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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Communications and "Communicators" in the Yuan and Early Ming

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Abstract

Having conquered a vast multi-lingual domain, the Mongols needed to devise a means of communication with the population. In earlier Chinese dynasties, individuals had translated Buddhist texts, treaties, and commercial agreements, but the Mongols in China founded government agencies and recruited Chinese and non-Chinese interpreters and translators to provide these services. Attempting to unify his lands, Khubilai Khan, who founded the Yuan dynasty, commissioned 'Phags-pa, a Tibetan Buddhist monk, to develop a written script that could be used for many languages. Despite repeated injunctions from the Yuan court, the script was used almost solely for such government issuances as paper money, seals, and *paiza*, objects which were markers of status or permission for a variety of activities or to ensure safe passage through the Mongol domains. Linguistic unity, via the 'Phags-pa script or a lingua franca eluded the Mongols, although Persian and Turkic were employed for specific purposes. The succeeding Ming dynasty learned from the Mongols of the need for translators and interpreters and established colleges of translators and interpreters.

Keywords: 'Phags-pa (or Square) script; *paiza*; Interpreters Institute; lingua franca; College of Interpreters; College of Translators

How, in tangible terms, did the Mongols govern the multi-linguistic territories that they occupied in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries? How did they communicate with the local elites, as well as with representatives—envoys, merchants, scientists, entertainers, and soldiers—of foreign lands? Who served as intermediaries in such conversations? Who transmitted Mongol orders and how did they do so? Did material objects, on occasion, substitute for language in communication? Was there a lingua franca that could facilitate interaction? How many Mongols knew the local languages? How did the Mongol policy toward foreign languages influence the early Ming dynasty? Some of these questions cannot be answered because of the paucity of sources on interpretation and translation in both the Yuan and Ming dynasties. This essay offers evidence that may be useful in providing partial answers, which encompass ability and authority, to these questions.

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Interpreters and Translators in Pre-yuan Times

Written accounts and anecdotes yield basic information about official interpreters as early as the Northern Wei dynasty (383–435), although there are also scattered references in the Han-dynasty histories (206 BCE–220 CE).[1] Private interpreters who may have served as intermediaries and may have played valuable roles in relations between Chinese and foreigners are scarcely mentioned in the sources. Commerce along the borders and in the capitals required interpreters and translators who could read foreign documents and "contracts," yet the sources are almost totally silent about those with such skills in foreign languages. Moreover, since much of the population was illiterate, the Chinese courts found it difficult to find competent translators. Thus, although official interpreters and translators did not engage in manual labor, they could also be considered "workers," and the various dynasties of China eventually valued their abilities and services.

To be sure, private individuals, but not officials, in the early Chinese dynasties had certainly translated religious works, particularly Buddhist writings. They translated Buddhist texts from Kuchan, Sanskrit, and Sogdian into Chinese; and Kumarajiva (344–414), one of the most renowned figures, appears to have founded a translation bureau to undertake such projects.[2] Yet no official government translators were involved in these efforts. Contracts in a variety of non-Chinese languages have been discovered, but very little is known of the translators, except that they appear not to have been officials.

Government offices sporadically employed interpreters as early as the Later Han dynasty. Most of these interpreters were of foreign, not Chinese, origin. Because the most important court officials did not regard them highly, they were often omitted in the sections on government offices in the dynastic histories. They had the responsibility of caring for foreign envoys, supervising the groups who provided lodging, meals, and transport. During the Tang dynasty (618–907), a cosmopolitan dynasty that permitted and encouraged foreigners to come to China, the court founded the *sifang guan* for interpreters.[3] The *sifang guan's* tasks were to prepare proper facilities, including lodging, food, and possible banquets, and to arrange meetings for foreign ambassadors. To be sure, some of the interpreters themselves were foreigners. Some of the translators were also foreigners, but the government did not accord them a high rank. During the Song dynasty, Kitan translators participated in the negotiations that led to the Treaty of Shanyuan between the Chinese court and the Kitans in 1005.[4] Both the Kitans and the Song needed translators to provide them with the details of the Shanyuan agreement. Yet these translators and interpreters were not given much credit and are hardly mentioned in contemporary texts.

[1]Pamela Crossley, "Structure and Symbol in the Role of Ming-Qing Foreign Translation Bureaus," *Central and Inner Asian Studies* 5 (1991), 39; Yu Ying-shih, *Trade and Expansion in Han China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 143. The citation of Chinese sources has been kept to a minimum in these notes because articles with a comprehensive listing are in Morris Rossabi, "Ming and Inner Asia," in *The Cambridge History of China, 1368–1644*, Part 2, edited by Denis Twitchett and Frederick Mote (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 221n1.

[2]Valerie Hansen, *The Silk Road* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 70. Hansen provides additional details on such translations, see 56–74.

[3]Denis Sinor, "Interpreters in Medieval Inner Asia," *Asian and African Studies* 16.3 (1982), 304.

[4]For an analysis of the language used in the Treaty, see Wang Gungwu, "The Rhetoric of a Lesser Empire: Early Sung Relations with Its Neighbors," in *China among Equals*, edited by Morris Rossabi (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 54–59.

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Mongol Empire and Foreign Languages

The Mongols occupied a vast domain composed of numerous peoples with diverse religions, means of livelihood, and languages.[5] The written language was a prime concern from the outset of their interactions with other groups. As Chinggis Khan's (ca. 1162–1227) leading biographer wrote, "The illiterate Genghis Khan was also quick to grasp the importance of the written word, which would ensure that his wishes and his laws would be preserved accurately and without alteration for future generations."[6] Thus, he commissioned the development of a written language based on the Uyghur script, which, in turn, derived from the Sogdian and originally from Aramaic. His and his descendants' eventual recognition of the importance of written languages in their multi-ethnic empire influenced their attitudes and policies toward interpretation and translation.

It was the Mongols who elevated the status of interpreters (*tongshi*) and translators (*yishi*), along with other experts. They repeatedly sought foreign specialists, including skilled administrators, military engineers, astronomers, physicians, or anyone who offered tangible benefits. It is no accident that the Mongol recruitment of such experts led to advances in cartography, astronomy, use of siege engines, and medicine.[7] The Mongols quickly understood their need of foreign experts but did not initially recognize the importance of interpreters and translators. They initially found scribes who could serve as hoc translators.[8] As they occupied more and more territories, however, they eventually became aware of the significance of proper translations and interpretations of the multiple languages of their empire's subjects. At first, as Matthew Paris (ca. 1200–1259) reported, the Mongols "know no other country's language except of their own, and of this all other nations are ignorant."[9] In time, Chinggis Khan became aware that captured Uyghurs, Jurchens, or Kitans, with training in Mongolian, could be sent to the camps of potential enemy troops to persuade them to lay down their arms. In addition, the Uyghurs and Kitans performed invaluable services in the bureaucracy because some were literate, had administrative experience, and had a basic knowledge of Mongolian.[10] In addition, they would eventually translate Uyghur, Tibetan, and Chinese works into Mongolian.[11]

[5]The multiplicity of languages prompted a fourteenth-century Yemeni King to commission the production of glossaries for some of them. See Peter Golden, ed. *The King's Dictionary: The Rasūlid Vocabularies in Arabic, Persian, Turkic, Greek, Armenian, and Mongol* (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

[6]Paul Ratchnevsky, *Genghis Khan: His Life and Legacy*, translated by Thomas Haining (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 94; originally published in German as *Činggis Khan: sein Leben und Wirken* (Wiesbaden: F. Steiner, 1983).

[7]On cartography, see Hyunhee Park, *Mapping the Chinese and Islamic Worlds* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); on astronomy, see Nathan Sivin, *Granting the Seasons: The Chinese Astronomical Reform of 1280* (New York: Springer, 2009); on the recruitment of foreigners who could use siege engines, see Song Lian, et al. *Yuanshi* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1976), 203:4544–4545; and on medicine, see Reiko Shinno, *The Politics of Chinese Medicine and Mongol Rule* (London: Routledge, 2016).

[8]For a list of these scribes and early translators, see György Kara, *Books of the Mongolian Nomads: More than Eight Centuries of Mongolian Writing*, translated by John Krueger (Bloomington: Indiana University Research Institute for Inner Asian Studies), 36–38.

[9]Cited in Jorgen Bisch, *Mongolia, Unknown Land*, translated by Reginald Spink (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1963), 27.

[10]On the Uyghurs and other Turks employed by the Mongols, see Igor de Rachewiltz, "Turks in China under the Mongols: A Preliminary Investigation of Turco-Mongol Relations in the 13th and 14th Century" in *China among Equals*, 281–310 and Thomas Allsen, "The Yuan Dynasty and the Uighurs of Turfan" in *China among Equals*, 243–80.

[11]For such translations, see Kara, *Books of the Mongolian Nomads*, 44 and 49.

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Nonetheless, the Franciscan William of Rubruck (ca. 1210–ca. 1270), who served as an envoy to Möngke Khaghan (r. 1251–1259), and his Mongol hosts repeatedly expressed displeasure at the lack of competent interpreters. For example, the letter William conveyed from King Louis IX (St. Louis, 1214–1270) to the Mongol commander Sartaq (d. 1256) was misinterpreted. The French king had simply requested that William be permitted to preach and to seek converts and then congratulated Sartaq on his conversion to Christianity, albeit the Nestorian sect. The erroneous translation that the Mongol commander received (perhaps because other emissaries had proposed this possibility) was that Louis wanted assistance in a campaign against the Islamic world in a Crusade. William had learned about this mistranslation "during the last phase of [his] journey,"[12] only after this misunderstanding had generated problems. He also continued to complain about such inaccuracies until he encountered, at Möngke Khaghan's court, the captured French craftsman Guillaume Boucher's adopted son who accurately represented his words.[13] Xu Ting, one Chinese traveler to the Mongols' domain, was also disdainful of interpreters, noting that "they put on the airs of power and wealth, wangling *saugha* [gifts], and demanding things to eat."[14]

Other Western missions to the Mongols had a somewhat easier time. Benedict the Pole and two Turks, Temür and Shonkkur, accompanied the Franciscan John of Plano Carpini (ca. 1185–1252) on his trip to the Mongol ruler Güyüg (ca. 1206–1248), helped him as interpreters of Slavic and Mongolian languages, and translated Güyüg's letter to the Pope from Mongolian into Latin.[15] On another mission, which reached the Mongol commander Baiju (1210–1260), a Papal letter was translated into Persian. On the other side, the Nestorian Rabban Sauma (ca. 1220–1294) who was sent in 1287 by the Mongols to propose an alliance against the Mamluks of Egypt had an elaborate and sophisticated theological discussion in Rome with the College of Cardinals, who could rely on men who were able to interpret from Persian to Latin versa, as well as Italian, and vice versa.[16] Most of his conversations with Europeans were in Persian, but he had at least two Italian speakers in his entourage. Yet, there was a dearth of interpreters in Europe, which prompted Francesco Balducci Pegolotti (ca. 1290–1347), the Italian who provided a guide book for travel all the way to China, to advise travelers to devote considerable effort to finding a good interpreter or "dragoman."[17] The Catalonian writer Ramon of Lull (ca. 1232–1316) went a step further and advocated the establishment of a school for fifty Mongols and ten friars to learn each other's languages.[18]

Khubilai Khan and 'Phags-pa

Even more instructive was Khubilai Khan's (1215–1294) order to the Tibetan 'Phags-pa Lama (1235–1280) to create a more inclusive script for Mongolian and other languages in

[12]Peter Jackson and David Morgan, eds., *The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1990), 43.

[13]Jackson and Morgan, *Mission of Friar William of Rubruck*, 108, 232. See Leonardo Olschki, *Guillaume Boucher: A French Artist at the Court of the Khans* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1946).

[14]Christopher Atwood, *The Rise of the Mongols: Five Chinese Sources* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2021), 107.

[15]Paul Pelliot, "Les Mongols et la Papauté. I," *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien* 23 (1923), 3–30; Christopher Dawson, ed. Mission to Asia (London: Sheed and Ward, 1955), 79–84.

[16]Morris Rossabi, *Voyager from Xanadu* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 122–25.

[17]Henry Yule, *Cathay and the Way Thither* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1914), 3:151.

[18]See his *Blanquerna: A Thirteenth Century Romance*, translated by E. Allison Peers (London: Jarrolds Publishers, 1926).

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the Mongol domains.[19] Khubilai, the founder of the Yuan dynasty in China in 1271, knew Mongolian and could understand spoken Chinese, but he sought a written language that was more accurate in its depiction of Mongolian than the prevailing Uyghur script.[20] Yet, perhaps more important, he wanted the script to reproduce the sounds of both Mongolian and Chinese. It needed to be suitable for the transcription of diverse languages in the Empire. After all, Khubilai was aware that the Jurchens and the Khitans who had occupied all or much of North China from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries had developed their own written languages. Why should the Mongols not follow that precedent and provide a State Script (*Guozi*), which would be the appellation for the 'Phags-pa script? With the assistance of scholars and other monks, 'Phags-pa devised the script and presented it to the court in 1269.[21]

The government used the new writing system on imperial edicts, mostly on stone slabs, pages of books (including the *Xiaojing* or *Classic of Filial Piety)*, silk scrolls, birch bark, paper money, coins, seals, silver bottles, lacquer bowls, stelae, passports, and porcelains, and sometimes merely representing the owner's name.[22] Even the Juyong fortress on the so-called Great Wall on the Northern China border bears 'Phags-pa inscriptions, with Buddhist messages; examples of objects using the script reached such distant locations as Turfan and Dunhuang in Northwest China.[23]

Khubilai intended the written script to be used for a variety of different languages, not only Mongolian, in his domains, but he and his successors would be disappointed because knowledge of the script did not spread widely. According to the *Yuanshi*, the official dynastic history of the Yuan, and other sources, the Mongols repeatedly implored their subjects to use this new 'Phags-pa or Square Script.[24] They even promoted its spread by employing it on passports, inscriptions, paper money, and porcelains. The court set up a school to teach the script to officials, but students did not take the time to master this artificially designed and imposed script, which did not arise from ordinary people and society at large.[25] Despite all these efforts, the literate population did not use the new script. Yet the Mongols' considerable efforts reveal the value they accorded to languages.

Khubilai perceived the use of 'Phags-pa, or the Square Script as it was also known, as a means of unifying the disparate groups that the Mongols now governed because of their

[19]Song Lian, et al. *Yuanshi* 202:4518.

[20]Paul Pelliot, "Les systèmes d'écriture en usage chez les anciens Mongols," *Asia Major o.s.* 2.2 (1925), 284–89; on Khubilai's knowledge of Chinese, see Herbert Franke, "Could the Mongol Emperors Read and Write Chinese?" *Asia Major* 3 (1952), 28–41.

[21]Song Lian, et al. *Yuanshi*, 6:121. 'Phags-pa himself wrote works on philosophy and religion. For a translation of one of these, see Constance Hoog, trans., *Prince Jin-gim's Textbook of Tibetan Buddhism* (Leiden: Brill, 1983).

[22]See, for example, the inscription on a later blue-and-white porcelain dish in the Freer Gallery of Art collection (Registration No. 62–17). For an early notice of these inscriptions on Chinese porcelains, see Koyama Fujio, "Pa-ssu-pa moji aru Shina kotōji," *Gasetsu* 1 (1937), 23–31. For the silver and lacquer objects, which have the owner's name, see James Watt, et al. *The World of Khubilai Khan: Chinese Art in the Yuan Dynasty* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 287, 296.

[23]Nicholas Poppe, *Mongolian Monuments in HP'ags Script*, translated and edited by John Krueger (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrasssowitz, 1957), for translations of these two inscriptions. D. Tumurtogoo, ed., *Mongolian Monuments in 'Phags-pa Script* (Taipei: Institute of Linguistics, Academia Sinica, 2010) cites seventy such examples.

[24]Poppe, *Mongolian Monuments*, 139, 147; Paul Ratchnevsky, *Un code des Yuan* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1937), 149–51.

[25]Poppe, *Mongolian Monuments*, 142.

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conquests, but his efforts to compel its use from the top of the government proved to be an insuperable task.[26] He organized schools and special academies to teach the script, but repeated government injunctions show that the population did not abide by the regulations. As Nicholas Poppe has written, "Resistance taken to the measures to enforce the use of the hP'ags-pa was apparently overcome with great difficulty and the new script continued to spread very slowly."[27] Adding to the difficulties was that forgeries could more readily be pawned off on officials who had no knowledge of the 'Phags-pa written script and had no retainers who could read the inscriptions. A final problem was that local officials, rather than the court, could commission the production of passports or *paiza* (Mongolian adaptation of Chinese *paizi;* the original Mongolian was *gerege*), which heightened the possibly of forgeries.

The Mongols no doubt hoped that 'Phags-pa, their planned universal script, would become widespread, which would confirm Mongol imperial power over the large Eurasian domain they occupied. The use and perhaps prevalence throughout their domains of a written script they had commissioned would contribute greater legitimacy for their "empire."

Paiza

Besides inscriptions, books, and other genres, another form of communication in the Yuan dynasty was the *paiza*, a tablet or tally, which, on occasion, used the 'Phags-pa script and was granted to Chinese officials, religious dignitaries, and foreign travelers. The Yuan court was concerned about forged or fake *paiza*, but it generally approved of this tablet system, which, curiously enough, contained inscriptions in languages that foreign officials could not read but which they respected.[28]

Such material objects as the *paiza* offer clues about societies which supplement or, in some cases, substitute for written historical texts. The characters or words inscribed on the *paiza*, often in 'Phags-pa script, were frequently not as significant as the display of the object.[29] Could the *paiza* really be effective if the writing could not be deciphered? The writing could be incomprehensible, but the possessor, by showing the object to officials, could request and be granted services. *The material object counted for more than the content of the writing*. It could be a powerful force for government authority, even if foreigners could not understand the script. The Yuan dynasty, as well as local officials throughout the empire, employed *paiza* for a variety of functions, but this article focuses on their use as passports because it fits in with the themes of authority and ability in the rest of this special issue of the *Journal of Chinese History*. The *paiza* used as passports

[26]Kara, *Books of the Mongolian Nomads*, 52, offers another explanation for Khubilai's desire for the 'Phags-pa writing system. He "expressed a striving for a break with the traditions of the northern homeland [Mongol lands]."

[27]Poppe, *Mongolian Monuments*, 6.

[28]Patrick Bixby, *License to Travel: A Cultural History of the Passport* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022), refers to the *paiza* as among the first passports. A reviewer of the book (*New York Times Book Review*, December 4, 2022, 57) writes of them as "golden tablets issued to the Polo brothers by Genghis Khan's grandson." Genghis Khan's grandson is, of course, Khubilai Khan.

[29]In contrast to the inscriptions on Ming dynasty porcelains, bricks, and other material objects, which indicated ownership and guaranteed quality. See Dagmar Schäfer, "Inscribing the Artifacts and Inspiring Trust: The Changing Role of Markings in the Ming Era," *East Asian Science* 5.2 (2011), 260–62.

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served as symbols of authority for the government and, at the same time, emphasized the roles of interpreters and translators, due to their abilities in understanding foreign languages and cultures, to determine which foreigners would receive these precious artifacts and, most important, have opportunities to use and access the resources of the elaborate postal station system the Mongols had devised. The postal stations possessed horses, sheep, carts, and oxen, and provided lodging and food for officials, envoys, and merchants.[30] The *paiza* were honored in the postal stations and other official hostelries in many regions in Asia and the Middle East (which could prove vital for travelers), although officials could not understand the writings on the object.

One of the most essential features in this system of transport was the various *paiza*, which were used as passports and patents by favored foreign rulers, envoys, and merchants who arrived at court. Provincial commanders also, on occasion, issued them to both natives and foreigners. Some of the Mongol rulers, including Ögödei (r. 1229–1241) and Möngke (r. 1251–1259) banned the Mongol nobility from producing *paiza* or prevented merchants from possessing them, but they could not totally control their issuance or use.[31]

Metallic, often made of iron, copper, or silver, and oblong or circular in shape, the *paiza* could readily be attached to a belt or worn around the neck. Several of these were produced during Chinggis Khan's era, but later rulers, including Khubilai Khan, themselves commissioned their production and use. Marco Polo (1254–1324), among others, mentioned that the Mongol court also used specific *paiza*, which were oblong, as indications of rank for its military officials. Leading commanders received gold tablets, while lower-ranked military men were granted silver *paiza*, which were, on occasion, returned to the government on the individual's death, but could also be transferred or inherited.[32] Another *paiza* permitted travel at night but did not include permission to use postal stations. Local officials granted such *paiza*, which were made of copper, not gold or silver, and had to be returned to the authorities on completion of a night-time journey.

[30]For additional details about the decorations and use of the *paiza*, see Christopher Atwood, "Symbols of Authority in the Mongol Empire," The Rubin: Project Himalayan Art, https://projecthimalayanart.rubinmuseum.org/mongol-messengers-badge-paizi-or-gerege-in-pakpascript/?fbclid=IwAR0_ppyNOjbDhCLNZqbLzgFYqhNoruRIQGR3KsSF_MdWAYcHH14g; on the postal station system, see Dang Baohai, *Meng Yuan yizhan jiaotong yanjiu* (Beijing: Kunlun chubanshe, 2006); Peter Olbricht, Das *Postwesen in China unter der Mongolenherrschaft im 13. Und 14.* Jahrhundert (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1954); and Hosung Shim, "The Postal Roads of the Great Khans under the Mongol-Yuan Empire," *Journal of Song Yuan Studies* 44 (2014), 405–69.

[31]Christopher Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire* (New York: Facts on File, 2004), 433–34

[32]Baohai Dang, "The *Paizi* of the Mongol Empire," *Zentralasiatische Studien* 31 (2002), 31–62 describes the different kinds of *paiza* and their uses. See also his "The Paizi of the Mongol Empire (continued)," *Zentralasiatische Studien* 32 (2003), 7–10. He provides a useful bibliography of works on the *paiza*. An illuminating early study is Cai Meibiao, "Yuandai yuanpai liangzhong zhi kaoshi," *Lishi yanjiu* 4 (1980), 124–32. For Marco's description, see Henry Yule and Henri Cordier, *The Book of Ser Marco Polo the Venetian Concerning the Kingdoms and Marvels of the East*, rpt (Amsterdam: Philo Press, 1975), 350–51. An unusual grant of a *paiza* was to the leader of the Assassins after the Mongols defeated them in 1256. However, the *paiza* did not protect him. He was subsequently murdered on his trip to the Mongol domains in the East. See Laura Venegoni, "Hülagüs Campaign in the West (1256–1260)," in *Eran ud Aneran: Studies Presented to Boris Il'ič Maršak on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, edited by Matteo Compareti, et al. (Venice: Libreria Editrice Cafoscarina, 2006), 637.

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In addition to the actual *paiza* that have survived, visual representations in art attest to the importance of the objects, even if the writing on the tablet is obscured. For example, a Persian illustrated manuscript of the great historian Rashid al-Din's work shows a figure accompanying a royal procession with a *paiza* on his neck.[33] The handles on the *paiza*, on occasion, had depictions of tiger heads, a Tibetan influence.

The inscriptions on the *paiza* were often in gold or silver and were frequently formulaic, although gold writing indicated urgent messages. A typical inscription which was designed to intimidate potential robbers or hostile rulers is found in the *paiza* purchased by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1994. It states: "By the strength of Eternal Heaven, an edict of the Emperor. He who has no respect shall be guilty."[34] The inscription on the *paiza* at the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg has a similar message: "By the power of Eternal Heaven, may the name of Möngke Khan be revered. He who does not have it shall perish and die."[35] Very few *paiza* have survived, and they are found in museums in China, such as the National Museum in Beijing, the Gansu Provincial Museum, the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Provincial Museum, the National History Museum and the Chinggis Khan Museum in Mongolia, and in Russia, Japan, Turkey, and at least one in the United States at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and several other venues. The inscriptions were in Kitan, Tangut, Chinese, the Uyghur script of Mongolian, and Persian, but the 'Phags-pa or Square Script is predominant in the surviving *paiza*.

Despite the Mongols' eagerness to have the Square Script as a universal written language, few Mongols and even fewer foreigners were conversant with the script.[36] A *paiza* was meant to identify cherished visitors, yet many in China, not to mention the foreigners in whose lands the bearers of these passports traveled, could not read the inscriptions. Would this attempt to intimidate robbers or enemies who might harm travelers be successful by these means? It appears that the *paiza*, *the object itself, and not the inscription*, was the real means of communication.

What was the purpose of using an incomprehensible script on a passport? Why did the Mongol rulers in China continue to produce and use *paiza*? Here is a case where the appearance of the object was more significant than the writing. Although officials in China and the Middle East could not read the message on the *paiza*, they recognized the object. Its appearance generally had the desired effect. Fear or willingness to accommodate the Mongol rulers prompted foreigners as far away as the Middle East and Russia to provide needed services or to allow safe passage for travelers. Several decades of futility in promoting the 'Phags-pa script in China did not deter the Yuan court, but it eventually

[33]Linda Komaroff and Stefano Carboni, *The Legacy of Genghis Khan: Courtly Art and Culture in Western Asia, 1256–1353* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 69, 250. On the Persian use of *paiza*, see Sheila Blair, "East Meets West Under the Mongols," *The Silk Road* 3.2 (2005), 29–30; the Ilkhanate or Mongol rulers in West Asia also adopted the *paiza* and provided them, similarly, to commanders, to foreign envoys, and to postal station workers entrusted with sending urgent messages. Corruption crept in, and local commanders, wives of the Khans, and others provided them illegally to favored individuals See Kim Hodong, "The Postal Relay System in Western Asia Under the Mongol Rule and Ghazan Khan's Reforms," *Journal of Northeast Asian History* 19.1 (2022), 43–85.

[34]Translated by Morris Rossabi. See James Watt, *The World of Khubilai Khan: Chinese Art in the Yuan Dynasty* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 10–11.

[35]Claudius Müller, et al. *Dschingis Khan und seine Erben: Das Weltreich des Mongolen* (Munich: Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde, 2005), 29.

[36]After the collapse of the Mongol dynasty in China, the 'Phags-pa script was no longer used, but traces of its letters survived in Tibet; and as Poppe writes, "in the most recent times, the legends on the seals of the Dalai Lama were cut with hP'ags-pa letters"; *Mongolian Monuments*, 15.

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recognized its failure and added Chinese and Persian inscriptions to the *paiza*. By supplementing the 'Phags-pa with the indigenous languages, the court thus recognized that the Mongols and Chinese of Yuan China, the Ilkhans or Mongol rulers in the Middle East and their subjects, and the Golden Horde in Russia, by the fourteenth century, surely had scant knowledge of the 'Phags-pa script. Nonetheless, it also became aware that the symbols and designs on the *paiza* were sufficient to attain the objectives of protecting the traveler and providing him with the assistance he required during his travels.

Initially, in the thirteenth century, the Yuan could use the 'Phags-pa script for *paiza* and other purposes such as on paper money, seals, and porcelain, but governance of diverse groups required knowledge of foreign languages. Mongol rulers needed to communicate with their subjects—both to learn from them and to explain Mongol policies and innovations. Despite their emphasis on foreign languages, for whatever reasons (perhaps due to the lack of organized institutes, specifically for them), few Mongols would learn Chinese; instead, they depended upon intermediaries to provide these services. Recruitment necessitated a specific government body and high status for interpreters. The Yuan court established the Interpreters Institute (*huitong guan*) in 1272 and abolished it in 1288,[37] perhaps due to a temporary suspicion of foreign Muslims, who were among the principal interpreters, and native Muslims, but restored it in 1292.[38] Two Commissioners-in-Chief administered the agency. A critical feature was that the Commissioners-in-Chief had a 4B rank in the 9-rank government system. In comparison, the Commercial Tax Superintendent had a 5B rank, and the Grain Transport Superintendent had a 5A rank. The relatively high rank of the Interpreters Institute's Commissioners-in-Chief attested to the value that Mongol rulers and bureaucrats accorded the skills provided by the Institute. No formal official body for interpreters had existed earlier. Chinese dynasties had recruited interpreters, but they had not incorporated them into the high levels of bureaucracy. Various government offices also appointed their own interpreters because of the substantial need for communication in this multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic empire. The salaries and other rewards for 4B officials were commensurate with their importance in the Yuan court.

The court could draw on numerous foreigners who knew Chinese to staff the Interpreters Institute. Kitanese and Jurchen officials in the Liao and Jin dynasties who had become fluent in Chinese were one source, and the Muslim populations of Central and West Asia, as well as the Muslims who had settled in China before the Mongol conquest, were another source. The historian Chen Yuan (1880–1971) was among the first scholars to offer evidence of such foreigners serving the Mongols, which is now a commonplace view, but he also cited foreigners who were exposed to Confucian

[37]Song Lian, et al. *Yuanshi*, 15:314, 85:2140; David Farquhar, *The Government of China under Mongolian Rule: A Reference Guide* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1990), 196.

[38]The controversy arose because Muslims would not eat Mongol-slaughtered animals at a banquet organized by Khubilai. On the Mongols' and Muslims' differing views on slaughtering animals, which created difficulties between the two groups, see Song Lian, et al. *Yuanshi*, 217–18 and Chen Gaohua, et al., *Yuan dian zhang: Da Yuan sheng zheng guo chao dian zhang* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011), 57, 11a–11b (1893–1894). For an analysis of the hostility bred by this difference, as well as by different attitudes toward circumcision, during Khubilai Khan's reign, see Liu Haiwei, "Following Their Own Customs: A Reexamination of Khubilai's 1280 Edict on Muslim Practices," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 142.4 (2002), 935–53 and Morris Rossabi, *Khubilai Khan: His Life and Times* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 200.

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learning.[39] He appeared amazed that a few even wrote commentaries on the Confucian classics and histories.

Some of the foreigners were recruited when the court needed interpreters. A Uyghur Buddhist who had received part of his instruction from the 'Phags-pa Lama served as a secretary at the court. The 'Phags-pa Lama had urged him to "serve the sage emperor [Khubilai Khan] with fidelity." Thus, when two Buddhist monks with excellent training as astronomers arrived at the court, Khubilai commanded the Uyghur to act as an interpreter. The *Yuanshi* account, which was based on a stele inscription written by the painter Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322), wrote that the monks asserted that "their qualifications were inferior to his [the Uyghur Buddhist]," which pleased Khubilai.[40] Another example was of a Mongol named Chaghan who had mastered Chinese and translated works from Chinese into Mongolian and vice versa. His translations primarily consisted of historical accounts, even a history of Vietnam.[41]

After 1315, a few Mongols and men of Muslim background entered the bureaucracy through the traditional system of passing the civil service examinations and becoming *jinshi*.[42] They served in government but were even better known as poets, composers, painters, calligraphers, and architects. The court, on occasion, recruited them to act as interpreters, although they were not part of the Interpreters Institute. The military had its own group of interpreters/soldiers, some of whom were foreigners. They were invaluable in negotiating peace settlements or surrenders.

The Yuan had welcomed and invited numerous foreigners to China. It doubtless had few difficulties in finding interpreters among all these new residents, particularly those who lived in other domains in the Mongol Empire. It had access to Turkic, Iranian, and Korean speakers, among others. Translators were a different matter. Translations of orders of submission, census lists, laws, and other documents were essential for administration of the empire, and the court could not be certain that interpreters could read and write the languages in which they had achieved speaking proficiency. The court needed a body to train translators, and, within a short time, it organized such an agency.

A lingua franca in the substantial territories conquered by the Mongols could certainly be helpful in diplomacy and commerce. If speakers of a particular language could be found in China, Russia, and Persia, communication could certainly be facilitated, but controversy has swirled around the issue of a lingua franca in Mongol times. Persian may have been the lingua franca of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, although Turkic has recently been suggested as the more representative language.[43] The Mongols' first allies, whom they, on occasion, recruited for their military were Turkic peoples who constituted a large percentage of the Mongol-led forces in Central Asia and southern

[39]Ch'en Yuan, *Western and Central Asians in China under the Mongols*, translated by Ch'ien Hsing-hai and L. Carrington Goodrich (Los Angeles: Monumenta Serica, 1966), 18–41.

[40]Ch'en Yuan, *Western and Central Asians*, 64–65.

[41]Ch'en Yuan, *Western and Central Asians*, 177–178.

[42]Ch'en Yuan, *Western and Central Asians*, 26–31.

[43]On support for Persian as the lingua franca, see Liu Yingsheng, "A Lingua Franca Along the Silk Road: Persian Language in China between the 14th and 16th Centuries" in *Aspects of the Maritime Silk Road: From the Persian Gulf to the East China Sea*, edited by Ralph Kauz (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010), 87–95. For Turkic, see Stephen Haw, "The Persian Language in Yuan-dynasty China: A Reappraisal," *East Asian History* 39 (2014), 5–32. For a differing viewpoint, see David Morgan, "Persian as a *Lingua Franca* in the Mongol Empire" in *Literacy in the Persianate World: Writing and the Social Order*, edited by Brian Spooner and William L. Hathaway (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 160–70.

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Russia. Turkic-language speakers could be found in China, northern Central Asia, and Russia in northern Asia. Persian-language speakers mostly resided in a southerly direction from the Yuan. Such renowned Persian historians as Ata-Malek Juvayni (1226–1283) and Rashid al-Din (1247–1318) produced works in this time that had a wide currency and status, and Persian-language speakers were present from China all the way to Europe.

The controversy may be somewhat overstated because there may not have been a lingua franca.[44] Different groups may have used specific languages for specific purposes —one for commerce, another for diplomacy, and still another for daily activities. Interpreters and translators were even more valuable under these circumstances, especially when diplomatic relations between two lands were the dominant issues. In promoting the 'Phags-pa script, Khubilai Khan sought gradually to move toward the use of a lingua franca and greater unity in the Mongol domains, but that effort had failed.

Translation and Interpretation Offices in the Ming Dynasty

Several scholars have brought attention to the remarkable Yuan influence on the Ming dynasty, citing, one example, the Ming court's establishment in 1407 of the College of Translators (*siyi guan)*, originally under the Hanlin Academy, and its founding in 1404 of the College of Interpreters (*huitong guan)* in Beijing, under the Ministry of Rites.[45] Training of interpreters and translators was indeed a major Yuan impact on the Ming. Despite the Ming's purported xenophobia, the court established these two offices to provide itself with their services. Paul Pelliot, Norman Wild, and Pamela Crossley, among other Western scholars, not to mention East Asian specialists, have studied the two institutions.[46]

Even before the founding of these two agencies, the Ming considered translation important and commissioned the production of glossaries, grammars, and documents to assist translators. The court recognized, for example, the need for translations of the Mongolian documents left behind by the Yuan rulers. As early as the reign of the first Ming emperor, a Sinicized Mongol named Huo Yuanjie (in Mongolian, Qoninci) helped to compile the *Hua Yi yiyu*, a glossary initially of Mongolian and Chinese, which offered a phonetic transcription of Mongolian.[47]

[44]Xin Wen also concluded that there was no lingua franca in a slightly earlier period of the Silk Road; see Xin Wen, *The King's Road: Diplomacy and the Remaking of the Silk Road* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), 196.

[45]For the Mongol influences, see, for example, David Robinson, *In the Shadow of the Mongol Empire: Ming China and Eurasia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), as well as Morris Rossabi, "Mongol Impact on China, with Preliminary Notes on Other Parts of the Mongol Empire," *Acta Via Serica* 5.2 (2020), 25–50. For these offices, see Charles Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985), 263–64, 448.

[46]Paul Pelliot, "Le Sseu-yi-kouan et le Houei-t'tong-kouan" in "Le Hôja et le Sayyid Husain de l'histoire des Ming," *Toung Pao* 38 (1948), 2:5 (Appendix III), 207–90; Crossley, "Structure and Symbol," 38–70; and Norman Wild, "Materials for the Study of the Ssu I Kuan," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 11 (1943–1946), 617–40.

[47]For studies of the glossaries, grammars, and documents, see Carla Nappi, "Tilting Toward the Light: Translating the Medieval World on the Ming–Mongolian Frontier," *The Medieval Globe* 2.1 (2015), 157–78 and Nappi, *Translating Early Modern China: Illegible Cities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021). Jurchen documents have survived. One study of a Jurchen glossary is found in Daniel Kane, *The Sino-Jurchen Vocabulary of the Bureau of Interpreters* (Bloomington: Research Institute of Inner Asian Studies, 1989).

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By the late sixteenth century, the College of Translators was composed of groups that translated Mongolian, Tibetan, Thai, Sanskrit (although there was a dearth of qualified Sanskrit translators), Uyghur, Burmese, Persian, Jurchen, Baiyi (spoken in the province of Yunnan) and Chiangmai (a Tai dialect spoken in Thailand). It did not, at various times, have translators in Siamese, and in one notorious case, in the late sixteenth century, the Ming court either detained or perhaps recruited Siamese envoys for the College of Interpreters.[48] The Chinese sources note that both the translators and the interpreters had poor salaries, low status, and little power. Although the Ming government needed their services, it did not accord them much prestige. Unlike interpreters in modern times or even interpreters of the later Qing dynasty, they had scant opportunities to visit or study abroad.[49] The interpreters collaborated with the Bureau of Receptions (*Zhuke qinglisi)* and the Court of Imperial Entertainments (*Guanglusi)* of the Ministry of Rites in the provision of food, accommodations, and banquets for foreign envoys, with the number and splendor of banquets dependent on the Ming court's assessment of the power of the lands they represented.[50] They also monitored the activities of foreign ambassadors who were, on occasion, merchants portraying themselves as official envoys to gain entry illegally into China to trade for Chinese goods. They sought to prevent the foreigners from engaging in illegal commerce and in such obstreperous behavior as drunken escapades.

Most of the sources highlight the supposed deficiencies of the two colleges. Although the interpreters and translators needed to pass three levels of exams to earn their positions, these accounts charge, perhaps unfairly, that the colleges lacked proper equipment and teachers and that many students in the colleges had failed the civil service examinations before seeking careers as translators. Students allegedly cut classes and missed examinations. The sources also accused many translators and interpreters of laziness and of seeking such employment because of the subsidies of rice, grain, and money they would receive, and several texts suggested that they used their positions to solicit bribes.[51] The court chronicles wrote that one such interpreter extorted gifts, including silver, from Central Asian envoys.[52] Under these circumstances, the leading officials at the court asserted that they could not recruit the best men for these offices,

[48]Nappi, *Translating Early Modern China*, 15–21.

[49]For example, the chief Chinese interpreter in the renowned Macartney embassy to China in the 1790s had the opportunity to study Latin and Italian in Naples. See Henrietta Harrison, *The Perils of Interpreting: The Extraordinary Lives of Two Translators between Qing China and the British Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 37–38.

[50]For details of their responsibilities, see Zhang Tingyu, *Mingshi* (Taipei: Guofang yanjiu yuan, 1962–1963), 56:618–620. For the ranking of envoys of different regions, see Shen Shixing, *DaMing huidian* (Taipei: Dongnan shubaoshe, 1963), 114:1674. For additional sources, see Morris Rossabi, "Ming Officials and Northwest China," in *Officials on the Chinese Borders* (Taipei: Academia Sinica, Institute of History and Philology, 2006), 476–78.

[51]English translations of the criticisms by Chinese officials may be found in Nolan Bensen, "The Tripod of Ming Foreign Policy: Land Borders, State Language Training, and Maritime Borders in the Long Shadow of the Mongol Empire" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2024), 122–24. More criticisms are mentioned in Crossley, "Structure and Symbol," 45–47. Criticisms of translators and interpreters persisted throughout traditional Chinese history. Officials in northwest China accused the interpreters of Turkic languages, many of whom were Turks, of corruption during the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). See Eric Schluessel, *Land of Strangers: The Civilizing Project in Qing Central Asia*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 80–82, 100–102.

[52]*Ming shilu: Wuzong shilu* 48:1 (Taipei: Academia Sinica, 1961).

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especially because, unlike the Yuan rulers, they sought Chinese, not solely native-born speakers, as interpreters and translators. Stating that they found it difficult to fill these positions, they were compelled, at various times, to recruit interpreters and translators involuntarily. By not providing sufficient funds for the colleges, their buildings, and repairs, the court contributed to some of the alleged problems.[53]

It is difficult to assess the credibility of these criticisms. The officials who wrote these accounts were often contemptuous of foreigners and foreign relations.[54] Yet the translators often provided accurate versions of letters sent to the Ming court from foreign lands in Asia, and interpreters could generally make themselves understood by foreigners.

It is also difficult to reconcile these negative views with the reports of travelers to the Ming court. Ghiyath al-Din Naqqash, one of the envoys sent by Tamerlane's son Shahrukh, reached China in 1419 and was dazzled by the banquets and entertainments the court provided. Nonetheless, he was just as impressed by the abilities of the interpreter who was "attached to the person of the Emperor … who knew Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Mongol, and Chinese."[55] During his stay, interpreters offered him information about China's rituals, economy, and legal system. Similarly, 'Ali Akbar Khatai, a Persian traveler and merchant who arrived in China in the early sixteenth century and wrote the Persian language *Khatay nameh*, learned about Chinese institutions from interpreters. His most important discovery was that the Zhengde Emperor (1506–1521) looked favorably upon Islam and may have converted to Islam.[56]

Another question is whether the court consulted with translators and interpreters in devising foreign policy, given that they had the greatest contact with foreign officials. Yet many in the court did not perceive them as highly competent and complained of their alleged deficiencies. David Robinson has challenged the court's view concerning at least one group. He has asserted that "the linguistic skills and cultural knowledge of Mongols proved useful to the Ming court in its relations with neighboring countries."[57] The court faced a dilemma: it did not entirely trust these experts, but it needed them as, after all, they were the most knowledgeable officials about foreigners.

Interpreters' travels and interactions with foreigners also yielded information about other lands. They contributed to knowledge about foreign areas—information that played a role in both Yuan and Ming dynasty foreign relations. Intelligence information, including maps and descriptions of important sites, would have been a prime desideratum for both courts, but Yuan and Ming officials also received reports of other lands' economies and cultures. To be sure, some of the reports may have been inaccurate or may have led to misconceptions. Nonetheless, aside from accounts from envoys, described below, interpreters' and translators' reports were among the few sources on

[53]Crossley, "Structure and Symbol," 45–46.

[54]On the other hand, they still believed they could shape the foreigners' views by exposing them to Chinese civilization. For example, they sent gifts of Confucian texts to Korea and Vietnam and Buddhist writings to Tibet. For this, see Felix Kuhn, "Much More Than Tribute: The Foreign Policy Instruments of the Ming Empire," *Journal of Chinese History* 5.1 (2021), 59–82.

[55]K.M. Maitra, *A Persian Embassy to China* (New York: Paragon Reprint, 1970), 59–60.

[56]Kaveh Hammet, "Children of Cain in the Land of Error: A Central Asian Merchant's Account of Governance and Society in Ming China," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 30.3 (2010), 434–48. On Ming and Ottoman relations, see Yuan Julian Chen, "Between the Islamic and Chinese Universal Empires: The Ottoman Empire, Ming Dynasty, and Global Age of Exploration," *Journal of Early Modern History* 25.5 (2021), 422–56.

[57]In "Images of Subject Mongols under the Ming Dynasty," *Late Imperial China* 25.1 (2004), 69.

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foreign lands. The judgements in these accounts had an impact on the two dynasties. In the very act of interpreting, interpreters, through nuance and shades of meaning, could also have considerable influence on negotiations. They could, at times, tone down the rhetoric to avert conflict among the parties. In sum, they "were responsible for mediating the diplomatic, commercial, and other modes of communication from which something like a medieval or early modern globe emerged."[58]

Looking comparatively, one might ask "how many of the European states in this period had government-sponsored offices to translate diplomatic documents from the Arab states or Mongol Russia?"[59] In his *Renaissance Diplomacy*, Garrett Mattingly showed that several of the European kingdoms had officials capable of reading and speaking other European languages but not languages of other civilizations as distant from Europe as China.[60]

Other Interpreters

Eunuchs and envoys to foreign lands added to the list of interpreters in Ming times. Several of the court eunuchs were foreign and were fluent in non-Chinese languages. They could serve as interpreters in dealings with foreign ambassadors. A few even traveled abroad as envoys. Isiha (fl. 1409–1451), a eunuch of Jurchen background, led a mission to his homeland in Manchuria; Li Da, another eunuch, accompanied an envoy named Chen Cheng (d. 1457) on his first mission to Central Asia, and two other eunuchs joined his two other embassies to the region;[61] and the renowned traveler Zheng He (1371–1433) who reached the east coast of Africa was a eunuch, although, in his case, whether he knew foreign languages is unclear. These eunuchs had not been trained as diplomats, but their fluency in one or another language certainly led to their appointments on embassies. Whether they could translate written documents is also uncertain.

The report of Chen Cheng to the Ming court and Ma Huan's (fl. 1413–1451) written account, *Yingyai shenglan*, offer additional evidence of the significant role of interpreters. Chen Cheng could readily describe the buildings, the markets, and the products of Shah Rukh's capital of Herat, but he needed information from an interpreter about marriage patterns, fasting during Ramadan, bathing practices, and the rearing of lions, all of which he included in his account.[62] Ma Huan, who traveled, by sea, with Zheng He to Southeast Asia, India, Persia, and the Middle East, met "someone who instructed him in the Arabic script and in either the Arabic or Persian language; and he became a proficient translator and interpreter."[63] Ma Li (fl. 1514–1556), an official who had worked in the Court of Imperial Entertainments and was probably a Muslim, continued this tradition, and wrote

[58]Nappi, "Tilting Toward the Light," 174.

[59]Morris Rossabi, *China and Inner Asia from 1368 to the Present Day* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975), 64–65.

[60]Garrett Mattingly, *Renaissance Diplomacy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1955).

[61]On the Isiha and Chen Cheng missions, see Morris Rossabi, "Two Ming Envoys to Inner Asia," *T'oung Pao* 62 (1976), 1–34.

[62]For a partial translation of his work, see Morris Rossabi, "A Translation of Ch'en Ch 'eng's *His-yü fan-kuo chih*," *Ming Studies* 17 (1983), 49–59. On a gift of a lion to him, see Sally Church, "A Lion Presented as Tribute during Chen Cheng's Diplomatic Expeditions to Herat (1413–1420)" in *Tribute System and Rulership in Late Imperial China*, edited by Ralph Kauz and Morris Rossabi (Bonn: Bonn University Press, 2022), 203–22.

[63]J.V.G. Mills, trans., *Ma Huan: Ying-yai Sheng-lan: The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 34–35.

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an account and presented a map of the so-called Western Regions (*Xiyu)*, including descriptions of Mecca, Jerusalem, and Beirut. He portrays the Ottoman Empire in a Chinese light, which exaggerates the influence of Chinese law and government on this foreign land. His work complements ʻAli Akbar Khatai's account of the Ming dynasty, which magnifies the role of Islam in China. Unlike ʻAli Akbar however, who had journeyed to China, Ma Li himself did not undertake travels through the Ottoman domains to Istanbul. Instead, he must have received his information from envoys, translators, and interpreters.[64]

Conclusion

In sum, the Mongol rulers of the Yuan quickly recognized that they required translators and interpreters because of the multiple languages spoken in their domains. Previous dynasties in China had recruited translators and interpreters, but the Mongols were the first to establish government agencies for these tasks. Khubilai Khan went further and commissioned the development of a written language, the ʻPhags-pa script, that could be used for a variety of languages and could help unify the diverse peoples in the Mongols' conquered territories. Despite repeated government entreaties to adopt the script, few Chinese and Mongols learned the new writing system, which the court also used on *paiza*, a metal object that acted, in part, as a passport. Few could read the inscriptions on the *paiza*, but the Mongols had become so dominant that the images on the metallic object created an effective passport. The Yuan influenced the succeeding Ming dynasty, which organized a College of Translators and a College of Interpreters. Despite the Ming officials' critiques of the two agencies, translators and interpreters contributed generally accurate translations of foreign documents and useful interpretations of the foreigners' conversations. They served as valuable intermediaries in communications among civilizations. Even when their translations were not exactly faithful to the original remarks or writings, they vastly influenced inter-civilizational relations. Thus far, our knowledge of them during the Yuan and Ming dynasties is limited. Many were not Chinese, but much else about them needs to be studied. The Mongol rulers of the Yuan and the Chinese court of the Ming depended upon their work and understood the value of these intermediaries, but can their lives, influences, and significance be recovered?

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Competing interest. The author declares none.

[64]Yuan Julian Chen, "Between the Islamic and Chinese Universal Empires," 440–453 for a fine account of Ma Li and his work.

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