

Dialogues of Silence

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Dialogues of Silence

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From the Sui (581A.D.-618 A.D.) and Tang (618A.D. – 907A.D.) dynasty to the Ming (1368A.D.-1662 A.D.)and Qing (1644A.D.-1911 A.D.) dynasty, the travels of government officials, transportation and cultural exchanges among East Asian nations had been incessant during this lengthy period of more than one thousand years. Nevertheless, it seems that a crucial matter is lost from our memories. While the availability of instantaneous interpretation service was limited and the mutual communication with a common language was rare in the East Asia during this lengthy period, how could East Asians deliver order, convey message and exchange knowledge after they left their home countries?

Not only a great many varieties of official languages in East Asian countries, but also countless regional dialects were spoken in different locals. In case a Ryukyu envoy went ashore in Fujian, their official interpreter might be able to communicate with inhabitants there. If they traveled further to Zhejiang, Fujian dialect became infeasible for communication. Even if this envoy had their own official interpreter speaking fluent Zhejiang dialect, this fluency would be helpless upon their arrival at Beijing. *Bitan* thus became the only possible means available for their communications with other envoys, such as envoys of Vietnam and Chōson, in Beijing. Notwithstanding the varieties of Chinese officials' regional dialects and foreign envoys' different mother tongues, all of them possessed a common fundamental element of Chinese culture---conversancy in reading and writing Chinese characters.

1. The English translation of *bitan*

In the fall term of 2012, I had profound difficulties to fully translate the meanings of the Chinese academic term *bitan* (筆談) into English upon my offer of a postgraduate course *The Studies of East Asian Bitan in Chinese Characters* (東亞漢文筆談研究) to students of Peking University, though I

had to do it as per university regulations.

I found that what was predominantly explained by English-Chinese and Chinese-English dictionaries “conversation by writing” was not the exact meaning of *bitan*. For example, the 2003 edition of *A New Century Chinese-English Dictionary* published by the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press defines *bitan* as follows:

- (1) exchange ideas by way of writing instead of conversation;
- (2) comment in writing;
- (3) [often used of book titles] sketches; notes.

According to the first definition, *bitan* is an exchange of ideas in written form without any relevance to verbal communication whatsoever. Let us imagine the circumstances under which a party may choose this special means for communications. He is likely a deaf-mute of neither speaking nor hearing ability. Writing is thus the only feasible means available. In *Qing Bai Lei Chao* (清稗類鈔), which was edited by Xu Ke (徐珂) in the Qing dynasty, Wang Kangnian (汪康年) was an eloquent speaker having a wide acquaintance, whereas his younger brother was a deaf capable of *bitan* only. *Bitan*, as such, prevented him from cultivating his acquaintance. Nowadays, for the most part in the world, schools for deaf-mutes normally offer *bitan* courses due to limited availability of experts in sign languages. To deaf-mutes, *bitan*, therefore, is an important means for their communications and socializing.

The second scenario is making use of *bitan* as a communicative measure in order to ensure confidentiality. Dialogue may be overheard. The possibility of leakage of confidential information cannot be erased. Writing is comparatively safer for conveying messages. On 28 October 2011, the Taiwanese newspaper *United Daily News* had an article about the oral history project of the late Zhang Xueliang. Guo Guanying, the interviewer, asked Zhang Xueliang whether he had *bitan* with his fourth younger brother Zhang Xusei in the reading room of his home at Xikou. Zhang Xueliang confirmed that he dared not discuss any matter sensitive there due to his being put under close surveillance. In consequence of Xi'an Incident, Zhang Xueliang had all along been under Chiang Kai-shek's house arrest in Chaing's hometown at Xikou, Fenghua, Zhejiang. When Zhang Xusei visited him there, two of them used *bitan* in lieu of verbal communication, thereby preventing secrets from leaking to Chiang Kai-shek's tracking watchdogs in the vicinity.

The third scenario is writing Chinese character for cross-lingual communication owing to

communication breakdown caused by language barrier. In 1543A.D., amid a typhoon in Ningbo, the current drifted a Portuguese merchant ship to Tanegashima Island *en route* Siam to China. The habitants there were xenophobic and hostile against this unlooked-for alien group of *persona non grata* holding rough guns, foolhardily labeling them as “monstrosities speaking an unknown language”. While violent conflict was on the verge to break out in consequence of impossibility for mutual communication and understanding, a Confucian scholar Wu Feng (五峰), alias Wang Zhi (王直), on board the Portuguese merchant ship acted as the mediator for both parties. In view of the impossibility for verbal communication with this Confucian scholar, the head of islanders judiciously wrote Chinese characters on the sand with a stick as a last resort, intending to clarify the nationalities of passengers and sailors on board the Portuguese merchant ship. He wrote: “What are the nationalities of those monstrosities on board the ship?” Without a second thought, Wu Feng replied by writing on the sand that they were southwestern “barbarian” merchants. Details of this dialogue between Wu Feng and the head of islanders can be found in *Teppoki* (鉄炮記), which was written by a Japanese monk Nanpo Bunshi (南浦文之, 1555A.D.-1620A.D.) in 1606 A.D. and compiled in *Nanpo Corpus* (南浦文集).

My course in Peking University concerned *bitan* in the third scenario. The term *bitan* conceptualizes a unique “visual” means by writing Chinese characters for cross-lingual, cross-racial and cross-cultural communications. We can only find such uniqueness in the circle of Chinese character and culture. The implications of the English term “conversation by writing” fundamentally cannot provide any connotative sense of this kind.

In 1996, Joshua A Fogel, a professor of the University of California at Santa Barbara, published his unprecedented scholastic masterpiece *The Literature of Travel in the Japanese Rediscovery of China 1862-1945*. From the late Qing dynasty to the early Republic of China, most Japanese politicians, scholars and visitors in China were conversant with Chinese characters but ignorant of its Mandarin pronunciations. Writing Chinese characters was thus the only possible means for their communications with mainland Chinese. Fogel’s scholastic work, therefore, provides immense information about *bitan* between Chinese and Japanese during this lengthy 85-year period.

Fogel is one of very few Western scholars paying attention to the literature on *bitan*. He realizes the value and rarity of it in the Western academic intelligentsia. In *The Literature of Travel in the Japanese Rediscovery of China 1862-1945*, he points it out as follows:

The importance of the written Chinese language as a medium of interaction cannot be stressed

enough.....As during the later diplomatic missions to China, the use of literary Chinese meant that communication took the form of writing, known in Chinese as *bitan* (K., *p'iltam*; J., *hitsudan*) or “brush conversation.” The fact of a shared linguistic medium enabled meaningful interaction, even if words were rarely or never exchanged orally, and the medium would prove to be just as important in Sino-Japanese (and, interestingly, in Korean-Japanese) relations.

In the Eastern society, brush was the most popular stationery. Fogel introduced a special academic term “brush conversation” to Westerners in order to help them obviate misinterpreting *bitan* as “conversation by writing”. He simultaneously transliterated the common academic terms *bitan*, *hitsudan* and *p'iltam* for Chinese, Japanese and Korean respectively.

As a unique cultural phenomenon in the East Asia only, the methodology for the clear understandable expression of *bitan* in the Western culture is merely the following three feasibilities :

- (1) introducing *bitan* as a new concept by transliteration;
- (2) replacing it with such existing concept as “conversation by writing”; or
- (3)paraphrasing it in native language.

In November 2014, I had a lecture on “Silent Dialogues – *Bitan* in the East Asia” in Fudan University. On that occasion, the lecture topic “Silent Dialogues” is the English transliteration of the lecture topic “*Wu Sheng De Dui Hua* (無聲的對話)” in Chinese.

2. The history of *bitan* in the East Asia is over millennium

In the lengthy history of communications among East Asian nations, *bitan*, as the mainstream official format for cross-language communications consistently, is not simply an incidental, temporary and emergent phenomenon. It is noteworthy that before the invention of tape recorder, the preservation of the content of a casual dialogue vividly which took place a few days ago was impossible, let alone a few years ago. However, the contents of dialogues in *bitan*, which has a long history of over millennium, are now preserved through *bitan* manuscripts. What an undeniable amazing miracle!

When did this cross-language *bitan* come to being in the East Asia? Notwithstanding the impossibility to confirm the exact year, we can estimate the approximate time frame according

to two historical pre-conditions: the formation of the circle of Chinese character and culture, and the emergency of tributary system in East Asia. The former implies the transmission of Chinese characters to neighboring races, their reading comprehension power of Chinese characters and capabilities to write it knowledgeably. The latter confirms that the phenomenon of frequent regular travels of envoys in East Asia was common and regular.

Historically, the start of transnational communications among East Asian nations can be traced back to the Qin (221 B.C. – 206 A.D.) and Han (206 B.C. –220 A.D.) dynasty. In these two dynasties, the envoys were predominantly mainland Chinese who emigrated from the mainland to neighboring East Asian nations. In spite of the unpopularity of Chinese characters in neighboring countries during the period of Six Dynasties (222 A.D. to 589 A.D.), the transnational communications among mainland China, Korean Peninsular and Japanese islands had not been interrupted. We reason that the early mainland Chinese emigrants and their descendants in East Asian nations acted as interpreters in this region. On one hand, the unprecedentedness of strong emissive power of Chinese culture to East Asian nations from the Sui (581 A.D. – 618 A.D.) to Tang dynasty (618 A.D. - 907 A.D.) was attributed to the termination of North-South confrontation in mainland China by unification. On the other hand, the socio-cultural and socio-political assimilations to Chinese culture were accelerated by the emergence of authoritative powerful central governments in Korea and Japan and their sending tributary envoys to China regularly and frequently. This analytical reasoning carries much conviction that *bitan* had been popularly used as an important bridge for cross-lingual communications among East Asian nations since the Sui and Tang dynasty.

In the East Asian history, the earliest historical record of *bitan* was found in Japan while it was under the reign of Prince Shotoku in the late sixth century. While East Asia was being conceptualized gradually as a region, one of Prince Shotoku's measures for reforms in domestic and foreign affairs was sending tributary envoy led by Onono Imoko to the Sui dynasty in 607 A.D.

Prior to the tributary envoy led by Onono Imoko, Sino-Japanese communication by envoy had already been interrupted for more than one hundred years, during which China ended confrontation between the South and the North by unification, while drastic changes happened in international affairs among East Asian nations simultaneously. To this first Japanese tributary envoy, China was an unknown country. They were totally ignorant of China. In accordance with the narrations in *Fuso Ryakki*, Inono Imoko's envoy drifted to somewhere in southern China but they managed to overcome the insurmountable and traveled onward to Hengshan Mountain (one of the "Five Sacred Mountains" in today's Hengyang City, Hunan Province, China), in where the first scene of *bitan* recorded in East

Asian history was laid.

In front of a Buddhist temple in Hengshan, Onono Imoko came across an old monk. In view of the profound difficulties in mutual communication, which was most likely caused by either interpreter's poor knowledge of Hunan dialect or no interpreter available, Onono Imoko had to explain his personal identity and purpose of visit by writing on the ground. Realizing Ono Imoko's embarkation at Japan, the old monk recalled the hearsay that a late famous old monk *Huisi* in Hangshan had already reincarnated to become the Emperor of Japan after his passing away. The old monk then continued his dialogue with Onono Imoko by *bitan*, making further enquiries about the current affairs in Japan.

This unexpected nodding acquaintance between Onono Imoko and an old monk, and their *bitan* for the convenience of cross-nation and cross-lingual communication not only hinted the commencement of subsequent frequent regular Sino-Japanese communications in the Sui and Tang dynasty, but also opened a new chapter in the history of East Asian cultural exchange. It reminds us that acquaintance of similar natures is also discerned in the before-mentioned contact on Tanegashima Island one thousand years later. History is repeating itself. Without any provision of brush, ink and paper beforehand, *bitan* was actualized by stick and sand in these two incidents. Notwithstanding a time gap of approximate one thousand years, it is thought provoking that these two *bitan* incidents hastened Sino-Japanese and Japanese-Western cultural exchanges, triggering Japanese acculturation and assimilation to the Tang dynasty and the West.

Now, let us skip the passage of the time of over one thousand years and shift our focus from the first Japanese tributary envoy led by Onono Imoko in 607 A.D. to the appointment of first Chinese ambassador to Japan in the third year of Emperor Guangxu's reign (1877 A.D.). With the strong recommendation of Li Hongzhang (李鴻章), who was the most senior official discharging the responsibilities for foreign affairs, the Editor of Imperial Academy (翰林院編修) He Ruzhang (何如璋 1838 A.D.-1891 A.D.) of Guangdong origin, was mandated to be the "Ambassador on His Majesty's Diplomatic Service in Japan" (出使日本國正使欽差大臣). This landmark appointment opened a new chapter in the history of Sino-Japanese diplomatic relations.

The exchange of ambassadors was under Sino-Japanese Provisions of Cordial Relations (中日修好條規) signed by China and Japan in 1871. The language requirement for official correspondence stipulated in Article 6 of it is noteworthy. Though both China and Japan should use Chinese and Japanese for official correspondence respectively under Article 6, Japan should either attach an additional copy of Chinese translation to Japanese documents or wholly use Chinese only. It means that if Japanese was used in official correspondence, the provision of official translation in Chinese

was a must. Obviously enough, it prescribed that the only one language recognized for official written communication should be Chinese thereafter. The ambassadorial corps of Qing dynasty in Japan had neither binding obligation to write Japanese nor even the necessity to touch on Japanese, so to speak.

On 26 November 1877, which was the third year of the reign of Emperor Guangxu, He Ruzhang and his ambassadorial corps of more than 40 officials embarked at Shanghai for Japan by the Qing battleship *Haianhao* (海安號). Probably, they were misled by the above-mentioned Article 6. No competent Japanese interpreter had been deployed to accompany this ambassadorial mission beforehand. According to schedule, He Ruzhang presented his credentials to Emperor Meiji on 28 December 1877. On 23 January 1878, they designated Gekkai Temple (月界僧院) in Shiba Yama (芝山), Tokyo (in today's Sojyoji(増上寺) as the first Chinese Embassy in Japan.

Shortly after the official inauguration of diplomatic service, Chinese Embassy attracted a lot of official and unofficial visitors. For the most part, their communications were reliant on *bitan*. Yisigawa Kousai (石川鴻齋1833-1918), a Sinologist teaching Sinology at the Pure Land Buddhist School (淨土宗學校) in the vicinity of Chinese Embassy, made use of this location advantage for the frequent *bitan* with He Rushang and his subordinates. This is a typical case that “a baker's wife may bite of a bun, a brewer's wife may bite of a tun”. It was recorded that they had *bitan* all day without any sense of tiredness. They felt free and easy to express whatever unconventional, unusual and interesting by writing Chinese characters on papers, piling up papers like a hill. All these *bitan* manuscripts had subsequently been collected in *Shizan Issho* (芝山一笑 *A Smile in Shiba Mountain*), which was published by Tokyo Wen ShengTang(東京文升堂) in 1878. Ookouchi Teruna(大河内輝聲), another Sinologist of great scholarship, also had very frequent *bitan* with ambassadorial corps there. He systematically collected all his *bitan* manuscripts, compiling it into 96 volumes and 94 copies. The existing 73 volumes and 71 copies have a total number of more than 4000 pages.

For over one millennium from 607 A.D. to 1877 A.D., *bitan* had been a common, normal, authoritative and noble way for communication. It constituted the historical axis of cultural exchanges among civilians and government officials in East Asian nations. In consequence of the disintegration of traditional East Asia and the rise of modern international relations, East Asian nations made efforts to improve their academic trainings in foreign languages and strengthened their own institutions for professional translation service. *Bitan*, as a visual means relying on Chinese characters for communications, gradually faded away from the stage of history. Even so, people in the early years of Republic of China were resonant with *bitan*. Evidently, *bitan* is still an efficient and effective auxiliary means for communication in modern time. *A Book about with Bitan with Chinese* (中国人と筆談

する本), which was published by Ooyizumi Honten in Japan in 2003 and soon became a bestseller, confirms that my arguments in this article are downright correct.

3. Characteristics of the historical literature on *bitan*

In the preface of Chen Yuan's (陳垣) *The Records of Dunhuang Material after Robbing* (敦煌劫餘錄), Chen Yinke (陳寅恪) says: "Ground breaking academic research in an era should be propounded through the discovery of new data, literature and academic issues. With new data and literature, research can be conducted to find and solve new academic issues, thereby pioneering in a new academic trend." The gist of Chen Yinke's arguments is that new research gains fundamental momentum from the discovery of new data, which can provide hints to confirm the existence of a new research issue. Thereafter, the application of a new method for the solution of a newly confirmed academic issue can lead to the conception of a brand new academic current in an era.

The reason why literature on Dunhuang is new is simply because of its being buried in the sands unobserved for tens of thousands years. The causation for the "brand newness" of research on oracle is its being wrongly regarded as a kind of fossil fragments in traditional Chinese medicine. The "brand newness" of the literature on *bitan* is attributable to the unavailability of academic categorization of its style and the definition of its academic nature in concrete terms. As a new primary data for pioneering original research, the "brand newness" of literature on *bitan* is crystallized by three characteristics, namely, new socializing format, new literary format and new primary research data. These three characteristics are briefly propounded hereunder:

(a) A new socializing format

Matteo Ricci, a scholastic Italian missionary who came to China in 1582 A.D., took notice of the particular verbal socializing format in the East Asia. According to his meticulous observations detailed in *De Christiana Expeditione apud Sinas Suscepta ab Societate Iesu* (利瑪竇中國劄記), verbal communications among Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese and Ryuku nationals in social gatherings in China were beyond their listening comprehension due to great disparities in their native languages. Even so, they had reading comprehension power to understand the same literary language in written Chinese characters. Matteo Ricci's descriptions confirm that verbal language barrier could

be overcome by writing Chinese characters as a remedial measure for communications and cultural exchanges among East Asian nationals in social functions.

Let us imagine what a Westerner can do if he is awkward in communication breakdown due to language barrier. In order to express the objective in his mind, he would probably resort to ineffective “body language” as an alternative. If similar case happens among East Asian nationals who are knowledgeable about Sinology, they may use “brush in lieu of tongue” as a socializing means.

In *Course in General Linguistics*, Ferdinand de Saussure, the world renowned founder of modern linguistics, says: “Language and character belong to two entirely different semantic systems. The only one rationale for the existence of the latter is its expression of the former.” What de Saussure talks about is the semantic communication in the Western society. The case in the East Asia is quite different. Character, as a visual means for communication, is always more important than the audio means of verbal language.

On 17 January 2013, the ex-Japanese Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio (鳩山由紀夫) visited The Memorial Hall of Victims in Nanjing Massacre. He emotively wrote “friendship and peace” on a banner and appended his signature with Chinese characters of 鳩山友紀夫 instead of 鳩山由紀夫. The pronunciations of 友紀夫 and 由紀夫 are similar but reading comprehension provides different meanings. The Chinese character “友” condensed the essence of his emotionality which cannot be expressed by any verbal means whatsoever. Surely, no East Asian will regard “友” as a wrong word. *Bitan* belongs to this category of cross-lingual visual communication which can overcome oral communication breakdown and provide perception of hidden implications.

(b) New literary format

When my students helped me compile my academic works in the past few years, they used to ask me how to handle dialogues of scholars and journalistic interviews. In a trilateral dialogue among an American, a Japanese and I, my contribution to the whole content was approximated to one-third according to the whole published dialogue record. If the whole dialogue was compiled as my work, I might likely be suspected of plagiarism. Quoting my part only would definitely render content of the whole trilateral dialogue to be meaningless and inconsistent because I would be “transformed” into a “soloist” without the dialogues of “conversers”. Journalistic interview is the same. As a matter of equitable ownership of copy right, I am not supposed to proprietarily own the whole intellectual property of the questions and answers between a journalist and I. No matter journalistic

interview, bilateral or trilateral dialogue between/among two or three conversers, classifying it under the traditional stylistic categorization or indexing it as corpora of scholars according to habitual complying practice is infeasible. In essence, it belongs to a new literary format.

The minimum number of “conversers” in *bitan* should be two but the number of five to six “conversers” is not uncommon. This complicates the intellectual property right issue. Furthermore, *bitan* used to be a cross-nation socializing process involving nationality issue. It thus all along had not been compiled into personal corpora. Zhu Shunshui (朱舜水, 1600A.D.-1682A.D.), a Confucian scholar who emigrated from China to Japan for settlement in late Ming dynasty, left voluminous primary data about his *bitan* with Japanese nationals. In *Collected Works of the late Honorable Shunshui* (舜水先生文集), which was compiled by Tokugawa Mitsukuni (徳川光圀) and published by in 1715 A.D., *bitan* was classified into the category of miscellaneous. In *Collection of Zhu Shunshui* (朱舜水全集), Zhu Qianzhi (朱謙之) re-classified it into the category of “questions and answers”. It was not until the *Collection of Huang Zunxian* (黃遵憲全集) and *Collection of Yang Shoujing* (楊守敬全集) published in recent years that *bitan* was duly classified as a particular category.

Zhu Shunshui had not left any work which fully and systematically narrated all his thought in a nutshell. Tokugawa Mitsukuni knew that the essence of Zhu Shunshui’s Confucian thought was agglomerated in his *bitan* manuscripts but he had difficulty to classify it into a particular literary category. His categorizing it as miscellaneous was pronouncedly unsuitable. Whereas, Zhu Qianzhi’s re-categorization of it into “questions and answers” is an improvement on “miscellaneous” but still far from satisfactory. At second thought, it is discernible that the contents of Zhu Shunshui’s *bitan* manuscripts are not limited to “questions and answers”. It also covers discussions, reminiscence, etcetera. By adding a heterodox footnote “*biyu*” (笔语) to the part of “questions and answers”, his attempt to provide academic term of orthodoxy for *bitan* was apparently still unsuccessful.

To make the matter worse, most “conversers” in *bitan* did not intend to preserve these situational offhand “word-of-mouth” *bitan* manuscripts as pieces of formal writing or works of art, let alone their incentive to descend it from generation to generation. Without polishing wording beforehand, they used to write free and easy at first thought. For example, Hong Tae-yong, a Chōson envoy to China in the Ming dynasty, was requested by the Chinese “converser” either to burn all his *bitan* manuscripts on the spot or conceal it from view thereafter. Taking his own personal private copies of *bitan* manuscripts back to Korea, Hong Tae-yong intended to compile it into books. He ate humble pie when he endeavored to ask the Chinese side for the damaging and missing parts of *bitan* manuscripts. His request was not complied with. In brief, *bitan* provides a strong sense of “participating on the scene

of *bitan*”, originality and authenticity, notwithstanding that the manuscripts are always primitive, unsystematic, coarse and colloquial. .

(c) New primary data for original research

Bitan manuscripts, as primary data for original research, have paramount literary value. East Asian scholars used to write rhyming lyrical poems for expressing their own feelings and emotions upon social gatherings. On an occasion of *bitan*, Huang Zunxian and Japanese scholar Miyajima Seiichiro (宮島誠一郎) festively wrote the following poem in an offhand manner:

舌難傳言筆能通, 筆舌瀾翻意未窮。
不作佞盧蟹行字, 一堂酬唱喜同風。

East Asian scholars also preferred poems reading on the scene of *bitan*. There are tens of thousands poems written regularly and offhandedly on similar festive *bitan* occasions during Ming and Qing dynasty, amassing a great literary treasure for scholars’ original academic research today.

Secondly, *bitan* manuscript is a precious literature leaking out a “converser’s” real inner feelings. Zhu Zhunshui is well-known as a Confucian scholar placing emphasis on pragmatism, practicalities and history instead of traditional theoretical literary works. In the *Reply to Fuichi Kanemoto* (答古市務本書), for instance, he criticized the impracticality and uselessness of overemphasis on the literary works of poem (“詩不可為也”、“今之詩益無用矣”). Nonetheless, upon *bitan*, he vitally discussed, wrote and amended poems. Undoubtedly, Zhu Zhunshui was an outstanding knowledgeable pragmatic talent of great Confucian scholarship in literary works. As a patriot, his exodus from China to Japan had not stopped his patriotism and loyalty to the declining Ming dynasty, even when China was passing the particular historical transitional milestone of serious social turmoil caused by the downfall of Ming dynasty and the rise of Qing dynasty. Thematically, his political doctrine was that pragmatism should be accorded priority and paramount urgency. His ambition and momentum to develop his talent in the literary work of poem should thus be suppressed and controlled tightly in public. Upon the “private and personal” occasions of his *bitan* with his disciples and friends without external restraints, his mind was suddenly released from such distressful psychological suppression. While his state of mind felt relaxed, he managed to brace every nerve and all his “scholastic energy” for the momentum to do outstanding literary works.

Lastly, but not the least, *bitan* manuscripts are full of historical, geographical, religious and folklorist information. The case of East Asian castaway getting adrift on the open sea is a typical example. In Ming and Qing dynasty, East Asian nations adopted close-door policy. They, therefore, interrogated castaway closely. For example, Chōson and Japanese government officials used to interrogate Chinese castaway by *bitan* for clarifications on such information as the name of government official in charge of castaway's place of origin, scale of city, cityscape, historical landmark, prominent cultured figure and local specialty. All these are valuable original data for the compilation of local chronicles.

If we count every *bitan* as one piece of *bitan* literature, the total number of *bitan* literature is more than ten thousand pieces, of which the majority is in the original form of manuscripts and transcripts. If all these are open to the public, it is believed that it should be an original—but unprecedented—source of new primary data for research in many unexploited academic fields.

4. Silence is better than sound at this particular moment

Back to the theme of this article, what are the rationales for the use of “dialogues of silence” for the title of this article? Some readers may ask: “How can we converse silently?” Voiceless conversation is impossible. The most appropriate person to answer this question should be the “conversers” in *bitan* themselves.

The first answerer is the famous Japanese Confucian scholar Hitomi Chikudo (人見竹洞, 1637A.D.-1696A.D.) in the Edo period. He describes the scene of his *bitan* with Zhu Zhunshui as follows:

Two of us sat in front of the table, gazing at each other.

To the honorable Zhu Zhunshui, it was an exhilarating function.

The bitan manuscripts were raked up into piles.

Nobody broke the silence for one whole day.

Hitomi Chikudo depicts the scenario of *bitan* as “silent dialogue” (静話).

Yisigawa Kousai (石川鴻齋), a Japanese Sinologist, was one the earliest Japanese who “conversed with” He Ruzhang and other Chinese diplomatic representatives in Japan by *bitan*. He described *bitan* by rhyming poem:

默對禮終嗤啞然，寒暄無語共俱憐。

At the very beginning, two parties engaged in courteous rituals in the form of gesture without any one word spoken. What they did was merely a smile. The scene was like gazing at each other silently. They were supposed to greet mutually but silence was not broken until the commencement of *bitan* which excited them to express themselves exhilaratingly.

Oka Senjin (岡千仞, 1833 A.D. - 1914 A.D.), who traveled in China for one year in 844 and authored his sightseeing experience in *Kanko Kiyu* (觀光紀游), wrote preface for the book *Shizan Issho* (芝山一笑 *A Smile in Shiba Mountain*) in which he leaked an unknown anecdote. When he banqueted Chinese consular staffs at his home one day, his family observed that the host and guests only consumed wine silently without any dialogue. They, therefore, labeled them as “dumb drinking”. To bystanders, “conversers” in *bitan* were dumb for one whole day but the heartfelt feelings of “conversers” were entirely different. Oka Senjin then continued to write the follows:

Expressing what we wanted to say in black and white. We felt free and easy to say whatsoever we wanted. The written expressions were unstoppable—but ceaseless—unless and until we fully expressed ourselves. Whenever we intended to say something, we fetched stationery immediately. Without any barrier, we excited ourselves by putting down all our thoughts in written words.

In this connection, I want to introduce a book about *bitan*. Tokyo Metropolitan Central Library (東京都立中央圖書館) has the copy of a handwritten book *Sessen Yingo* (接鮮瘖語) re-compiled by Matsuzaki Modoro (松崎復). It factually recorded the *bitan* among Chōson official messengers and Japanese Confucian scholars in 1811. The total number of “conversers” on different *bitan* occasions was more than ten. The contents of *bitan* are very fertile but an odd term “瘖語” is used for the book title.

The Chinese word 瘖, which means dumb 啞 and implies inability to speak, is seldom used. *Huainanzi Taizuxun* 《淮南子·泰族訓》 states: “The dumb cannot speak. The deaf cannot hear. A person who is dumb and deaf cannot communicate.” Nonetheless, even if a person who is born deaf and dumb, he can make use of *bitan* for communication. This is the spell of *bitan*.

Such Chinese terms as 靜話、默對、無語 and 瘖語 cannot be fully translated in English but East Asians have a connotative sense of it. We understand that Chinese characters 靜、默、無、瘖

connotatively negate audio ability and spoken language. 話、對、and 語 positively express visual ability and the communicative functions of written words. The combination of these two categories of Chinese characters into one term is equivalent to “dialogue of silence”.

Nevertheless, bitan solely relies on written words. In the perspective of linguistics and communication studies, is this sole reliance making the effectiveness and efficiency of *bitan* to be far lower than that of verbal communication? Our answer is negative.

In 1771, a Japanese government bureaucrat Arai Hakuseki, who was responsible for foreign affairs, visited Chōson official messenger Tyo Taioku. Though official interpreters accompanied them, Tyo Taioku preferred written communication. He wrote: “A brush is identical to a tongue for lucid verbal communication. The lucidity obviates the necessity to rely on instantaneous interpretation.” (from *Kokan Hitsudan* 江關筆談) Through official interpreter, the communication process would be adversely affected by unnecessary courteous rituals. The objective of free expression could not be achieved. Tyo Taioku thus decided not to rely on interpreters. To them, written communication in the form of *bitan* was more effective, efficient, lucid and down to earth.

Yang Wenfeng (楊文鳳), an envoy of Ryukyu, had *bitan* with a Japanese Ishizuka Saikou(石冢崔高) in 1803. In reply to Ishizuka’s question about the language proficiency of the representative mandated by Qing dynasty, Yang Wenfeng said that verbal communication was not lucid and understandable though official interpreter was available. However, subsequent to understandability facilitated by *bitan*, mutual communication became smooth and easy. Since then, *bitan* had been practiced as a matter of course in the mutual communication between the officials of Ryukyu and Qing dynasty. (琉館筆譚) Before modern China, a huge gap existed between written and oral Chinese, preventing a cultured talented scholar from fully expressing his academic brilliance by oral Chinese. To make the matter worse, a large number of regional dialects were spoken in extensive mainland China. The provision of substandard ineffective instantaneous interpretation service was not uncommon. On one hand, *bitan* helped overcome the barrier of regional dialects. On the other hand, it fully evinced the outstanding literary level and calligraphy of the “converser”. In comparison with verbal communication, *bitan* was evidently more efficient and effective.

Yang Wenfeng also mentioned an anecdote about being drifted to Taiwan by a tropical storm while he was on envoy duty to mainland China. The local Taiwanese officials were so snobbish that they refused to answer any question even when he knelt down humbly to ask for their mercy. Upon his *bitan* and gifting them a poem, the abruptness of their change of attitude was sighted. All the Taiwanese officials there suddenly took a seat and acted courteously. This anecdote confirms

that being knowledgeable about Chinese characters and the ability to write poem in Chinese are of paramount importance for a cultured East Asian identity and demarcation between barbarians and the civilized.

In 1905, Vietnamese revolutionist Phan Boi Chau (潘佩珠) sought assistance in Japan, where he had a meeting with Liang Qichao (梁啓超). Notwithstanding an interpreter surnamed Tseng along with him, they preferred to communicate by *bitan*. When Phan Boi Chau recalled this incident, he commented that interpreter was for exchanging greetings whereas *bitan* was for the expressions of solicitous heartfelt feelings. (*The Chronicle Biography of Phan Boi Chau*) (潘佩珠年譜)

Bai Juyi (白居易), a famous poet in Tang dynasty, wrote the follows in Song of the *Lute Player* (琵琶行):

Only an undertone of quiet grief (別有幽愁暗恨生)

Is more poignant in the silence than any sound (此時無聲勝有聲)

To Bai Juyi, the state of silence is far more emotional and moving than words uttered, so is the uniqueness of *bitan* in the East Asia.

In *dongshudushuji* (東塾讀書記), Chen li (陳澧) in Qing dynasty said that we sensed the mundane world through visual perception and then the consequential verbal description expressed what we sensed. However, verbal description could neither be transmitted nor preserved in an alien place where another language was spoken. Chinese character, as a “vestige” resultant from verbal description and what we sensed, was a remedial measure for it.

The *bitan* propounded in this article refers to the Chinese characters written for the “vestige” of verbal expressions. Before the invention of tape recorder, *bitan* was the best to authentically mirror the on-site atmosphere, the innermost heartfelt emotional feelings of “conversers” and all their dialogues.

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