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Tilting toward the Light: Translating the Medieval World on the Ming-Mongolian Frontier

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TILTING TOWARD THE LIGHT: TRANSLATING THE MEDIEVAL WORLD ON THE MING-MONGOLIAN FRONTIER

CARLA NAPPI

I.

We are the commoners, by decree of Heaven born in the empire of the Mongol qaghan.¹

Wang Zilong 王子龍 was tired and his hand was cramping. He looked up from the letter and hoped not to die or otherwise embarrass himself the following day.²

We have lived this way since the days of our ancestors to the time of our own people, from generation to generation. Although there have been difficult times, our commitment has remained the same. We have been determined to follow our sovereign and to serve him to the best of our ability.

It was hard work to translate from Mongolian into Chinese, and Wang had been struggling through the night. It was now March of 1608, and there was no guarantee that this fourteenth-century text would be adequate preparation for dealing with the envoys who awaited him at the border. Wang had come to the Translators' College (*Siyi guan* 四夷館)³ only four years earlier, earning a place at the Mongolian Bureau (*Dada guan* 鞑靼館) after an examination on a hot July day. He had been an exemplary student, rising quickly through the ranks of his fellow student-translators and distinguishing himself as a promising mediator between the Chinese and Mongolian written records. By 1607, he had been promoted to the rank of a Salaried Student (*shiliang zidi* 食糧子弟) at the Hanlin Academy, a prestigious institution for scholar-officials.⁴

1 Here and below, the text from which these quotations are derived is the *Hua Yi yiyu* (1918), 2:1a–13b. Translations from the Mongolian are my own, but were made in consultation with Mostaert, de Rachewiltz, and Schönbaum, *Le Matériel mongol*.

2 This is my own reconstruction of the scene.

3 The central character in name of the *Siyi guan* was changed from “barbarian” (*yi* 夷) to “translation” (*yi* 譯) when the Manchu Qing took control in 1644.

4 By some accounts, his performance at the Bureau was so impressive that he was given

We find Wang here in the following year, waiting to travel to Xifeng kou 喜峰口, a border station along the Great Wall in Hebei province that served as an important military checkpoint. Later, in the Qing era, a traveler would relate the experience of passing through Xifeng kou with mixed admiration and frustration. After an ascent through sloping hills covered with “beautiful long grass and dotted with yews, walnuts, chestnuts, and willows,” one would get to the thirty-foot-tall section of the Great Wall, which at that point was built of seven or eight feet of granite blocks topped with fifty-five layers of four-inch bricks. After reaching the pass, one apparently had to wrangle with officials who rudely demanded to see a traveler’s passports before proceeding to take an “extraordinary amount of trouble” to copy them.⁵ Back in the early seventeenth century, Wang was preparing to be one of the group of officials stationed at the pass to meet Mongol envoys coming to the territory of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) from the north; the envoys were obliged to pass through the station in order to secure formal entry into the empire. Cheng Jiugao 成九皋, the official who had previously been in charge of meeting envoys at the border station, had just retired. Given the importance of Xifeng kou to Ming-Mongol relations, it was important that Cheng be replaced, and thus a new official was needed to go to the border station to meet envoys bringing tribute. One translator official from the Mongolian Bureau was offered the position and refused to accept it: Lin Zhou 林洲 didn’t leave much of a trace in later historical documents after declining to accept this responsibility, and not much is known about him as a result. Wang had been offered the opportunity to go to Xifeng kou in Lin’s stead and he accepted the invitation.⁶

Here he was, then, reading over a Mongolian letter and copying the text to practice his translation work, in preparation for his post at the border. Practically speaking, it’s unclear how useful this practice would have been: the letter had been written more than two centuries before and was collected as part of a documentary reader that was made available to Chinese-Mongolian translators

an early exam in 1606 by imperial favor—this would have been a year earlier than was typical—and then earned a salary and a promotion along with a passing grade. By other accounts, Wang passed the translation exam after the normal three years of study and was awarded a food allowance of one bushel of rice per month and a promotion. “Bushel” here is used to translate the Chinese *dan* unit of measure, the precise meaning of which varied: see Wilkinson, *Chinese History*, 560.

⁵ Gill, *River of Golden Sand*, 67.

⁶ Wang’s acceptance was a wise move on his part: as a result of his work at the border station he was promoted to the rank and salary of a translator-official (*yizi guan* 譯字官), and he was exempted from the next exam.

working for the Ming court.⁷ In the course of his education in Changli county (in the northeastern part of today's Hebei province), Wang Zilong had probably read about some major historical figures, like Chinggis Qan's grandson Arigh Böke (1219–66).⁸ It is unlikely, however, that Wang had realized that the history of the previous dynasty would be so critical to his work as a Mongolian language translator for the Ming empire.⁹

Yesüder, prince and descendent of Arigh-Böke, and others revolted along with the Oirats, violently killed the qan and seizing the great seal.

Arigh-Böke was famous as a Mongol leader, having failed to prevail in a struggle with his brother Qubilai (1215–94) for succession of the Mongolian Empire in the early 1260s. Qubilai went on to become not just Qaghan, or Great Qan, but also first emperor of the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368). Both of them appeared throughout the official history of the dynasty, the *Yuan History* (*Yuanshi* 元史). In 1388, more than a century after his death, Arigh Böke's descendent had overthrown the descendent of the last emperor of the dynasty that his estranged brother Qubilai had founded. A Mongolian chieftain had then written a letter to the Ming emperor to tell him all about it.

This was the letter Wang was reading now. The Oirats were a northern forest-dwelling people who had been making trouble in the Mongolian documentary record from at least *The Secret History of the Mongols*, a thirteenth-century chronicle of Mongolian history focusing on the family of Chinggis Qan. In those pages, Qutuqa Beki (the leader of the Oirat during Chinggis's ascent) joined forces with a tribal leader of the Naiman, a powerful people living in the northwest, and together they attempted to conjure a magical rainstorm to defeat Chinggis and his troops. (Their conjuring backfired, dousing them and their Oirat and Naiman troops instead.)¹⁰ The Oirats had been integrated into the Mongol Empire by Chinggis's eldest son in the early thirteenth century, and though relations between the Oirats and Chinggisid Mongols became increasingly rocky as the Oirats became

7 The nature of this documentary reader will be explored in more detail below.

8 Arigh Böke (as A-li-bu-ge 阿里不哥) appears several times in the *Yuanshi*.

9 This is an educated conjecture: we don't know exactly what student-translators like Wang, working at the Translators' College described below, would have known about the work and training they were to undergo at the College before they arrived.

10 See de Rachewiltz, *Secret History*, 63–64. The account of this event differed across historical sources. Ming readers would likely not have had access to the *Secret History* account as I am using it here.

more powerful, as of the late fourteenth century they were still obliged to offer military service to the Mongols.

Now, we can read over Wang's shoulder and see the Oirats joining forces with Yesüder, a descendent of Chinggis's grandson Arigh-Böke, to take power from another Mongol leader. The leader that Yesüder and the Oirats had murdered was Toqus Temür, son of Toghhan Temür, who had been the last emperor of the Yuan dynasty and the last Mongol leader who had occupied the throne before the Ming overthrew Yuan rule. After the father Toghhan Temür was routed by Ming forces, his sons (including Toqus)—eventually deemed the “Northern Yuan”—claimed legitimacy in part by their holding of Chinese-language state seals.¹¹ Toqus Temür was soon attacked and defeated by Ming forces early in 1388, and he then lived as a refugee before being killed by Yesüder the following winter.

All of this history was buried in the very brief passage Wang was copying. Finally, he was introduced to the letter's author:

As they annihilated and destroyed the people, we deliberated, myself Nekelei, dignitaries, soldiers, and all the people, and we said to ourselves and to each other, “How can we stand here and allow such evil villains to destroy the people before our eyes?”

Nekelei (or, in Chinese, 捏怯來) was a Mongolian officer who had served and been loyal to the now-dispatched qan, Toqus Temür. Guessing that the Ming would be a more useful and lasting ally than Yesüder and the Oirats, now that their leader was defeated, Nekelei had written to the Hongwu Emperor (r. 1368–98), founding ruler of the Ming, to explain his position and to pledge his allegiance.

Since ancient times, people have faced the difficult choice: whether to flee to avoid the darkness, or stay and tilt toward the light and away from the darkness. The Ming Emperor, by decree of Heaven, has the wide and extensive mandate to have, without partiality, mercy and compassion for all peoples of the world as if they were his son. We thus conform to the intentions of Heaven, and declare our allegiance to the Emperor.

Nekelei was playing with words a little, here. The name of the dynasty to which he was pledging allegiance, “Ming 明,” means “brightness” or “light.” When claiming to stay and “tilt toward the light,” then, he was being clever and doubly proclaiming his obedience.¹²

11 On the “Northern Yuan” and the seals, see Atwood, *Encyclopedia* (especially on “Northern Yuan” and “Three Guards”), and Honda, “On the Genealogy.”

12 As described below, the letter was actually written in Mongolian with translations of

The letter concluded with a brief explanation of some logistical matters. Nekelei explained to the emperor that the letter would likely arrive before he would: he and his colleagues had stopped to graze their horses on the way to the Ming capital, given that it was a chilly time of year, but had sent colleagues ahead with the letter and a gift of nine geldings, to request an audience with the ruler. He then briefly thanked the emperor before signing off. The letter clearly worked. By 1389, Nekelei was one of three Mongolian chieftains (along with his colleagues La'usa and Siremün) who surrendered to the Ming court in the wake of the assassination of Toqus Temür, and he initially made out fairly well in the deal.¹³ He received a military commandery and was made a local leader in what is now Inner Mongolia, in recognition of his submission.¹⁴ He continued to correspond with his new ruler, writing to request grain for his soldiers and their families, and fabric to clothe them.¹⁵ He relayed his recent activities: among other demands, Prince Yan (the young man who would go on to become the Yongle emperor) had ordered him to report on the population of his commandery, and he did so. He was following the rules, feeding the officials he was asked to feed, outfitting their men for travel, clothing their families.

Despite this, Nekelei would be dead as a result of a colleague's conniving (if not at his hands) shortly thereafter. The comrades with whom Nekelei had surrendered to the Ming were jealous of his success. Siremün, one of the two who had vowed allegiance alongside Nekelei, was not given a command or official rank by the Ming, and was consequently under Nekelei's command. He sent his own letter to the Ming ruler.¹⁶ Siremün's letter was fairly straightforward: he wrote to report on travel orders he had received and of official documents that had been sent to him. Judging solely from his report to the Ming, he was prepared to continue to be obedient, and all was well. Ultimately dissatisfied with the way he was treated, however, the envious and power-hungry man decided to turn away from the Ming and from Nekelei's command shortly after declaring his allegiance to both. He qui-

individual terms given in Chinese. Here, "light" was rendered as the Mongolian *gegen* and translated in the document as the Chinese *ming* 明.

13 Serruys, "Dates," 422.

14 Serruys, "Chinese," 22. Nekelei's commandery was in what was (for Serruys) Wudan, and what is now the capital of Ongni'ud Banner. See also Serruys, *Sino-Mongol Relations*, 3–18, on Mongol and Jurchen commanderies in the Ming.

15 *Hua Yi yiyu* (1918), 2b:14a–19a (second letter from Nekelei).

16 *Ibid.*, 2b:7b–10a (letter from Siremün). According to Serruys ("Dates," 425), Siremün's letter was likely sent in August or September of 1389. This would have been sent after Nekelei's first letter of 1388 and second letter of 1389.

etly got in touch with a local friend and attacked Nekelei on his own turf.¹⁷ Nekelei fled. . . Right into the territory of an ally of Yesüder, whose revolt had prompted Nekelei's avowal of obeisance to the Ming in the first place. The Mongolian chieftain and new Ming subject was consequently murdered at the hands of Yesüder's ally.

Much of this story is scattered across the documents in the *Hua Yi yiyu* 華夷譯語, the text that we have been reading along with Wang. Compiled in the middle of the reign of the first Ming emperor, the *Hua Yi yiyu* comprised a topically organized Mongolian-Chinese glossary and twelve additional Mongolian documents, including the letters of Nekelei and Siremün described above, accompanied by varying levels of Chinese translation, from a mere interlinear Chinese rendering of individual Mongolian terms, to a full Chinese translation at the end of each full statement.¹⁸ The genesis of the *Hua Yi yiyu* in its early Ming context is partially documented. The preceding Yuan dynasty had been part of—or considered equivalent to—the larger Mongol empire, whose official language was Mongolian. When the Yuan dynasty fell, the new Ming ruler reinstated Chinese as the official language of the empire. However, that left the issue of how to deal with the copious documents and ongoing communication in the previous imperial language. On top of this, there were ongoing clashes on the northeastern frontier that made it vital for the Ming to continue to train diplomats and interpreters in Mongolian speech and writing.

The studious Wang Zilong, anxious about passing his exam in 1608, was therefore an aspiring heir to this long tradition. It had begun with a man named Qonici. The Mongolian Qonici was made an official at the elite Hanlin Academy in 1376, eight years after the consolidation of Ming rule. The members of this prestigious central government agency served as imperial advisors and tutors, supervised the civil examinations, and played prominent roles in large-scale scholarly projects. By 1382, Qonici had received a promotion at the Academy and sinicized his Mongolian name to Huo Yuanjie 火源潔.¹⁹ He had been working with a fellow Hanlin compiler named Ma-sha-i-hei Ma-ha-ma 馬沙亦黑馬哈馬 on a bilingual edition of *The Secret History of the Mongols*, and now the emperor had a new job for them: compile a Sino-Mongolian dictionary, transcribed entirely in Chinese

17 *Hua Yi yiyu* (1918), 2a:17a–23a (rescript to the Board of Rites to be forwarded to Yingchang wei) contains instructions to Nekelei for how to deal with Siremün.

18 For a description of the contents, see Serruys, "Dates." See also Haenisch, *Sino-mongolische Dokumente*; Haenisch, *Sinomongolische Glossare*; Lewicki, *La Langue mongole*; and Mostaert, de Rachewiltz, and Schönbaum, *Le matériel mongol*.

19 At first he adopted the Chinese name Huo Zhuang 霍莊, later switching to Huo Yuanjie with characters that could be written 火源潔 or 火原潔.

characters.²⁰ This way, even if readers could not understand Mongolian script, they could still sound out the Mongolian words by reading the Chinese transcription.

To do this, Huo and his collaborator(s) devised a system that used small graphs as pronunciation aids for sounds in Ming Mongolian that weren't perfectly represented by existing Chinese characters. According to this system, a handful of Chinese characters were written in small script and placed alongside or beneath Chinese terms in the text to show readers how to alter their pronunciation of those Chinese terms in order to help them more exactly recreate the sounds of Mongolian. If a translator or a student of Mongolian language was trying to pronounce these Chinese characters in a Mongolian way, then he had directions for how to shape his mouth, when to touch his palate, and how to map his tongue so that he could visualize the words coming off specific places on its surface. The meaning or appearance of these small symbols reminded him what to do. A small graph for "inside" (*zhong* 中) placed next to a character told him to make the corresponding sound inside his throat instead of at the front of his mouth.²¹ Thus *ha* 合 became *qa* and *hu* 忽 became *qu*. A small tongue (*she* 舌) placed alongside a term told him to read the corresponding character by trilling the tip of his tongue. Thus, *er* 兒 - *li* 里 - *la* 刺 - *lu* 魯 - *lun* 倫 would become *rr-ri-ra-ru-run*. When he saw a small graph beside a character that resembled something reaching up to touch a line on top (*ding* 丁), he knew to pronounce it by using the tip of his tongue to touch the top of his palate at the end of the word. Instead of *wen* 溫 he said *wel*. Instead of *wu* 兀 he said *wul*. And so on. This system was explained in the preface to the resulting text, the *Hua Yi yiyu*, which was completed in 1388 and printed in 1389.²²

20 Very little is known about this Ma-sha-i-hei Ma-ha-ma, who was not credited as an author in the final version of the text. For this account of the creation of the *Hua Yi yiyu*, including its relation to the *Secret History* (or, *Yuan bishi* 元秘史), see Lü, *Siyi guan ze*, 41. The earliest known edition of the *Secret History* is a Chinese transcription of the Mongolian text, and later editions reconstruct the Mongolian from the unique transcription system of the Chinese version, which used variously sized Chinese characters in sophisticated ways, including as diacritic markers, to indicate Mongolian sounds. Compilers consulted the *Secret History* for reference, but it is not entirely clear how they chose the vocabulary for the glossaries, or the documents for the reader. On the history of the *Hua Yi yiyu* as a didactic work, see de Rachewiltz, *Secret History*, 1:xliv-xlvii.

21 These are the directions given in the Chinese text that I describe. The directions that a Mongolian language learner would receive now would look quite different.

22 See *fanli* 凡例, in *Hua Yi yiyu* (1918), 1:4a-4b. This transcription system is also described in Hung, "Transmission," 454-61. *The Secret History of the Mongols* was reportedly the basis for the vocabulary included in the *Hua Yi yiyu* glossary. There is some debate over which text featured the special transcription system first. For comparisons between the systems for transcribing Mongolian words in the *Secret History* and the *Hua Yi yiyu*, see Chen, *Chen Yuan*, 2:104-36.

By the time a translation student like Wang Zongzai encountered the *Hua Yi yiyu* documents in the early seventeenth century—documents that included the letter by Nekelei—the text had become the prototype for many of the pedagogical materials used at their College and at its sister organization, the Interpreters' Station (*Huitong guan* 會同館), which was devoted to oral communication and the hosting of foreign envoys. The original version of this text (comprising both the glossary and the primer of documents) was available and used only Chinese characters; so was a later version of the text that included Mongolian script. The structure and categories of both the glossary and document collection (the main components of the *Hua Yi yiyu*) had become models for similar manuals used at most of the language bureaus at the College. Many of the glossaries produced by the College preserved the phrase *yiyu* 譯語 (“translated terms,” indicating a foreign-language glossary) in their titles. These glossaries organized terms according to what was largely the same framework that had been used in the *Hua Yi yiyu* glossary: thus, they mined the compilers' memories and official documents for the key ideas (usually expressed in a word or two) that fit into the required conceptual grid: Heavenly Bodies and Phenomena; Precious Objects; Human Affairs; Geography and the Land; Writing and Records; Types of People; Buildings; The Human Body; Directions; Numbers and Counting; Birds and Beasts; Flowers and Trees; Tools and Implements; Cloth and Clothing; Colors; Food and Drink; and Time and Calendrics. A section for Commonly Used Terms functioned as a miscellaneous grab bag of words that didn't fit elsewhere. There were other categories included in other bureaus' glossaries—the Tibetan instructors had added a section for Aromatic Drugs and one for Classical/Religious Terminology. Not all of the categories existed in all of the glossaries, and their order varied, but for the most part this was the expected map of important foreign knowledge as embodied in its envoys and instantiated in official documents.²³

There were also glossaries for the Interpreters' Station, geared toward assisting interpreters in learning the vocabulary that was vital to helping them carry out their duties at the station. Being intended for spoken conversation, they only included Chinese transliterations of foreign terms, without foreign scripts.²⁴

23 Some of the category names varied slightly in the glossaries. In addition, the Sanskrit glossaries that I have seen are not at all like this, and in fact they are not properly glossaries at all, but sutras in a Sanskrit script with one- or two-character Chinese transcriptions next to each Sanskrit letter. Semantically arranged dictionaries organized in similar categories had a long precedent in the Chinese language. See the discussion of orthographic classification focusing largely on the *Shuowen jiezi* (completed c. 100 CE) in Bottéro, *Sémantisme et classification*.

24 See the Chaoxian glossary from the Awa no Kuni collection for prefatory remarks on the

They were typically organized according to the same categories as the Translators' College texts, though some editions contain additional rubrics. One Korean glossary, for example, contained a section for the names of the heavenly stems and earthly branches, and one for the names of diagrams from the *Classic of Changes*, an ancient divination text.²⁵ Judging from the terms and phrases included in the Station glossaries, interpreters had many kinds of interactions with visiting merchants and envoys. They commented on travel conditions and the state of the roads and buildings of the capital and its environs, and were well armed with phrases that described the conditions of rivers and directions for fording them, crossing bridges, traveling along roads, using wells, and negotiating city walls. They spoke of the various stages of the night watch, the times of the day and the year, and they commented on changes in the seasons. They learned the names for flowers, plants, trees, animals, and foodstuffs that would typically come up in conversation with foreign envoys: not just lice and butterflies, but also glowworms and mad dogs and silver-haired horses. In the glossaries for Mongol and Jurchen languages, this could include many names for different varieties of horses, signaling the importance of the animals for trade with those groups. They learned how to instruct newly arrived envoys on the proper etiquette for inhabiting households in the capital: no running around, for example, and no burning the doors and windows down.²⁶ They learned the terms for instruments used for cooking, playing music, and maintaining horses and livestock; terms for madmen, scarred men, beltmakers, hatmakers, and idiots, hunchbacks, tanners, and people with hare-

whole series of thirteen glossaries, based on an edition compiled by Mao Ruizheng (*jinshi* 1601; fl. 1597–1636, *zi* Bofu), who had written the *Huang Ming xiangxu lu* (1629), a treatise on tribute states of the Ming, and other texts on military and foreign relations. The edition also included a preface by Zhu Zhifan (1564–?, *jinshi* 1595 [optimus]), a senior official in the Hanlin Academy who was famed for his calligraphy. Zhu had been sent as an envoy to Korea in 1605, perhaps explaining why his preface to the work appeared at the beginning of the Korean glossary. The glossaries included in the Awa no Kuni collection are Korean (Chaoxian), Ryukyu (Liuqiu), Japanese (Ribei), Vietnamese (Annan), Champa (Zhancheng), Siamese (Xianluo), Mongolian (Dazu), Uighur (Weiwuer), Tibetan (Xifan), Persian (Huihui), Malacca (Manlajia), Jurchen (Ruzhen), and Baiyi. The glossaries are Ming products, but more precise dating is unknown. See Davidson, “New Version.” Because some of these countries communicated in writing with the Ming using Chinese, they didn't need script glossaries.

25 Huo, *Hua Yi yiyu*, Zhu Zhifan preface. This edition credits Huo with the translation and a Di Bofu with the compilation or editing. Di Bofu likely refers to Mao Ruizheng, whose *zi* or courtesy name was Bofu. The texts that I describe here are examples of a much broader landscape of conversation manuals and phrasebooks.

26 *Guanfang buxu zuojian* 官房不許作踐; *men chuang buxu shaohui* 門窗不許燒毀. See Kane, *Sino-Jurchen*, 244.

lips.²⁷ They learned how to talk about actions, from meditating to agreeing to sitting, including special terms for “not becoming a useful person,” asking in detail, requesting wine, and bringing in horses. They learned how to talk about body parts and things one could do with and to them, emotions, illnesses, and qualities of character. The nature of some of the phrases in these glossaries give us a sense that interpreters were not solely called upon to perform duties within the walls of the Station or even the capital: they were also sent to accompany envoys on their travels. Some interpreters’ glossaries included multi-word phrases under the rubric of “Human Affairs” that would ostensibly have been of use to foreign envoys staying at the hostel: “That’s ugly.” “I’m drunk!”²⁸ Thus the interpreters of Jurchen at the Station could consult the handbook for instructions on how to direct Jurchen-speaking envoys in practical matters for navigating the roads, chatting about the weather, and instructing envoys in matters of court etiquette.²⁹

By Wang’s time, the Mongolian Bureau still continued to use the *Hua Yi yiyu* glossary, transcribed into both Chinese and Mongolian scripts and supplemented by additional terms and addenda that had been accreted to the text in the years since Huo compiled it. The documentary collection in the *Hua Yi yiyu* was also adapted into similar collections of paired documents (each pair consisting of a document in a foreign language specific to the particular bureau charged with translating its documentary script, along with a Chinese version) that were known as *laiwen* 來文. Together, these documents functioned as a reader of primary source texts for use by students and translators who were studying the craft of reading and rendering diplomatic language between Chinese and the other languages of the College.

2.

The Translators’ College had been founded by the Yongle Emperor (r. 1402–24) in 1407, immediately after the admiral Zheng He (1371–1433) had returned from the first voyage of his “treasure fleet” after setting out two years earlier. The College served as the official government body responsible for translation in the Ming capital.³⁰ When Yongle founded the College, there were eight bureaus

27 The “People” (*ren*) category of Interpreters’ glossaries could be exceptionally diverse. The examples given here are all taken from the *ren* section of a single glossary.

28 These examples can be found in the Human Affairs (*renshi*) section of the Ryukyū (*Liuqiu*) glossary from the Guiting chubanshe edition of the *Hua Yi yiyu*, 94. Many more cases are included in the many Interpreters’ glossaries. There are several examples from the Awa no Kuni Bunko glossaries.

29 For specific examples of these kinds of phrases, see Nappi, “Full. Empty. Stop. Go.”

30 Though the extant literature on the Interpreters’ Station (*Huitong guan*) and Trans-

devoted to a range of languages crucial for diplomatic communication between the Ming empire and states that did not use Chinese script for written communication. The Mongolian (*dada* 韃靼) Bureau handled diplomatic exchange between the Ming court and any state officials or others who preferred to use the Mongolian language in written communication. The Jurchen (*ruzhen* 女真) Bureau was established to translate between Chinese and an Altaic language that had become politically crucial in the Jin Dynasty (1115–1234) when North China was under Jurchen rule.³¹ The Muslim (*huihui* 回回) Bureau handled texts from areas that were known to practice Islam and that submitted documents in *huihui* script. (The glossaries were in Persian, but the term *huihui* could also indicate Arabic.) A wide territory fell under its jurisdiction: Samarkand, Arabia, Turfan, Champa, Java, Cambodia, Malacca, and, remarkably, Japan.³² There was a Tibetan (*xifan* 西番) Bureau, responsible for literary and diplomatic texts written in headless *dbu-med* script, which were often brought by Lamas; a Gaochang (*gaochang* 高昌) Bureau, responsible for texts in Uighur script that came into the Ming from across central Asia; a Baiyi (*baiyi* 百夷) Bureau that covered many polities and subprefectures around what is now Yunnan; and a Burma (*miandan* 緬甸) Bureau. The Sanskrit (*xitian* 西天) Bureau produced and translated sutras and other classic literature, and its extant “glossaries” were not glossaries at all. In principle, the officials of this bureau were also responsible for written communication with India.³³ In addition

lators’ College (*Siyi guan*) largely maintains that they were separate institutions producing separate glossaries, the extent of their separation from 1407 to 1748 is not at all clear from the surviving glossaries.

31 By the late sixteenth century, this bureau seems to have been an extinct or at least defunct part of the College: throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the Jurchen people preferred to write and read Mongolian, even while they spoke Jurchen.

32 Wang, *Siyi guan kao*, 10b–22b. In the 1695 Qing version of the *Siyi guan kao* by Jiang Fan, *Huihui* was added as an additional region administered by the Muslim bureau. See Jiang, *Siyi guan kao*. Classification under the Muslim bureau would have meant that Japan was sending Persian documents to China for official communication. On views of Japan in early modern China, see Fogel, *Sagacious Monks*. The essays in Part I, “Ming to Early Qing,” are especially pertinent, though I find no mention of a perceived Japanese-Muslim identity mentioned there.

33 See note 24, above. The Sanskrit Bureau seemed to be a problem for the College. According to a popular story, in the early days of the College, one Qin Junchu (1385–1441) faked his way through the imperial exams and into a position as Sanskrit Bureau translator by memorizing or sneaking a copy of a sutra into the exam, copying it out in Sanskrit, and attaching it to the end of his exam paper. His deceit wasn’t discovered until a century after his death, when instructors at the Bureau wanted to compile a glossary like that of their peers and had no model. They consulted the “*Hua Yi yiyu*” compiled by Qin during his days

to the eight original bureaus founded by Yongle in 1407, a ninth bureau devoted to Babai (*babai* 八百), a script used in Yunnan, was added in 1511. A tenth bureau for the language of Siam (*xianluo* 暹羅) was added in 1578. Each was charged with translating a particular foreign script to and from Chinese, training students and officials in the relevant language, and creating written materials as study aids and to facilitate translation between the script and Chinese.

The original Translators' College founded by Yongle had been under the jurisdiction of the Hanlin Academy, but it wasn't located anywhere near that prestigious institution: instead, the College occupied twenty rooms just outside the eastern stone wall of the city (*Dong'an shimen*).³⁴ Thirty-eight students were chosen from the Imperial Academy (*Guozijian*, an institution separate from the Hanlin that prepared students for positions in the imperial bureaucracy) to study in what was or soon became, by all accounts, a rather dilapidated bunch of leaky rooms. The court later approved renovations and in 1542 allowed the College to move closer to the center of the imperial action, just outside the eastern entrance to the Forbidden City and a stone's throw from the Academy itself.

Students came to the College through many routes. Though language students at the College originally were drawn from the Imperial Academy, scholars could later test into the College by examination, and many managed to buy or bribe their way in. By the late sixteenth century, positions at the College had largely become hereditary: when an instructor died, his son often took over his job. This option was implemented after several directors of the College complained about the quality of the students who were securing places through examination or bribery. According to these complaints, the classrooms were full of rich boys who had neither the aptitude for learning nor an interest in studying the languages to which they were assigned.³⁵ The entrance examinations were irrelevant to the work the men actually did upon enrolling in the College, and these privileged sons of wealthy officials were threatening to undermine the work of the entire institution. After one particularly strident complaint from a College director in the sixteenth century, the court implemented the director's suggestion that a new set of students should be chosen from among the blood relations of the current College

teaching at the Bureau, expecting it to contain translations of pertinent terms and ideas like the other glossaries, and found only a recopying of a Buddhist sutra, the *Manjusri-Nama-Samgiti* (Chanting of the Names of Manjusri).

34 Lü, *Siyi guan ze*, 42. See Crossley, "Structure and Symbol," 45, on the condition of the bureau buildings. For more on the College and Bureau, see also Pelliot, "Le Hoja."

35 For the full text of the 1566 memorial sent by Director Xu Jie (1494–1574) to the Jiajing emperor (r. 1521–67), along with a commentary by Gao Gong, who at that time had just become president of the Board of Rites, see Lü, *Siyi guan ze*, 193–97.

translators. Students were typically examined every three years, at which point they either failed (and could retake the test twice more during the regular three-year cycle before being ejected from the College) or were rewarded with a promotion. After three of these tests, or nine years of training, a student was qualified as an instructor.

Wang Zilong had taken this latter route of entry into the College: after growing up in the northeastern part of the Ming empire, by 1604 he had decided to become a translator for the Ming. (We don't know why he would have decided this, but it was not unusual for translators at the Mongolian Bureau to come from that region of the northeast). In July of that year he passed an entrance examination and earned a position as student and resident of the Mongolian Bureau. As described above, Wang rapidly distinguished himself as a promising mediator between the Chinese and Mongolian scriptural worlds. Though he doesn't seem to have had family with him at the Mongolian Bureau, among the sixty-two colleagues who passed the 1607 exam the same year he did, there seem to have been at least two pairs of brothers.³⁶

Though positions at the College were neither glamorous nor terribly prestigious, the facilities were in constant need of repair, and there was little cash available to do anything about it, it wasn't entirely a bad situation. Students were housed and clothed, and received a modest salary, with their transportation to the College paid and their tax burdens sometimes forgiven. As they passed their examinations and were promoted, their allowances and salaries went up as well. As long as they were actively studying and not sick or otherwise absent, they received salaries of silver, cash, fuel, and silk according to rank—and even absent students found ways to claim their allowances anyway.³⁷

Since its founding in the early fifteenth century, the Mongolian Bureau remained one of the most important arms of the College. Not only did relations between the Ming and Mongol groups along its borders remain fraught well into the history of the Ming empire, but a diplomatic and cultural knowledge of Mongols was also useful for relations with the Mongolian-speaking people who lived and served in Ming territory in military and other capacities. As a written language, Mongolian was used by many non-Ming people in their communication with the empire. Not only many self-identified Mongolians, but also Jurchens used

36 Many of the students seem to have been related; personnel records for many of the bureaus often indicate groups of two to four students from the same area with the same surname and similar given names being admitted to the roster of a particular language bureau at the same time.

37 For a brief description of this, see Wild, "Materials," 632–34.

the script for written communication. It was a kind of diplomatic *scripta franca* in constant use throughout Ming rule. Recruiting personnel who had some knowledge of Mongolian language and script thus continued to be crucial for the Ming court well after their defeat of the Yuan in the fourteenth century.³⁸

One of the reasons the script continued to be so widely used was the continuing trouble that brewed in Ming-Mongolian relations. As noted above, the Ming had come to power after defeating the Mongol Yuan dynasty in the fourteenth century, and the complex relations between the Ming empire and various groups of Mongols along its borders have been well documented. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the Ming reinvigorated its staffing of translators and students at the Mongolian Bureau: eight translators joined the Bureau in 1566, two more men in 1578, and fifteen men in 1604, all from the northern part of the Ming empire. This was an unusually large staff for any single College bureau and signaled the importance of Mongolian as a diplomatic language for the Ming. Crucially, however, language training was not the only kind of education that pedagogical language materials were being used to inculcate in the students and translators who used them.

3.

Language education for a Ming translator in the early seventeenth century was also a kind of history education. Whether or not they were aware of it, Mongolian student-translators like Wang Zilong were learning a particular version of the history of the Mongols and the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368) as they worked through their vocabulary and grammar lessons. The small compendium of documents selected for inclusion in the Mongolian *Hua Yi yiyu* included a modest range of the kinds of textual forms that a translator who was rendering diplomatic documents to and from Chinese and Mongolian for the Ming court might encounter. Some, like the letter from Nekelei discussed above, took the form of requests or updates written to the throne. Others took the format of edicts, diplomas, or rescripts, all dating from 1384 to 1389. Full or abbreviated Chinese versions of some of them appear in the Ming Veritable Records (*Ming Shilu* 明實錄), a historical record of each Ming ruler's reign compiled after his death and based on archival documents. The origin of others is unclear.

These texts collectively mapped out a particular route through the historical terrain of the Yuan period and the genealogies of Mongol rule. They inculcated the reader into a particular vision of what Mongolian history and foreign relations had looked like prior to the Ming, a vision of history that emphasized particular

³⁸ See Robinson, "Images," 69–70.

aspects of Mongolian and Yuan pasts. Several common themes emerge from a close reading of these twelve *Hua Yi yiyu* documents. One important theme was the special importance of Buddhism (and Tibetan Buddhism specifically) to Ming-Mongol relations. The second document in the collection, a 1389 rescript sent to a Tibetan monk, exemplifies this.³⁹ The monk had refused to fight in northern resistance against Ming rule, choosing instead to retreat to a temple to study and propagate Buddhist doctrine. The document situates the monk within the larger historical context of the western origin of Buddhism and its spread eastward. In the document, the monk is given permission to stay where he is and is exempted from making tribute or tax payments to the Ming, ostensibly at least in part as a reward for his previous refusal to fight Ming rule.

The fact that this document was chosen for inclusion in the *Hua Yi yiyu* reader signals that the compilers (and later, instructors who used the text for pedagogical purposes) identified Tibetan Buddhism as a socio-political force that was important for Mongolian-Chinese translators to be aware of, and one that was likely to recur in future documentary correspondence that would need translating. The specific vision of Tibetan Buddhist practice offered here presents it as a realm that was associated with protesting Mongols while not necessarily following the same political or diplomatic path. It presents a snapshot of a vision of Tibetan Buddhist society that could potentially be allied with, or at least not run contrary to, Ming interests.

Another common element across the *Hua Yi yiyu* documents was a tendency to depict Mongolian history prior to the Ming in terms of a genealogy of rulers whose shared Mongolian past extended from the birth of Chinggis Qan through to the events that were under discussion in the document at hand.⁴⁰ The documents collectively created a transhistorical category of “Mongols” by charting a lineage that was anchored in a few key figures. One letter accuses Toghan Temür, the last Yuan emperor (who fled the capital as Ming forces overtook it), of neglecting his duties and ultimately bringing about the fall of the Yuan dynasty. The figure to whom the letter was addressed, A-zha-shi-li 阿札失里 (or Ajasiri), was urged to consider himself and his family as part of this longer Mongolian history that extended through the Yuan and was punctuated by the career of Toghan Temür, and was in turn part of a larger history of ruling families in and across the empire. According to the narrative emerging from these documents, the success of a Mongol leader depended on the affection he showed or withheld from the people he was charged

³⁹ *Hua Yi yiyu* (1918), 2a:8a–12a (Rescript to monk Rinchen bZangpo).

⁴⁰ See, for example, *Hua Yi yiyu* (1918), 2a:24a–28b (Rescript to the Board of Rites to be forwarded to Anda Naghacu), and 2b:5a–7a (Letter from Torghocar).

with leading. The letters often invoke examples of effective and ineffective leadership, with Toghan Temür as the paradigmatic case of the latter.⁴¹ Understood collectively as a kind of historical account, these letters provided a way of periodizing Mongol genealogy in terms of its relation to the Ming, often based on cycles of benevolent rule.⁴² According to another letter, the history of the Mongols could be traced as a genealogy of benevolence to a deserving people, and of submission to a more potentially benevolent ruler by unkind leaders. The availability of a moral education, and of a way to ensure moral leadership, was also at issue for the history that was transmitted to translators.

Probably the most common historical theme in the *Hua Yi yiyu* documents is a recurring discussion of the submission of local Mongol leaders and their followers to Ming rule. Many of the documents were the products of recent submissions, functioned as the written technologies by which submissions occurred, or invoked submissions in the course of a narration that contextualized whatever matter was under discussion in the document at hand. Tales of obedient submission were occasionally contrasted with reports of Mongol “bandits” who had been engaged in some sort of combat. (“Bandits,” a derogatory term as used here, could refer to any number of people who refused to submit to Ming rule and took arms in protest).

This embedding of a historical education into language training was not limited to the student-translators at the Mongolian Bureau: most of the language bureaus at the College produced documentary *laiwen* collections that can be read as offering a particular perspective on the past and present of the regions that fell under the purview of each bureau and their relations with the Ming state.⁴³ However, because of its early date of compilation in the late fourteenth century and its

41 See *Hua Yi yiyu* (1918), 2a:24a–28b (Rescript to the Board of Rites to be forwarded to Anda Naghacu).

42 The use of history to forward an idea of government rooted in a benevolence-based statecraft was also a feature of Liu Sanwu’s preface to the *Hua Yi yiyu*. There, Liu provides an account of the history of the distinction between *Hua* and *Yi*, and justifies the need for translators, by invoking the kind of benevolence that comes from a moral education. The distinction between Chinese and barbarians (*yi*) had existed since antiquity, according to Liu. Despite the repeated efforts of a series of sages, that distinction could not be overcome, and this was due primarily to the differences in their spoken languages. If it was impossible to understand a man’s speech, one could not impart a moral education to him; expanded to the level of groups of men, this impossibility of rendering a moral education made it also impossible to ensure that their societies were properly ordered. This problem reached a particularly difficult point with the coming of Yuan rule.

43 In addition to the Mongolian Bureau *laiwen* collection, I have consulted *laiwen* collections from the Muslim, Jurchen, Siam, and Tibetan bureaus.

continued use thereafter, a reading of the Mongolian materials offers a particularly rich case of the continued use of language textbooks to transmit a particular vision of that world to early modern students.

Many questions emerge from this brief reading of Mongolian-Chinese translation documents with an eye to the broader historical sensibility that they made available to students of Mongolian language. We don't know how individual students like Wang Zilong read and understood these documents, or how the picture of Mongolian and Ming histories that they conveyed would have differed, if at all, from what the students had learned elsewhere. Still, at the very least, the narrative form taken by this history was notable and important: reading from a collection of individual, translated primary sources mostly associated with named authors is a very different experience from reading selections of a massive official history like the *Yuan History*. We also don't know the precise pedagogical context within which this text was embedded, or how students and instructors experienced it as part of a curriculum. It is unclear what other materials students at the College may have had available to supplement the history of the regions they studied.⁴⁴ We don't even know on what basis the compilers of the *Hua Yi yiyu* decided to include the documents they did, or (just as interestingly) what they purposefully left out.

Despite this ambiguity, though, the act of asking these kinds of questions about the materials of language learning and the technologies of translation in late medieval and early modern China is already a step toward integrating a very different range of textual materials than are usually at the forefront of discussion into the wider dialogue of global medieval and early modern historiography, including both the histories written by us and those written between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries. Sometimes, it is only by asking the unanswerable questions that we are able to change the character of the discussion. By training our eyes to read translated Mongolian-Chinese materials as a kind of history, even if we don't ultimately see the answers we're looking for in these texts, perhaps this act of refocusing will help us see new phenomena when we return our new eyes to other materials in other contexts. Indeed, historical writing is itself always an act of translation, whether that translation is a movement between present and past, fragments and narratives, or materials and language.⁴⁵

44 Wang Zongzai, director of the College for four months in 1578, compiled a guidebook to the regions that were included under the purview of each language bureau. It is not clear, however, what the actual readership of his *Siyi guan kao* was and whether students at the College had access to it.

45 There is much more to be said on this topic. I thank Carol Symes for her inspiration in thinking about the connections between historians and translators in these terms.

4.

Though many of them left little or no named mark on the historical record, and it can be extraordinarily difficult to trace them or their histories, language students and translators like Wang Zilong helped shape the medieval and early modern worlds. From a perspective rooted in Ming history, these translators were responsible for mediating and facilitating the diplomatic, commercial, and other modes of communication from which something like a medieval or early modern globe emerged. We may not have access to the details of their days, and, in order to bring a student like Wang to life in these pages, we had to translate the translator across the realms of confirmable fact and probable conjecture. We may never know exactly how and when they used the documentary archive of materials associated with them. But as readers and translators today, we can at least get a sense of the epistemic landscape of foreign language pedagogy through a close reading of the materials available to students.

There is a much fuller story to tell of the spaces, texts, and practices of medieval and early modern translators of foreign languages within the Ming empire. That story begins by mapping a path through some of these pedagogical materials to facilitate a close reading of them as literature. Taking another look at documents that aren't typically described as "literary"—glossaries, textbooks, dictionaries, student worksheets—and reading them with an attentiveness to their artistry and capacity for storytelling opens up new ways of contextualizing and reading a history from them. It invites an approach to reading that is informed by the kind of sophistication we bring to studies of comparative literature and cultural history, rather than a narrow disciplinary approach that situates dictionaries within the field of lexicography, textbooks within the history of education, and so on. By considering textbooks as literature here, there emerges an understanding of one kind of purpose that foreign language texts like the *Hua Yi yiyu* served for readers who worked closely with them: for Ming translation students, Mongolian language learning was simultaneously an education in Mongolian history. We can provisionally extend this mode of reading, if not the conclusion, to other pedagogical materials at other College bureaus, or even potentially to language-learning contexts elsewhere in the medieval and early modern worlds. Much of the time, then as now, language learning was arguably about much more than just linguistic competence.

We can also take another lesson from this case. Though researching Chinese history depends on a mastery of Chinese texts, the Ming state was multilingual, and it is necessary to go beyond Chinese-language materials to understand the encounters of what we now define as "China" within medieval and early modern Eurasian networks. The people who speak to us from this documentary archive

of Chinese history were themselves translated across languages and context in their lifetimes. Nekelei, the Mongolian chieftain who turned toward the light of the Ming; Qonici, who became at least one and perhaps many other selves in Chinese; Wang Zilong, who both existed across languages and helped others do so as well—all of them are part of Chinese history and none of them existed comfortably solely in Chinese. In writing our histories of the medieval and early modern globes, we need to honor their itinerancy and multiplicity, and be itinerant and multiple ourselves. Our labor and that of Ming translators, after all, is not all that different. Working amid what could be a bewildering range of differences—of terms, scripts, and concepts—Wang Zilong and his fellow Ming translators nonetheless used their tools to manufacture relationships that allowed them to weave coherent stories. They created samenesses between the qualities of men in foreign scripts and those in Chinese, between bodies and their actions in Mongolian texts, for example, and those in Chinese. Word by word, they invented equivalents through juxtapositions on the page, creating translated bestiaries, heavenly and urban landscapes, and histories (among much else). Modern historians also work to make historical and documentary relationships visible, to build bridges where there were none before, and to find ways to translate very different languages of discipline, document, and medium into a common conversation. Just as translation can create a form of history, so history is a kind of translation.

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Abstract Ming China maintained relationships with neighboring peoples such as the Mongols by educating bureaucrats trained to translate many different foreign languages. While the reference works these men used were designed to facilitate their work, they also conveyed a specific vision of the past and a taxonomy of cultural differences that constitute valuable historical sources in their own right, illuminating the worldview of the Chinese-Mongolian frontier.

Keywords Wang Zilong, Ming Dynasty, China, Mongol, Chinggis Qan, *Hua Yi yiyu*, Yuan Dynasty, translation, Mongolian language, *Siyi guan*, *Huitong guan*.