You walk for days among trees and among stones. Rarely does the eye light on a thing, and then only when it has recognised that thing as the sign of another thing: a print in the sand indicates the tiger’s passage; a marsh announces a vein of water; the hibiscus flower, the end of winter. All the rest is silent and interchangeable; trees and stones are only what they are.1

As we sit and read, Marco Polo (1254–1324) (as stylised by Italian writer Italo Calvino) recounts the feeling of a journey that leads to a city called Tamara. Tamara is a city of signs. The traveller along her streets is surrounded by images that point, warn, encourage or describe. Even her buildings are themselves signs: their form and placement signify the roles they play within Tamara’s broader urban ecology. The goods on display along her streets accrue value only insofar as they signify other things. In wandering among the signs of Tamara with Marco Polo, our knowledge of the city (like his) never quite moves beyond the surface. We leave Tamara, according to him, without actually having discovered it. What the city might be beneath this thick coat of signs remains a mystery after we leave her streets.

In Calvino’s book, Tamara is just one of many cities that Marco Polo describes to Yuan ruler Khubilai Khan (1260–94) in the course of a conversation about the spaces of the ruler’s empire that the Venetian explorer has visited in his travels: a city that exists as a mirror-image, a city of dead things and a city that cannot be expunged from the mind once it has been experienced. But Tamara takes on special meaning as a city that becomes a text, and a text made up only of signs and names:

Your gaze scans the streets as if they were written pages: the city says everything you must think, makes you repeat her discourse, and while you believe you are visiting Tamara you are only recording the names with which she defines herself and all her parts.2

This chapter takes Tamara and her signs as inspiration to look anew at the ways Ming translators also related cities and text. Ming students and instructors of translation mapped distant spaces and languages on gridded glossary pages, naming the categories and signs of foreign experience and finding equivalences in documentary Chinese. To understand these translators’ practices – especially their creation and use of bilingual glossaries – is to comprehend how they used signs on a page to create new kinds of equivalence. The translators’ signs weren’t quite tiger paw prints or hibiscus flowers: instead, these men read lines, sounds and images. But in doing so, they similarly encountered and created foreign peoples as constellations and combinations of symbols. By understanding them in this way, and by exploring the consequences of reading their practices as such, we can bring Ming history into dialogue with a larger set of questions about identity, ontology and empire in the early modern world. These texts can help us think anew about Ming objects by inviting us to consider not just what kinds of objects circulated in the early Ming, but also how we can use the early Ming to rethink objects themselves, from what and where they emerge and how they are constituted through literary technologies. This chapter will ultimately suggest that knowing a world and its objects is knowing what it looks like to be the same. The material world – as we encounter and know it – is a world of sameness.
In order to get there, let us first visit the Yongle 永樂 court (r. 1403–24).

'A print in the sand … a tiger's passage'
Tigers stalked the capital of the Yongle emperor. They did not walk along its streets, but instead across the pages of its foreign language glossaries. And so ba-er-si 巴兒思 or 把兒思 prowled the Mongolian and Gaochang 高昌 glossaries. Po-lang-ke 部郎克 populated the pages of Persian glossaries. Gong 鄧 roamed through Tibetan glossaries, and si 思 padded through Thai glossaries.

The Yongle emperor had prompted the creation of this multilingual paper bestiary in the fifth year of his reign (1407) after winning the throne in a bitter battle against his nephew, the erstwhile Jianwen 建文 emperor (r. 1399–1402). He was in the midst of a campaign to subjugate Annam (Northern Vietnam), and the eunuch Zheng He 鄭和 (1371–1433) had just returned from the first voyage of his treasure fleet. Zheng He arrived at court laden with gifts, envos and stories from the many foreign states his troops had visited. Yongle rewarded him and his men before immediately hatching plans for their next assignment to the south, which the emperor planned at the same time as an extended campaign against Mongolia in the north.

As the membranes of this Ming world became increasingly porous, the empire was increasingly incapable of sustaining communications using written Chinese alone. Therefore, in order to protect and expand it, in 1407 the Yongle emperor created a Translators' College (siyi guan 語語關). Initially part of the Hanlin Academy, the College included eight bureaus devoted to a range of languages that were crucial for diplomatic communication between the Ming empire and states that did not use the Chinese script. The Mongolian (Dada 閼麄) 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 (Nüzhen 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. The Huihui 魏巍 Bureau handled texts from areas that were known to practise Islam and that submitted documents in Persian, although the term huihui could also be used to describe texts in Arabic script. A wide territory fell under its jurisdiction: Samarkand, Arabia, Turfan, Champa, Java, Cambodia, Melaka and, remarkably, Japan. There was a Tibetan (Xiānluó 西番) Bureau responsible for Tibetan literary and diplomatic texts; a Gaochang 高昌 Bureau responsible for documents in Uighur script; a Baiyi 百夷 Bureau that covered many polities and subprefectures around what is now Yunnan; and a Myanmar (Mianandian 縁甸) Bureau. The Sanskrit (Xiānluó 西番) Bureau produced and translated sutras and other classic literature – its extant ‘glossaries’ (yiyu 訳語) are in fact Sanskrit texts copied out with Chinese glosses on pronunciation – and its officials were also responsible for written communication with India. In addition to the eight original bureaus founded by the Yongle emperor in 1407, a ninth bureau devoted to Babai 百白, a script used in Yunnan, was added in 1511. A tenth bureau for an early version of the Thai language (Xianluo 錫羅) was added in 1578. Each of these bureaus 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.

Students came to the College through various routes and performed many different sorts of functions once established there. The earliest students at the College were culled from the Imperial Academy and the instructors were recruited from a pool of local interpreters who were native or fluent speakers of the relevant languages. Later students were allowed to enter the College by examination, and many managed to buy or bribe their way in. By the late 16th century, positions at the College had largely become hereditary: when an instructor died, his son often took over his job. 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. Once establishing himself as a capable translator, in addition to teaching and studying foreign scripts, a student or instructor could also be called upon as a calligrapher. He might alternatively be sent to a border station, where he would translate and produce documents for the court and occasionally teach Chinese classical literature and culture to foreign envoys.

The students and faculty at the College left a dispersed documentary archive of traces of a variety of materials meant to aid in the study and practice of translation. Students were responsible for learning, and in principle were periodically examined on, the most commonly used terms in the language they worked with. These included manuals for recognising and producing the alphabets of foreign scripts like Persian, Mongolian and ‘Phags-pa. They also included bilingual compilations of laiwén 萊文, which were paired memorials in Chinese and a range of languages that were of diplomatic importance to the state. In addition, translators produced bilingual sets of poems that were ostensibly intended to aid in their practice, which was based in part on the memorisation of vocabulary. Aside from Sanskrit verses that were (like the other extant materials from that bureau) actual Buddhist texts, most of the bilingual poems composed by the bureaus were likely created by teachers and students as learning exercises. Each bureau composed two examples of verse in five- or seven-character units: each word was rendered both in Chinese and in foreign script with a Chinese gloss, with a complete Chinese-only version of the poem also provided as a reference. The poems are laid out on each page in the direction of the original non-Chinese script. The Persian poems, for example, are read from right-to-left, with one line of verse continuing across all the pages of the document before the reader would have had to flip back to the first page to read the next line, and do the same for that line. In contrast, the Thai poems are read top-down and right-left on each page. For the most part, these were not particularly attractive literary works, but they served the purpose of helping students become caked and salaried translators. Some students and instructors at the Thai Bureau, for example, wrote a ditty that helped them
remember basic terms like moon and mountain, person and plant, and hot and cold.\textsuperscript{75} The language bureaus were also charged with creating bilingual glossaries full of words and phrases that were arranged in topical categories: 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; Colours; Food and Drink; and Time and Calendars. A section for Commonly Used Terms functioned as a miscellany of words that did not fit elsewhere. Some glossaries included other categories that included important vocabulary not subsumed in the typical glossary topics: the Tibetan instructors added a section for Aromatic Drugs, for example, and one for Classical or Religious Terminology. Each glossary page had columns of paired terms that were sometimes related to each other, with the entries in each topical category often beginning with the most simple and familiar, and ending with specialised terminology that was specific to the documents in a particular script. Readers would begin at the top right of each page and read down each column until arriving at the left edge and turning to the next set of words. For each entry, the translators provided three components: a word in foreign script, a translation into Chinese and a Chinese transliteration of the way the foreign term sounded. Some glossaries were clearly the work of several people, with at least one responsible for each script: the scripts on some extant glossaries seem to have been written at different times, and likely by different hands.

Like prints in the sand marking the passage of a tiger, the terms on these glossary pages marked the passage of objects across and through Ming imperial languages of translation: suns and moons, rivers and roads, vegetables and trees. Ming translators’ glossaries were full of the traces of these objects and more. Reading these glossaries not just as translators’ tools but also as collections of objects allows us to understand Ming history as it might inform a broader history of objects and traces thereof.

\textit{A marsh … a vein of water}'

In the early 15th century, the Yongle emperor had founded not just a Translators’ College, but also a machine for generating and then codifying possible ways of being the same for things in the Ming world. Those included ways of being a human body, ways of being a colour and even possible ways of being a mother or a son. This sameness were systematised through the education and practices of Ming translators.

Understood in this way, Ming translators’ glossaries were not just inscriptions produced by imperially sanctioned translators of diplomatic documents, but were also paper technologies for generating new likenesses and new ways of being the same. At one level, this was happening when translators decided to classify a particular term in a specific glossary category: when a Mongolian translator included terminology for ‘pearls’ within Precious Objects instead of Birds and Beasts, for example, he mapped the physical universe of the Mongolian and Chinese languages in a particular way. At another level, when translators equated a Persian term with a particular Chinese term, the juxtaposition of those two terms subtly expanded the meaning of each and created a new way of being the same for each of them. We cannot attribute these juxtapositions to the intentions of particular translators who might have decided to equate particular terms — the glossaries may well have been products of multiple hands writing multiple scripts and working collaboratively, and the extant glossaries are often devoid of the kinds of paratexts that might be used to ascribe authorship to them. Still, the texts themselves performed equivalence and accomplished the work of generating and inscribing likenesses.

In creating these texts, Ming translators were actually changing the material landscape of the dynasty insofar as they were changing the way it was defined and understood. That landscape was in part created through Ming practices of synonymy, and translators’ glossaries both recorded traces of these practices and helped enact them. This phenomenon was not local to the particular context of Ming translation. One of the most important ways that we come to know the world of objects in general is through synonymy: deciding what things are the same as other things and in what ways. A definition is just a statement of a series of ways of being the same as other things. The way a marsh, for Calvino, announces the presence of a vein of water, so he makes up part of what it is to be a river. The names we have for things become part of how we understand those things, by becoming part of the constellation of traces from which they emerge and become present to us. Names thus become an integral part of the things themselves. At the same time, the way that synonymy was enacted by Ming translators generated a very specific set of relations. The terms included in translators’ glossaries were ostensibly culled from, and intended to aid in translating, documents of diplomatic importance to the Ming state. The particular kinds of equivalence were therefore shaped by the nature of Ming diplomatic relations with other states and the documentary traces that those relations produced. Diplomatic (or in some cases, religious or literary) documents were anatomised into individual units of vocabulary and then fitted onto a grid of glossary categories. What it was to be the same, for these translators, was thus the result of a disciplining process that transformed foreign documents into a shape that could be used and consumed by Ming readers and writers.

That disciplining proceeded according to the practical needs of translators and interpreters. Translators’ College glossaries were meant to aid script-based translation of written documents, and thus foreign terminology was included, translated and integrated into the Chinese glossary system to the extent that it was useful to writers and readers. In contrast, consider the terms included in the glossaries of another Ming organ of translation, the Interpreters’ Station (\textit{Huitong guan} 會同館). These texts were geared toward assisting oral interpreters in learning and using the vocabulary that was vital to carrying out their duties at the station. Intended for spoken conversation, they only included Chinese transliterations of foreign terms and
did not include foreign scripts.14They were typically organised according to the same categories as the Translators’ College texts, though some editions contained additional rubrics. One Korean glossary, for example, contained separate sections for the names of the heavenly stems and earthly branches, and for the names of the trigrams from the *Yijing* (Classic of Changes).15 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, travelling 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 glow-worms 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, signalling the importance of the animals for trade with those groups.) They learned how to instruct envoys on the proper etiquette for inhabiting households in the capital: no running around, for example, and no burning the doors and windows down (guang tang xiao zuojian 官房不許作踐, men chuang buxu shaohua 門窗不許燒燬).16 They learned the terms for instruments used for cooking, playing music and maintaining horses and livestock; words for madmen, scarred men, belt makers, hat makers and idlers, hunchbacks, tanners and people with harelips. They learned how to talk about actions, from meditating to agreeing to sitting, and included special terms for ‘not becoming a useful person’, for asking in detail, for requesting wine and for bringing in horses. They learned how to talk about body parts and things that one could do with and to them, emotions, illnesses and qualities of character. The nature of some of the phrases in these glossaries gives 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. Thus, some interpreters’ glossaries included multi-word phrases on Human Affairs that would ostensibly have been of use to foreign envoys staying at the hostel: ‘That’s ugly’, or ‘I’m drunk!’17 Interpreters at the Station could consult the handbook for instructions on how to direct foreign envoys in practical matters for navigating the roads, how to chat about the weather, how to direct envoys in matters of court etiquette and what to say to envoys who were on their way back home after visiting the Ming.

The kinds of relations that the Interpreters’ Station glossaries generated were based on an assumption of embodied performance: they were equivalences of gesture or oral utterance, to be invoked in a context where the primary goal was face-to-face communication, discipline, entertainment and/or stewardship. We can compare this to the kinds of equivalence generated by the Translators’ College glossaries and other textual materials, which assumed a context of archivable ink on a page, where the equivalences would be experienced as written text rather than spoken physical action. This contrast is interesting insofar as it draws our attention to the situatedness and locality of a quality we may otherwise take for granted: the state of being the same.

So, how does this help us understand these objects in these glossaries at this point in the Ming? And why does that matter?

‘A hibiscus flower . . . the end of winter’

The objects inscribed into Ming translators’ texts collectively made up a traveller’s landscape, whether that traveller was ultimately at home in the Chinese language and exploring non-Chinese documents, or vice versa. In Calvino’s city of Tamara, the objects experienced by the traveller were not in themselves meaningful: instead, they stood only as signs for other, absent things. A hibiscus flower was not meaningfully experienced as itself, but instead only as an indication that spring was near. We might consider translators’ glossaries in a similar sense. As much as they performed equivalence in the ways explained above, they also inscribed difference: each term in Persian, Tibetan, Mongolian or another script immediately called attention to itself as distant from the object it named even as it was part, on some level, of it. If it was included in a College glossary, it signalled its own morphological difference from Chinese terms (through the body of its script, through the transliteration of its sound into Chinese characters) and thus from the scriptural body of the Ming, even as it became part of it by becoming partnered with Ming Chinese terms on the page. Therefore, in a way the vocabulary collected in Ming College glossaries can be read as signs of difference, of absence from the legible heart of the Ming empire and of illegibility that needed translating. Vocabulary in the Interpreters’ Station glossaries signalled a different kind of distance: there, each of the terms was offered in a transliterated Chinese script and the presence of a glossary signalled some kind of a distinction in oral cultures and a resulting potential problem through in-person communication. In both cases, translators’ vocabulary was a sign of a distance that needed to be overcome.

Even if it could not entirely be overcome, however, that distance could potentially be controlled. And that control was enacted by translators’ practices of synonymy, of making foreign terms – and thus objects, and actions and ways of speaking – functionally equivalent to Ming Chinese ones. The Translators’ College and the bureaus subsumed within it systematised these ways of being the same, and did so using fairly consistent rubrics. Each of the bureau glossaries that were used for practical and pedagogical purposes by students and instructors included virtually the same categories. Many of the glossary categories began with the most commonly used terms and proceeded to more specialised terms that were specific to the documentary contexts of particular languages. Because of that, there was significant overlap in the vocabulary included in the early pages of most of the bureau glossaries at the College and Station. As a result, the different language glossaries are also related to each other: looking at tian 天 (Heaven) across the bureau glossaries and the translation and language-learning
practices that these glossaries form traces of) gives us a way of expanding our notion of *tian* and relating the terms that translators equated with it not only to *tian* but also to one another: thus *akba*, *tugri*, and the heavens in other scripts and languages become the same. And this was the case not just for heaven, or for things like tigers and stones, but also for actions and modes of being, like ‘walking’, saying ‘yes’ or ‘sitting’. As we explore connections and contacts in the Ming world, it is useful to keep in mind that those linkages could take many different forms, and the production of sameness by Ming translators was one important way that the early Ming formed new relationships and brought a new landscape of (language, translated) objects into being. And just as Tamara’s hibiscus flower signalled a transformation as well as an ending in pointing travellers ahead to a new season, a foreign term in a foreign script in a Translators’ College glossary signalled both a limit to communication and a transformation that transgressed that limit.

‘Trees and stones … only what they are’
As the traveller makes her way to Calvino’s city of Tamara, there are objects she does not see. If a thing does not signal another thing, it escapes her notice. She walks for days among trees and stones without seeing them: trees and stones, after all, are only what they are. Beyond Tamara, Calvino’s book is peppered with other cities distinguished by their relationships to signs. Zirma, a city of memories and redundancies populated by blind men, madmen and girls raising pumas. Zoe, a city whose buildings and spaces and objects are indistinguishable from one another. Hypatia, a city that embodies a fantastically unconventional relationship between objects, images, language and signs, where the musicians hide in tombs and beautiful women wait in the stables. Olivia, a city of peacocks and sarcasm that challenges the traveller’s relationship between words and things. In each case, as we read, a page becomes a world full of things that are always pointing to other things. The documentary traces of Ming translators—especially the bilingual glossaries they made and used—can be read in a similar light. The things strewn across its pages are meaningful, are included and are significant only insofar as they point the reader to other things: to a foreign script, to another state, to a particular way of gridding material reality and ultimately to distance itself.

Notes
1 Calvino 1972, 13.
2 Calvino 1972, 24.
3 Zheng He returned with his fleet in October 1407. On the seven voyages of his fleet, see Dreyer 2007. Dreyer interprets the voyages of Zheng He as a display of Ming power, in contrast to the popular account of Zheng He as a benign explorer.
4 On the dating of the founding of the *Siyi guan* to 1407, and on scholarly disagreement over which month it was founded in (November/December or April), see Pelliot 1947, 207–90, 227–8.
5 By the late 16th century, this bureau seems to have been an extinct or at least defunct part of the College: throughout the 15th and 16th centuries the Jurchen people preferred to write and read Mongolian even while they spoke Jurchen.
6 Wang Zongzai 1924, 10b–2b. In the 1605 Qing version of the *Siyi guan kao* by Jiang Fan, *Huahui* was added as an additional region administered by the *Huahui* Bureau. See Jiang Fan 1997. Classification under the *Huahui* bureau would have meant that Japan was sending Persian documents to China for official communication.
7 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 (1395–1441) faked his way through the imperial exams and into a position as Sanskrit Bureau translator by memorising 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 was not discovered until a century after his death, when instructors at the Bureau wanted to compile a grammar like that of their peers and had no model. They consulted the *Huaiyi yuyu* compiled by Qin during his days 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 *Manjushri-Nama-Samgiti* (Chanting of the Names of Manjushri).
8 Pelliot 1947, 229.
9 Pelliot 1947, 229.
10 A number of articles and essays have studied the *Siyi guan* and *Huahui guan*. The interested reader should consult Hirth 1888; Wild 1945; Pelliot 1947; Kan 1989, esp. 90–95; Crossley 1994, 38–70; and Nappi 2015. Many of the early works rely on the foundational work by French Sinologist (educated in medicine as well) Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat. See Abel-Rémusat 1826. Several short articles through the early 20th century reported discovering new manuscripts of the text in European collections in London, Paris, Berlin and St Petersburg. See, for example, Ross 1908, 689–705, which discusses a manuscript that likely originated in the *Huahui guan*.
11 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. The entrance examinations, he protested, were irrelevant to the work the men actually did upon enrolling in the College, and the privileged sons of wealthy officials threatened to undermine the work of the entire institution. After one particularly strident complaint from a College Director in the 16th century, the court implemented his suggestion that a new set of students should be chosen from among the blood relations of the current College translators. For the full text of the 1566 memorial sent by Director Xu Jie to the Jiajing Emperor (r. 1522–66), along with a commentary by Gao Gong, see Lu Weiqi 1928, 193–7.
12 The 1695 *Siyi guan kao* by Jiang Fan includes examples of poems used to aid in the memorisation of vocabulary from the eight bureaus extant in 1695: Persian, Uighur, Tibetan, Thai, Burmese, Sanskrit, Baiyi and Babai. Some of the poems are titled, and most include the names of the authors, all of whom were translators of the College. These were most likely student assignments, as each bureau set includes the names of one or two officials who composed the poems (it is unclear whether they did so in foreign or Chinese script), and the names of student translator-officials who translated them.
14 See the *Chaoxian 朝鮮* glossary from the Awa no Kuni collection at Cornell University for predatory remarks on the whole series of Sanskrit glossaries, based on an edition compiled by Mao Ruiheng 萬喜僧 (jinshi 1601; fl. 1597–1636, 20 Bofu 伯符, who had written the *Huang Ming xiangxu lu* (Record of the Interpreters of the August Ming) (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 Zhihan 朱芝漢 (1563–7, 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 Ming products, but more precise dating is unknown. See Davidson 1975. Because some of these countries communicated in writing with the Ming using Chinese, they didn’t need script glossaries.
15 Huo Yuanjie 1979, with Zhu Zhihan preface.
16 Kan 1989, 244.
17 These examples can be found in the *Rinshi* section of the *Koryo* glossary from Huo Yuanjie 1979, 94. Numerous other cases are included in the many Interpreters’ glossaries. There are several examples from the Awa no Kuni Bunko glossaries.