Abstract

This paper presents evidence of written Chinese being widely used among literati of Chinese as a lingua franca or ‘scripta franca’ in East Asia, which broadly comprises nations now known as China, Japan, South Korea and North Korea, and Vietnam. That common linguistic-cultural practice, being a time-honored tradition in sinographic East Asia, is generally known as 筆談 (Mand.: bĭtán; Jap. hitsudan ひつだん; Kor. pildam 펠담, Viet. bút đàm), literally brush talk or brush conversation. While extant brush talk data has been documented in a vast array of literature published in these East Asian languages roughly since the Tang dynasty in China (618–906), in this paper our brush talk data will mainly be drawn from secondary, published sources involving inter-ethnic cross-border communication dating back from late Ming dynasty (1368–1644) until the 1910s. A survey of the relevant literature shows that brush talk tended to occur in four recurrent contexts, comprising both transactional and interactional communication: (i) coastguards checking the identities of alien seamen whose vessels were wrecked after being blown off course by a storm; (ii) foreign visitors asking locals for factual information; (iii) deep conversations between diplomats, courtiers or scholars; and (iv) exchange of poetic verses and artistic improvisations. Despite being written communication, the functional equivalent of speech acts like greeting and expressing (dis)agreement is enacted seamlessly, albeit by brush and ink on paper. The context may be more official or convivial. As a written lingua franca, Sinitic or sinogram-based brush talk (i.e., using Chi. 方塊字 fāngkuàizì, Jap. kānji, Kor. hanja, Viet. chữ Hán, chữ nho, Hán tự, or Hán văn) in premodern East Asia appears to be unique or sui generis and is clearly under-researched from the linguistic and sociolinguistic points of view. We will assess the degree of its uniqueness by briefly comparing the lingua franca functions of Latin in medieval Europe.

About the Speaker

Professor David C.S. Li is Professor and Head of the Department of Chinese and Bilingual Studies at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. His research expertise covers bilingual interaction and code-switching (translanguaging), multilingualism in Greater China, Chinese learners’ EFL learning difficulties and error-correction strategies, Cantonese as an additional language in Hong Kong, South Asian Hongkongers’ needs for written Chinese, World Englishes, ‘Hongkong English’, and ‘China English’. He is the author of numerous articles and books, including Multilingual Hong Kong: Languages, Literacies and Identities (Springer 2017) and Chinese–English Contrastive Grammar: An Introduction (with Zoe Luk; HKU Press, 2017).

All are welcome