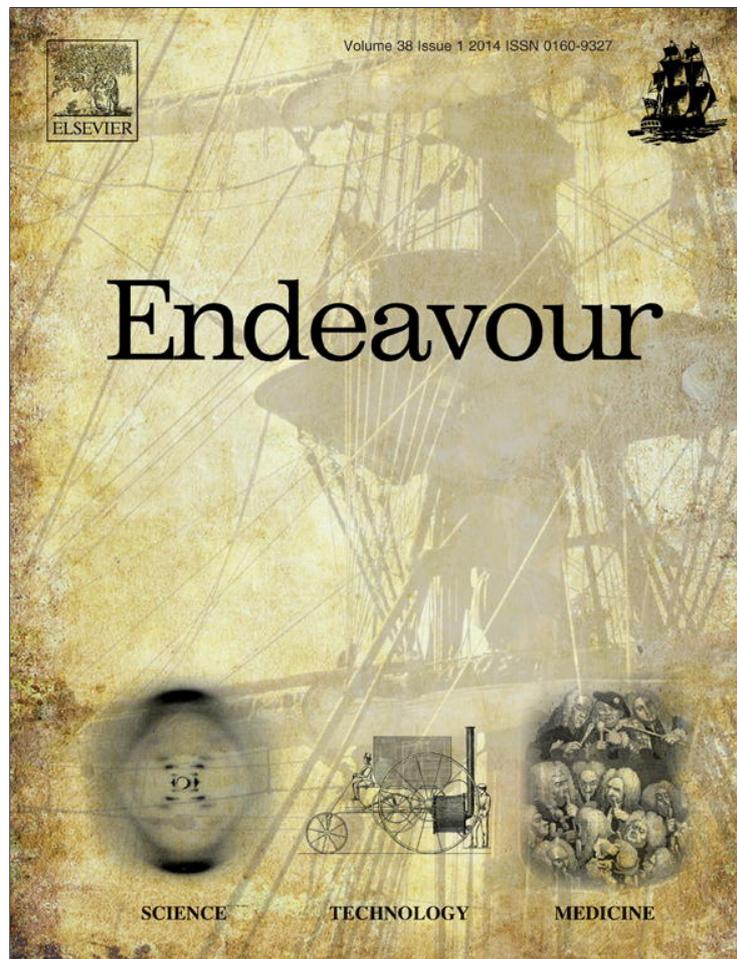


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Maggots, jawbones, and a multilingual archive of decay

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Think with me, for a few minutes, about the importance of translation in history. Specifically, let's think together about how important translation has been in the history of science and medicine. Emphasizing the importance of translation to the shaping of science is not new: for decades, scholars of the history of science have been writing about the ways that translation across languages has shaped the history of knowledge about the natural world.¹ Some of the most productive of these works have looked in particular at the ways that words, concepts, and practices were translated into Chinese in early modern and modern history. Even in its most productive moments, however, this attention to translation tends to create and maintain the illusion of a coherent "China" or "Chinese" character that has persisted across time and space, whether we construe it in linguistic, culturo-linguistic, or geo-political terms. As with many approaches to comparative history or the history of exchange, the discourse of translation in the history of science tends to treat the entities being compared or studied as stable individuals. When Greek philosophy is translated into Chinese,² when the language of chemistry is negotiated by Chinese scientists in late imperial China,³ or when the discourse of Darwinism is rendered in multiple culturo-linguistic contexts,⁴ we tend to treat each linguistic side of the exchange as an unproblematically coherent entity. But "China" has not always been "Chinese," and all of the various shifting geographic and political entities that we tend to retrospectively define together as "China" have included many non-Chinese peoples, languages, and cultural practices. It's time to bring that insight more firmly into the way we think about "China" in the history of science and its translations and manifestations across space and time. Looking closely at the importance of translation with the Manchu language offers a particularly interesting case study in this context. It also offers a fascinating and unusual window into the history of objects and their traces. But more of that in a moment.

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¹ Some recent examples include Benjamin A. Elman, *On Their Own Terms: Science in China, 1550–1900* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2005); Michael Lackner and Natascha Vittinghoff, *Mapping Meanings: The Field of New Learning in Late Qing China* (Leiden: Brill, 2004); Scott Montgomery, *Science in Translation: Movements of Knowledge through Cultures and Time* (Chicago, IL: Univ. Chicago Press, 2000); and Nicolaas Rupke, "Translation Studies in the History of Science: The Example of Vestiges," *British Journal for the History of Science* 33 (2000): 209–222.

² Robert Wardy, *Aristotle in China: Language, Categories and Translation* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

³ David Wright, *Translating Science: The Transmission of Western Chemistry into Late Imperial China, 1840–1900* (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

⁴ Marwa Elshakry, "Knowledge in Motion: The Cultural Politics of Modern Science Translations in Arabic," *Isis* 99 (2008): 701–730, and James Reeve Pusey, *China and Charles Darwin* (Harvard, 1983).

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To the right is a page from the Imperially Commissioned Manchu Dictionary in Five Scripts (*Han-i araha sunja hacin-i hergen kamciha Manju gisun-i buleku bithe*, or [*Yuzhi*] *Wuti Qingwenjian*). The very top row of the page displays terms in Manchu script. The next row down shows terms in Tibetan script, followed by two different transliterations in Manchu: first a Manchu transcription of how each Tibetan term is spelled, and then a rendering in Manchu of how the term sounds if pronounced properly in Tibetan. In the fifth row we have terms in Mongolian, expressed here in the script that was used to write Mongolian from the thirteenth century until the Cyrillic alphabet was adopted in the middle of the twentieth century. After that are terms in Turkic that are written in a modified Persian script, followed by transcriptions in Manchu of what the Turkic terms sounded like.⁵ Finally, across the bottom of the page we see terms in Chinese. Each column from top to bottom represents a set of what the authors of the text considered to be equivalent terms in what were considered to be the five major Qing languages.

The position of Manchu terms at the head of each column on each page affirms the position of Manchu language in Qing imperial bureaucracy and ideology. Written Manchu (*qingwen* or *manwen*), a Tungusic language in the Altaic language family that was very different from Chinese, was the official state language of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911).⁶ A wide range of documentary materials was composed in Manchu, from historical annals that date from before the Manchus conquered the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), to edicts, memorials, regulations, literary texts, and compendia that were composed after the conquest in the explicitly multilingual atmosphere of Qing bureaucracy. In addition to its use as a documentary language, Manchu was also a crucial medium of translation among Chinese and many European languages in the context of global exchange at the Qing court and beyond. This happened in at least two ways: the use of Manchu translations of Chinese texts by translators of Chinese texts into European languages; and the use of Manchu as a medium into which knowledge from European-language texts was rendered. Many Chinese-language texts were translated into Manchu in this period, including books of ethical and political advice, novels, poems, works of military strategy, Buddhist sutras, and legal codes, among others. Prefaces to the Manchu translations of these works often heralded the

⁵ Though the language of these terms is often described as "Uyghur" or "Uighur," in order to avoid the anachronistic use of that modern ethnonym I prefer here to describe the language more broadly as "Turkic."

⁶ See Pamela Kyle Crossley and Evelyn S. Rawski, "A Profile of the Manchu Language in Ch'ing History," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 53.1 (June 1993), 63–102.

Manchu versions for being easier to understand than their Chinese counterparts. This sense was echoed by some of the first European translators of Chinese classics who often used the Manchu versions as translation aids, as the grammatical structure of sentences in Manchu could be much clearer than in classical or literary Chinese.

In addition to its use in rendering Chinese texts, Manchu was also used as a medium for the translation of texts from European languages for a Qing court readership. This was particularly common at the court of the Kangxi Emperor (r. 1661–1722). Kangxi has become famous among historians of Chinese science for his patronage of “Western Learning” at the Qing court, notably by facilitating the work of Jesuit missionaries who came to his court with expertise in cartography, astronomy, military technology, mathematics, art, and medicine. Much has been written of the scientific exchanges during Kangxi’s reign, which are often understood as a negotiation between the ideological interests of the missionary-scholars and the imperial interests of a Manchu leader eager to maintain control.⁷

Along with Chinese, Manchu was used at the Kangxi court for medical and scientific exchange with the Jesuits. Manchu language tutors were appointed by the Emperor to train Jesuit scholars and facilitate their translation of scientific and medical texts into Manchu. They aided Ferdinand Verbiest (1623–1688) in his translation of Euclid’s *Elements* into Manchu, and helped Joachim Bouvet (1656–1730) and Jean-François Gerbillon (1654–1707) to produce Manchu works on mathematics, geometry, Scholastic philosophy, medicine, and anatomy.⁸ Dominique Parennin (1665–1741) was also called upon to produce substantial translations of texts on anatomy, medicine, and physics into Manchu from French, Latin, Portuguese, and Italian. Though some Jesuit scholars were mastering Manchu and using it to communicate with Kangxi, not everyone at court could comprehend the language. Composing a treatise in Manchu would effectively limit its readership, and this was a means of asserting control over the circulation of knowledge.⁹ According to modern commentators, Manchu language was thus used as a means of asserting power and control over, and maintaining secrecy with respect to a significant number of the European treatises on science and medicine translated for the Qing court.¹⁰ For this reason, Manchu became an important language of medical and scientific translation from European to Qing contexts.

Though the Manchu script was not understood by all Qing subjects, it was widely used at court. In this context, the ability to demonstrate a knowledge of and facility with the Manchu language became an integral part of Manchu identity. It was not only as a symbolic representation of the

Manchu state and people, but was also an important medium of communication and translation among the scholars and rulers of this critical period in Eurasian history, and for the many scientists, doctors, scholars, and other literate figures who spent time at the courts of many Qing rulers. Since most surviving Manchu texts on explicitly scientific and medical topics were produced under the Kangxi reign, we tend to focus on that period in an attempt to integrate Manchu studies into the broader history of science. However, if we extend our gaze to later in the Qing, we see that other texts produced in the eighteenth century can also be understood as contributions to the history of science and medicine. Let’s return to our page.

Toward the end of his reign, the Qianlong emperor (r. 1735–1796) rendered his multilingual empire in visual terms, commissioning the most ambitious dictionary project in Qing (1644–1911) history. On each of its nearly five thousand pages, the Imperially Commissioned Manchu Dictionary in Five Scripts (*Han-i araha sunja hacin-i hergen kamciha Manju gisun-i buleku bithe*, or [*Yuzhi Wuti Qingwenjian*]) collected a series of words or phrases in the major languages of diplomatic importance to the Qing.

This is a book full of objects. There are many thousands of them classified, ordered, and translated in 32 main categories. Each category serves as a pentaglot miscellany made of objects that explode and multiply on the page, with any given Manchu entity finding partners in Tibetan, Mongolian, Turkic, and Chinese scripts. The categories range from The Heavens to Insects, with additional entries appended at the end of the dictionary. Along the way from *abka* (heaven) to *larin* (a kind of donkey), readers can consult clusters of entities related to Time, Ritual, Music, Military Tools, Gods, Doctors and Shamans, Fireworks, Cloth, and Ships.¹¹ There are also categories of objects that would fascinate the natural historians and doctors among us: Birds, Livestock, Scaly and Shelly Beasts, Grains, Fruits, Plants, and Flowers, among others. But by far the largest single group of objects was gathered under the category of “People.” Here we find lists of the kinds of movements people made, the ways that they grew from birth to death, their emotions, the various sounds they might have heard over the course of a lifetime, their illnesses and ways they could be punished.

The page before you is from one of the most colorful collections in this section of the dictionary: a list of torments that people suffered and inflicted upon each other. Included here is an account of some of the most useful or common Manchu epithets, curses, and insults along with their descriptions or translations into the four other languages in the dictionary.

Starting at the top lefthand corner of the page, we see

Eimeburu!	Fiyada!	Fiyarunaru!	Fiyarunahangge!
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Translated roughly, we have

Hateful thing!	Jawbone!	Maggoty!	Maggoty (again)!
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⁷ See Florence Hsia, *Sojourners in a Strange Land: Jesuits and Their Scientific Missions in Late Imperial China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Elman, *On Their Own Terms*; and Catherine Jami, *The Emperor’s New Mathematics: Western Learning and Imperial Authority During the Kangxi Reign (1662–1722)* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁸ See Hartmut Walravens, “Christian Literature in Manchu: Some Bibliographic Notes,” *Monumenta Serica* 48 (2000): 445–469, 446, and T. Pang and G. Stary, “On the Discovery of a Printed Manchu Text Based on Euclid’s ‘Elements,’” *Manuscripta Orientalia* 6.4 (December 2000): 49–56.

⁹ On the use of Manchu as a form of protected communication by the Qing state, see Crossley and Rawski, “A Profile,” 70–73.

¹⁰ See Jami, “Imperial Control,” 43.

¹¹ This is a selection of the total list of categories in the text.

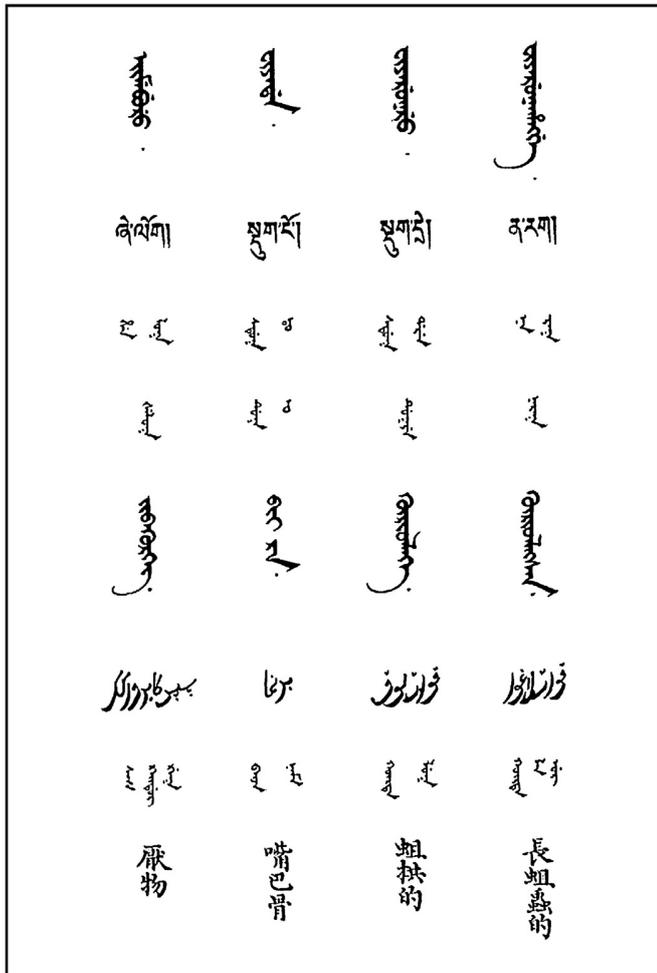


Fig. 1. This is one of thousands of pages from the Qing Pengaglot. This page, taken from the "People" section of the text, provides quadrilingual translations of four Manchu expletives. From *Yuzhi Wuti Qingwenjian* [Qing Pentaglot] (Beijing: Minzu chubanshe, 1957), 3 v., vol. 2, 2185.

These Manchu epithets were variously translated into the other languages, from phrases that meant something different from the Manchu terms but had roughly the same effect when yelled at a Tibetan speaker, to utterances that might be semantic equivalents in Mongolian, to narrative descriptions of what the Manchu epithet meant in Chinese.

Altogether, this collection of abusive and unpleasant curiosities spanned 14 pages of text and 54 Manchu terms.

For those of us who tend to be especially interested in the materiality and thinginess of knowledge-making, it is significant that many of these pages are filled with *objects* of abuse: a gathering of putrefying materials, dead bodies, and unpleasant creatures. Strewn across these pages are the bones of snakes and people, insects, corpses, sea slugs, patches of scabies, soles of feet, monsters, and demons, among various other types of unsavory people and the occasional invocation of specific levels of hell. Significantly, the object of disdain to which these are directed is named. It's not just, You are despicable!; it is instead, You are a body full of maggots! Naming here becomes a transformative act: the one hurling the insults is not just describing, but is actively bringing about the metamorphosis of a person into another type of object. It is a kind of verbal alchemy that transforms pages of people into the decaying afterlife of a natural landscape after it has ceased growing and thriving (Fig. 1).

So what is the significance of this for the way we understand the history of science, medicine, technology, and its objects? The history of science has been and continues to be shaped by the mediation of translation and translators. This dictionary collected within itself many lists of many categories of objects that were multiplied and extended across linguistic fields. Each column of equivalent terms running from the top to the bottom of a single page, each group of related terms extending across handfuls of pages: together and separately they named networks of objects populating the natural world in Manchu and beyond. Texts like this about words and their meanings and translations collectively form an exciting and under-utilized resource for the history of bodies and their relationships and transformations in time and space, which is essentially what we are studying when we study the history of science. Our textual archive is not just a repository of words and meanings and discourse: it is also a visual and material landscape full of moving objects that were named, inscribed, and networked across time and space. The natural history of that landscape is a field still full of surprises for the explorer-historian. Importantly, that landscape is also multilingual: the history of natural knowledge in China is not a history that can be mapped solely by tracing the topographies of Chinese-language texts. When we start incorporating that more fully into our practice as historians of science and medicine, we will begin not only to map new material worlds, but also to help create them.