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Huai Su 懷素 (737–799), Tang calligrapher and Buddhist monk

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It has often been claimed that Persian was an important lingua franca in the Yuan empire. A recent article by Professor David Morgan has discussed this premise at some length, setting out what seems to be impressive evidence in its favour. For some time, however, I have entertained doubts about the validity of some of this evidence. Although I have no doubt that there were a significant number of Persian speakers in the Yuan empire, of whom a number may have held important official positions, I believe that the Persian language was never a genuine lingua franca in China and Mongolia. Its use was probably confined to a section of the Muslim community, and to limited commercial and official circles. Its precise importance must have varied over time, but, generally speaking, other languages were of higher status and more commonly used. Mongolian, the language of the rulers, undoubtedly held the highest status. Turkic was almost certainly in more common usage than Persian, not only in the Yuan empire, but throughout most of the Yeke Mongghol Ulus. It must be realised that most of the variants of Turkic, whether Uighur, Cuman (Qipchaq), Qangli, or whatever, were mutually intelligible. Thus, from the Uighur lands around the Tarim Basin all the way to the Black Sea, what was effectively a single language was predominant.

First, I shall examine the evidence adduced for the importance of Persian. Professor Morgan begins his article with the common claim that Marco Polo must have had a knowledge of Persian, which was ‘spoken and written very widely in China (and elsewhere in the Mongol empire), in the circles in which Marco Polo moved’. Morgan, however, is a Persian scholar, with no knowledge of Chinese. As he has no direct access to Chinese sources in the original language, it must be assumed that he is here following the opinions of others. He is undoubtedly in very good company. The idea that Marco Polo was only really fluent in Persian, and certainly had no knowledge of Chinese, can be traced back at least to the 1870s. In his heavily annotated edition of Marco Polo’s book, first published...
in 1871, Colonel Sir Henry Yule states that there are 'positive indications of Marco’s ignorance of Chinese', and that 'his intercourse and conversation ... at the Kaan’s court ... probably was carried on in the Persian language'. One wonders how Yule could have come to such a conclusion, however. He himself certainly was ignorant of the Chinese language, and apparently knew little about China, to judge by his heavy reliance on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Western accounts of the country. The great Mongolist and Chinese scholar Francis Cleaves commented: 'I think that Yule was somewhat harsh in his appraisal of Marco Polo’s knowledge of Chinese ...'. It may be noted also that Pauthier, who did have knowledge of Chinese, considered that Marco may well have learned several languages of the Yuan court, including both Persian and Chinese, and that he probably also learned the Chinese, Uighur, Phags-pa and Perso-Arabic scripts. All this is highly speculative, of course.

Great weight was added to the theory that Marco Polo principally, if not entirely, relied on a knowledge of Persian while in the Yuan empire, by no less an authority than Paul Pelliot. He refers approvingly to Yule’s opinion, and avers that: 'Marco Polo, maint exemple le prouve, était entouré de Persans ... le persan est même sans doute la seule langue orientale qu’il ait jamais manié couramment'. This opinion was taken up by Henri Cordier, who quotes Pelliot in his Notes and Addenda to Yule’s edition of Marco Polo’s book. It is also repeated in Pelliot’s Notes on Marco Polo, where Pelliot several times says that Marco ‘had in mind, as usual, the Persian term’, or something similar. Pelliot’s opinion has naturally carried a great deal of weight. Frances Wood took up the refrain, listing, as Persianised versions of Chinese place-names, Polo’s ‘Chemeinfu for Kaipingfu, Pianfu for Pingyangfu, Quengianfu for Xi’anfu and Taianfu for Taixuanyanfu’. This is a very short list, but at least a couple more names could be added to it. A couple could also be removed from it, however, as will be shown shortly. In reality, Marco Polo uses only a very few clearly Persian versions of Chinese place-names, and other Persian vocabulary. Most of the names that he gives for places in China are purely Chinese: the fact that some of them are used in more or less the same forms by Rashid al-Din and other Persian writers does not make them any less so. In some cases, too, he uses what are very clearly Mongolian and Turkic versions of place-names, and a number of words from various languages other than Persian.

Wood’s list requires close examination. ‘Cheminfu’ is undoubtedly a Persian version of Kaipingfu 開平府, Marco uses this name for the city only once, however, when it is first mentioned in his book. This is when he is recounting how he first arrived at the court of Qubilai Qa’an, with his father and uncle. This may explain the use of the Persian version of the name at this point: Marco had only just arrived in the Yuan empire and, at the time, probably only knew Persian, which he had learned during the outward journey. He had not had time to learn any of the languages of Yuan China. If he really did make notes during his travels, and used them when recalling his adventures for Rustichello to record, then he may well have stuck to names as he had noted them at the time. Apart from this one usage, he always calls this city ‘Ciandu’ (or something similar, as there are, as usual, a number of scribal variants in different manuscripts of the book). This was derived from the Chinese ‘Shangdu’ 上都, and is not in any way Persian. Even Pelliot had to admit that he could ‘not find the name in Rašīdu-‘d-Dīn, who uses only Keminfu’. This, then, is a clear example of Marco not following Persian practice. Incidentally, Pelliot is wrong to say that ‘the name of K’ai-p’ing-fu was changed to Shang-tu’ in 1263. The superior prefecture (fu 府), and also the local county (xian 县), continued to be
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called Kaiping. Shangdu was an additional name, which recognised the status of the city as an imperial residence. It was used for the route (路) of which the city was the centre of government, but Kaipingfu was not immediately abolished.20 It is also quite likely that the name Shangdu may have come into informal use some time before 1263, so that its appearance at earlier dates is not necessarily the anachronism that Pelliot considered it to be.21

It seems very likely that Marco’s ‘Taianfu’, for ‘Taiyuanfu’ (太原府), may have been derived, not from any Persian form of the name, but from a Mongolian

abolished.20

the city was the centre of government, but Kaipingfu was not immediately

include in her list, is ‘Çardandan [Zardandan]’. This is a translation of the Chinese ‘Jin Chi’ (金齒), meaning ‘Gold Teeth’, a name applied to a people of the Yuan province of Yunnan, and to the area where they lived26 (today partly in Yunnan

24 Pelliot, Notes, Vol.1, p.256. Pelliot sees no difficulty in deriving ‘Ciandu’ directly from Chinese; it may be noted in passing that Marco’s use of a final -n in the first syllable, rather than –ng, is a normal feature of Romance languages, which generally lack final –ng; the French still usually refer to Beijing as ‘Pékin’, for example, while modern Italian usage is ‘Pechino’.25
27 Pelliot, Notes, Vol.1, p.256. Pelliot sees no difficulty in deriving ‘Ciandu’ directly from Chinese; it may be noted in passing that Marco’s use of a final -n in the first syllable, rather than –ng, is a normal feature of Romance languages, which generally lack final –ng; the French still usually refer to Beijing as ‘Pékin’, for example, while modern Italian usage is ‘Pechino’.25
28 later converting most of his army of 150 thousand Mongols.35 Muslim
30 Rashīd al-Dīn (trans. J.A. Boyle), The Successors of Genghis Khan (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1929), refers to Shangdu in the second year of the Zhongtong 重統 reign-period, that is, 1261.
37 Boyle, Successors, p.164 and note.
30 Boyle, Successors, p.283.
31 Boyle, Successors, p.283.
32 Boyle, Successors, p.283.
33 Boyle, Successors, p.283.
34 Boyle, Successors, p.283.
and partly in Myanmar). The custom of covering some of the front teeth with gold persisted until modern times. Again, there may be an explanation for this usage. The governor of Yunnan province from 1274 until 1279 was a Muslim, Sayyid Ajall Shams al-Dīn, whose family came from Bukhara. His son, Nasir al-Dīn, who is mentioned by Marco, also held various high offices in Yunnan, until 1291, when he was moved to Shaanxi. It is not unlikely that the Muslim influence in Yunnan may have given currency to a certain amount of Persian nomenclature. Otherwise Marco uses very few definitely Persian terms. There is Pulisanghin, which is his name for the ‘Marco Polo Bridge’, (Lugou Qiao 卢沟桥), today in south-west Beijing. He also refers to the emperor of the Southern Song as ‘facfur’. It seems that, as in the case of Kenjan, this usage went back several centuries. Versions of the word occurred in Arabic as well as in Persian.

Now I have to return to Professor Morgan’s arguments. He cites Pelliot, as quoted by Cordier, as the source for:

two especially eloquent examples of ‘Persianisation.’ One is that Marco uses as his term for south China the word manzi, which is what Rashid al-Dīn calls it but is not the Mongolian word, which is nangias. The other example, a particularly telling piece of evidence, is that when he is discussing the Chinese/Mongolian twelve-year animal cycle, he gives ‘lion’ in place of the correct ‘tiger’. Here he cannot be translating from Turkic or Mongolian, in which the two animals are clearly distinguished. The obvious solution is that he is translating the Persian word shir, which, notoriously, can mean either ‘lion’ or ‘tiger’.

None of this makes any sense at all to me. I cannot understand how the fact that Marco uses a Chinese word for southern China (the area of the former Southern Song empire) can be interpreted as meaning that he was influenced by Persian usage. I would suggest that, in reality, it implies no such thing, but rather offers very slight support for the idea that he had some knowledge of Chinese. I have already dealt with the question of his use of ‘lion’ for ‘tiger’. It seems, however, that I have failed to convince Professor Morgan, so I shall return to this question shortly.

Morgan tells his readers that manzi 蛮子 ‘is a term which, it seems, first begins to appear in the Mongol period’, which is ‘distinctly vernacular (as is revealed by the nominative suffix zi)’ and is pejorative. This is mostly correct, although I would question the use of the word ‘nominative’ (but this is not the place to discuss the peculiarities of Chinese grammar). Certainly the term is pejorative, for the character for man is written with an element meaning ‘insect’. Manzi can be traced back to well before the Mongol period, however. It is the fact that it is indeed vernacular that makes it hard to know exactly when it came into use, for written Chinese was generally very different from the spoken language, at least until recent times. The ‘nominative suffix zi’ would normally not appear in written texts. The single character man is ancient, and was quite commonly used several centuries BCE. It means a ‘southern barbarian’ — that is, a person from south of the main Chinese culture area who was considered, by the Chinese, to be an inferior savage. Manzi has exactly the same meaning, but is colloquial. I have been able to trace an occurrence of the term in a work dating from about 950, where it apparently refers to ‘southern barbarians’ during the period of the Tang dynasty (the text is unfortunately defective, with missing characters, close to this occurrence).
was divided between the Jin empire, founded by the Jurchens (ancestors of the later Manchus) in the north, and the Song empire in the south. There is at least one example of its use by Jin subjects to refer to southern Chinese. In 1221, when Jin armies invaded the Song empire, the Song town of Qizhou (in modern Hubei province, just north of the Yangtze River) came under siege. An eyewitness account, written by one of the Song defenders, describes how some of the Song crossbowmen fired at the Jin attackers bolts that were small, but could be lethal, because they were poisoned. When the Jin soldiers saw these small crossbow bolts, they cried: ‘The Manzi are firing chopsticks at us!’

It seems likely that it became common for northernners from the Jin empire to refer, pejoratively, to southerners from the Song empire as *Manzi*. This then continued during the Yuan period. This is not in any sense a Persian usage, however.

In fact, Rashid al-Din does not exclusively use the term *Manzi*. At least three different names for southern China can be found in his writings. He uses the Mongolian word, ‘Nangiyas’, several times, and a third expression, ‘Machin’. Indeed, at one point, he refers to ‘Machin — which the Cathaians call Manzi and the Mongols call Nankiyas’. So, whatever term Marco had chosen to use for southern China, he could probably have been said to have been following Persian usage. Similarly, Juvainī refers both to ‘Khitai’ (north China) and ‘Manzi’, and also, apparently with the same meanings, to ‘Chin and Machin’. Jūzjānī does not appear to know the term *Manzi*; only ‘Chin and Machin’ appear in the *Tabakāt-i-Nāsir*. Mustawfi refers to ‘Khansay, capital of Machin’, and to ‘Machin. A great and extensive kingdom, which the Mongols know as Nangiyas’. He does not seem to have been familiar with the term *Manzi*. It is, therefore, apparent that Persian authors, other than those who, like Juvainī and Rashīd al-Dīn, had more extensive knowledge of the eastern part of the Mongol empire, did not use the word *Manzi*. If there was a distinctively Persian term for southern China, then it was *Machin*. This word does not appear in Marco Polo’s book.

The essentially Chinese nature of Marco’s usage is emphasised by the fact that his transcription of *Manzi* is a very accurate representation of the standard Chinese pronunciation of the word in his time. It must be realised that the transliteration *Manzi* represents modern pronunciation (in the system known as *Pinyin*). Marco (or Rustichello, for Marco) wrote it as ‘Mangi’. The standard pronunciation during the Yuan period, as represented by the phonetic transcriptions of Chinese in the *Phags-pa* script, was *man-de*. It would, therefore, seem reasonable to conclude that Marco took this word directly from Chinese. There is absolutely no reason to think that Persian influence was involved in any way.

The question of Marco’s use of the word ‘lion’, for what were clearly tigers, is a similar red herring. I have already suggested that it must reflect the fact that neither Marco nor Rustichello knew a word for the tiger, because it was an animal that was virtually unknown to mediaeval Europeans. I have additionally pointed out that Odoric of Pordenone similarly refers to ‘lions’ in China. In fact, Odoric also says that ‘black lions in very great numbers’ are found in India. These must certainly have been black panthers, a colour variant of the leopard. Odoric’s usage of the word suggests that mediaeval Europeans may often have used ‘lion’ simply as a general word for any big cat. What we have here, it seems to me, is another example of the anachronistic approach to Marco Polo that has so often confused studies of his book.

Today, everyone knows what a tiger is, so it seems strange that someone...

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52 Rashid al-Dīn (trans. Thackston), Vol.1, p.154. This clearly shows that Rashid al-Dīn himself considered ‘Manzī’ to be a Chinese term.
would not recognise that an animal similar to a lion, but with stripes, was a tiger (at one point in his book, Marco actually describes a striped tiger). This completely ignores the fact that mediaeval Europeans may very well have had no clear idea of what kind of animal a tiger was.

The bestiary was a popular genre of work in mediaeval Europe, especially during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Mediaeval bestiaries quite often describe ‘tigers’. It is very obvious that their authors had never seen a tiger and had very little idea what one was like. Tigers are usually described as having spots, and being able to run very fast, which would seem to indicate that the word ‘tiger’ was actually applied to the cheetah. Many bestiaries are illustrated, and the pictures commonly show a spotted animal, with no sign of any stripes. A manuscript now in the Bibliothèque Municipale de Douai (MS 0711), in France, includes a depiction of a rather dog-like ‘tiger’, spotted all over with bicoloured rosettes. This manuscript dates from the third quarter of the thirteenth century, and is therefore exactly contemporary with Marco Polo. Another bestiary, dating from somewhat earlier (about 1210), now in the British Library (Royal 12 C XIX), shows a more cat-like animal, but also spotted, not striped. Both of these bestiaries, and others of the period, tell how young ‘tigers’ can be stolen from their mothers by means of a trick. The thief, although mounted on a horse, cannot move fast enough to escape the mother tiger. When she comes close, he drops a mirror, or a glass ball, and she then stops to look at her reflection, thinking it is her cub. By doing this, sometimes repeatedly, the thief is able to make good his escape. Some earlier bestiaries contain even more bizarre descriptions, so that the ‘tiger’ becomes more or less a mythical beast. In some twelfth-century bestiaries, ‘a tiger is described as a kind of serpent, and is actually drawn as a dragon with wings’. Neither Marco nor Rustichello would therefore have been likely to identify the striped ‘lions’ that Marco saw in China as tigers. Once again, any Persian influence can be discounted.

The list of terms used by Marco, when he is describing the Yuan empire, that are reasonably clearly of Persian origin is, then, restricted to about half a dozen. To me, at least, this hardly indicates a strong Persian influence on Marco Polo. It might just as easily be argued that he was strongly influenced by Mongolian, Turkic, or, indeed, Chinese usages, for he gives place-names in China, as well as other words, in all these languages. Indeed, I would suggest that there is better evidence that he had some knowledge of Chinese and of Turkic than there is for his knowledge of Persian. Again, I have already covered some of this ground elsewhere, but it may be useful to go over at least part of it again, with additional detail. For Marco’s probable knowledge of Turkic, there is not only the evidence of a few place-names in China that are given in his book in their Turkic form, but also other Turkic vocabulary. Perhaps most tellingly, there is what Marco says about the Turkic language of the ‘Turcomans’ of Anatolia: ‘they are ignorant people and have a barbarous language’. It seems at least possible that he was here contrasting the Turkic of the nomadic Turcs of Anatolia with the, no doubt more sophisticated, Turkic of the Uighurs, who had become settled town-dwellers, engaged in agriculture, with a script for their language, well before the 1200s. They even made considerable use of printing. For Marco to be able to make such a comparison would, of course, require him to have a good knowledge of Turkic.

One interesting piece of evidence, that suggests the importance of Turkic in Yuan China, is Marco’s use of a Turkic name for the town of Zhengding 真定 (now Zhengding 正定, in Hebei province). He calls it ‘Achbaluch’, the ‘White
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What makes this especially interesting is that Rashid al-Din calls the same place 'Chagha’an Balghasun’, which is the Mongolian for ‘White City’. This suggests that Marco may have heard the Turkic name more frequently than the Mongolian, although both must have been current. Certainly Marco’s use of the Turkic name does not agree with Rashid al-Din’s usage. Zhending was the personal appanage of Sorqatani Beki, mother of two Qa’ans, Möngke and Qubilai, and of the first Ilkhan, Hülegü. A number of officials appointed to office in Zhending were Turkic. They included the Uighurs Buyruq Qaya (during the reign of Ögödei Qa’an), Mungsuz, and Shiban. The two latter were very influential under Qubilai Qa’an, so perhaps it is not surprising that Marco picked up a Turkic name for Zhending. Marco also mentions a second ‘Acbalec’, near the border between north and south China, which is distinguished by having ‘Mangi’ suffixed to it, meaning, as is explained in his book, ‘the white city of the border of Mangi’. Again, Pelliot here sees a Persian construction, ‘Aq-baliq-i-Manzi’, but this seems odd, as ‘Aq-baliq’ is certainly Turkic, not Persian, while ‘Manzi’, as already seen, is Chinese. It might just as well be an Italian, or Frankish, or perhaps Latin, construction: ‘Acbalec [di/ de] Mangi’. ‘Mangi’ might perhaps have been used as if it were a Latin genitive.

Another very obvious use of a Turkic name by Marco Polo is, of course, ‘Cambaluc’, from the Turkic Qan Balïkh, the ‘city of the Qan’. Pelliot notes that it is ‘purely Turkish’, but indicates that it was borrowed into Persian. One might wonder why, if Persian was such an important language in the Yuan empire, the city acquired a Turkic name, which was then borrowed into Persian, rather than vice versa. Marco also gives the Chinese or Mongolian name of the same city, ‘Taidu’. Pelliot says that the Chinese character for the first syllable of this name, now pronounced da, ‘was still pronounced dai [dai in Pinyin] during the Yuan dynasty’. It seems, however, that this is not absolutely correct, for both pronunciations, da and dai, were probably current. This use of a Turkic name for the principal capital of the Yuan empire, and (in all cases but one) of a Chinese name for the summer capital, is surely significant. If Persian had really been an important lingua franca in the Yuan empire, and had strongly influenced Marco’s use of names, then it might have been expected that some sign of this would have appeared when he was talking about the chief cities of the empire. Yet this is not the case. There is only the single use of ‘Cheimeinfu’ for Kapingfu, that is, Shangdu, to indicate some small Persian influence. This might be taken to suggest that, if Persians did have some influence in the Yuan empire, then it was certainly not paramount in the capital cities. As has been seen above, the administration of the appanage of Qubilai Qa’an’s mother had been partly staffed by Turks. Indeed, Sorqatani Beki was herself a Kereyid, and the Kereyids were, in all likelihood, at least partly Turkic. It seems very probable that, for the Mongols, the most important group of non-Mongols were the Turks. Indeed, the Yuan imperial family had marriage relations with Uighurs.

Marco also uses some other Turkic vocabulary in his book. One example is bagherlac, sandgrouse. Pelliot correctly notes that the form seen in most manuscripts, which puts an r after the first a, is erroneous. Clauson gives baghrak, which is extremely close to Marco’s version of the word. The particular bird that the word is applied to is almost certainly Pallas’s Sandgrouse. Another word of Turkic origin, but apparently borrowed into Mongolian, is ‘tosaqar’ or ‘tosaqal’, ‘men who stay to watch’, or, more simply, watchmen. Even Pelliot, although he found a related usage in Rashid al-Din, did not consider the word, in Marco’s form, to show any Persian influence.
A further instance, of considerable interest, is Marco’s use of the term ‘Argon’, which he defines as meaning ‘guasmul in French, that is to say that they are born of the two races, of the lineage of those of Tenduc who worship idols and of those who worship by the law of Mahomet’. Pelliot explains that ‘guasmul’ means someone, ‘one of whose parents was Latin and the other Greek’. Arkan, in mediaeval Turkic, had the meaning ‘cross-bred’, so the correspondence is clear. According to Pelliot, however, Argun was also a tribal name, of a people apparently from a region between Talas and Balasaghun. He suggests that a substantial number of these people were moved eastwards by the Mongols to the region where Marco Polo came across the Argon, and that Marco heard ‘the name of the Mussulman Argun settlers; but he knew also the Turkish word argun used in the sense of half-breed, and applied it wrongly’. If this is correct, then it is further evidence that Marco had at least some knowledge of Turkic.

Marco also uses various Mongolian words, of course. Some were common to both Mongolian and Turkic. They include titles, the name of an animal, and other vocabulary. Thus, he refers to ‘Baian Cingsan’, the conqueror of Mangi. This is Bayan of the Bärin, and the title is the Mongolian form, ching-sang, of the Chinese chenxiang, Chancellor, a title which Bayan did indeed hold. Marco also refers to the rebellious Chinese warlord, Li Tan 李璮, as ‘Liitan Sangon’. Pelliot’s explanation of this, which, as he himself noted, differs from that of most other commentators, is quite wrong. He rejects the Mongolian (and Turkic) form, sänggün or sänggiin, of the Chinese jiangjun 將軍 (military) General, as the origin of ‘Sangon’, claiming that jiangjun was ‘rarely used’ during the Mongol period. Instead, he suggests that xianggong 相公, ‘Duke minister’, which ‘in the Middle Ages was applied to young men of high families’, was the Chinese original of this term. Yet a search of the Yuan shi reveals that jiangjun appears quite literally hundreds of times, while xianggong is extremely rarely used, with only four occurrences that I have been able to trace. Jiangjun also occurs more than a hundred times in the Guochao wenlei 國朝文穎, while xianggong occurs only twelve. Pelliot’s theory can therefore be rejected. ‘Sangon’ certainly derives from sänggün, which in turn was derived from the Chinese jiangjun.

Another title appears in Marco’s ‘Vonsamcin’, one of the commanders of the second Mongol invasion of Japan. The person intended was Fan Wenhu 範文虎, but ‘samcin’ comes not from his name but from his title. In Chinese, this was canzhi zhengshi 參政事 (Second Privy Councillor), commonly shortened to canzheng 參政. The Mongolian equivalents were samji jinsghi and samjing. Clearly, Vonsamcin is Marco’s version of Fan Samjing. The Yuan shi records that Fan Wenhu was promoted from Second Privy Councillor to be a joint Junior Vice Councillor of the Central Secretariat in 1278. Other Mongolian words used by Marco include ‘quesitan’, from the Mongolian kešīten, members of the kešīq, or personal guard of the Qa’an; ‘gudderi’, meaning the musk deer; ‘burcan’, which is burqan, the Mongolian (and Turkic) word for Buddha; and, rather obviously, the titles of the Mongol rulers, ‘Can [Qan]’ and ‘Kaan [Qa’an]’, which are of ancient usage, both in Turkic and in Mongolian. There is, therefore, far more Mongolian vocabulary in Marco Polo’s account of the Yuan empire than there is Persian.

In fact, there is very little evidence to support the idea that Marco Polo could understand and speak Persian. I do not wish to question this belief, as it seems probable that he did learn Persian. Nevertheless, to my mind, there is
much better evidence that he had a knowledge of Turkic (as has been outlined above), and quite good evidence that he had at least an imperfect command of spoken Chinese. His probable confusion of Jin 晉 and Jin 金, when he was in Xiezhou 解州 (in modern Shanxi province), is only likely to have occurred if he had heard the name spoken, and understood it wrongly. He if he had been able to read Chinese characters, then such confusion would have been improbable. Perhaps, if he did indeed learn at least some Chinese, he learned only the ‘Phags-pa script for written Chinese.

Morgan notes that Turkic was probably very important in the early Mongol empire, and quotes Juwaini’s ‘well-known grumble’ that the Uighur language and script had come to be considered ‘the height of knowledge and learning’ in his time. Yet Morgan immediately goes on to say that: ‘It does not seem likely that Uighur Turkish, if it seemed pre- eminent in those early decades, retained any kind of supremacy over Persian permanently’. He gives absolutely no explanation of this claim, nor does he provide evidence to support it. It can only be assumed that he believes that the superiority of Persian is self-evident. It is very probably true that, in the Ilkhanate, Persian became the principal language of administration under the Mongols, as Fragner has stated. It is undoubtedly the case, however, that Persian had no claim to any kind of superior status in the Yuan empire, where Chinese culture and the Chinese language and script were predominant. To the Chinese, Persian would have been just another ‘barbarian’ language. Indeed, during the Mongol/Yuan period, the Chinese (and very probably also the Mongols) did not even distinguish clearly between Persians, other Muslims, and the various other peoples from the ‘Western Regions’ (Xī yù 西域).

Professor Charles Melville has expressed a view quite opposite to Morgan’s: Juwaini’s complaint that a knowledge of the Uighur script was a passport to advancement was probably as true at the end of the Ilkhanate as at the beginning.

The pre-eminent status of the Uighurs was clearly stated by Qubilai Qā’an himself in 1270. When the Koreans complained that they were accorded a lower status than the Uighurs at the Yuan imperial court, Qubilai replied:

You submitted later, therefore you are ranked low among the princes. During the reign of our Tai Zu [Chinggis Qan], the īduq qut119 was the first to submit. Therefore it was ordered that he be ranked first among the princes. Arslan119 submitted afterwards, therefore he was ranked below him. You should know this!

The Koreans no doubt felt that they were a civilised people, with a long history of relations with China, so that they deserved to rank above the Uighurs. Probably the Persians felt similarly about Turks. Qubilai, however, quickly put the Koreans in their place. The idea that Persian would surely soon have replaced Turkic, presumably because of its cultural superiority, can therefore be dismissed.

Morgan quotes Leonardo Olschki on the status of Persian as a language ‘commonly used ... for purposes of business and trade’,120 Olschki also says, however, that, in the fourteenth century, ‘the Turkish dialect of the Comans ... was, ... together with Persian, the language spoken or understood throughout the Tartar empire from Persia to Cathay’. He goes on to opine that Turkic ‘certainly must have been one of the various languages Marco claims to have learned’. This is surely correct, as I have already suggested above, for by forms of a language to differ, and it is not entirely clear exactly how the ‘Phags-pa transcriptions of Chinese relate to the contemporary spoken language; it is possible that they represent a pronunciation that was already archaic in the thirteenth century. See Coblin’s remarks in Chapter IV of his Handbook of ‘Phags-pa Chinese, especially pp.72–74.

114 Morgan, ‘Persian as a Lingua Franca,’ p.164.
118 This was the title of the Uighur ruler.
119 Ruler of the Qarluq Turks.
121 Morgan, ‘Persian as a Lingua Franca,’ pp.163–64.
123 On the Turkicisation of Central Asia, and the absorption by the Turks of other ethnic groups, who became Turkic speakers, see Golden, History of the Turkic Peoples, especially pp.152–53, on the Turks and
trade; and pp.164–65, on the absorption by the Uighurs of eastern Iranians and Tokharians.


126 Liu Xu 留希 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975); Vol.16, J.150, shang 享, p.5367; de la Vaissière, Sogdian Traders, pp.75–76.


131 John of Plano Carpini, ‘History of the Mongols,’ in The Mongol Mission, (London: Sheed and Ward, 1955), p.59; original Latin text in Recueil de voyages et de mémoires, publiées par la Société de Géographie, Vol.4 (Paris: Arthus-Bertrand, 1839), p.750. It may be noted that this is clear evidence that there were many Muslim Turks at this time.


the thirteenth century Turkic, at least as much as Persian, had become commonly used as a language of commerce, right across Central Asia.125 Today, various Turkic languages are spoken across a broad stretch of the Asian continent, from Xinjiang in the east to Turkey in the west. Turkic languages have more or less completely replaced all the earlier languages of this region. Of the inhabitants of Central Asia today, 89 per cent are Turkic speakers.124 At the time of the Mongol conquests, the process of Turkicisation was already well advanced (indeed, in the west, in the area near the Black Sea, Turkic peoples and languages were probably more widespread than they are today).125 The mixing of Iranian peoples, such as the Sogdians, with the Turks had a long history by the year 1200. For example, An Lushan 安祿山 (703–757), whose rebellion in 755 almost caused the collapse of the Tang dynasty, was the son of a Sogdian father and a Turkic mother.126 Sogdian documents from Mount Mugh, dating from 710, mention a bridegroom with a clearly Turkic name (‘Ot-tegin’) marrying a probably Sogdian wife.127 There was Turkic influence on the Sogdian language, from as early as the time of the trilingual Qarabalghasun inscription (early 800s). During the ninth to tenth centuries, various Turkic languages often called ‘Turco-Sogdian’ had developed, that is, Sogdian showing strong Old Turkic influence.128 By the time the Mongols invaded Sogdiana (then part of the Khwarazmian empire, which had recently taken it from the Qara Khitayans),129 it was very likely at least as much a Turkic as an Iranian area.130 Indeed, much of Khwarazm itself seems already to have been largely Turkicised. After travelling across Central Asia in the mid-1240s, John of Plano Carpini said: ‘On leaving the land of the Kangits [Qangli] we entered the country of the Bisermins. These people used to speak the Coman language, and still speak it, but they hold the faith of the Saracens.’131 The ‘Bisermins’ were the Khwarazmians.132 In relation to this country, John goes on to relate that, on a large river of which he did not know the name, there were cities called ‘Iankinc’, ‘Barchin’ (or ‘Karachin’), and ‘Orpar’ (or ‘Ornas’).133 The first is surely Yangikent, so that the river would be the Syr-Darya. Orpar has already been identified as probably being Otrar,134 which is indeed on the same river. ‘Barchin’ has been identified as Barjilgh-Kent, said to be ‘somewhere between Jand and Sughnaq’,135 or, if ‘Karachin’ is assumed to be the more correct reading, it might possibly be Khojend. In either case, it would be on or very near the Syr-Darya.136 It would seem, then, that by the 1240s, when John passed through it, the area around the Syr-Darya was already Turkicised.137

At a slightly later date, William of Rubruck made a similar journey to that of John’s, apparently passing south of Lake Balkhash and spending twelve days in Qayaliq (if his ‘Cailac’ is this town, as seems very likely). He records that the area around the town ‘used to be called Organum and used to have a market in it’, to which ‘many merchants’ from Qayaliq were said to have frequented.138 Presumably, the principal language of this market would have been Turkic, of some form. The resemblance of ‘Organum’ to Arkun or Arjun (already discussed above) is striking. Perhaps the word was used in this area, too, for people of mixed descent, partly Turkic, interbred with the earlier inhabitants. As Morgan notes, William also mentions ‘a fine town called Equisus, inhabited by Saracens who spoke Persian, though they were a very long way from Persia’.139 This town is mentioned before Cailac, when William was travelling eastwards, it should presumably be west of it. This would rule out the identification with Quyas, which Morgan embraces, following Pelliot (although Pelliot also considers another possibility, iki-Ögüz).140 A
major question here is what exactly William meant by 'Persian' and 'Persia'. There were peoples at least not very far removed from the area between Talas and Qayalïq, where 'Equius' apparently was situated, who spoke Iranian languages. There may very well have been Sogdian settlements in the area, as there had also been much further east, at one time, and Sogdian is an Iranian language. Perhaps, then, William's 'Persian' was Sogdian, in which case, these Persian-speaking Saracens were not so very far from home. They may well have been simply a surviving remnant, isolated among the Turkic incomers, of the earlier inhabitants of the region. Nevertheless, what William says here about being 'a very long way from Persia' is significant. Clearly, to him, Persia was distant from the location of 'Equius'. It would seem, then, that this entire region was clearly not Persian when William passed through it. The fact that he found some Persian speakers was evidently unusual and worthy of comment.

It is also worth noting that Marco Polo gives an account of what he calls 'the great Turquie', by which he apparently means Turkestan; 'The great Turquie is beyond the river of Gion and stretches from toward tramontane as far as to the lands of the Great Kaan', indicating that Samarkand (and presumably all of Transoxania) was in 'Turquie'. Although he himself had probably never been to Samarkand, his father and uncle had very likely been there, and had certainly spent time in Bukhara, so his testimony is likely to be reliable.

On the question of the languages used in trade during the Mongol period, it is probably not without significance that the word adopted by the Mongols for the 'merchant partner' system was of Turkic origin. Ortaq (borrowed into Mongolian as ortogh) is a Turkic word meaning 'partner'. Morgan notes that: 'These Muslim merchants [of the ortogh] were no doubt of very varied ethnicity ... At least they will have spoken a wide variety of languages ...'. This is probably generally correct, but it must be likely that Turkic languages were predominant, at least on the overland trade routes through the largely Uighur regions around the Tarim Basin, and the mainly Turkic Semirechye and Khwarazm. If Persian were really the principal language. Of the documents from Chinese Turkestan available in the database of the International Dunhuang Project, only nineteen fragments are in the New Persian language, and written, not with Arabic, but with Syriac script. All of them originated from Turfan. Probably they are documents of Nestorian Christian (or perhaps Manichaean) origin. The Qarakhanids, who controlled a large part of Central Asia during the eleventh and early twelfth centuries (including Transoxania), 'cherished their Turkish ways', and 'fostered the development of a new Turkish literature alongside the Persian and Arabic literatures that had arisen earlier'.

Morgan also raises the issue of the language used in communications between the Mongols and the Papacy. He quotes John of Plano Carpini at some length, regarding the languages used for writing the letter which John carried from Güyük Qa’an to the Pope. Impressively, he reveals that the Pers-

143 de la Vaissière says that there was Sogdian ‘colonization’ of Semirechye, towards the Issyk Kul; see *Sogdian Traders*, pp.114–16.

144 ibid., pp.329–30, says that the language that had disappeared from the area must have been Sogdian, and that ‘*Organum* is certainly the land of Argu’.


146 ibid., p.452.

147 Haw, *Marco Polo’s China*, p.86.

148 Clauson, *Pre-Thirteenth-Century Turkish*, p.205.

149 Morgan, ‘Persian as a *Lingua Franca*,’ p.163.


153 Morgan, ‘Persian as a *Lingua Franca*,’ pp.164–65. Morgan wonders if the seal indicated ‘that the Persian was the “official” version’. I think that all versions of the letter issued by the Qa’an’s secretariat would have carried such a seal impression, without which they would have been regarded as of no validity.


155 Findley, *Turks in World History*, pp.56–57, 72; Golden, *History of the Turkic Peoples*, sian original of the letter still exists in the Vatican archives, bearing the seal of Güyük Qa’an. It seems to me, however, that a language used for a diplomatic communication with a foreign dignitary need not have been one that was any kind of *lingua franca* in the place of issue. The question was whether the Pope would be able to find, in the area where he resided, someone who could read the letter. John makes it quite clear that original versions of the letter were carefully prepared in more than one language, including Latin.154

He says that: ‘we were asked if there were any people with the Lord Pope who understood the writing of the Russians or Saracens or even of the Tartars’. Clearly then, one option was to send a letter written in Russian (or perhaps, at this period, it would be better to say Slavonic). I do not believe anyone has ever suggested that Russian was a *lingua franca* in the Mongol empire. John responded that ‘there were … Saracens in the country but they were a long way from the Lord Pope’. It is not very clear exactly what he may have meant here, but probably there were Turks who were closer to the Pope than any Persians. There were certainly Turks in Anatolia at this period, and even in the Balkans, besides those with whom the Crusader states had contact.155 Some of the Cumans had converted to Latin Christianity in the 1220s,156 so that there were close contacts between the Roman Church and Turks.

The fundamental issue here, is what John meant by ‘the writing of … the Saracens’. Morgan seems convinced that it must have meant Persian, but this is by no means certain. It may be noted that John in fact refers to Saracen writing in a different section of his narrative, which provides a useful comparison: ‘we delivered the letter [from the Pope] and asked to be given interpreters capable of translating it. We were given them on Good Friday, and carefully translated the letter with them into Ruthenian, Saracenic and Tartar characters.’157 This occurred when he was at the *orda* of Batu, somewhere near the River Ural. It seems unlikely that ‘Saracenic’ here would mean Persian (although ‘Saracenic … characters’ may have meant the Perso-Arabic script, used to write Turkic). Far more likely is that John here meant Persian (or Slavonic), Turkic and Mongolian. Batu, after all, was ruler of the Qanate of Qipchaq, where Turkic (the Cuman language) was predominant. According to Fragner, while Persian became the principal language of administration in the Ilkhanate, the rulers of the Jochid Ulus ‘preferred Qipchaq Turki’.158 The ambiguity of the word ‘Saracen’ is shown by what William of Rubruck says about the ‘Iron Gate’ (in the Caucasus), ‘which is on the route of all the Saracens coming from Persia and Turkey’.159 So Saracens could clearly be either Turks or Persians. Also of significance is that William says that, during his return journey, Batu assigned him a guide who was an Uighur.160 Again, if Persian was such an important *lingua franca*, why give William a guide who was a Turk? William clearly states that he ‘believed that you [King Louis IX of France] were still in Syria and directed my journey towards Persia’.161 So he was given a Turkic guide to lead him towards Persia! It may be worth noting here that Persia had itself been under Turkish rule for a long time before the period of the Mongol conquests. The Seljuqs, who, of course, Turks, had conquered Iran in the mid-eleventh century, and ruled there until about 1200. The chronicler Matthew of Edessa, writing in the 1130s, frequently refers to ‘Turks’ and ‘Persians’, without any discrimination between them. For example, he relates that:

In the year 571 of the Armenian era [1122–23] the Persian general Il-Ghâzi collected troops and marched against the Frankish forces. First he descended
Upon Aleppo and from there went and encamped in the Muslim town of Shaizār. Baldwin, the king of Jerusalem, came and was joined by the count of Edessa Joscelin; then both marched forth and encamped opposite the Turkish forces.\textsuperscript{162}

Subsequently, the Turcic Khwarazmshahs Tekish and his son Qutb al-Din Muhammad took control of most of Iran, until the Mongols destroyed the Khwarazmian empire.\textsuperscript{163} Persia had, therefore, been under considerable Turkic influence for more than a century and a half before the period of the Mongol conquests. Indeed, it has been suggested that the New Persian language developed at least partly under Turkic influence.\textsuperscript{164} It is commonly overlooked that Turkic is widely spoken in Iran; it has been suggested that there may, in fact, be more speakers of Turkic in Iran than of Persian. ‘It is generally thought that in the land of Persia, nothing is spoken but Persian, and few are aware that Turkish is widespread throughout Iran. It is perhaps even more common than Persian ...’,\textsuperscript{165} In this context, Judith Pfeiffer has stated that: ‘Mongol rule in the Middle East extended westwards until the Euphrates River, eventually resulting in the Euphrates becoming a political and cultural border zone, with an Arabophone zone south of the river, and a Perso-Turkish zone to the north of it’.\textsuperscript{166}

An indication that the Persian letter in the Vatican archives may have been translated from a Turcic original is that its opening phrase, which Pelliot translates: ‘Dans la force du Ciel éternel, [nous] le Khan océanique du grand peuple entier; notre ordre’, is actually in Turcic (written with the Perso-Arabic script). It corresponds more or less exactly with the Mongolian wording of the Qa’an’s seal on the document.\textsuperscript{167} It seems most unlikely that, if the original of the letter had been entirely in Persian, then its opening phrase would have been translated into Turcic. On the other hand, if the original had been in Turcic, then it is conceivable that this opening phrase might have been left untranslated, as it was a standard formula (as evidenced by the fact that it was engraved in Mongolian on the Qa’an’s seal). Whatever the case, it seems that the Turcic version of this formula was so familiar to whoever originally wrote the letter that he wrote it in Turcic, even though the rest of the text was Persian. Presumably, then, he was not familiar with a Persian version of the formula. Turcic, therefore, must have been more commonly used than Persian at the court of the Qa’an. This is also an interesting early use of the Perso-Arabic script for writing Turcic.

A final piece of evidence in favour of the ‘Saracenic’ used for writing to the Pope being Turcic is that Marco Polo clearly states that: ‘the great lord [Qubilai Qa’an] had his letters and privileges immediately made in the Turkish tongue to send to the Apostle [the Pope] and entrusts them to the two brothers [Marco’s father and uncle] and to his baron ...’.\textsuperscript{168} Here, then, is an unequivocal statement that letters to the Pope were written in Turkish. Moreover, this was in or about 1267, after Turcic should have begun to be replaced by Persian, according to Professor Morgan. Even if this story is untrue (as some would probably argue), it nevertheless demonstrates that, during the late thirteenth century (when Marco’s book was written), Turcic could have been thought to be an appropriate language for a Mongol Qa’an to use when writing to the Pope.

It is also worth noting that the Chinese term Huihui 徽回字, which might be considered equivalent to ‘Saracenic characters’, can mean the Uighur script. A Chinese work dating from 1237 says the following regarding Mongol writing:

\textsuperscript{p.224. On contacts between the Cumans and the Latins of Constantinople in 1237 and 1241, see I. Vásáry, Cumans and Tatars, Oriental Military in the Pre-Ottoman Balkans, 1185–1365 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp.63–66.}


\textsuperscript{157 John of Plano Carpini, ‘History of the Mongols,’ p.56.}

\textsuperscript{158 Fragner, ‘Shah Ismail’s Ferdamins,’ p.36.}

\textsuperscript{159 William of Rubruck, ‘The Journey,’ p.124.}

\textsuperscript{160 Ibid., p.209.}

\textsuperscript{161 Ibid., p.208.}


\textsuperscript{167 P. Pelliot, ‘Les Mongols et la Papauté (1),’ Revue de l’Orient Chrétien, 3.23 (1922–23):}
The Tatars [Mongols] originally had no script or documents. However, there are three kinds that they now use. That which is current in the original country of the Tatars is only to use small pieces of wood three or four inches long, cut at the four corners. Thus, if ten horses are concerned, then ten cuts are made. In general, only the number is cut. ... These small pieces of wood are like the old tallies [of China]. That which is current among the Huihui 使用 is in charge of it. There are only 21 letters in the Huihui script. ... That which is used in the lost [conquered] countries of the north Chinese, the Khitans and the Jurchens is only Chinese characters.

Thus, it would appear that only the Uighur script and Chinese characters were in common use among the Mongols in the 1230s. It is by no means impossible that John’s ‘Saracenic writing’ might have been Uighur script, used to write Uighur Turcik.

The claim has been made that Persian was an ‘official’ language of the Yuan court. It is repeated by Morgan, quoting Igor de Rachewitz, who based his opinion on an article by Huang Shijian. Great as is my respect for Professor de Rachewitz, I am convinced that he is quite wrong about this. Indeed, it seems that Huang Shijian persuaded him to alter an earlier opinion, for at one time he asserted that: ‘the lingua franca of the Mongol empire, at least in its eastern portion, was almost certainly not Persian, but Turkish’. Huang’s evidence for this claimed ‘official’ status of Persian is, as Morgan notes, based on ‘scattered … pieces of evidence’. Nevertheless, Morgan continues, ‘evidence for anything in the Asia of the 13th and 14th centuries’ is similarly scattered. This is debatable, at least in the context of China during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. There is, in fact, a very great deal of evidence for the situation in China at that period. Of course, there are lacunae, but if Persian had really been an ‘official’ language of the Yuan court, then there should be much more evidence for this than the meagre fare offered by Huang. His pieces of evidence are: (1) the Chinese term Huihui, in the great majority of instances, means ‘Persian’; (2) there are (as of 1986) inscriptions in Persian on two Mongol paizi 牌子 (‘tablets of authority’, as Marco Polo called them), and on some officially issued standard weights; (3) a Muslim National College (Huihui Guozi Xue 回回國子學) was established in 1289, with the principal purpose of teaching Persian.

None of this evidence is at all convincing. Firstly, the term Huihui quite certainly cannot be considered to be to any degree synonymous with ‘Persian’. It means ‘Muslim’ or ‘Islamic’, and, like the mediaeval European term ‘Saracen’, it was applied to people of various backgrounds who were Muslims, including both Persians and Turks (and also Arabs, of course: the Abbasid Caliph is referred to as Huihui Halifa 回回哈里發 in the Yuan shi). Indeed, it was sometimes used even more loosely, to refer to Jews (Zhuhu Huihui未忽忽回) and even to some groups of Christians. It is in fact quite likely that the majority, or at least the largest single group, of Muslims in China were Turks. Indeed, the term Huihui is a variant of the Chinese transcription of the ethnonym ‘Uighur’. This was originally Huihe 回纥 or Huihu 回胡, but during (or even before) the Yuan period it became Huihui, and was applied to Muslims in general. Presumably this was because the first large group of Muslims with which the Chinese became familiar was the Uighurs (although it must be noted that they were not all Muslims during the Yuan period; it was the Uighurs of the eastern part of the Qarakhanid realm — the oases of the western Tarim Basin — who were probably the Muslim Uighurs known to the Chinese).
Huihui was sometimes used in the sense of ‘native of Turkestan’. A new Chinese transcription of the name of the Uighurs came into use, Weiwuer (畏兀兒, as well as other variants). It has already been shown above that much of Central Asia had become largely Turkicised by the period of the Mongol conquests: Khwarazm is referred to in Yuan Chinese sources as ‘the Country of the Muslims’ (Huihui Guo 回回國), and a large part of Khwarazm, at least from the Semirechy to the Aral Sea, was mainly Turkic.

It is also important to note that the Mongolian equivalent of Huihui was Sarta’ul. This word probably derives from a Sanskrit original, meaning ‘merchant’. It came to be applied to the settled, non-nomadic inhabitants of Turkestan and, at least by the fourteenth century, in the form Sart, was used by the Russians, and by Western travellers, as a name for any Turkish-speaking, Muslim, non-nomad, oasis-dweller of Russian or Chinese Turkistan.

As already seen above, Huihui was derived from the Chinese transcription of ‘Uighur’, and sometimes meant a ‘native of Turkestan’. It may well be that Sarta’ul and Huihui already, during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, had something of the nineteenth century sense of Sart. Indeed, Mahmūd Yalavach and his son Mas’ūd are described as ‘Sarta’ul of the Qurumši clan’.

That Huihui were likely to be Turks is shown by a passage in one of Zhou Mi’s works. He gives a description of ‘How Muslims [Huihui] bury their dead’, which he says was based on what he had personally witnessed in 1291:

The custom of Muslims is that, whenever someone dies, there is a person, who specialises in washing the corpse, who pours water from the mouth of a large copper urn and washes the stomach and abdomen to get rid of all the unclean qi. Then the body is washed clean from head to foot. After the washing has been completed, the body is then dried with dry cloth. Then a bag is made of ramie, silk or hempen cloth and the body is put into it naked. Only then is it placed in a coffin. The coffin is made of thin pine boards and is only big enough for the corpse, nothing else at all is put into it. The dirty water from the washing of the body is collected in a pit under the room and covered with a stone: this is called ‘summoning the spirit’. They set up a table above the pit. Every four days an offering of food is made. After forty days this ends, and on a suitable day the coffin is taken out and interred in the Ju Jing Yuan 聚景園. This garden is in the charge of a Muslim. The rent of every plot of land has a regular price, and the overseer of the garden has all the bricks, mortar and labour used, which he sells for money. When it comes to the time of mourning for the dead, the relatives all cut their faces, tear their hair and rend the seams of their clothes. Staggering and wailing, they move [the hearts of everyone] near and far. When the coffin is carried out, the rich get beggars to hold candles and scatter fruit along the road; the poor do not do this. Then everyone in order, young and old, bows and kneels, as is the common custom. When the obeisances have been completed, they make a noise with the tips of their boots by way of music, and comfort each other. When they have fully expressed their feelings, they get all the Muslims to recite their sacred texts. Three days later, they again go to the place of burial. The rich mostly kill oxen and horses and give a banquet for their fellows, even down to the poor and beggars of their neighbourhood. It is also said that sometimes when the coffin arrives at the place of burial, the body is removed from it and buried naked in the grave with the face towards the West.

The Ju Jing Yuan was on the shore of the West Lake at Hangzhou. What is of greatest interest here, however, is that these Huihui were clearly Turks. Lacquer facing the case as a sign of mourning was very distinctively a Turkic custom.
Killing oxen and horses for the funeral feast was also a steppe tradition, from the time when Turks were nomads (as, indeed, many still were at this period).

The Turkic custom of lacerating the face as a sign of mourning can be traced back several centuries before the Yuan period. When Attila died in 453, it was part of the mourning ritual of the Huns. In 576, Byzantine ambassadors to the Turks attended the funeral of a chief, and were obliged to undertake it. It is also mentioned in the Chinese annals of the Tang dynasty. A Chinese princess, who had married the Qaghan of the Uighurs, was apparently expected to commit suicide so that she could be buried with him when he died. She avoided this fate by using the excuse that her late husband, by taking her as his wife, had shown his admiration for Chinese customs, which did not include such a requirement. Nevertheless, she "observed Uighur custom by slashing her face and weeping loudly". A Chinese work completed in 1285 describes the mourning customs observed by the peoples from north of the Gobi:

According to custom north of the desert, when someone died, the body was placed in a tent. The sons and grandchildren, and other members of the family, male and female, each killed an ox and [or?] a horse, and placed them in front of the tent as sacrificial offerings. They rode round the tent on horseback seven times. Going to the door of the tent, they slashed their faces with a knife and wept, so that blood and tears flowed together. This they did seven times.

Cutting the face, weeping loudly, and killing oxen and horses would, therefore, seem to have been old Turkic customs, which had persisted even after the conversion to Islam. Zhou Mi was resident in Hangzhou at the time when he wrote his description of Islamic funeral customs, and the reference to burial in the Ju Jing Yuan makes clear that he was referring to Muslims of Hangzhou. This city, on the east coast of China, at the southern end of the Grand Canal, was the former capital of the Southern Song empire (Marco Polo's Quinsai). It was a major population centre, with a flourishing commerce, attracting sea-borne trade, and no doubt also merchants from all over the Mongol empire. Its Muslim community probably represented a good cross-section of the Muslims in China at the period. If, for Zhou Mi, Huihui were Turks, then it seems likely that Turks formed at least a substantial fraction of all Muslims in the Yuan empire, if not an outright majority.

It is also known that a number of prominent Muslims in Mongol service were, or probably were, Turks, or, at least, speakers of a Turkic language. They include Mahmud Yalavach, who was "a Turkish speaker from Khwarazm ... and ... a merchant by profession". Many of his descendants also served the Mongols, for several generations. There is no clear information about the language or ethnicity of Sayyid Ajall Shams al-Dīn, but his family came from Bukhara, in what had been Sogdiana but was strongly Turkicised by the Mongol period. It must at least be likely that he had some knowledge of Turkic, even if it was not certainly his first language. The infamous Ahmad came from Fanakat (Benaket), on the Syr-Darya, near modern Tashkent in Uzbekistan, and may very well have been a Turk, or at least of mixed Iranian and Turkic stock. There are also the three thousand Muslim artisans who were transported from Samarkand, Bukhara, and other places, and installed in Xunmalin, near modern Zhangjiakou (formerly Kalgan). Most of them were probably Turks, or at least of mixed parentage, and partly Turkic. A search of the History of the Yuan Dynasty has revealed no Muslims (Huihui) for whom there is any very definite indication of Persian origins.
There are, however, Persian inscriptions on surviving tombstones, which indicate that there must have been a significant number of Persians in China (particularly in Quanzhou and Hangzhou) during the Yuan period. Nevertheless, the surviving inscriptions are mostly in Arabic, with only a small minority in Persian. They include a number that are memorials to Muslims who were probably Turks. For example, of the gravestones from Quanzhou described by Chen Dasheng, only some half a dozen bear inscriptions in Persian, all of which also bear Arabic inscriptions, while there are more than two dozen with inscriptions only in Arabic. The ethnicity of most of the deceased cannot be determined with any kind of certainty, but perhaps a dozen were probably Persians, while about half as many were Turks. In this south-eastern port city, this preponderance of Persians is scarcely surprising. During the Yuan period, Quanzhou was the principal port for commerce with South-east Asia, India and the Persian Gulf. It seems quite likely that the maritime trade routes, particularly those leading towards the Persian Gulf, tended to be dominated by Persians (and no doubt also Arabs), while the overland routes, from north-western China across central Asia, were to a great extent the preserve of Turks. For centuries, the Turks had been influenced by the Sogdians, the great traders of the overland ‘Silk Road’. They had intermarried with them (as already seen above), and eventually had subsumed them under a wave of Turkic migration. They had probably also replaced them as merchants.

If perhaps no more than a third of Muslims in Quanzhou were Turks, it is probable that, further to the north and west, the proportion of Turks was higher. Overall, it is quite possible that a majority of Muslims in the Yuan empire were Turks, or at least speakers of a Turkic language. Since there were also many non-Muslim Turks, it is quite clear that Turks must have greatly outnumbered Persians. It has sometimes been said that the majority of the ‘Classified Peoples’ (Semu ren 色目人) were Muslims. This is certainly not true. The Classified Peoples were a very diverse group, including many different peoples who were not Muslims. The Huihui were only one group among many included in this class. The idea that large numbers of Persians were among the Classified Peoples was rejected three decades ago.

It should also be noted that by no means all religious inscriptions from Quanzhou are Islamic. There are also Nestorian Christian, Manichaean and Hindu relics from the Quanzhou area. Most of the Nestorian ones, at least, must date from the Yuan period, as Nestorian Christianity was proscribed during the late Tang dynasty and more or less entirely disappeared from China until after the Mongol conquest. The religion flourished under the Mongols, some of whom were themselves Nestorians. The mother of the Q’an Mōngke and Qubilai, Sorqaptani Beki, was a Nestorian Christian. Many, very possibly most, of the Yuan-period Nestorians, who were by no means insignificant numerically, must have been Turks. The inscriptions on Nestorian tombstones from Quanzhou are in Syriac script, but the language used in the main body of most of them is Turkic. In fact, a considerable number of Nestorian inscriptions in Turkic written with Syriac script, and sometimes with Uighur script, are now known from China. Most Nestorian remains have been found in north-west China and Inner Mongolia, but there are a significant quantity from Beijing, Yangzhou and Quanzhou. It seems sometimes to be believed that most rich merchants in the Yuan empire were Muslims, but this is not necessarily so. A decree of Mōngke Q’an quoted by Wang Yun refers to ‘Uighurs and Muslims who are engaged in trade’.


For example, C.P. Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia*, p.37: 'Bayan tried to revive the old ethnic hierarchy'; M.C. Brose, 'Realism and Idealism in the Yuanshi Chapters on Foreign Relations,' *Asia Major*, 19.1 (2005): 327–47, at p.345: 'they [the Mongols] categorized other peoples according to ethnographic terms'; and also Hung, 'China and the Nomads,' pp.624–25: 'As is well known to both Chinese traditional historians and modern scholars, Yuan society as a whole discriminated among populations of different ethnic and geographic origins'. 'Geographic' is perhaps not completely unjustified here, but it implies an emphasis that is not, in my view, correct. The difference between *Han ren* and *Nan ren* was not based on geography, despite my translations, but on when the different groups had come under Mongol rule.

The Tangut region, that is, the former Xi Xia 西夏 state.


On the Qara Khitai empire, see Biran, *The Empire of the Qara Khitai*.

The Hexi region had formed a large part of the former Tangut, or Xi Xia, state. It may be noted that there were a significant number of Uighurs in the Hexi region.

de Rachewiltz, 'Turks in China under the Mongols,' pp.282, 297n.

Tao Zongyi 陶宗儀 lists 31 different kinds of *Sema ren* in *Nancun chuo geng lu* 南村輟耕錄 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), j.1, p.13; for a discussion of his list, see Yanai Wateru 水村 伊和, *1127*: Chen Jie 陳捷 and Chen Qingguan 陳清泉, *Yuandai Meng Han semu daiyu kao* 元代漢人色目待遇考 (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1932), pp.18–29.

The following counts were obtained using a searchable electronic version of the text of the Yuan shi.
THE PERSIAN LANGUAGE IN YUAN-DYNASTY CHINA: A REAPPRAISAL

180 times. Qipchaq (钦察) appears more than 160 times; Uighur (Weiwu or Weiwuer), just over 40; Kangli (康里), more than 30; Qarluq (Halalu 哈拉鲁), about ten; Tangut (Tangwu 唐兀), about 70; and Naiman (Naiman 乃蠻), more than 90. This can only give a very rough idea of relative numbers of these various Semu ren. Nevertheless, it seems clear that, although the Muslims were a major group, they were certainly not the majority of Semu ren. It also seems very probable that the various Turkic peoples collectively outnumbered the Huihui. Since many, if not most, of the Muslims were also Turks, it is entirely reasonable to conclude that there were far fewer Persians than Turks in the Yuan empire.

Another approach to the same question results in a similar conclusion. In the early 1980s, Igor de Rachewiltz produced a detailed study of Turks in the Yuan empire. In it, he provides counts of Turks who played a significant role in some aspect of government or culture at various times during the Yuan period. He excludes those about whom there is only 'scanty' information, and also 'eminent Turkish women', 'those whose names have been preserved, but who were neither scholars nor officials', and, finally, those mentioned in various sources that he had 'not yet tackled'. Including Uighurs, Qarluqs, Kanglis, Qipchaqs, Onguuts, Kereyids, and Naimans, the total for the entire Mongol/Yuan period is 646 (excluding Kereyids and Naimans, who may not, or may not all, have been Turkic, the total is 550). This figure can be compared with one for the number of Huihui who were officials under the Yuan, compiled by Donald Leslie. He includes only those for whom biographical information is available, but draws upon quite numerous sources, both primary and secondary. His figure is 43. Although the methods and sources used by de Rachewiltz and Leslie for the compilation of their figures undoubtedly differed, so that the numbers are not directly comparable, the large discrepancy between them is at least indicative. Once again, when it is taken into consideration that a number of Leslie's Huihui were undoubtedly Turks, it is clear that Persians must have been greatly outnumbered by Turks in Yuan society. It is perhaps also worthy of note that, of the 50 or so 'eminent personalities of the early Mongol-Yuan period (1200–1300)' whose biographies have been collected in In the Service of the Khan, only one (Sayyid Ajall Shams al-Din) might perhaps have any claim to have been Persian.

I now come to the question of the inscriptions on paizi, and on standard weights. First of all, it must be said that they are very few in number. Although Liu Yingsheng has claimed that: 'During the last 50 years many metal (bronze, silver or gold) paizi ... (tablets of authority) were found with the above mentioned three languages [Mongolian, Chinese and Persian] written on them — some had even five languages', the fact is that the number of known extant Mongol paizi is very few. Moreover, only about four carry inscriptions in any language other than Mongolian, and only one is known with inscriptions, not in five languages, but in five scripts. There is an important issue here, for it appears that scholars from China quite commonly confuse 'language' and 'script'. For example, Liu Yingsheng refers to 'Phags-pa as a 'language', although it was no such thing. It was a script, devised at the command of Qubilai Qa’an and named after the ‘Phags-pa Lama. It was intended to be a universal script, that could be used to write any language, and was in fact often used for writing Mongolian, and sometimes also for writing Chinese, Sanskrit, Tibetan and Turkic. Most extant Mongol paizi bear inscriptions in Mongolian in the ‘Phags-pa script. An article published in 2003 lists, and gives brief descriptions of, seventeen extant Mongol paizi. This included almost all...


The problem that scholars from China seem to have is their desire to criticize the Chinese language as a lingua franca of the Yuan empire, in their perspective, this is not the case. The Yuan emperor, after all, always claimed to be more than just the ruler of the Toluid Ulus. The use of Persian inscriptions, alongside Mongolian, on standard weights and paizi may have been no more than an indication of the claim of the Great Qan to be supreme ruler of the entire Yeke Mongghol Ulus. The Yuan emperor, after all, always claimed to be more than just the ruler of the Toluid Ulus in Mongolia and China. He was the Great Qan (Qa’an), supreme overlord of the whole Chinggisid Empire. Since Persian was undoubtedly the most important language of the Ilkhanate, part of this great empire, then its use on paizi is certainly Persian. it has also been suggested that they are, in fact, in Chinese, they are said to be in ‘Bosiwen 波斯文’, and whether this means ‘Persian language’ or ‘Persian script’ is uncertain.

The significance of these inscriptions is also unclear. They are very few, only about a dozen in total (mostly on weights, with a few on paizi), and very short, not more than five words each. A few short inscriptions in Persian may not mean very much at all. Most extant weights and paizi do not have any Persian on them. The use of Persian inscriptions, alongside Mongolian and Chinese, on standard weights and paizi may have been no more than an indication of the claim of the Great Qan to be supreme ruler of the entire Yeke Mongghol Ulus. The Yuan emperor, after all, always claimed to be more than just the ruler of the Toluid Ulus in Mongolia and China. He was the Great Qan (Qa’an), supreme overlord of the whole Chinggisid Empire. Since Persian was undoubtedly the most important language of the Ilkhanate, part of this great empire, then its use on paizi and standard weights may have been simply a way of asserting this claim. The often symbolic nature of inscriptions of this kind is well exemplified by the inscriptions in Latin on current British coins. Latin is certainly not any kind of a lingua franca in the United Kingdom today. Closer to the period in question here, coins issued under Qara Khitai rule bore subscript inscriptions only in Chinese, although, strictly speaking, this should mean ‘Chinese writing’. Another example of this confusion is that Huang Shijian 黃士堅 says: ‘‘the so-called Tāzīk script ... meant not the Arabic script, but Persian writing’’. Persian, of course, was written using Arabic script, so that this assertion makes no sense at all. This question affects the issue of these Persian inscriptions, for often, in Chinese, they are said to be in ‘Bosiwen 波斯文’, and whether this means ‘Persian language’ or ‘Persian script’ is uncertain.

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Turkic written in Chaghatai script, that is, the Perso-Arabic script adapted for writing Turkic. There has, indeed, been considerable controversy about this issue in Chinese publications. In their English-language publications, neither Huang Shijian nor Liu Yingsheng make any mention of this controversy. Huang no doubt felt that he had dealt with the question, in one of his Chinese-language publications, discussing the inscriptions on weights. He opines that the Perso-Arabic script had not been applied to writing Turkic before the fourteenth century, and that, in the conditions of the late 1200s and early 1300s, when the Great Qan was at war with Qaidu and the Chaghatai Qanate, it would be unlikely that the Chaghatai script would be used on weights produced in China. However, as has already been noted above, Turkic was being written with the Perso-Arabic script at the court of Güyük Qa’an, in Mongolia, as early as 1246. The evidence for this, in the surviving letter from Güyük to the Pope, is incontrovertible. Indeed, the Perso-Arabic script began to be used for writing Turkic much earlier, as early as the eleventh century. A document from Yarkand (in what is today Xinjiang), dated AH 515 [1121], is in Turkic written with the Arabic script. Huang is therefore certainly wrong regarding dating. As it seems quite likely that the Perso-Arabic script was used by Muslim Turks throughout the Mongol empire, including Mongolia and probably also China, from at least as early as the 1240s onwards, his argument about the war with the Chaghatai Qanate is likewise unconvincing.

What is particularly striking is that the Perso-Arabic inscriptions on these weights were not only identified as Chaghatai, but were also read, and translated into Chinese. How this could have been done, if the language had been wrongly identified, seems hard to comprehend. Yet Huang Shijian claims also to be able to read the inscriptions, as Persian. This is certainly something of a mystery. Until this mystery is properly resolved, the inscriptions on these weights cannot be accepted as good evidence for anything. Interestingly, in his recent English-language paper about Persian in China, Liu Yingsheng makes absolutely no mention of the inscriptions on these weights.

Liu mentions the inscriptions on paizi, however. As already stated above, he exaggerates the number, both of extant paizi and of Perso-Arabic inscriptions on them. It is perhaps worth repeating that, at least up to 2008, only four Perso-Arabic inscriptions on Mongol paizi had been reported. Liu also claims that:

As Persian had been the most important written language in Central Asia since the end of the 10th century and most of the Muslims in Yuan China came from Central Asia, they were strongly influenced by Iranian culture, and Persian became the common language among the Huihui population, and later even the mother tongue of many of their children and grandchildren before the process of sinification came to an end. Until the present day, there are still many Persian words and phrases in the daily Chinese language of the Huihui.

He gives no evidence for these claims, which I consider to be overstated. In the absence of evidence, these assertions cannot be accepted. It may well be that Persian was important as a written language of culture and learning in Central Asia, but it does not follow that it was also commonly spoken, as a lingua franca must be. It is perhaps relevant to note here that, although there were schools where boys studied the Quran and other religious works, literacy among the Persian-speaking Tajiks of Central Asia in pre-modern times was very low, only something over two per cent.

253 For a description of this paizi, and reproductions of rubbings of its two faces, see Huigejiletu Sarula, Basibazi Mengnyu Wexian Huihun, pp.473–74, and plate 47.


255 Cai Melibao et al., ‘Keyou Zhongqi yexun pai,’ p.54. Liu here seems to contradict what he says in ‘A Lingua Franca,’ pp.92–95, regarding Persian in China during the Ming dynasty.


257 Cai Melibao et al., ‘Keyou Zhongqi yexun pai,’ p.53.

258 G. Doerfer, Türkische und Mongolische elemente im Neupersischen unter besondere Berücksichtigung älterer neupersischer Geschichtsquellen, vor allem der Mongolen und Timuridenzeit, Band 1, Mongolische elemente im Neupersischen, (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1963), pp.239–41.

259 Erdal, ‘The Turkish Yarkand Documents,’ p.265, notes that the vocabulary of Turkic documents dating from the late eleventh to early twelfth centuries is ‘full of Arabic and New Persian elements’.


263 It may be noted that Huigejiletu Sarula says that the inscription is Chaghatai; see Basibazi mengnyu wexian huihun, p.473.

264 See, for example, R. Gluckman, ‘Remade in China: The Fine Art of Fakery’ (2002), The paizi with inscriptions in five different scripts is a good example of the controversy surrounding these ‘tablets of authority’. A very interesting article, published in a Chinese academic journal, reveals that five different Chinese experts had been asked, by the journal’s editors, to give their interpretations of the Perso-Arabic inscription on this paizi. All five gave different readings. One considered that the language of the inscription was Turkic, the other four thought it to be Persian. One of these four, however, was able to read only one word of the inscription. There was also disagreement regarding the number of words in the inscription, two thinking that there were five, the others, four only. The editors of the journal expressed a certain degree of dismay at this: ‘Regarding these different readings, we of the editorial department now have no ability to discriminate between them, and at the moment also do not know where to find advice …’. I personally do not have the linguistic competence to attempt to read the inscription, and I have no access to the original paizi (which I believe is now in a museum in Inner Mongolia, near where it was found). I can therefore offer no definite opinion about this issue. Liu Yingsheng’s comments on the inscription are of interest, however, and it is worth considering what he says. His conclusion is that the inscription is in Persian, but that there are errors in the writing of the letters, and that, although the vocabulary is Persian, it is not written in Persian word-order. He suggests that the word-order is that of Chinese. He further says that this must be because the paizi is from late in the Yuan period, presumably meaning that, during the later part of the dynasty, knowledge of correct Persian had deteriorated, and Chinese influence on the language had become strong. His reading of the inscription has the merit of being very similar in meaning to the inscriptions in other languages on the same paizi. A sixth interpretation of this inscription was published a year later. Its two authors saw four words in the inscription, taking two of them to be different from all previous readings, and indicating some doubt regarding the correct reading of the second word. They considered the language of the inscription to be Persian, but did not address the issue of the non-Persian word-order. They took the last word to be a noun with the same meaning as paizi. This did not, therefore, represent much of an advance on previously published opinions.

There are a number of points that seem worth making here. Firstly, Liu reads the last word of the inscription as ‘paiza’. This is, of course, a loan-word from Chinese, and it occurs not only in Persian but also in Mongolian and Turkic. This word is therefore ambiguous as regards determination of the language of the inscription. Liu sees a total of five words in the inscription, although all but one of the other experts considered that there were only four. Since there is no agreement about the reading of these words, and since there were certainly Persian loan-words in the Turkic of the period, it seems very difficult to make any decision about the language of the inscription based only on vocabulary. What is perhaps more significant is what Liu says about the word-order. I strongly doubt that this results from Chinese influence. It is known that, during the Yuan period, Chinese was sometimes being translated into Mongolian, but I am not aware of this kind of influence in the opposite direction. Indeed, since all important official documents were written in Mongolian, and then translated into other languages, it would seem unlikely. The word-order of this inscription, if it is clearly not right for Persian, would, almost certainly, be the normal word-order of Turkic, with the principal noun, ‘paiza’ (or however it may be read),
in final position, preceded by words qualifying it. This obviously needs more research, but, at the moment, it seems to me that this inscription is at least as likely to be Turkic as Persian. It would appear that, as with the inscriptions on the weights, the inscriptions on paizi are of very uncertain value as evidence for anything.

There is another issue regarding both the paizi and the weights. Some of them do not appear to have very good provenance, so that there is little assurance that they are all authentic. It is well known that a huge quantity of fake antiquities has been produced in China in the last few decades (and, indeed, much earlier). Even dinosaur fossils have been faked, in considerable quantity. Any object that does not have good provenance must, therefore, be open to a certain amount of suspicion. The provenance of some of the paizi, in particular, leaves considerable room for doubt. What is especially worrying is that, in Chinese publications, issues of provenance and authenticity are scarcely ever mentioned. Indeed, it can be difficult to find precise information about the provenance of any particular item. The mere fact that about half of all known extant Mongol paizi have been found in China during the last thirty years is, in itself, worrying.

One especially fine, gold paizi is reported to have been discovered by a local farmer when digging sand for building from beside a river in the Qorchin Right Wing Front Banner in south-eastern Inner Mongolia in 1961. He kept it, presumably secretly, for many years. Eventually, his son sold it to a professor from Inner Mongolia University, in April 2000, no less than 39 years after its alleged discovery. In 1986, about 1.5 kilometres from a village in the Qorchin Right Wing Central Banner, a farmer found the five-script paizi discussed above. Considering that this bronze paizi had presumably being lying in the ground for more than six centuries when it was discovered, it seems to be in very good condition. Of course, it is entirely possible that genuine objects could be found in such circumstances. Unfortunately, however, this kind of provenance provides very little assurance of authenticity.

It is also of significance that there are extant coins of the Mongol empire which bear inscriptions in Turkic written with Arabic script. A large issue of coins of the regency of Töregene, who was regent during the years 1241–46, bears the Turkic inscription, ‘Ulugh Mangyl Ulūs Bek’. These coins were struck at mints in Transcaucasia and Iranian Azerbaijan, including Tabriz, possibly at the behest of Baiju, the Mongol commander in that area. Coins struck in Samarkand during the 1220s often bear Persian inscriptions, but about three decades later similar inscriptions are in Turkic. Mongol coins frequently carry inscriptions in Mongolian in Uighur script, and commonly also in Arabic (language and script). Coins of the Yuan empire often bear inscriptions in Mongolian written with the ‘Phags-pa script, which occasionally appears on coins of other Qanates. Chinese characters are also of common occurrence on Yuan coins. Persian inscriptions appear sporadically, but even coins from the Ilkhanate normally bear inscriptions in Mongolian and Arabic, and only sometimes in Persian. This numismatic evidence does not suggest that Persian was used widely outside the Ilkhanate during the Mongol period. It was very probably only during the Timurid period and later that Persian became commonly used in Central Asia: in post-Mongol Iran and Central Asia, ‘[t]he middle of the 15th century can be considered the turning point in the struggle of Persian for leadership in coin design’. Inscriptions on coins do not necessarily bear much relation to the language(s) actually spoken in the
regions where the coins circulated, however. Persian verses appeared on the coins of the Muslim rulers of India, ‘for whom (as for the majority of their subjects) Persian was not even a native language’.275

I come now to the final piece of evidence which, according to Huang Shijian, proves the importance of Persian in the Yuan empire, and that is, the Huizhi Guozi Xue. Liu translates this ‘School of Persian Language’.276 Such a translation really cannot be justified. A much more accurate translation is ‘Muslim National College’,277 and there is, in fact, absolutely no evidence at all that it was involved with the teaching of Persian. I have looked at all the references that I have been able to trace to this Muslim National College, in the Yuan shi278 and other sources,279 and I have found no mention of what languages were studied in it. The sources say that it was set up for the study and teaching of the ‘Istifi’ (Yisitifei 亦思替非, 伊斯提非) script.280 There has been quite a lot of discussion of what exactly this ‘Istifi’ script was, with some rather bizarre theories advanced,281 but there should be no real difficulty with this expression. ‘Istifi’ is an Arabic word. ‘Istifa … comes from the root verb [in Arabic] safā, which means to be clear or pure, or to select the best. In the Qur’an, Allah istifa (chose) his messengers and prophets …’.282 Thus, the ‘Istifi’ script was the script that had been ‘chosen’ to write down the words of God in the holy Quran; that is, the Arabic script.283

Since there is no indication in the sources of what language or languages were written with this ‘Istifi’ script, there is really no point in speculating on the subject. Persian may well have been among them, but so may Arabic and also Turkic. It must be said that the Muslim National College does not seem to have been very important. According to Liu Yingsheng: ‘about 50 persons of this agency were staff and government-sponsored students; meanwhile dozens were students who paid their own expenses’.284 However, this is not exactly what the Yuan shi actually says:

In the second year of the Taizong (1325), in spring, in the intercalary first month, because this year the sons and younger brothers of the nobility and the sons of ordinary people who entered the College to study were numerous, the teachers and students were more than fifty. Apart from twenty-seven who already were supplied with food and drink [presumably this means that they were given a subsistence allowance by the government], there were a teaching assistant and twenty-four students requiring official support, and it was ordered to supply them.285

Several things are clear from this. Firstly, it was exceptional for there to be as many as more than 50 students and teachers in the College. Normally, the number would have been less, and probably significantly less, otherwise it would not have been noteworthy for there to be more than 50. Secondly, there were no ‘students who paid their own expenses’. There were only those who did not yet have official support, but were granted it. Moreover, they were included in the figure of more than 50, not additional to it. Thus, it can be seen that normally, there were probably only some three or four dozen students and teachers in the Muslim National College. This may be compared with the situation in the Mongolian National College, which ‘by 1315 had places for 100 students, although enrollment sometimes ran to 200 or 300’.286

The information translated above about the students at the Muslim National College can be analyzed further. Those students already receiving government support must have been continuing students, who had entered the College before 1325. The 24 students requiring similar support were the
new intake in 1325. Perhaps there was some question regarding whether the government would pay to support all of them, as they were more numerous than usual. The 27 continuing students must have been from more than one year’s intake, otherwise 24 would not have had an exceptionally large enrolment. Thus, in a normal year, probably about thirteen or fourteen new students entered the College. If they usually each spent three years in the College, then the normal number of students would have been about 40. With perhaps as many as half a dozen teaching staff, this would give a normal complement for the College of about 45, roughly ten or a dozen less than in 1325.

The Yuan shi also states that the students from the College filled the posts of translators (yi shi 譯史), as needed, in the various offices of government. The work of these translators would mainly have consisted in translating official documents. Perhaps, therefore, the Muslim National College was indeed solely concerned with teaching Arabic script. The students who entered the College may have already spoken various languages. What they needed was training in how to write them well. Perhaps some of them knew how to write Turkic in the Uighur script, but wanted to learn to write it with Arabic script, too. This is largely specula tion, of course, but the point is that absolutely nothing is said in the sources about the Muslim National College being involved with anything other than script. The claim made by Hyunhee Park, citing Liu Yingsheng as source, that: “Scholars attending these Muslim institutes at the Mongol court, according to Chinese sources, conducted their discourse in the ‘Huihui’ or ‘Muslim’ language, which in most cases meant Persian”, is untrue, and is not, in fact, supported by Liu’s statements. No Chinese sources say anything of this kind.

Morgan, following Huang Shijian, says that the Muslim National College was ‘renamed a Directorate of Education in 1314’. This is not exactly correct. In fact, a Muslim National Institute (Huihui Guozi Jian 回回國子監) was created in 1314, which was not merely the National College under a new name, but an additional, higher level, body. What Huang and Morgan failed to note, however, is that this National Institute had a very short existence, as it was abolished in 1320. Liu says that: ‘Emperor Renzong 仁宗 in 1314 ordered the re-establishment of an official post of ‘Supervisor of the Persian School’ (Huihui guozi jianguan 回回國子監官) to supervise the Persian language education in the school’. The term Huihui guozi jianguan does not mean ‘Supervisor of the Persian School’, however (here it is probably plural, and means ‘officials of the Muslim National Institute’), and the supposed ‘re-establishment’ is an error, based on a misunderstanding of the original Chinese text.

In the conclusion of his paper, Professor Morgan brings up a few new pieces of evidence for the importance of Persian in the Yuan empire. He points out that, in a letter written in 1306, John of Monte Corvino says: ‘I have had six pictures made of the Old and New Testaments for the instruction of the ignorant, and they have inscriptions in Latin, Turkish and Persian ...’. Again, this proves very little. Latin certainly was not a widely used language in the Yuan empire, and Turkish appears here alongside Persian. It seems likely that Persian was included because it was a language of the Nestorian Christians, whom John no doubt hoped to attract to the Latin Church. Giving Rossabi as his source, Morgan also asserts that even “so quintessentially Chinese a dish as jiaozi” may have been of Persian origin, and have entered China during the Yuan dynasty. This is almost certainly untrue, for dumplings (jiaozi 餃子 角子) seem to have existed in China before the...
Mongol invasions. A work of the early Song period records that: ‘during the reign of Ren Zong (仁宗 1023–63), when the spring examination was held for the Jin Shi 養士科 the ladies of the court assembled to watch. The Jin Shi examinees were presented with cake dumplings (bing jiaozi 餅角子), and the examining officials were given ‘seven-treasures tea’ (qi bao cha 七寶茶).’

This does not, of course, completely rule out a Persian origin for jiaozi, but it does make it very unlikely that they were introduced during the Yuan dynasty.

A check of Morgan’s source, however, reveals that Rossabi does not, in fact, state that jiaozi may have come from Persia. His actual words are ‘jiaozi (dumplings) may have come to China from West Asia during the Mongol era.’ A further check, back to Rossabi’s source, reveals that it suggests that jiaozi were ‘probably inspired’ by ‘Arab cooking’. So, jiaozi are not from Persia, after all. Rossabi’s source was Buell and Anderson’s translation of, and commentary on, the Yinshang zhengyao 飲膳正要. An examination of this work shows that it provides very little support for the thesis that Persian was an important lingua franca in the Yuan empire. On the contrary, it indicates the predominance of Turkic. Buell and Anderson list and count the words of foreign origin that occur in the Yinshang zhengyao, and they are overwhelmingly Turkic: ‘Turkic terminology … dominates with 36 out of 49 words’.

I am not trying, in this paper, to deny that Persian had any place at all in the Yuan empire. Clearly, there were Persians in China during the Yuan period, and the Persian language was of some importance as a language of learning. It was important in astronomy, for example, and to some extent also in medicine.292 There were periods when Islam, and, quite probably, therefore, also Persians and the Persian language, were particularly influential. For example, during the reign of the Taiding emperor 泰定皇帝, Yesün Temür (1323–28), Muslims were very influential in the government. A Muslim of uncertain origins, Daula Shah, ‘was apparently the moving spirit behind the administration’.

On the other hand, there were also times when Islam was discouraged. Although there were Muslims in the entourage of Chinggis Qan from an early date, and even among those who ‘drank the water of Baljuna’ with him, at one time he prohibited the slaughter of animals in the Muslim fashion.293 The Mongols were clearly often uncomfortable with Islam, because many of its tenets conflicted with their own customs and beliefs. As they were the conquerors, they saw no reason to tolerate what they sometimes perceived to be insulting behaviour on the part of those they had conquered:

Among all the [subject] alien peoples only the Hui-hui say ‘we do not eat Mongol food’. [Činggis Qa’an replied]: ‘By the aid of Heaven we have pacified you; you are our slaves. Yet you do not eat our food or drink. How can this be right?’ He thereupon made them eat. ‘If you slaughter sheep, you will be considered guilty of a crime.’ He issued a regulation to that effect. … [In 1279/1280 under Qubilai] all the Muslims say: ‘If someone else slaughters [the animal], we do not eat.’ Because the poor people are upset by this, from now on, Mussulman Hui-hui and Chu-hu [Zhuhu] 术忽 (Jewish) Hui-hui, no matter who kills [the animal] will eat [it] and must cease slaughtering sheep themselves and must cease the rite of circumcision.”

These harsh prohibitions may often not have been strictly enforced, or not enforced for long, but they clearly show the difficulty that the Mongols (and the Chinese, who were probably among ‘the poor people’) had with accepting Islamic practices. It would seem that Qubilai Qa’an may have felt a particular dislike for them. In 1290, a senior Muslim official of the Jiang-
Huai 江淮 Branch Secretariat reported that officials of the public granaries had stolen grain and embezzled money, and requested that they be punished ‘according to Song law’, by carving their faces and cutting off their hands. Qubilai replied: ‘This is Islamic law!’ and would not permit it.\(^{308}\)

It is also recorded that on two occasions, in 1292 and 1293, Muslim merchants offered large pearls to the Qa’an, but Qubilai refused them, saying that pearls were a waste of money, which could be better spent helping the poor.\(^{309}\) Whether it was for a similar reason, or perhaps because of the war with Qaidu and the Chaghatai Qanate, in 1281, Qubilai forbade all Muslims of the north-western border area to cross the border to trade. Ten years later, in 1291, he forbade Mongols to travel to Muslim regions as merchants.\(^{310}\) It seems that Qubilai was prepared to restrict trade if he felt it to be necessary, and did not always look favourably on the activities of Muslim merchants.

Although Islam prospered in the other Mongol Qanates, and, sooner or later, the rulers of the Ilkhanate, the Jochid Ulus and the Chaghatai Qanate all became Muslims, in the Yuan empire it was Tibetan Buddhism that won most favour with the Qa’ans. The ‘Phags-pa Lama, who had been greatly esteemed by Qubilai Qa’an, posthumously became a figure of veneration. In the first year of the reign of Ying Zong, posthumously became a figure of veneration. In the first year of the reign of Ying Zong, 1320, ‘it was commanded that a Hall of the Imperial Preceptor ‘Phags-pa should be built in every prefecture. Its style should be similar to that of the Confucian Temples, but grander’.\(^{311}\) In at least one instance, this command redounded badly for Islam, for in the following year ‘the mosque in Shangdu was demolished, and its site was used for a Hall of the Imperial Preceptor’.\(^{312}\)

There were also general reductions in the privileges of the Muslim community during the Yuan period. Whereas at first Muslims had enjoyed exemptions from taxation and from corvée labour, and had been allowed a considerable degree of self-governance, under their qadis, these privileges were gradually abolished after 1310, and particularly during the 1320s. The death of Yesün Temür in 1328 was followed by the execution of Daula Shah and at least one other high-ranking Muslim official.\(^{313}\) Muslims and Islam were often unpopular with the masses in China, too. One of the dramas of the time contains a threat by one character against another: ‘I’ll sell you to a Muslim, a Tartar, or a Jurchen!’\(^{314}\) Clearly, being sold to a Muslim was not thought to be a pleasant fate. There is also the well-known note by Tao Zongyi in Hangzhou. So many curious onlookers climbed onto the roof that the building collapsed under their weight, killing the bride, groom and many others. Tao quotes a thoroughly unpleasant satirical poem about the incident, which displays obvious prejudice against Muslims.\(^{315}\)

It seems to me that several conclusions are inevitable. Firstly, Muslims were not the majority of the Semu ren in the Yuan empire. The largest single group of Semu ren was undoubtedly the Turks. Indeed, Turks were a major element in the entire Yeke Mongghol Ulus. Golden quotes al-‘Umari regarding the Mongols and the Qipchaqs:

this country was formerly the land of the Qibjâq. When the Tatârs inundated it, the Qibjâq became their subjects. Then, they mixed with them and intermarried with them. The land was victorious over natural disposition (jibillâh) and origins. All (of them) became like the Qibjâq, as if they were of one stock (jins wâhid), because the Mogul lived in the land of the Qibjâq and (because) of their marital ties with them and their community in their land.\(^{316}\)
This process, or a very similar one, affected two of the major parts of the Mongol empire, the Chaghatai Qanate and the Jochid Ulus. The Mongol conquests, indeed, added to an influx of Turks into Central and Western Asia, which had begun centuries before the time of Chinggis Qan. Various dialects of Turkic, most of them mutually intelligible, became the common language of a wide belt of country, from the Tarim Basin all the way to Anatolia and the northern shores of the Black Sea. Cumans (Qipchaqs) settled in Hungary and the Balkans, so that Turkic was a language even of central Europe. Thus, all the way from Europe to China, there were Turks, and speakers of Turkic.

It is also quite likely that Turks were the majority of the Muslims in the Yuan empire. This cannot be asserted with complete assurance, but it is clear that at least a substantial proportion of Muslims in the Far East were Turks. Since it is also clear that many of the non-Muslim Semu ren were Turks, it is obvious that Turks greatly outnumbered Persians in the Yuan empire. Persian was an important language in one part of the Yeke Mongol Ulus, the Ilkhanate, and was likely the lingua franca of the maritime trade routes from the Persian Gulf to the south-east coast of China. It was not a major language elsewhere, however. In the Jochid Ulus and the Chaghatai Qanate, Turcik was the predominant language. In the Yuan empire, Turcik was the predominant language of the Semu ren. There is absolutely no good evidence that Persian was an 'official' language of the Yuan court. This claim is based on poor evidence, all of which has been shown in this paper to be either invalid or, at best, of very dubious value.

There is a further important point to be made here. For far too long, the study of the Mongols, their conquests, and their empire has been dominated by scholars of Persian. It has been claimed that the Persian sources, particularly Rashid al-Dīn’s Jāmi’ al-Tavārīkh, are the most important for this study. Of course, the works of Juwainī, of Rashid al-Dīn, of Wassāf, and of one or two other Persian historians are extremely important. The fundamental sources, however, are undoubtedly Chinese. This should surprise no one. After all, the Mongols lived in close proximity to the Chinese from a very early date. Indeed, Chinggis Qan himself was at one time a vassal of the Jin empire of northern China. The Chinese also kept extremely good historical records, and had been doing so continuously for centuries before the rise of the Mongols. Long before anyone in Persia had even heard of the Mongols, the Chinese were writing about them. While it is true that the Yuan shi, the official dynastic history of the Mongol empire in China, is deficient in various ways, it is still a voluminous document containing a vast amount of information. More to the point, it is by no means the only Chinese source for the period. This subject requires a separate paper, which may well need to be even longer than this one. Suffice it to say, the status of Persian in the Mongol empire has been greatly exaggerated, and so has the importance of Persian sources for Mongol studies. As Rashid al-Dīn himself wrote: 'I realized that they [the Chinese] are masters in all fields of knowledge'.