthropologist's encounter with the illiterate Nambikwara people in the Amazon basin. When the Nambikwara chief sees Lévi-Strauss writing, he too makes a show of drawing wavy lines on the sheets of paper in front of the villagers, acting as if the meaning of those lines is understood by Lévi-Strauss. The anthropologist deems this behavior as farce aimed primarily at boosting the chief's image and authority in the eyes of his people. To Lurie, the irony of this interpretation of the historical significance of the advent of writing in illiterate societies derives from the presumed relationship between writing and its political meaning, which could only be possible if both parties in the incident subscribed to the inherent transparency and institutional dimension of writing. While Lévi-Strauss focuses on the power of literates over illiterates regardless of whether the 'literate' person understands the text or just pretends to do so, Lurie sees the possibility of resistance in actions that do not regard writing from the perspective of a transparent relationship, that is, considering texts only as either legible or illegible. Instead of viewing the incident through the lens of domination exerted by means of a written word, Lurie interprets the Nambikwara chief's tactful use of *opaque* 'writing' as an expedient way to maintain independence from his interlocutor. As far as the chief did not read French, he was free from

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[2] While this is generally true, some exceptions exist, e.g., 蝴 as in 蝴蝶 (unlike 蝶, which can be used on its own), and 琵琶.

[3] These objects are the earliest known evidence of the presence of writing in the Japanese archipelago. Japanese had not produced any known indigenous writing before the arrival of Chinese characters.

Lévi-Strauss's writing and the accompanying textual and linguistic apparatus of the colonizing power. In fact, he was free from any writing including his own drawing (pretend-writing) of wavy lines, as he did not regard any writing through the narrow dichotomy of legible and illegible texts. Drawing on William Harris's (1989) criticism of Lévi-Strauss's hypothesis that the primary function of written communication is to facilitate slavery, Lurie sheds light on the possibility of mental, economic, and political independence in the actions of illiterate people by recognizing the value of their opaque relations with writing. He makes a case for the importance of writing that cannot be interpreted as a literacy event, that is, to be read and understood via the conventional relationship between written form (*signifiant*) and linguistic meaning (*signifié*). When a person in a pre-literate society comes to learn about the existence of writing, s/he does not instinctively recognize the essential meaning of writing as a matter of course and does not immediately enter into a relationship with the literate colonizer as an illiterate subject who strives to decipher the meaning of a text and grasp its linguistic functions. Rather, such a person might maintain her/his independence by treating writing as opaque outside of the dichotomy of legibility and illegibility while recognizing other socially grounded values of writing such as decorative, aesthetic, magical, talismanic, and so forth.

In the history of Japan's contact with Chinese writing, inscribed objects played an important role in mediating the tributary relationship between the early Japanese chiefdoms and the Chinese court. However, they did so regardless of the specific content or 'legible' political meanings they carried.[4] One example involves the record of the mid-third century (238 CE) diplomatic communication between the Wei 魏 emperor Cao Rui 曹叡（206–239) and the Wa 倭 queen Himiko 卑弥呼 (170–248) described in the last chapter of the 'Book of Wei' 魏書, which is the first part the 'Records of the Three Kingdoms' 三國志. Along with biographies of other ethnic groups inhabiting Chinese periphery regions such as Wuwan 烏丸, Xianbei 鮮卑, and Dongyi 東夷, the record provides an account of the characteristics of Wajin 倭人 or Japanese people and describes the tributary relationship between the Wei court and the queen of the Wa who briefly unified the various regional chiefdoms under the proto-Japanese federation of Yamatai 邪馬台, recounting the diplomatic exchanges involving envoys, tributes and written communications. Regarding the early encounters with Chinese writing via written objects and Japan's adaptation of sinograms in the Yayoi period, Lurie poses a fundamental question whether Chinese characters were regarded as 'true', that is, legible writing or merely talismanic marks by Himiko and her officials. The following line in the *Records of the Three Kingdoms* mentioning an exchange of written texts has often been interpreted as evidence that Japanese people read and wrote sinograms.

> 傳送文書賜遺之物詣女王 不得差錯 (Chen 1964: 856)
>
> [The official] sends the documents and bestowed items to the Queen, so it is impossible to tamper with them. (Lurie 2011: 76)

Against that reading, Lurie argues that the Japanese in the Yamatai federation 邪馬台國 regarded the documents as artifacts not writing. Since the word 賜 'bestow' is used appropriately only if the gifts flow from the Chinese court but not the other way around, it can be interpreted that the Japanese only received the documents. This does not automatically preclude that the

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[4] These objects were usually seals, swords and mirrors.

Japanese queen and her officials could read the documents and were able to understand the linguistic meanings of sinograms. It does however allow us to surmise that for the queen, the documents and other written objects received from the Kingdom of Wei at the very least served as artifacts that helped enhance her magical power and political authority independently of the linguistic meanings they carried. In other words, the significance of these objects for Himiko did not necessarily derive from the 'true' meaning of the writings they featured but from her independent re-appropriation and re-purposing of the inscriptions towards readings that presumably deviated from the tributary power relationship they were originally meant to acknowledge.

Using various examples pertaining to Japan's early accommodation and responses to sinograms such as the one involving queen Himiko above, Lurie theorizes the context in which people relate to texts outside the narrow dichotomy of legibility and illegibility and conceptualizes as *alegible* the specific relations to texts developed by early adaptors in which the potential linguistic content of texts is not necessarily considered essential. The alegible texts are sets of graphs that are seen but not necessarily read. In the ancient Japanese archipelago, alegible texts such as the documents bearing sinograms were often used to enhance the power and authority of the owner. Whether texts were read or unread is hard to establish as well as less significant than the effects the writings conferred on the recipients. Lurie writes:

> We should note that the readability of a text was simply not the major issue in the contexts in which those artifacts were being produced and employed. The role of the 'unread' at this early stage in the history of Japanese writing draws attention to the continuing importance of this class of relations to texts, even in contexts that also involve widespread acts of reading in the familiar sense. Such coexistence, which occurs worldwide in both pre-modern and modern contexts, involves familiar phenomena such as the use of graphs in amulets or logos, the magical power or social cachet of illegible inscriptions (whether in ancient books or on contemporary T-shirts and tattoos), and the aesthetic dimensions of writing considered as calligraphy or typography. (Lurie 2011: 3)

The above passage not only reminds us of the dual values people have assigned to texts across time and space—the linguistic and non-linguistic meanings we ascribe to written words—but also underscores that sometimes our relationship with a text can be ambiguous and opaque. In some contexts, Chinese characters function as non-linguistic symbols, for example, when they first arrived in the ancient Japanese archipelago inscribed on shell ornaments around the first century BCE. Although it is impossible to know with certainty what their 'readers' made of the marks, we can assume they were valued as ritual objects and symbols of social distinction, political authority, and magical power rather than being regarded in the narrow sense of writing that conveys linguistic meaning. In modern times Chinese characters generally operate as purely linguistic tools intended to deliver ideas and store information, just as how we use them when we read a newspaper or write emails. In alegible contexts in which sinogram-based texts were not simply defined as something to be read or to be 'unread' based on a modern, normative sense of literacy, the two functions intersected, operating simultaneously and fluidly side by side while reflecting the heterogeneous mix of the 'readers' differing relationships with Chinese characters. Sometimes sinograms were assigned with strictly linguistic or non-linguistic values and sometimes with varying degrees of both depending on the person and other context-specific concerns. For instance, as a form of visual art, Chinese calligraphy conveys both aesthetic and semantic meanings; an illiterate viewer at the very least may be able to appreciate the former, while a literate one may understand either, or both. By the same token, identical texts and written objects can be valued differently by different users depending on their class, gender, occupation, socio-cultural dispositions and so on, as well as their collective consciousness as members of a given social group, be it a tribe, ethnolinguistic group or a transnational community of people bound together by a specific socio-cultural framework such as Confucian literati in premodern East Asia. To recall Lévi-Strauss's encounter with the Nambikwara people in the Amazon basin, the illiterate village chief used his own imagination of how social existence ought to be played out to establish socio-cultural relationship with writing, albeit not necessarily the kind that conformed to the paradigm espoused by Lévi-Strauss. As Lurie observes in his commentary on the incident, whether through his writing-pretense performance the chief sought to pursue social distinction, political authority, magical power over his fellow illiterates or independence from his literate guest remains a moot point. Similarly, how Chinese writing—in terms of both written text and the act of writing—was treated and valued in premodern and modern Japan would depend on the sense-making processes underpinning the collective imaginary of non-Chinese receivers and users of sinograms. While the linguistic meanings attached to texts were relatively straightforward, the non-linguistic values of sinograms to the Japanese users varied from political to religious and aesthetic to commercial depending on the alegible contexts in which these writings were received and the social imaginaries that enabled and legitimized the sense-making practices of the recipients.

In what follows, I will use the concept of alegible texts to explore the tacit richness of opaque writing functions that are discernible from specific brush-talk encounters between East Asian users of sinograms in Japan during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Events related to two historical contexts will be examined, one being historic trade negotiations between the United States and Japan in 1854 featuring the participation of the Chinese businessman/interpreter Luo Sen, the other being Japanese encounters with Vietnamese independence activists seeking assistance from Japan in 1905. My discussion will focus on various ways in which literate and 'illiterate' Japanese users assigned socio-cultural values to the production of Sinographic writing based on the shifting relationship between legible and alegible meanings it conveyed to the readers/writers and/or spectators.

Role of Sinitic writing in the 1854 US-Japan negotiations

Tao Demin (2005), a historian of modern Sino-Japanese relations, points out the often-forgotten historical fact that two foreign languages, Chinese and Dutch, played an essential role in early United States-Japan diplomacy. He elaborates the circumstances which saw Luo Sen 羅森, a Hong Kong-based Chinese businessman, join in 1854 the pivotal American expedition to Japan, which marked a turning point in the country's history. The trading treaty extracted from the Tokugawa shogunate by the American side through their use of gunboat diplomacy ended 220 years of Japan's self-imposed seclusion and forced it to open the country's ports to American merchant ships and rescue stranded American seamen. As it turns out, Luo Sen's role in that critical moment of history and his contribution to American diplomacy was quite substantial. A bilingual speaker of Cantonese and English—the latter acquired through his trading business—he did not know Japanese. This did not, however, stop him from successfully conducting 'conversations' with Japanese officials and connecting with ordinary Japanese people directly via writing enacted by Sinitic brush-talk. In fact, Luo Sen's ability to converse with Japanese officials in brush-talk using erudite expressions in elegant calligraphy helped to resolve many of the underlying tensions and allay suspicions between the two negotiating sides during the early stage of the talks.

How did Luo Sen, by all accounts an ordinary, if educated, Cantonese merchant in his thirties, become implicated in historical events of such great importance? It had much to do with Japan's political reticence and the peculiar linguistic ecologies of Sinographic East Asia. Due to restrictive isolationist policies the linguistic expertise of the Japanese side was severely circumscribed (Aoyama 2020), forcing Commodore Matthew C. Perry (1794–1858), the American commander of the expedition, to conduct the negotiations in either Dutch or Chinese. While the talks during his first trip to Japan in 1853 were largely facilitated in Dutch via Dutch-speaking interpreters provided by both sides, for the second trip in 1854 Perry decided to make heavier use of Chinese. The man he chose to assist him both times as chief interpreter for the Chinese language was a fellow American, Christian missionary Samuel Wells Williams (1812–1884), who had spent decades in China and was regarded among Western orientalists at the time as an expert not only on China but also on Japan (Turner 1851). Although he possessed a high level of communicative competence in Chinese, Williams was fully aware that the task would require either elegant Chinese writing skills or good knowledge of colloquial Japanese, neither of which was his forte. Having decided to enroll an educated Chinese interpreter to serve as his assistant during the second voyage, he recruited Luo Sen in Shanghai. We can only speculate what moved the Cantonese businessman to take up the position when most other eligible Chinese fellows would prefer to focus on advancing their careers through more conventional means of civil service, but it appears that his decision may have been partially motivated by discontent with the Qing court, which had failed to acknowledge his contribution in suppressing the Taiping Rebellion (Luo 1856: 400; Tao 2005). Williams and Luo had quickly developed a congenial and productive working relationship, with Luo translating documents and taking dictation from Williams. Of his decision to bring Luo Sen onboard as the diplomatic dealings advanced between 1853 and 1854 Williams wrote:

> Heretofore, most of my taking having been in a small way and on unimportant matters, if I bungled't was not so much consequence; but now the affair is serious, so I bring Lo[5] into considerable service to make one language help the other, and thereby avoid many mistakes. (Williams 1889: 219)

Luo's contribution to the fruitful result of the expedition was not, however, limited to his secretarial skills deployed behind the scenes; his ability to carry on face-to-face communication with the Japanese officials via brush-talk was just as—if not more—important. Returning to Japan in 1854, after they presented the letter from President Millard Fillmore requesting the opening of political and commercial relations between the two countries a year earlier, Americans felt a deep sense of suspicion on the Japanese part. In his diary of the expedition Luo Sen reports seeing a fleet of more than a hundred Japanese vessels anchored near the shore of Yokohama in Edo Bay and a military camp on land deployed by the shogunate in preparation for possible conflicts. To complicate the matters, Dutch-speaking interpreters from the Japanese side were not always available to participate in the meetings; on such occasions, Chinese language—which was Williams's preferred language for documentation—was used as an official medium of communication. Despite very limited direct interaction between the Chinese and the Japanese during the preceding 200 years, Sinitic writing proved to be an ineluctable and indispensable link connecting the two nations that could be brought to bear on the spot to facilitate communication using brush, ink and paper, without the need for a single word to be uttered in speech. Because the same sinograms were pronounced differently by the Chinese and the Japanese they were mutually unintelligible if read out loud, yet none of it mattered in written communication. Luo Sen's advantage over Williams as a Chinese literatus intimately familiar with the cultural and intellectual resources of the Chinese literary canons enabled him to use Sinitic with greater freedom in order to express and play with various meanings accessible to those who, like him, were educated in the same tradition—in this case the Japanese commissioners and dignitaries involved in the diplomatic negotiations. As attested by Williams in his diary, Luo Sen 'gets on admirably with the natives; he is indeed the most learned Chinaman they have ever seen' and the Japanese feel 'delight in showing off to him their attainments in Chinese' (Williams 1889: 219).

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[5] Lo is an alternative romanization of Luo.

The momentous nature of the events was only matched by the tremendous extent of distrust and intimidation tactics involved on both sides. In a diplomatically charged situation in which the negotiating parties had no recourse to a common spoken language, the option to resort to brush-talk offered invaluable assistance that effected dual merit. First, at the level of linguistic content facilitated by the morphographic nature of Sinitic, it allowed the interlocutors to convey their messages to one another (Li 2020; Li et al. 2020). Even though the Japanese side did not speak any Chinese, the writing-mediated 'conversation' could still take place using brush, ink and paper and produce a certain measure of linguistic meanings readily legible to both sides. In the hands of literati with erudite knowledge of Sinitic classics and canons rooted in a shared intellectual tradition, the range of meanings that could be yielded and mutually recognized by the educated interlocutors would expand immeasurably. What is more, the sense-making processes employed in brush-talk were not operating only in relation to the potential legible meanings of the produced text; what mattered more was the symbolic value of shared Sinitic writing that allowed the interlocutors to recognize and acknowledge each other as members of the same cultural sphere or community. Luo Sen's ability to compose erudite phrases when engaging in brush-talk with the Japanese officials, therefore, helped more than just to overcome a language barrier; in a way it also allowed him to transcend the cultural and political apprehensions that had accrued between the Chinese and Japanese as a result of their lack of direct contact for over 200 years. As an immediate effect, his agility and literary flair in Sinitic brush-talk provided the wherewithal to earn goodwill from the Japanese side, and helped to allay latent suspicion of the samurai officials and extenuate some of the tension that inevitably afflicted the initial negotiations (Tsu 2010; Tao 2005). Not only was face-to-face, back-and-forth writing instrumental in helping the parties to instantly grasp one another's intentions and clarify misunderstandings but it also aided Luo Sen in creating a relaxed atmosphere during the talks and forging rapport and personal connections with the Japanese hosts.

It was a standard practice for educated literati of Sinitic to use brush-talk to exchange poetic verses, which Luo Sen did many times during his interaction with the Japanese scholar-officials.

On one occasion Luo and the Japanese officials shared in the amazement at how well they could communicate with the help of just brush, ink and paper:[6]

> On the same day, Wau-che-choo, of Shan-pun, asked me to inscribe a fan for him, and presented to me the four following lines:
>
> “Say not our meeting here was all of chance;
> To you we owe the treaty and our peace.
> From far the strangers came, their language strange,
> ‘Twas well we had your pencil and your tongue.” (Luo 1856: 402)
>
> 橫濱相遇豈無因
> 和議皆安仰賴君
> 遠方鴃舌今朝會
> 幸覩同文對語人 (Luo 1854–55: 590 (129))

Rhapsodic interactions such as these give us a vivid idea of the Japanese hosts’ delight and recognition of Luo Sen’s participation in the negotiations which was largely attendant on Sinitic writing. Unlike colloquial speech, direct communication via brush-talk provided a much better means of signaling erudition and cultural credentials required to prove one’s worth as a fully-fledged member of a mutually shared realm of intellectual tradition and civilized learning across Sinographic East Asia. Likewise, exchanging poetry, inscribing handheld fans and gifting of writing tools typified time-honored attitudes which developed as an important ingredient of Chinese literacy and functioned as another kind of meaning-making device within a socio-cultural framework sanctioned by Sinitic writing. Thus, by exchanging poetic verses, Luo Sen and his Japanese partners engaged in a centuries-old cultural practice that enabled them to forge a high level of intimacy and trust, both being crucial dispositions towards building consensus.

Symbolic power of sinogram inscriptions on handheld fans

The extensive use of brush-talk was not just a feature of Luo Sen’s primary undertaking in Japan as an interpreter for the American side. He was just as likely to turn to brush and ink when meeting with Japanese people in a private capacity beyond his official business. While strolling around the port of Shimoda 下田 one time he was approached by two Buddhist monks who asked him to write something for them, to which he responded by inscribing a phrase ‘encircling peaks, girdling waters’ 峰回水繞 in reference to the surrounding scenery. The pair reciprocated with a poem,

> “Here in our little cells we sit,

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[6] Luo Sen’s notes from his visit to Japan were translated by Samuel Williams into English and first published on 11 September 1854 in *Overland Register and Price Current of Hong Kong*. They were later included as appendix in the official record of Perry’s mission published in 1856: https://books.google.com.hk/books?id=OD08AQAAIAAJ. Luo’s ‘Journal of a Visit to Japan’ 日本日記 in the Chinese original was published separately in Nov. and Dec. 1854 and Jan. 1855 issues of ‘Chinese Serial’ 遐邇貫珍 in Hong Kong. There are significant differences between the two versions.

Bound our inkstones the white clouds meet,
Mere dust to us is gold so rare,
The future gives us not a care. (Luo 1856: 404)

一丈方庵玉座同
寸餘硯石白雲通
黃金畢竟塵中物
不省明朝炊米空 (Luo 1854-55: 591(128))

It can be postulated that the Japanese monks saw the encounter with Luo Sen as a miraculous moment worthy of commemoration in the spirit of Buddhist philosophical thought. A chance encounter with strangers from foreign lands became a spiritually inspiring juncture that transcended space and time and brought the two sides together through the act of writing. In fact, such incidents happened frequently enough that Luo Sen wrote:

> As the Japanese for two hundred years have had no intercourse with foreigners, and have seen none, excepting the few Chinese and Dutch who carry on the trade at Naga-saki, I found myself quite an object of interest; and as they set a great value on Chinese characters and compositions, whenever I went to the hall of reception many of them were sure to ask me to write on fans for them. The fans which I inscribed during a month while we were at Yoku-hama could not be fewer than five hundred. (Luo 1856: 401)

Even after Luo Sen's official engagement in the negotiations between the Americans and Japanese came to an end in June 1854, he continued to interact with Japanese people on various occasions (Tao 2005: 106–108, Williams 1910: 209). In every port at which he disembarked during the course of his entire sojourn in the country—including Yokohama, Shimoda and Hakodate 函館—he received scores of requests from the local public to inscribe Chinese characters and verses on their fans. Since a person's chance of meeting a foreigner at that time was close to zero, the excitement of coming face to face with someone from outside the Japanese territory was likely overwhelming, both for the educated and uneducated folk. We can only speculate how many of the people who approached Luo Sen for fan inscriptions were literate enough to comprehend the 'true' meaning of the writing he inscribed for them, but it is safe to assume that many in fact did not read Sinitic. All the same, the requests kept coming through wherever Luo went and the locals were clearly keen on having their fans inscribed with sinograms. Indeed, as evidenced in the passage from his diary above, the enthusiasm and curiosity towards Luo Sen displayed by the Japanese in Yokohama were not dictated simply by the fact that he was a foreigner but specifically because he could produce Sinitic writing on their fans, which were held nation-wide as socio-culturally prestigious and therefore good to have.

The custom of inscribing handheld fans goes back to the Heian 平安 period (794–1185), when court aristocrats began using fans made of cypress wood for writing down poetry and recording the order of ceremonial events alongside their original function of creating an airflow for cooling one down (Casal 1960). The nobles traditionally gave and received inscribed fans adorned with their poems and drawings (Park 2016). Later on, when folding fans developed into ones made of bamboo and paper, they grew more decorative and became fashionable items carried casually around by the wealthy class. With the commercialization of foldable fans (Davies 2019) in the Edo period (1603–1867) the custom of inscribing poetry and drawings on fans was able to spread among ordinary people. A once-in-a-lifetime event of coming face-to-face with a foreigner—particularly one who could produce Sinitic writing—deserved to be cherished and commemorated, and an inscription on one's fan provided for a perfect memento.

Both Luo's and Williams's diaries contain many mentions of the Japanese commoners' keen interest in obtaining Sinographic inscriptions on their fans. Williams, for example, observed:

> 'he [Luo Sen] turns a graceful verse or two for them [the Japanese] upon a fan; of these he has written, I should think, more than half a thousand since coming to Japan'
> (Williams 1889: 219)

Conversely, there appear to be no references in the relevant historical records to any requests for English fan inscriptions directed at the American navy officials. It was always sinograms and Chinese verses that were sought out by the Japanese receivers. What is strikingly interesting here, however, is that the power of sinograms was not limited to educated literati but applied equally to commoners with no or limited literacy. The Japanese, both literate and illiterate folk—including the many women who rarely received formal education and thus could not be expected to be able to decode the lexical meanings of the sinograms[7]—each set value on Sinitic writing in their own way. Accordingly, the examples discussed in this section attest to the diversity and richness of non-linguistic meanings attached by the readers (scholar-officials, Buddhist monks) and onlookers (literate and illiterate fan inscription enthusiasts) of Chinese characters to writing. The functions performed by sinograms and Sinitic writing here should thus be interpreted as partly alegible and aesthetically loaded with symbolism associated with literacy in Literary Sinitic.

While the normative literacy level of the Japanese officials who crossed paths with Luo Sen was presumably rather high, the same cannot be easily estimated of the women seeking out his fan inscriptions. In any case, it is beside the point whether any of Luo's writings were read by either group for their linguistic content—as is indeed the feature of alegible contexts. Rather, the significance of brush-talk events discussed within this section relates to Sinitic writing's unique potential for enabling sense-making practices that do not unduly privilege the linguistic function of literacy and remain open to a variety of opaque readings which are rooted in a collective centuries-old cultural imaginary within Sinographic East Asia. The shared socio-cultural meanings and symbolic values embodied in Sinitic writing meant that the Japanese from all walks of life were able to create an instant kinship with Luo Sen, despite having been instilled with mistrust towards foreigners as a matter of official policy and given the fact that exposure to non-Japanese speaking people had been extremely limited.

Brush-talk as a preferred mode of communication in the early 1900s

Did the power of Sinitic writing as a means that facilitated transnational encounters in premodern Japan extend into the twentieth century? In the early 1900s Japan was a very different country compared with the time of the Perry expeditions. In the decades that followed Luo Sen's mission it embraced modernity and opened its doors to foreign goods, knowledge and residents. By the 1900s, ninety percent of school-age population was enrolled in elementary public education, learning the national language, so basic literacy and knowledge of sinograms was comparatively more widespread (Rubinger 2007).[8] Given the transformed landscape of regional hierarchies and notions of collective belonging informed by Japan's radical makeover, what functions and meanings did Sinitic writing generate for its users in the early 1900s? This is possibly one of the last times we see interactional brush-talk in action as an attested mode of transnational communication in face-to-face encounters between Japanese and non-Japanese members of the Sinographic East Asia. This section turns to Phan Bội Châu 潘佩珠 (1867–1940), a prominent leader of the Vietnamese revolution and independence movement and a foreign sojourner in early-twentieth-century Japan, and the transnational interactions with the people he encountered during his 1905 politically intriguing visit to Japan.

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[7] According to Dore (1964), female literacy rate in late Edo was around 15%.

One of the most widely respected figures in Vietnam's modern history, Phan Bội Châu is known for initiating the struggle against the French colonial rule and organizing Đông-Du Movement 東遊運動 or Go East Movement, which encouraged young Vietnamese revolutionaries seeking to rise against the French domination to pursue education and training in Japan. As founder and representative of the Vietnam's Association for Modernization 維新會, Phan himself left his homeland in 1905, heading first to China and on to Japan in search of political collaboration, military assistance and financial aid for Vietnam's independence movement. Born to a poor Confucian scholar, he began studying Chinese classics at the age of five and sat in the civil service examinations. Despite lacking proficiency in spoken Chinese, he had extensive knowledge of Sinitic and was well-acquainted with Confucian thought and Chinese poetry. In the context of his venture to Japan Phan wrote the following in reference to his linguistic skills:

> The most awkward thing was that I did not understand Japanese and was not well versed in Chinese; brush-conversation and talking by gesture were very troublesome (筆談手語煩累滋多). What a great shame for a diplomat! (Phan 1999/1926: 84)

Based on what we know about his training and the fact that he succeeded in conducting multiple successful brush-talk interactions throughout his trip, Phan's self-professed weakness in Chinese composition appears to be an exaggeration. In Hong Kong he conducted a fruitful face-to-face interaction in writing with Feng Chih-you 馮自由, the editor of the *Journal of China* 中國日報, delineating his plan for an anti-French uprising in Vietnam and soliciting leads on possible collaborators sympathetic to his cause within the Qing government (Phan 1999/1926: 82). On the ship from Hong Kong to Shanghai, Phan managed to obtain the Japanese address of the Chinese scholar and reformist Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929) by 'brush-talking' with another passenger, a Chinese student named Chou Chun 周椿, and on the train from Kobe to Yokohama, he made friends with a student from Hunan surnamed Chao 趙, who was in Japan to study the Japanese language. Of Chao's dedicated assistance during the journey, Phan wrote:

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[8] For example, three-quarters of Japanese males of 20 years of age possessed elementary level of literacy in 1905, while 10% were illiterate (Saito 2012).

> He never minded the trouble he took and did not expect any compensation; this is a really fine quality of people of a great nation. Then again, my Chinese composition may have helped too (大國民之美質誠然哉. 亦漢文之介也). (Phan 1999/1926: 84)

Phan's Sino-Vietnamese pronunciation and the students' Chinese pronunciation of the sinograms produced in the course of these conversations were mutually unintelligible (DeFrancis 1977: 161–162), but like what happened to Luo Sen half a century earlier in Japan, the literati could rely on brush-talk as a convenient and efficient means of exchanging practical information in the absence of interpreters. As Phan proceeds along his journey and arrives in Yokohama, he writes:

> I then got off the train and went to the gate of the station. My luggage was nowhere in sight. I stood there helplessly for a long time, until a Japanese wearing a white cap and a sword came up to me. I took a small notebook out of my pocket. He wrote the question: "Why don't you leave?" I answered: "I cannot find my luggage." He wrote: "I have paid for a reservation at the inn for you. Your luggage will be sent there." (Phan 1999/1926: 85)

Spotting a foreign traveler, the railway guard figured that speaking to him in Japanese would not be of much use, but the visitor's East Asian appearance made him instead reach for a pen—in an instinctive decision to give brush-talk a try. It may not be a coincidence for a train guard to deploy this mode of communication spontaneously in 1905 Yokohama. After China's unexpected defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War in 1895, Japan became a popular destination for Chinese students pursuing overseas education in liberal arts and modern sciences, not least because of the country's relative affordability compared with the cost of overseas study in the west (Harrell 1992: 77–78) and, in fact, thanks to the shared script (Vogel 2019: 132–149). In 1905 more than eight thousand Chinese students were enrolled in various courses in Japan (Sanetō 1960); many of them would have passed through the Yokohama station early on in their Japanese sojourn, before they had a chance to learn Japanese. Even though we have no way of knowing the precise literacy level of the Japanese train guard who approached Phan Bội Châu in the Yokohama station, his readiness to assist a disoriented foreigner through writing suggests that their interaction was not an isolated case and that brush-talk indeed must have functioned as a standard practice of transnational communication between the increasing numbers of foreign travelers and Japanese railway staff, at least in train stations with a high volume of foreign passengers.

Not being able to speak Japanese, Phan Bội Châu relied extensively on brush-talk in both mundane matters and diplomatic encounters of a high order. Just like when one may turn to a translation app on one's mobile phone when travelling abroad in the 2020s, Phan carried with him a pen and a notebook which he would procure whenever he had to 'talk' to a Japanese local or someone from China. When he visited Liang Qichao at his home in Yokohama, the first part of their conversation was assisted by Tăng Bạt Hổ 曾拔虎 (1856–1906), Phan's Vietnamese travel companion who spoke some Cantonese and translated orally for Phan and Liang. This got them only so far, however, and every time the conversation turned to a more intricate or momentous subject, the two scholars would resort to brush-talk to clarify their intentions and record their ideas in written form. For educated literati such as Phan and Liang, brush-talk was thus not at all an inferior substitute for a spoken language—something that perhaps may have been the case in more quotidian interactions such as the encounter in the railway station. At the most basic level, it permitted the speakers to bypass the interpreter whose assistance could potentially alter or dilute the speakers' intended meanings. Additionally, since writing proceeds at an inherently slower pace than speaking, it further empowered the speakers to convey their thoughts in a measured and deliberate manner, which in turn facilitated firsthand comprehension of the interlocutors' perspective and intent—a direct meeting of the minds so to speak. As we have learned from the interaction between Luo Sen and his Japanese interlocutors, this function of brush-talk played an important role in negotiating multiple layers of complex meaning-making within the socio-cultural ecologies shaped by the partly shared Sinitic canons. Even though Phan and Liang's conversation focused entirely on the pan-Asian anti-colonial movement, their use of brush-talk was a way of conveying ideological camaraderie, a profound connection which in all likelihood would go well beyond the literal meanings of the written words they exchanged on the spot and back to the complicated and opaque literacy values attached to writing by the literati class of the Sinoghrapic cosmopolis. During his stay in Japan, Phan also met twice with Sun Yat-sen 孫逸仙 (1866–1925), leader of the Chinese republican movement, at his home in Yokohama. Likewise, they discussed matters related to the revolutionary fronts in Vietnam and China and communicated in brush-talk, with Sun promptly bringing out brush and paper on Phan's arrival (Phan 1999/1926: 101). Their first meeting lasted four hours, from eight in the evening until midnight, and covered a wide range of delicate topics including their different takes on constitutional monarchy and the democratic republican system, including the question of which revolution, Chinese or Vietnamese, should be achieved first. This further shows us the wide range of complex subjects that could be effectively addressed via brush-talk in the skillful hands of solidly trained literati in Sinitic.

Sinitic as a semantic and semiotic interface at a historic transcultural meeting

Through the introduction of Liang Qichao, Phan met the influential elder Japanese statesmen Okuma Shigenobu 大隈重信 (1838–1922) and Inukai Tsuyoshi 犬養毅 (1855–1932) at a gathering in Inukai's home, an occasion which provides us with additional interesting insights into the functions of brush-talk as a mode of communication and a vehicle of linguistic and non-linguistic meaning-making among the East Asian literati of Sinitic. The four men spent the entire afternoon discussing politics including plans to bring Prince Cường Để 彊柢 (1882–1951), the heir of the Nguyễn dynasty 阮朝 (1802–1945), out of Vietnam to secure the royal family's endorsement for the anti-colonial movement, ideas for uniting Vietnamese intellectuals and organizing a revolutionary party, and the difficult position of the sympathetic Japanese political leaders who were wary of provoking a direct confrontation with France if they were to support Vietnam. All conversations were almost entirely writing-mediated and took place without interpreting. At a more practical level, the disinclination towards speech was dictated by the fact that between the three first languages represented in the group—Vietnamese, Chinese and Japanese—none was spoken by all parties. It appears that only Liang Qichao had the option of communicating orally with the Japanese interlocutors if we assume that his Japanese proficiency was adequate to the task. This should be a reasonable expectation given his lengthy stay in Japan—he had fled China to Japan seven years earlier—and the fact that he had composed a

Japanese textbook for his countrymen (Kotajima 2008; Shen 2010).[9] Phan's account of the meeting, too, mentions that the three men, Liang, Inukai, and Okuma, spoke to each other in Japanese at one point (Phan 1999/1926: 88). Brush-talk, however, remained the principal mode of expression intended for readership and appreciation within the collective sphere, driven in part by the performative appeal of the physical act of writing itself.

One instructive example of such performative use of brush-talk in the meeting involved an act of 'poignant' writing by Liang, a deliberate gesture meant to underscore a moment of heightened emotion. After Phan laid out to everybody the details of Vietnam's predicament, Okuma made him an offer of subsistence and accommodation in Japan. Declining, Phan said that his reason for coming to Japan was to find relief for his fellow compatriots back home, not for himself. Moved by Phan's resolve and dedication, Liang wrote 'This man deserves great respect' 此人大可敬 (Phan 1999/1926: 256). As a speaker of Japanese, Liang could have said the same directly to Okuma and Inukai in Japanese—but we already know that the purpose of his message was not simply to convey linguistic information. That same message, if conveyed in spoken Japanese, would need to be translated to Phan in writing anyway. By contrast, apart from its all-inclusive audience function in that context, Sinitic writing helped cement solidarity and appeal for a shared sense of purpose performatively by seeking to drum up an intense emotional response from the interlocutors. By showing off his handwritten characters to Okuma and Inukai, Liang officially endorsed Phan as a person of outstanding character and sanctioned Phan's plea for help on his cause. Making a point of inscribing the relevant sinograms on paper and presenting them to interlocutors had its own, separate, ritualistic function which coincided with the 'actual' writing and reading—just as everybody was aware of what Liang's sinograms said they were even more acutely conscious of the symbolic meaning of his statement delivered in his solemn writing performance. We can therefore say that brush-talk here indexed socio-psychological influence, whereby the act of brushing sinograms was vested with symbolic power that would otherwise be unattainable by their putative lexical equivalents in speech, or to put it more simply, where writing something endowed it with more power than simply verbalizing the same content. Thus, the brush-talkers utilized Sinitic as a semantic and semiotic interface which enabled them to channel linguistic meanings and symbolic messages side by side in complete abstraction of verbalized speech.[10]

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[9] Liang also traveled to Canada, Hawai'i, and Australia in 1899 and 1901, but Japan remained his primary home base from 1898–1912. The exact level of Liang's Japanese proficiency is unclear. After his arrival in Japan, Liang learned Japanese from a Chinese student Luo Pu who assisted him in the writing of a Japanese textbook for Chinese learners published in 1900: 和文漢読法 (Xia 1997; Kotajima 2008; Shen 2010). Luo Pu, who came to Japan before Liang, completed his language training at Tokyo Senmon Gakkō 東京專門學校(currently Waseda University) which used western communicative language teaching methods (Kotajima 2008; Shen 2010; Chū 2017).

[10] My intention here is not to argue that the sinograms convey messages directly to brush-talkers' minds, bypassing the speech sound (See 'the ideographic myth', DeFrancis 1984). In a silent conversation, as well as meanings, sinograms still represented speech sounds of the speakers' respective languages inter-subjectively in individual speakers' minds (Li 2020; see also Li & Aoyama, this volume). The key to a successful communication in transcultural brush-talking, however, was to improvise sinograms interactively without vocalizing them.

Multi-layered functions of Sinitic writing

The material, semi-permanent record of brush-talk meant that even those who had not taken part in a conversation could gain access to its content at a later point provided they were shown the relevant sheets of writing. This is why Kashiwabara Buntarō 柏原文太郎 (1869–1936), an educator serving in the Japanese House of Representatives and one of the founders of East Asia Common Culture Academy (Tōa Dōbun Shoin 東亜同文書院), a pioneering institution in the field of Chinese studies, could offer his comments on the meeting after glancing through everyone's brush-talk inscriptions, even though he sat beside the other four men at the gathering without directly participating in the conversation. He wrote:

> Today, as I watched all of you, I felt as if I were reading a tale of the ancient heroes in a novel, since you are the first Vietnamese who has come to the Land of the Rising Sun to meet with our men in high positions. (Phan 1999/1926: 89)

Brush-talk, with its physical output, could thus help latecomers to join in the conversation and those who were never there to see what had been discussed, much like the function performed by modern-day meeting minutes, only richer in meaning because in addition to linguistic content it also provided a sense of the speakers' idiosyncratic handwriting and calligraphy. Furthermore, in a real sense, the semi-permanent record of brush-talk interaction had the potential to transcend time and space. Compared with a verbal summary, the handwritten materials resulting from international figures' brush conversation could lend far greater credibility of the Japanese leadership's undertaking to support foreign allies when revolutionaries like Phan Bội Châu returned home to persuade his compatriots and members of the Vietnamese royal family to join the anti-French movement (cf. "a more prestigious and direct conduit for communication," Clements 2019: 305).

Not unlike Luo Sen fifty years earlier, Phan, too, ended up inscribing Chinese poetic verses on fans upon request, in a testament to the lasting symbolic power of sinograms and Chinese culture in Japan which stretched well into the early twentieth century. Towards the end of Phan's meeting with Liang Qichao and the Japanese statesmen, Inukai's wife Chiyoko 犬養千代子 (1866-1952) entered the room and asked Phan to write something on her fan as a way of commemorating the historical gathering of East Asia's distinguished political minds. Phan's deft inscription of a verse from the Book of Documents 書經 cleverly alluded to Chiyoko's role as devoted wife supporting her husband from the sidelines:[11]

> That the wind blows through all the Four Directions is thanks only to your great work.
> 四方風動 惟乃之休 (Phan 1999/1926: 89)

Besides being a great resource on the role of brush-talk among the educated elite, Phan Bội Châu's autobiography affords us a glimpse into ordinary Japanese people's relationship with Sinitic writing in the early twentieth century. Lương Ngọc Quyến 梁玉眷, a young and destitute Vietnamese revolutionary who traveled to Japan to escape French surveillance and resided in

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[11] Inukai Chiyoko later became the chairwoman of Seiwakai 清和会, the Association for Women's Suffrage (Uemura 2011).

Phan's lodging in Yokohama, was once forced to make the grueling trip to Tokyo on foot because he could not afford the Yokohama-Tokyo train fare.[12] The growing number of Vietnamese political activists taking refuge in Japan combined with limited funding meant that many had to go hungry and suffered from Japan's snowy winters, so one day Lương decided to seek assistance from Chinese students in Tokyo. Phan writes:

> He then walked all day long on an empty stomach to make his way from Yokohama to Tokyo. That night he turned in to sleep in the doorway of a police station. The police questioned him in Japanese. In a state of blank incomprehension, he did not know what to answer. When they made a search, they found his pockets to be empty. They suspected him of being feeble-minded. When brush-conversation began, however, then at last it emerged that he was a young man from our country [Vietnam]. The Japanese police were astonished, and supplied him with the money to go back to Yokohama by train. (Phan 1999/1926: 97)

Lương's shabby appearance and lack of Japanese language skills flagged him as suspect to Japanese police; however, as soon as he proved himself to be literate in Sinitic the policemen's distrust was instantly dispelled and they recognized him as a respectable person. Knowing sinograms not only allowed Lương to explain his circumstances through brush-talk but also earned him confidence and goodwill on the part of the Japanese policemen who in turn ended up paying for his train fare. It makes us wonder if writing in a European language would produce a similar effect, at least as far as proving one's upstanding stature goes since the leery policemen would not be able to comprehend the actual content of the scribbled text in this case. By 1905 Japanese attitudes towards foreign cultural elements began to shift in favor of English, so it is conceivable that European writing could be recognized as prestigious because of its modern symbolic connotations. Nevertheless, the historical record of Phan Bội Châu's visit to Japan presented above strongly suggests that the symbolic affordance or currency of Sinitic writing among all classes of the Japanese society remained relevant well into the early twentieth century.

Conclusion

Following sinograms' arrival in the Japanese archipelago during the Yayoi period they were not only regarded as a vehicle of advanced thought and technology but in fact as writing itself, with native Japanese scripts appropriating sinograms for their phonetic value beginning to emerge only in the seventh century (*man'yōgana* 万葉仮名).[13] The notion of Sinitic writing as a vector of cultural and technological legitimacy endured in Japan well into the early twentieth century and shaped Japanese people's relationship with linguistic and non-linguistic functions of literacy throughout the intervening period.

As a logographic script, Sinitic may have had an advantage over phonographic *kana* scripts insofar as individual sinograms were mostly morphographic with a more or less well-defined meaning beyond speech sounds, something that semi-literate and literate users of sinograms alike would be quite cognizant of. Another factor influencing the symbolic status of sinograms in pre-modern Japan was related to diglossia, that is, hierarchical functional division between the written and spoken language, privileging Sinitic as a ‘high’ language variety which was common across the whole of Sinographic East Asia. These features of Sinitic were of particular significance in transnational encounters since they allowed for transmission of meaning via visual forms of the ‘sacred language’ (Anderson 2006), inter-subjectively without the need for working out how the relevant sinograms corresponded to sounds.

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[12] Yokohama and Tokyo are approximately 35 kilometers apart.

[13] Man'yōgana employs sinograms to represent Japanese language phonetically. The two Japanese phonographic scripts: square form *katakana* 片仮名 and cursive form *hiragana* 平仮名, were developed in the ninth century.

As it happens, contemporary Japan continues to be a particularly rich field demonstrating the ways in which foreign written words often become appropriated for their symbolic status, usually in advertising. Jan Blommaert, for instance, refers to the power of French words for the Japanese consumers who do not read the language to explain how written symbols change their meanings and functions, depending on who reads them, from linguistic signs to emblematic ones in transnational contexts (Blommaert 2010: 28–30). His concept of indexicality highlights the sociocultural function of language and emphasizes the need to think of language semiotically rather than linguistically at a time when human languages move across the globe, no longer tied to stable and resident communities (Blommaert 2010: 181). Two transcultural settings discussed in this chapter illustrated how mid-nineteenth and early twentieth century Chinese and Vietnamese speakers gained the goodwill of literate and non-literate Japanese public through inscribing handheld fans and showing off their writings performatively in a ceremonious manner. It was the multi-layered functions of Sinitic writing that enabled amiable, intellectual and poetic exchanges of various kinds, in addition to the symbolic power of sinograms that motivated locals to communicate with foreigners without a shared spoken language.

In her article conceptualizing brush-talk as the lingua franca of East Asian diplomatic encounters in the Edo period Rebekah Clements draws our attention to a scroll painting attributed to Hanabusa Itchō 英一蝶 (1652–1724) depicting Japanese townsman asking a Korean envoy on horseback to inscribe for him an autograph in Sinitic (Clements 2019: 300–302; see Figure 12.1). The scene portrays an event from an early eighteenth century Chosŏn embassy parade, with a Japanese townsman extending a large piece of paper to the Korean representative who is writing with a brush.

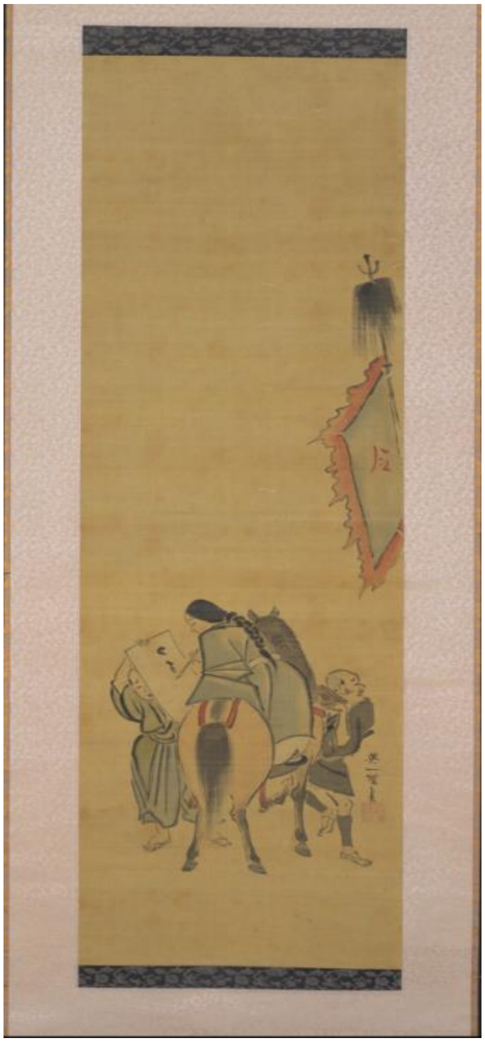

Figure 12.1 *Chōsen no kozōzu* 朝鮮小童図 or 'Calligraphy of a Korean boy' (Courtesy of Osaka Museum of History)[14]

As previously mentioned, Edo period's seclusion policies made it exceedingly hard for Japanese samurais and common folk alike to interact with foreigners outside the port of Nagasaki. In virtually all cities Korean envoys passed they would draw crowds of Confucian scholars and feudal domain retainers eager to quench their thirst for knowledge and achieve recognition outside the archipelago. Plentiful brush-talk records produced during these encounters attest to Japanese intellectuals' passion for learning Korean customs and history, advanced medical knowledge, and the latest situation of Chinese academia (Trambaiolo 2014). For example, Sin

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[14] According to the curator at the Osaka Museum of History the depicted scroll painting could be a copy of the original artwork by Hanabusa (author's personal correspondence). 'Hanabusa Itchō's Picture Book' 英一蝶画譜, a collection of the artist's drawings, contains a work with a nearly identical composition (see National Diet Library Digital Collection 2021 at https://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/2554324/17). In the drawing, pails with water are clearly visible to the side of the main scene as is the ink stone held up by the footman, which implies that the townsman was well prepared to take advantage of the encounter with the Korean visitors rather than it being a chance meeting.

Yu-han 申維翰 (1681–1752), secretary of the 1719 Chosŏn embassy, remarks that he stayed up until dawn drawing calligraphy for the Japanese visitors, while Wŏn Chung-kŏ 元重擧 (1719–1790), secretary to the Vice-Envoy of the 1764 embassy, mentions that he inscribed 'two thousand' verses of poetry as tokens of exchange during his three- to four-month stay in Japan (Tenri Central Library 1988; see also Jang, this volume). Japanese curiosity about Korean envoys was not limited to educated classes, but—as Hanabusa's work clearly demonstrates—also extended to merchant class townspeople, reflecting widespread enthusiasm for Sinitic writing in time of increasing literacy rates among wealthier merchants and peasants bolstered by the burgeoning commercial print industry in the Edo period (Clements 2015; Rubinger 2007, Suzuki 2017). We have no way of knowing what the townsman's precise motive was when he requested a Sinitic autograph from the passing Korean envoys. It could have been intellectual curiosity about the meaning of the line(s) he anticipated to receive, aesthetic appreciation of the writing's visual aspect if he were to display the calligraphy like a piece of art, or expectation of a commercial gain if he planned to sell the autograph for a price afterwards, or any combination of these. Furthermore, the townsman's literacy level is similarly uncertain, leaving us to speculate if he had the ability to read the inscription in a conventional sense or was drawn to its prestige-laden symbolic meanings.

Whatever the case may be, Lurie's (2011) concept of alegible texts helps broaden our focus beyond these hierarchies of different degrees of literacy to a more contextualized overview of writing as a socially embedded cultural practice. As early as the beginning of the eighteenth century, a Japanese townsman had the good sense to stop a foreigner from Korea and ask him to inscribe sinograms on a sheet of paper. Even if he was not able to decipher the linguistic meaning of the inscription himself, at the very least he knew that Korean guests and his own society's educated elite deferred to the same venerated script, rendering the inscription now in his hand a valuable commodity and/or cultural artifact admired and desired by many Japanese or even foreigners. His interaction with writing was thus shaped by a collective imagination extending beyond Japan to all of Sinographic East Asia where sinograms were looked upon as a symbol of affinities between people who did not necessarily speak the same language and ascribed heterogeneous—legible and alegible—values to texts based on the social contexts in which those texts were read and/or spectated. The main goal of this chapter is to show that the departure from what we tend to view as the core, that is, the content-driven function of writing, was an essential feature of literacy in Sinographic East Asia. What is more, the symbolic functions of sinograms over and above their lexical meanings apprehended by literate beholders, applied in equal measure to educated and illiterate classes of the Japanese society between mid-1850s to early 1900s.

As evidenced in the analysis of the Chinese-Japanese and Vietnamese-Japanese brush-talk encounters discussed in this chapter, the role of face-to-face writing was rarely just about facilitating reading. In such transnational scenarios sinograms functioned as 'the desirable' (Kluckhohn 1951: 395), the symbol of value which influenced the selection from available modes of communication because of its rich potential to convey both linguistic and cultural meanings. As such, sinograms helped mediate collective life in the Sinographic cosmopolis by allowing strangers who did not share a spoken language to construct imaginary relations through interactive, face-to-face inscriptions. This is a less explored aspect of brush-talk which serves to underline the difference between this mode of communication and other forms of inscription in premodern Japan whose users rarely held a global view of writing from a cross-border transcultural perspective.

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