

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.

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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*.