

The Uses of Persian in Imperial China

The Translation Practices of the Great Ming

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The reach of Persographia extended to the imperial court of the Great Ming Empire (1368–1644), where language specialists were employed for the important task of translating the emperor’s written edicts to tributary countries from Chinese into Persian, and letters and petitions in Persian addressed to the emperor into Chinese. As was appropriate to the task of translating the emperor’s words, the translators were highly educated officers of the Hanlin Academy (*hanlinyuan*). They worked alongside translators of Mongolian, Uyghur, Tibetan, and other languages. This chapter presents an overview of the surviving documents that demonstrate how Persian was used in the Great Ming Empire. These extant relics of Ming court translations attracted the attention of bibliophiles in the Qing dynasty. Later, European orientalist took an interest in Persian translating: the French Sinologist Paul Pelliot published a detailed study of the Siyiguan translating college as early as 1948.¹ More recently, scholars in China, notably Liu Yingsheng of Nanjing University, have published articles on this subject.² This chapter revisits this question of the scale and kind of Persian-usage under the Ming emperors by surveying the various surviving primary documents from the period.

The practice of using Persian in imperial documents at the Ming court was inherited from the previous Mongol dynasty of the Yuan Empire (r. 1271–1368). Historians such as David Morgan and Stephen Haw have recently debated whether Marco Polo spoke Persian as a lingua franca when he was employed at the Mongolian court, and whether Persian was or was not an official language of the Yuan government in China.³ Records state that an Imperial Muslim College (*huihui guozixue*) was established alongside the Chinese and Mongolian Colleges, and young men of the official class were selected to be trained in languages written in *istifi* (Arabic script) to work as translators.⁴ Under the Yuan, official documents of all kinds—including edicts, patents, letters, and orders—must have been created in several languages, including Persian. However, none of these documents have survived, and only a few “safe-passes” (*paizi*) bearing Persian words attest to the use of Persian under the Yuan rulers of China.⁵

The situation is different for the Great Ming Empire, at least for its first century. As this chapter discusses in detail, several records describe the arrangements made at the Ming court for translating different kinds of documents into and out of Persian. These surviving texts show that Persian was used in communications within the empire; with countries along the Silk Road to the west; with Tibet to the south; and with countries along the sea routes to Calicut in India and Hormuz in Iran. This was expressly not Persian as a literary language. For the Ming, Persian served the practical imperial purpose of proclaiming the emperor's power abroad. Yet no special status can be claimed for it: it was a practical, bureaucratic medium of imperial governance, trade, and diplomacy.

The Persian College was one of ten colleges established within the Hanlin Academy. All ten languages were primarily used in the tributary process and in the emperor's communications with foreign lands. Persian never appears alone in a document: all surviving Persian translations appear alongside translations in one or more other languages. In some texts Persian precedes the other languages, while in others it comes last. Persian translators probably had a greater volume of work to do than the others, especially during the Yongle era from 1402 to 1424, when embassies arrived from many Central Asian countries and countries along the sea route to Hormuz.

While no original Persian tributary documents survive, several edicts and letters from Ming emperors to Tibetan leaders have been preserved and are held in Tibetan archives.⁶ They are on large scrolls, some of plain white linen paper, some of yellow linen paper patterned with dragon-and-cloud design, and some of silk brocade in broad stripes of different colours.⁷ A letter from 1453 in Chinese and Mongolian enumerating imperial gifts of silk, held in the Topkapi Museum in Istanbul, is also on dragon-and-cloud-patterned yellow paper.⁸ Of hundreds of fine scrolls in Chinese and other languages carried to tributary countries, only these few have survived.

The Ming History (*Ming shi*) and the Ming Veritable Records (*Ming shilu*), compiled from daily court records, provide a meticulous account of envoys and tribute missions, from which the amount of translation at the court can be gauged.⁹ The Great Ming Statutes (*Da Ming huidian*) contain information about the translation of documents and tribute activity.¹⁰ These records show that tribute missions took place regularly for most of the first Ming emperor's reign, called *Hongwu* (1368–98), but increased in frequency during the *Yongle* era (1402–24), when thousands of ambassadors and sometimes rulers themselves arrived with large retinues.

The first Persian translators at the Ming court were *semuren*, the administrative class of non-Mongolian peoples from the lands to the northwest, from Central Asia, and elsewhere. These included the *Huihuiren*, that is, Muslims who spoke Turkish and wrote Persian, and who served the Yuan administration, often in positions that Chinese people could not take.¹¹ When Zhu Yuanzhang's forces rode into Khanbalik in 1368, an amnesty was proclaimed, and officers of the former



FIGURE 6. Ming imperial Muslims: Niujie (Ox Street) Mosque, Beijing, rebuilt 1443. Photograph by Nile Green.

regime were employed in the new Ming administration at Nanjing.¹² Linguists from the old Imperial Muslim College probably translated the letters of accession that were sent overland to Samarqand and by sea to Calicut.¹³

THE SIYIGUAN TRANSLATION COLLEGE

In 1407 a translation college, known as Siyiguan was established within the Hanlin Academy in Beijing. This occurred when the Yongle Emperor began large-scale missions by sea to the Indian port of Calicut and by land to the Timurid cities of Samarqand and Herat. The resulting flood of tribute-bearers to the Ming court made it necessary to begin training translators and give them substantive posts.¹⁴ The overall Siyiguan translation college contained separate sub-colleges for Mongolian, Nüzhen, Tibetan, Xitian (Indian), Huihui (Persian), Gaochang (Uyghur), Miandian (Burmese), and Baiyi (Tay).¹⁵ A Babai (Chiangmai) College was added in 1511, followed by a Xianluo (Thai) College in 1578.¹⁶

In order to pass their regular examinations, candidates who aimed to become officers of the Hanlin Academy had to master, not only language translating skills, but also neo-Confucian dogma, historical and administrative knowledge, and composition and calligraphy skills in Chinese. A treatise on statecraft presented

to the throne in 1487 states that translators were selected from candidates of *juren* status, that is, those who had passed the provincial examinations. They had not only to write the demanding series of essays in Chinese on the prescribed neo-Confucian curriculum, but also to translate one or more of the essays they had written into the other language, a task requiring a high level of ability.¹⁷

The regulations of the Translating College (*Siyiguan ze*) that were compiled between 1543 and 1688 contain edicts, regulations, precedents, and name lists relating to teachers, students, courses, and examinations, as well as rules for seconding to other departments.¹⁸ The organization the regulations describe is not a translating bureau, where documents would be received, translated, and checked, but rather a translation training college that was staffed by teachers, and where translators could be trained, tested, and assigned official rank, and seconded for translation, calligraphic, or editing work within the overall Ming secretariat (*neige*). The Great Ming Statutes inform us that translating documents was part of the duties of the Patents Office (*gaochifang*).¹⁹ The Veritable Records also list translating officers as compilers.²⁰ They worked on the detailed records of tribute missions, recording the correct Chinese forms of country names, and names of sovereigns and ambassadors. However, it was not until 1494, during the *Hongzhi* reign (1487–1505), that supervisors (*tidu*) were appointed to oversee the translating colleges.²¹ Records of personnel and procedures were kept after that time, but the compilers of *Siyiguan ze* could not locate any materials for the period before 1490. Hence, we cannot see what the organization was like at its busiest during the *Yongle* era. Nonetheless, the surviving evidence does allow us to detail a range of different imperial functions for Persian.

MING COMMUNICATION WITH THE TIMURID EMPIRE

The Timurid and Ming empires both emerged from the breakup of the Mongol Empire of Chinggis Khan. The Hongwu Emperor soon sought to establish tribute relations with Timur (r. 1370–1405), but a series of tribute missions recorded in the Veritable Records did not begin until 1387, the twentieth year of the reign.²² In the sixth mission in 1394, Timur's ambassador arrived with tribute of two hundred horses and a letter. The original letter no longer exists. A letter from Timur to Charles VI of France written eight years later in 1402, preserved in the French archives, is in Persian, on a plain sheet of paper 47 × 20 cm, written in black ink, with the salutation and the title of the recipient in gold ink.²³ Timur probably also sent a Persian letter to the Hongwu Emperor (r. 1368–98), which was translated at the Chinese court. The translated letter so pleased the emperor that it was copied into the daily record and later into the Ming history.²⁴ It is the only surviving example of Persian tributary correspondence from the Hongwu period, and the only example of a translation from Persian into Chinese for the whole of the early Ming period. It is in polished literary style, using bureaucratic terminology, and shows

that the standard of Persian-Chinese translating was high. The obsequious tone of the letter has led to claims of it being a forgery, inasmuch as some consider it impossible that the proud Timur would have written such a letter.²⁵ But it is equally unlikely a merchant would have risked the ire of Timur, crossed the desert with a large tribute of 200 horses, and impersonated an ambassador at the Ming court, where five genuine embassies had arrived in the past six years. Others argue the letter is genuine; its elaborate language expresses the nature of the tributary relationship that existed at that time and confirms Timur's important wish to keep the roads open for commerce.²⁶

Timur inexplicably detained subsequent envoys, and tribute relations were discontinued for the rest of the first Ming emperor's long reign. When the emperor's fourth son, Zhu Di, usurped the throne and proclaimed *Yongle* in 1403, a series of major tribute missions soon began with Timur's successors Khalil and Shah Rukh. The Persian translations of two letters from the Yongle Emperor to Shah Rukh at his capital at Herat, together with two of Shah Rukh's letters in reply, are preserved in a Persian historical work *Zubdat al-Tawarikh* (Cream of Histories). This was compiled by Hafiz-i Abru (d. 1430), a historian at the court of Shah Rukh (r. 1405–47), who must have sorted through the original scrolls in the Timurid chancery archives at Herat and copied several of them into his history.²⁷ He gives a valuable description of the letters, including the useful information that all of the letters from the Chinese emperor were written in three languages: Chinese, Persian, and Turkish in Uyghur script.²⁸ These three languages were also used for communications with the Silk Road oasis town of Hami.²⁹

The Yongle Emperor's two letters to Shah Rukh are the best examples of court translation that have come down to us. Each is a long, continuous text, dealing with a variety of subjects. The first is the Yongle Emperor's first letter to Shah Rukh, which reached Herat in 1412.³⁰ A shorter Chinese version of the same letter is preserved in the Ming Veritable Records.³¹ A deeper comparison reveals that the Chinese text is the first draft, perhaps made in the presence of the emperor and copied into the daily record, thus finding its way into the Veritable Records. This draft was enlarged before being translated into Persian and Uyghur and copied onto scrolls. The Persian translation of the longer final Chinese version was preserved by Hafiz-i Abru. The imperious tone of the Chinese draft is softened and made friendlier-sounding in the longer translated version, while an injunction concerning Shah Rukh's relationship with his nephew Khalil is moderated and considerably shortened. Details of previous tributary activity, names of envoys, and lists of gifts are added, as well as the assurance that roads will be open for commerce. The translation is plain and grammatically correct, apparently by a native speaker of Persian who was accustomed to producing high-quality translations routinely.³²

The Chinese embassy that carried this letter to distant Herat, in what is today western Afghanistan, was the first of a series that continued to the end of the Yongle Emperor's reign. His fourth embassy, which reached Herat in 1419, carried

the second of the letters preserved by Hafiz-i Abru.³³ The plain, accurate Persian translation, with literal phraseology, is similar in style to the letter of 1412, and might have been done by the same translator. It expresses gratitude for presents of a lion, horses, a leopard, and falcons, and like the other letter, expresses the wish that envoys and merchants should continue to come and go. It differs from the letter of 1412 in that terms of equal address are used throughout. The relationship between the two rulers is described as friendship in the closest terms: “Our friendship is heart to heart, reflecting like a mirror, although there be such a distance between us.”³⁴

The subsequent return mission to China is recorded in the Persian diary of Ghiyas al-Din, a member of a large group of tribute-bearers from several Central Asian princes who arrived together at the new capital at Beijing in 1420. He provides vivid pictures of the magnificent tribute ceremonies, including the presentation of tribute letters.³⁵ His account is preserved in several Persian histories, and has been translated into European languages, including English, since the eighteenth century.³⁶

No other Persian translations survive from the regular missions that went back and forth annually, until the Yongle Emperor’s death in 1424, and thereafter continued to do so at longer and longer intervals. Tribute missions came from Herat until 1463. Shah Rukh’s successors continued to send missions from Samarqand. The last tribute missions from Samarqand recorded in the court history were from Uzbek rulers in 1508 and 1514. A mission from Babur, who briefly recaptured Samarqand, is also recorded in 1512.³⁷

THE TSURPHU SCROLL IN TIBET

The Tsurphu scroll, currently displayed at the Tibet Museum in Lhasa, is a large scroll some 49.68 meters long and 66 centimeters wide. It depicts the miraculous phenomena observed when the Tibetan Fifth Karmapa carried out a Buddhist ceremony for the salvation of the souls of the dead on behalf of Emperor Zhu Di’s late parents at the Linggusi monastery in Nanjing in 1407. In Chinese, the scroll is called *Gamaba wei Ming Taizu jianfu tu* (Pictures of the Karmapa Performing a Ceremony for Ming Emperor Taizu). Such lavish patronage of Tibetan Buddhism by the imperial family was a court practice adopted from the Mongolian rulers.³⁸ The ceremony and the scroll supported the Yongle Emperor’s claim to legitimacy. Although he was the first Ming emperor’s fourth son by a concubine, he ordered a ceremony for his parents, the emperor and empress, thereby asserting that his mother was the empress, and that his own reign was legitimate.³⁹

Twenty-one sections of text on the scroll describe the mystical phenomena in Chinese, with accompanying translations in Persian, Tibetan, Mongolian, and Tay (Shan).⁴⁰ The sections of text are interspersed with forty-nine fine paintings

depicting the miraculous phenomena of colored clouds, rays of light, cranes, bodhisattvas, and flowers. The scroll resided at the Tsurphu Monastery, at some distance from Lhasa, where Hugh Richardson photographed it in 1949, and Luo Wenhua and Patricia Berger have commented on it more recently.⁴¹ The publication in 2000 of high-quality photographs of the entire scroll now allow its text and images to be studied in detail.⁴² Luo Aili and Liu Yingsheng, who have published a study of the Persian language in the scroll, point out that the overall text, its choices of vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure, as well as its practiced, fluent calligraphy, indicate that the translator's first language was Persian, or at least that he knew Persian very well indeed.⁴³

Mirza Haydar Dughlat (d. 1551), who served the first Mughal emperor, Babur (r. 1526–30), his cousin, as governor of Kashmir, records in his *Tarikh-i Rashidi* (Rashidi History) of Mughulistan that in 1553, at a place called Zunka in Tibet, he saw a stone inscribed in Chinese, Tibetan, and Persian relating to repairs to a temple. The vertical Chinese inscription took up the right side, with Tibetan above and Persian below on the left. Prince Haydar thought the inscription was about a hundred years old.⁴⁴ Although the identity and location of Zunka are unknown, the stele evidently stood in a temple, where it had possibly been since the *Yongle* era, which is to say for more than a hundred and twenty years. It would presumably have been carved in Nanjing or Beijing before being transported to its location. It is unlikely that the emperor would have repaired a temple further away than southern Tibet, and transporting a stele to northern Tibet would have been difficult. So Haydar possibly saw the stele at a temple close to Lhasa, perhaps at the Tsurphu Monastery, where it might have been erected in the years immediately following the Karmapa's visit. Tibetan records state the Karmapa returned to Tsurphu and rebuilt many shrines and stupas and completely renovated all the living accommodations there.⁴⁵

Another surviving document is the *Yongle Edict* (*Yongle chiyu*), an edict of the Yongle Emperor in 1407 granting security to one Mir Hajji, a Muslim living in China. It is the only surviving example of an imperial edict from the Ming period. The text is in Chinese, with Persian and Mongolian translations. The *Yongle Edict* shows that Persian was used not only for communications with other countries, but also for administrative matters within the borders of the empire. The document is now held at Puhading Garden (*Puhading yuan*), a mosque complex in Yangzhou. Unfortunately, only an unclear black and white photograph has been published, in which the Persian and Mongolian texts are not clear enough to read.⁴⁶ The Tsurphu scroll was probably produced soon after the departure of the Karmapa from Nanjing on a pilgrimage to Wutaishan on the thirteenth day of the third month in 1407. The *Yongle Edict* was issued just eight weeks later on the eleventh day of the fifth month. It is therefore possible that the same translators and calligraphers worked on both of these texts.

COMMUNICATIONS ALONG THE SEA ROUTE
TO HORMUZ

Wang Zongzai, the supervisor of the Translating College in 1578–79, compiled a series of documents stored in the ten colleges into a work that he entitled Translating College Examinations (*Siyiguan kao*).⁴⁷ It was evidently intended as a preparation book for the Translating College examinations (*kao*). The compilation provides tribute histories as well as information about geography, local products, and customs for each of the countries dealt with by each of the colleges. In an interesting pointer to the maritime trade routes in which Ming China was taking such interest, the *Siyiguan kaon* states that Islam was practiced in Champa, Cambodia, Java, and Malacca; and that Persian was used to communicate with these regions.⁴⁸

An entry in the Veritable Records of 1487 concerning communications with Thailand tells us that tribute letters were presented in Thai and Persian together at first, but that later Persian alone was used.⁴⁹ Liang Chu, chief minister in charge of the Patents Office (*Gaochifang*), the agency in charge of preparing these translations, stated in a submission to the Zhengde Emperor (r. 1505–21) that when tribute documents from maritime countries like Champa, Xianluo, and elsewhere, were encountered in local languages and scripts, the Persian College translated them with the help of the interpreters. He also stated that Persian only was used in reply in the case of all the imperial orders and letters accompanying the gifts.⁵⁰

The first three voyages of the Chinese Muslim admiral Zheng He (1371–1433 or 35), all reaching as far as Calicut in India, set out at two-year intervals in 1405, 1407, and 1409. The next three, setting out in 1413, 1417, and 1421, at four-year intervals, went to Hormuz in southern Iran and to other countries beyond. The final voyage, ordered by the Xuande Emperor, set out in 1431, also going as far as Hormuz.⁵¹ Tribute missions from many lands beyond the Sumatran port of Semudera (including the island of Ceylon, and the ports of Calicut, Hormuz, and Aden), arrived with Zheng He's returning fleets, usually going back with the next fleet. No tribute missions are known to have arrived from these countries independently of Zheng He's fleets.

Several geographical works were created following the voyages. Chief among them is *Yingya shenglan* by Ma Huan, a Persian translator who took part in Zheng He's fourth, sixth, and seventh voyages.⁵² Ma Huan took care to note the presence of Muslims in each place, along with their status in local society; he also occasionally provided information about their writing systems.⁵³ Some of Ma Huan's material was novelized in 1597 by Luo Maodeng in *The Well-Known Romance of the Grand Eunuch Sanbao's Record of the Western Ocean* (*Sanbao taijian xiyang ji tongsu yanyi*), which was supplemented by personnel lists, letters, and tribute lists that are not authentic documents but bravura inventions of the author.⁵⁴ These scarcely add to the historical record.

THE GALLE STONE IN CEYLON

The only surviving Persian document relating to Zheng He's voyages is the so-called Galle Stone, a stele erected in Ceylon (*Xilan*, modern Sri Lanka) by Zheng He in 1411, which records the emperor's donations to various temples. The text is in Chinese, with Tamil and Persian translations. The text, translations, and calligraphy were completed in 1409 at the Ming court in Nanjing, where the stele was carved and then carried to Ceylon by Zheng He.⁵⁵ Galle was the major trading port in southwestern Ceylon, and there seems no doubt that Zheng He's fleets stopped there. Devundara, the "city of gods," a vast temple precinct and busy port on Ceylon's southernmost promontory, was nearby, and its great gilt roof was a landmark for mariners.⁵⁶ This was a fitting location for an imperial monument, and the stele must have stood there for 178 years, before the temple precinct was looted and destroyed by Portuguese forces in 1588.⁵⁷ An account by a Portuguese missionary written between 1671 and 1686 records that the stone still stood among the ruins in the seventeenth century.⁵⁸ This suggests that it was not located within any of the temples, which were destroyed, but instead stood in a public place.

When the stele was rediscovered in a culvert in Galle in 1911, British colonial scholars were rapidly mobilized. Rubbings were made, followed by transcriptions and translations of the Chinese text by Edmund Backhouse, of the Tamil text by S. Paranavitana, and of the Persian text by Khwaja Muhammad Ahmad.⁵⁹ Less than half of the Persian text is legible, but it is clearly a translation of the Chinese inscription. All three texts variously indicate that gifts were offered to Buddha, Vishnu, and Muhammad. The stone now stands in the Colombo Museum, but no rubbing or image of the Persian text has been published, and only the transcription by Khwaja Muhammad Ahmad is available for study. The 600th anniversary of the Zheng He voyages prompted publications on every aspect of Zheng He.⁶⁰ Among them, the contribution of Liu Yingsheng, the leading contemporary Chinese scholar of Persian, demonstrated the importance of the Galle stone as evidence of the use of Persian as a language of international communication for the Ming maritime expeditions.⁶¹

In 1431, seven years after the end of the Yongle era, the Xuande Emperor commissioned Zheng He's final voyage and also sent a large-scale mission to Herat, Samarqand, and several smaller kingdoms in 1432, which produced a final round of tribute-bearers, but no tribute missions came from beyond Southeast Asia after them. When Malacca fell to the Portuguese in 1511, bearers of tribute and even of letters from countries in the Southern (Indian) Ocean decreased to a trickle. Tribute relations with the Timurid rulers in Herat were also discontinued. However, missions from Samarqand, Turfan, and elsewhere in Central Asia, accompanied by large numbers of merchants seeking to trade, continued to arrive at Jiayuguan, where the Silk Road passes through the Great Wall, for the rest of the fifteenth

century. Many such merchants sojourned within the wall at Ganzhou and Suzhou, where border officials dealt with them and issued them entry permits.⁶²

THE PERSIAN EXEMPLARY BILINGUAL LETTERS

Chinese translations of four tribute letters, together with five petitions from Hami and other places within Ming jurisdiction, all from the last three decades of the fifteenth century, which were translated from Persian into Chinese at the court, have survived by their inclusion as “exemplary bilingual letters” (*laiwen*), in the Persian section of the word-List collections (*huayiyiyu*). They are the only surviving examples of the work of Persian translators after the Yongle period.

The first bilingual language learning material was produced at the court of the first Ming Emperor, before the Translating College was established. Huo Yuanjie and Mashaykh were ordered to write up this bilingual material in 1382, and it was published in 1389. Entitled *Huayiyiyu* (Chinese and Foreign Word List), it consists of a bilingual Chinese and Mongolian word list with 844 entries under seventeen topic headings.⁶³ It also has an appended section containing twelve Mongolian “exemplary letters” (*laiwen*), of which seven are authentic Mongolian letters to the court and five are Chinese imperial letters translated into Mongolian. It was not until the Siyiguan translation college was established in 1407 that the work of compiling the complete set of such word lists in the languages of each college was begun.⁶⁴ They consisted at first only of bilingual lists called *zazi* (collected words), forming a series that were called *huayiyiyu* like the Mongolian word list compiled in the Hongwu period.⁶⁵ The second element of the *huayiyiyu* model, the *laiwen*, examples of letters, was not added until much later. Some collections contain word lists and *laiwen* for the Thai College, which was not established until 1578, the sixth year of the Wanli era, so the date of compilation could be even later than that.⁶⁶ Supplementary vocabulary lists (*zengxu zazi*) derived from the exemplary letters, were added at the same time.

Several manuscripts and old printed editions of *Huayi yiyu* contain Persian word lists and exemplary letters under the title *Huihuiguan yiyu*.⁶⁷ They include *zazi*, *laiwen*, and a *zengxu zazi* (additional word list). Correspondences of dialect forms and place-names show that the additional word list was compiled partly from the exemplary letters. Liu Yingsheng has published an annotated edition of the Persian word lists, and Honda Minobu has published a transcription of the word lists and the exemplary letters, which is the only published text of Persian *laiwen*.⁶⁸ Liu Yingsheng collated twenty-six *laiwen* from four manuscripts.⁶⁹ The most interesting of these manuscripts as far as the *laiwen* are concerned is a Ming manuscript in the Tōyō Bunko in Tokyo, called B, or the Toyo Bunko text. Its fine calligraphy in all languages indicates that it was written by officers of the translating colleges. It contains the original *Huihuiguan zazi* vocabulary, but without the additional *zengxu zazi* vocabulary, and thirty *laiwen*.

The Persian *laiwen* texts have baffled scholars, who have thought them examples of ungrammatical Persian. However, they are neither original Persian letters nor even Persian translations. Rather, they are deliberate word-for-word Persian glosses of the Chinese translations of original Persian letters, and of Chinese tribute lists, which were created to test students at the Persian College during regular seasonal tests called *jike* (季課). The tests are described in the regulations of the Siyiguan.⁷⁰ They were carried out in each language and, according to the results, students were recruited to work in the Gaochiguan translating office, or the history department, or to do copying work.⁷¹ In his library catalogue the Qing bibliophile Qu Zhongrong describes a finely bound collection of seasonal tests of a candidate in the Tibetan College. It consisted of forty-five texts of the exemplary letter (*laiwen*) genre, with corrections by college tutors, which were made for each of the five seasons from winter 1575 to winter 1576.⁷²

Collections of *ke* examination texts in the different languages of the translation colleges were made using the Chinese texts stored in each language college. This was not done grammatically in accordance with the rules of the different languages being examined, but rather by closely following the word order of the Chinese source text. The uniformity of the glossing, with identical glosses used for the same words in all the texts, indicates that the texts were all glossed at one time. This evidently occurred when a decision was made to create uniform testing materials for all of the language colleges. This might have been soon after the appointment of supervisors to oversee the language colleges in 1494.⁷³ Several of the Persian exemplary letters (*laiwen*) can indeed be dated between 1472 and 1494. Another possible date is the supervisorship of Yang Zishan and Zhang Jisheng, who instituted the keeping of records and personnel lists between 1516 and 1519.⁷⁴ Their zeal may have given rise to the testing procedures. These supervisors evidently saw a need to establish uniform testing for all languages, and the glossed texts were a somewhat clumsy bureaucratic answer to that need. One collection of tests survives, titled *Gaochangguan ke* (高昌館課; Tests of the Uyghur College).⁷⁵ It contains eighty-seven Chinese texts of the *laiwen* type, including translations of letters referring to rulers in Turfan and Hami, as well as tribute lists, all glossed uniformly and systematically word for word in Uyghur. The letters are from the same period as the Persian *laiwen*.

Another Qing bibliophile, Qian Zeng, in a catalogue of his family's rare books made between 1669 and 1674, described a collection entitled *Huihuiguan ke* (Tests of the Persian College), which also contains texts of the *laiwen* type.⁷⁶ Elsewhere Qu Zhongrong describes slips of paper, inserted into an old book, bearing the titles *Huihuiguan ke* (Persian College Tests), *Miandianguan ke* (Burmese College Tests), and *Baiyiguan ke* (Baiyi [Tay] College Tests).⁷⁷ Collections of *ke* tests later provided the texts for the *laiwen* exemplary letters that were appended to vocabulary lists in the *huayiyiyu* collections some time after 1579.

The Chinese versions of the *laiwen* are the only examples of Persian court translation after the Yongle era ended in 1424. They are plain and correct, showing that

the translators had a good knowledge of both Persian and Chinese. The chapters in the *Ming shi* (Ming History) on Hami and Turfan give a detailed account of Great Ming's loss of control over the oasis kingdom of Hami and the subsequent breakdown of relations with the Mughul rulers of Turfan in eastern Turkistan. These events form the historical background to several of the letters preserved in the exemplary letters. The earliest dateable letter is an appeal from Hami for help following its invasion by Sultan 'Ali of Turfan in 1473.⁷⁸ Another letter refers to the return of detained Turfan ambassadors in 1499.⁷⁹ A tribute letter from Egypt is probably from al-Malik al-Ashraf Sayf al-Din Qaytbay (r. 1468–96), the eighteenth Burji Mamluk sultan of Egypt. The letter was most likely sent during the years when his reign prospered before 1481.⁸⁰

The French Sinologist Paul Pelliot scrutinized Ming records in his classic *Le Hōjō et le Sayyid Husain de l'histoire des Ming* to solve the problem of the identity of the prince of Hami who became a favorite of the Zhengde (正德) Emperor (r. 1505–21), and whose name appears in one or more of the Persian *laiwen*.⁸¹ A petition from a military commander (*dudu*) named Sayyid Husayn asks that official status be given to a mosque. Since he was granted *dudu* status only in 1494, the letter can be no earlier than that.⁸² In another letter, Mawla Hasan, a prince of Hami enfeoffed as a military commander there, petitions the Ming court seeking confirmation of his status. The Ming History records a mission by Military Commander Mawla Hasan to Turfan in 1511, so the letter is from before that time.⁸³ A surviving request from a Muslim holy man for a travel permit, and tribute letters from Turfan, Balkh, and Basra, unfortunately cannot be dated. In future, an overall study of the exemplary letters from all ten colleges may come up with more secure dating.

Only nine of the twenty-six *laiwen* are Chinese translations of Persian tributary letters or petitions. Seventeen of them are not actual letters, but rather tribute lists (*fangwuzhuang*), which were declaimed at audiences and listed goods brought and gifts bestowed. (The "Edicts of Hongwu" describe how the lists were declaimed.)⁸⁴ These documents list tribute from Mecca, Samarqand, Turfan, and Hami. Such tribute lists were an indispensable element of the tribute audience ritual, though the public declaiming of a tribute letter could be waived. The tribute lists are all inserted within the same few formulas, using the same wording each time. They were not translations from Persian, like the other *laiwen* letters, but are instead lists composed in Chinese by officers of the Board of Rites. They lay alongside the Chinese translations of letters in the college, and when the order was given to create collections of glossed examination texts, they were also taken up and used for this purpose.

CONCLUSIONS

Beyond the materials discussed here, no other Persian documents exist from the era of the Great Ming, so we cannot know what work translators did in the last

150 years of the dynasty. However, the lists in *Siyiguan ze* show that small numbers of officers continued to be appointed in each college.⁸⁵ Five were appointed to the Persian College in 1490, when records begin; six in 1509; one in 1537; four in 1566; one in 1578; six in 1605; and one in 1627. Collectively, these appointments show that the college remained active until the end of the Ming dynasty. The Tibetan seasonal tests recorded by Qu Zhongrong also show that testing was still being done in 1576, while Wang Zongzai states that he compiled *Siyiguan kao* in moments of leisure while supervising *ke* examinations in 1579. It is reasonable to tentatively conclude that language testing, including in Persian, possibly continued until the end of the dynasty.⁸⁶

The ten translating colleges were maintained to ensure that the Ming emperors could address tributary states in their own languages and understand the messages they sent. Alongside other languages, Persian was used exclusively for the emperor's purposes. Although the writing of Persian was practiced by a small number of translators, it did not serve as a lingua franca in China. Rather, it was used for a specific purpose, namely, the emperor's communications with countries in Central Asia, along the sea route to Hormuz in Iran, and, perhaps more surprisingly, with Tibet. As in other regions of Eurasia, the use of Persian was underwritten by an imperial state bureaucracy.

NOTES

1. Paul Pelliot, *Le Hōja et le Sayyid Husain de l'histoire des Ming* (Leiden: Brill, 1948) (*T'oung Pao* 38), app 3; *Le Sseu-yi-kouan et le Houei-t'ong-kouan*, 207–92.

2. See Liu Yingsheng, *Hailu yu Lulu, Zhongguo gu shidai dong xi jiaoliu yanjiu* (Maritime and Continental Routes between East and West) (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2011).

3. David Morgan has summarized the arguments for this proposition. See David Morgan, "Persian as a Lingua Franca in the Mongol Empire," in *Literacy in the Persianate World: Writing and the Social Order*, ed. Brian Spooner and William L. Hanaway (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 2012), 160–70. However, Stephen Haw has refuted all the arguments; Marco Polo's supposed use of Persian terms, the use of the term *huihui* in a Persian context, and Persian inscriptions on a small number of *paizi* safe-passes, arguing that in the Great Mongolian Empire, Turkic, not Persian, was the lingua franca of the *semuren* ("persons with special status," i.e., confederates of the Mongols such as Turks or Middle Eastern Muslims), and the language that Marco Polo spoke. Stephen G. Haw, "The Persian Language in Yuan-Dynasty China: A Reappraisal," *East Asian History* 39 (2014): 5–32.

4. Thomas T. Allsen, "The Rasūlid Hexaglot in Its Eurasian Cultural Context," in *The King's Dictionary: The Rasūlid Hexaglot*, ed. Peter B. Golden (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 37, traces the references to the Persian College in *Yuan shi*; Stephen Haw defines the term *istifi* in "The Persian Language in Yuan-Dynasty China," 28.

5. Igor de Rachewiltz, "Two Recently Published *P'ai-tzu* Discovered in China," *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 36 (1982): 414–17.

6. *Xizang lishi dang'an huicui* (A Collection of Historical Archives of Tibet), compiled by the Archives of the Tibet Autonomous Region (Shekou: Cultural Relics Publishing House, 1995), nos. 23–30.

7. Su Bai, "Lasa Budalagong zhuyao diantang he kuzang de bufen Mingdai wenshu," *Wenwu* 8 (1993): 40–48.

8. Francis Woodman Cleaves, "The Sino-Mongolian Edict of 1453 in the Topkapi Sarayi Müzesi," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 13 (1950): 431–36.
9. Zhang Tingyu et al., eds., *Ming shi*, 1736; repr. 28 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974); *Ming shilu*, 1418–mid-seventeenth century. Facsimile repr. of Guoli Beiping tushuguan cang hongge chaoben, 133 vols. (Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo, 1961–66).
10. *Da Ming huidian* (Collected Statutes of the Ming Dynasty), comp. Li Dongyang et al. (Taipei: Zhongwen shuju, 1963).
11. See a full discussion of this term in *Menggu shi cidian* (A Dictionary of Mongolian History), ed. Bao Yinhu (Huhehot: Nei Menggu daxue chubanshe, 2010), 203.
12. *Taizu shilu* (Ming Annals), 34: 9v. Cf. Henry Serruys, *The Mongols in China during the Hung-wu Period*, 1368–1398 (Brussels: Institut belge des hautes études chinoises, 1980), 57.
13. *Taizu shilu*, 38: 7v–8r (0338–9); 53: 9r. (1049).
14. *Ming shi* (Ming History) 74: 1797. Cf. Pelliot, *Hōja*, 226–27.
15. The language of Baiyi, identified as Māng² Maaw², land of the Dai, present-day southwestern Yunnan. See Christian Daniels, "Script without Buddhism: Burmese Influence on the Tay (Shan) Script of Māng² Maaw² as Seen in a Chinese Scroll Painting of 1407," *International Journal of Asian Studies* 9, 2 (2012): 147–76.
16. *Siyiguan ze*, 2: 3r; *Siyigu an kao* (1924 Oriental Society imprint), comp. Wang Zongzai (Taipei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1972), pt. 2, 21v–22r.
17. Qiu Jun, *Daxue yanyi bu* (Taipei: Shijie shuju, 1988), *juan* 145, 14–15.
18. *Siyiguan ze*, ed. Lü Weiqi (Taipei: Wenhai chubanshe, 1985).
19. *Da Ming huidian*, 221: 6v–7r (pp. 2939–40).
20. Wolfgang Franke, "The Veritable Records of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644)," in *Histories of China and Japan*, ed. W. G. Beasley and E. G. Pulleyblank (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 742–43.
21. *Siyiguan ze* 2: 3r (p. 45). Cf. Norman Wild, "Materials for the Study of the Ssü i Kuan," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 11, 3 (October 1945): 617–40, at 625, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0041977X00072311>.
22. These records are listed in Liu Yingsheng's chapter "Baiaerxintai ji qi chushi," in *Hailu yu lulu*, 316–17.
23. Silvestre De Sacy, "Observations on a Correspondence between Tamerlane the Great and Charles the Sixth, King of France," *Monthly Magazine, or British Register* 38, 2 (1814): 15–16.
24. The Chinese text of this letter is in *Ming shilu*, 8: 3420, and also in the chapter on Samarqand in *Ming shi*, 332: 8598. English translation in Emil Bretschneider, *Mediaeval Researches from Eastern Asiatic Sources: Fragments towards the Knowledge of the Geography and History of Central and Western Asia from the 13th to the 17th Century* (London: Kegan Paul, 1910), 2: 258.
25. Morris Rossabi, *China and Inner Asia* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1975), 27. "The letter . . . was undoubtedly forged by a Central Asian merchant. It is inconceivable that Tamerlane, who aspired to world conquest, could have written such a fawning, self-deprecatory missive." Also Rossabi, "The Ming and Inner Asia," in *The Cambridge History of China: The Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), Part 2*, ed. Denis C. Twitchett and Frederick W. Mote, vol. 8 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 247, "the Hong-wu emperor had faith in these forged missives &c."
26. Zhang Wende, "Lun Ming yu Zhongya Tiemuer wangchao de guanxi," *Lishi dangan* 1 (2007): 58.
27. Hafiz Abru, *Zubdat al-Tawarikh*, ed. Sayyid Jawadi (Tehran, 1993), 3: 46off. Also Kamal al-Din 'Abd al-Razzaq Samarqandi, *Matla'-i Sa'dayn wa Majma'-i Bahrayn*, ed. Muhammad Shafi (Lahore, 1946–49), 2, pt. 1: 130ff.
28. Hafiz Abru, *Zubdat al-Tawarikh*, 3: 467.
29. *Siyiguan kao*, 2: 1v.
30. Hafiz Abru, *Zubdat al-Tawarikh*, 3: 460.

31. *Taizu shilu*, 101: 3v (1316), and in Herat chapter in *Ming shi*, 332: 8610.
32. Liu Yingsheng, “Baiaerxintai ji qi chushi,” in *Hailu yu lulu*, 325.
33. Hafiz Abru, *Zubdat al-Tawarikh*, 4: 697. Translation by Joseph F. Fletcher, “China and Central Asia, 1368–1884,” in *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China’s Foreign Relations*, ed. John. K. Fairbank (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 212–14.
34. Fletcher, “China and Central Asia, 1368–1884,” 213.
35. *A Persian Embassy to China, Being an Extract from Zubdatul Tawarikh of Hafiz Abru*, trans. K. M. Maitra, intro. L. Carrington Goodrich (New York: Paragon Book Reprint, 1970).
36. Étienne Quatremère published his French translation of this text in 1843 and lists earlier translations into Turkish, French, and Dutch, including one by Antoine Galland in 1696. Quatremère, “Notice de l’ouvrage persan qui a pour titre: *Matla-assaadein ou-madja-albahrein* et qui contient l’histoire des deux sultans Schah-Rokh et Abou-Saïd,” *Notices et extraits des manuscrits de la Bibliothèque du Roi et autres bibliothèques* 14, 1 (1843): 10.
37. Ralph Kauz, *Politik und Handel zwischen Ming und Timuriden: China, Iran und Zentralasien im Spätmittelalter* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2005), 244.
38. David M Robinson, “The Ming Court and the Legacy of the Yuan Mongols,” in *Culture, Courtiers and Competition: The Ming Court (1368–1644)*, ed. Robinson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center; distributed by Harvard University Press, 2008), 371.
39. Patricia Berger, “Miracles in Nanjing: An Imperial Record of the Fifth Karmapa’s Visit to the Chinese Capital,” in *Cultural Intersections in Later Chinese Buddhism*, ed. Marsha Weidner (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2001), 149–50.
40. On the Tay (Shan) language, see n. 15 above.
41. Hugh Edward Richardson, “The Karma-pa Sect, A Historical Note,” in *High Peaks, Pure Earth: Collected Writings on Tibetan History and Culture* (London: Serindia Publications, 1998), 335–78; Berger, “Miracles in Nanjing,” 145–69; and Luo Wenhua, “Ming Dabao Fawang jian pudu dazhai changjuan,” *Zhongguo Zangxue* 1 (1995): 89–97.
42. “Gamaba wei Ming Taizu jianfu tu changjuan,” in *Baozang: Zhongguo Xizang lishi wenwu*, vol. 3: *Yuanchao shiqi, Mingchao shiqi* (Beijing: Zhaohua chubanshe, 2000), 96–115.
43. Luo Aili and Liu Yingsheng, “Gamaba wei Ming Taizu jianfu tu Huihuiwen chutan” (A Preliminary Survey of the Persian Text in the Tsurphu Scroll), *Xibei minzu yanjiu* 48, 1 (2006): 55.
44. *Mirza Haydar Dughlat’s Tarikh-i-Rashidi: A History of the Khans of Moghulistan*, trans. and ed. W. M. Thackston (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, 1996), 182. See also *A History of the Moghuls of Central Asia: Being the Tarikh-i-Rashidi of Mirza Muhammad Haidar, Dughlat*, trans. Sir E. Denison Ross, ed. Ney Elias (London: Sampson Low, & Marston, 1898), 416. Dr. Anya King of the University of Southern Indiana made me aware of this record.
45. Nik Douglas and Meryl White, *Karmapa: The Black Hat Lama of Tibet* (London: Luzac, 1976), 64.
46. *Quanzhou Yisilanjiao shike* (Islamic Inscriptions at Quanzhou), ed. Chen Dasheng, (Ningxia: Ningxia renmin chubanshe, 1984), 7–8.
47. Zhang Wende, “Wang Zongzai ji qi ‘Siyiguan kao’” (Wang Tsung-Tsai and His “Ssu I-Kuan Kao”), *Zhongguo bianjiang shidi yanjiu* 10, 3 (2000): 1.
48. *Siyiguan kao*, 1: 10v.
49. *Xiaozong shilu*, 2: 14v.
50. Liang Chu, *Yuzhou yi gao* (Manuscripts Bequeathed by Yuzhou) (Taipei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1973), 1: 10rv.
51. Jan J. L. Duyvendak, “The True Dates of the Chinese Maritime Expeditions in the Early 15th Century,” *Toung Pao* 34 (1939): 341–412.
52. Ma Huan, *Yingyai shenglan jiaozhu* (Overall Survey of the Ocean’s Shores Annotated), ed. Feng Chengjun (Taipei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1962).

53. All sources summarized in Ma Huan, *Ying-Yai Sheng-lan*, “*The Overall Survey of the Ocean’s Shores*” [1433], trans. and ed. J. V. G. Mills (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).
54. Luo Maodeng, *Sanbao taijian xiyang ji tongsu yanyi* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1985).
55. Liu Yingsheng, “Mingchu Zhongguo yu Yazhou zhongxibu diqu jiaowang de waiwen yuyan wenti” (On the Diplomatic Language in the Communication between China and Midwestern Asia in Ming Dynasty), in *Chuancheng wenming, zou xiang shijie, heping fazhan, jinian Zheng He xia Xiyang liubai zhounian guoji xueshu luntan lunwenji* (Carry on Civilization, Open to the World, for Peace and Development; Proceedings of the International Forum in Memory of the 600th Anniversary of Zheng He’s Expeditions) (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2005), 107.
56. W. I. Siriweera, *A Study of the Economic History of Pre-Modern Sri Lanka* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1994), 142–43.
57. P. E. Pieris, *Ceylon and the Portuguese 1505–1658* (Tellipalai, Ceylon: American Ceylon Mission Press, 1920), 108–9.
58. Fernão de Queyroz, *The Temporal and Spiritual Conquest of Ceylon*, trans. S. G. Perera (Colombo: A. C. Richards, 1930), 35.
59. Edward W. Perera, “The Galle Trilingual Stone,” *Spolia Zeylanica* (Colombo Museum) 8 (1913): 122–32; Tamil and Persian texts in S. Paranavitana, “The Tamil Inscription on the Galle Trilingual Slab,” *Epigraphia Zeylanica* (London: Frowde, 1912–33), 3: 331–41.
60. This was the International Forum in Memory of the 600th Anniversary of Zheng He’s Expeditions (*Jinian Zheng He xia xiyang 600 zhounian guoji xueshu luntan*).
61. Liu Yingsheng, “Mingchu Zhongguo yu Yazhou zhongxibu diqu jiaowang de waiwen yuyan wenti,” 113.
62. Enoki Kazuo, “Su-chou in Late Ming,” in *Studia Asiatica: The Collected Papers of the Late Dr. Kazuo Enoki* (Tokyo, Kyuko-Shoin, 1998), 538.
63. Antoine Mostaert, *Le matériel mongol du Houa i i iu, Huayi yiyu, de Houng-ou, 1389*, ed. Igor de Rachewiltz, *Mélanges chinois et bouddhiques*, 18 (Brussels: Institut belge des hautes études chinoises, 1977).
64. Liu Yingsheng, *Huihuiguan Zazi yu Huihuiguan Yiyu yanjiu* (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2008) 13.
65. *Ibid.*
66. Wang Zongzai, *Siyiguan kao*, pt 2: 21v–22r.
67. Liu Yingsheng, *Huihuiguan Zazi yu Huihuiguan Yiyu yanjiu*, 15–17.
68. *Ibid.* and Honda Minobu 本田實信, 回回館譯語に就いて / *On the Hui-hui-kuan I-yü (Chinese-Persian Vocabulary)* (Sapporo, Japan: Hokkaido University, 1963).
69. The manuscripts are described in detail in Liu Yingsheng, *Huihuiguan Zazi yu Huihuiguan Yiyu yanjiu*, 14–22.
70. *Siyiguan ze*, introduction: 2v (p.16).
71. *Ibid.*
72. Qu Zhongrong, *Guquanshangan tiba* (Prefaces and Postscripts from Ancient Spring Mountain Hostel), in *Song Yuan ban shumu tiba jikan*, ed. Jia Guirong and Wang Guan, vol. 1 (Beijing: Beijing tushuguan chubanshe, 2003), 326–28. Cf. Pelliot, *Hōja*, 279.
73. *Siyiguan ze*, 2: 3r (p. 45). Cf. Wild, “Materials for the Study of the Ssü i Kuan,” 625.
74. *Siyiguan ze*, 18: 3rv.
75. Hu Zhenhua and Huang Runhua, *Mingdai wenxian “Gaochangguan ke”: Ladingwen zimu yizhu* (The Gaochangguan ke Documents Transcribed in Latin Letters) (Wulumuqi: Xinjiang renmin chubanshe, 1981).
76. *Du shu min qiu ji*, ed. Qian Zeng and Ding Yu (Beijing: Shumu wenxian chubanshe, 1983), 189ff.
77. Qu Zhongrong, *Guquanshangan tiba*, 329.
78. *Ming shi*, 329: 8516. Rossabi, *China and Inner Asia*, 35–36, identifies Sultan ‘Ali as Yunus Khan of Moghulistan.

79. *Ming shi*, 329: 8532.
80. C. F. Petry, *Twilight of Majesty: The Reigns of the Mamlūk Sultans al-Ashrāf Qāyṭbāy and Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī in Egypt* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1993), 73–88.
81. Pelliot, *Hōjā*, 81–206.
82. *Dictionary of Ming Biography, 1368–1644*, ed. Chaoying Fang and L. Carrington Goodrich (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 1152.
83. *Ming shi*, 329: 8521.
84. *Da Ming huidian*, 58: 10v.
85. *Siyiguan ze*, 7: 1rff.
86. Wang Zongzai, *Siyiguan kao*, 2: 21v–22r.