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Was it Translated: Türkish Diplomatic Correspondence to China in Medieval Times

Rachel Lung

Introduction

The unification of China under the Sui dynasty ended three centuries of disunion in China and started the prime era of Sui (581–618) and Tang (618–907) in Chinese history. It was a time when most neighboring states in Central and East Asia were keen to establish diplomatic and trading ties with China. In line with the Chinese political ideology of its emperor's mandate, as the son of Heaven, to rule all people under Heaven, China considered country states, such as Paekche 百濟, Silla 新羅,¹ Koguryō 高句麗, Türk 突厥,² and Vietnam 安南, its vassal states, and expected them to pay tribute regularly, as part of their obligations, to symbolize their subordination to and respect for the Chinese Emperor. Countries not bestowed the vassal status

1 *Suishu* 隋書 (ch. 81, p. 1820) mentions that “the written language of Silla was the same as that of China” and provides a proof for the use of Chinese language in Silla in the mid-sixth century.

2 For consistency of usage, I will follow Gerard Clauson (2002) in using the term “Türk” to refer to the Türkish nation. This term was widely known to mean “strength and energy” in the French and Chinese historical sources, but Clauson (2002, p. 87) has shown that the correct meaning should be “ripeness (of fruit), or maturity (of a man).” The name “Türk” was often anglicized, later on, as Turk, or sinicized as Tujue 突厥 in the literature.

in the Chinese political framework, such as Yamato 倭國 and Sri Lanka, were considered “remote barbarians” (yuanyi 遠夷) in “remote territories” (jueyu 絕域). Nevertheless, these countries also came to China to pay tribute, sometimes, with either the agenda of gaining recognition for newly established sovereigns, or a pure desire to learn the language, literature, culture, and institutions of law and politics of China (Gao, 2003).

Besides sending tribute, vassal states often performed the proper etiquette of presenting diplomatic letters regularly to China to sustain their reciprocal ties. As documented in specific memoirs of barbarians in standard histories, which sometimes incorporate the complete letters from certain foreign states, this diplomatic correspondence to China seemed to be mostly in Chinese (Wang, 1013), despite the fact that these countries did not usually speak or write Chinese in their home countries at all. Were these state letters actually composed in Chinese, or were they translated into Chinese? To undertake such analyses for all Asian states who presented letters to medieval China would be a task far beyond the scope of the present article. I shall, in fact, confine myself to the state letters presented by two Turkish qaḡhans around the sixth and early seventh centuries.

The focus of our inquiry is whether the two state letters presented to Sui China in 584 and 607 were translated into Chinese, or composed in Chinese. We will begin with a brief description of the concept of the East Asian cultural sphere in medieval China, followed by a discussion of the way in which Asian historians dealt with diplomatic correspondence, to or from China, in the literature. This will be followed by a consideration of the Turkish relation with China in medieval times and a general view of the Türkic language of the time. The two Turkish letters will be analyzed, before linguistic and historical arguments are presented in support of my suggestion that they might well have been Chinese translations.

East Asian Cultural Sphere

In light of the political reality of China as one of the earliest civilizations developed in Asia, written Chinese was often used

for wider diplomatic communication across countries in East Asia in medieval times.³ Such a prestigious status attached to the Chinese language had its root in the concept of the East Asian cultural sphere. The East Asian cultural sphere, roughly formed around medieval times (Gao, 2003), was also called the Chinese cultural sphere because it was geographically centered round China, although it also covered the three Korean states, Yamato, and Vietnam. Han Sheng concisely points out the features of the sphere as follows:

In the context of their shared background as agrarian societies, the country states in East Asia committed to reform themselves through learning from China. The East Asian cultural sphere was thus formed and characterized with the use of written Chinese as their common language of correspondence, the application of the Chinese ritual and legal institutions as their ethical norms, and the adoption of Confucianism as their cultural component. (Han, 2005, p. 66, my translation)

Historically, China was thousands of years ahead of its Asian neighbors in the development of language and writing, institutions (ritual, political, and legal), and culture. China was thus considered the Asian centre of learning in written Chinese (via standard histories and classics), Confucius learning, laws, and Buddhism, apart from other technical and medical knowledge (Gao, 2003). Paekche, for example, actively “asked for collections of Chinese classics and Buddhist sutras [as means of learning] from China during the South dynasty [420–589]” (*Liangshu* 梁書, ch. 54, p. 805).

Learning Chinese writing and language was of utmost importance to the East Asian countries in their pursuit to learning from China in general. The Five Classics and other standard histories of China were therefore typically placed in the core curriculum in the schools found, around medieval times, in Asian states, such as Yamato, Paekche, and Silla. In fact, Chinese characters were consciously introduced as early as the beginning of the Christian era to Yamato, who had not yet, at the time,

3 See Feng (2004a, pp. 177–190) for state letters presented to China during the early eighth century by a number of Central Asian states.

developed its own written language.⁴ But by the third and fourth centuries, written Chinese was already quite well cultivated among the elite and in the ruling house of Yamato. The princes of Yamato, for example, were often tutored by some Buddhist monks from Paekche, who had been well-trained in the Chinese language and culture. After all, Paekche received earlier and more direct cultural influence from China than Yamato, who was categorized merely as a remote barbaric people in the political taxonomy of medieval China.

Sui and Tang historical sources also suggest that the Chinese language was actually used, quite widely, for official correspondence to and from China in medieval times (Feng, 2004a). Of interest to translation studies, then, is whether the letters to China, from various neighboring states, were drafted in Chinese, or were they simply translated into Chinese, before being presented to China? This question has not, understandably, yielded a definite answer because of the scarcity of positive evidence. In fact, unless it was positively identified in standard histories, one can never say with any certainty if a state letter sent to China, at the time, was translated into, or composed in Chinese. A more constructive approach, given the uncertainties in historical facts, I believe, is to organize relevant evidence and conjecture the possibility of specific correspondence having been translated based on the available evidence.

Literature Review

Diplomatic correspondence has always captured the interest of scholars in historical studies of China and its neighbors. Kaneko Shūichi 金子修一 (1988) identifies three typical opening phrases of outgoing Tang diplomatic correspondence and concludes that these three types of openings correspond to the recipient countries' political status with Tang China. Kaneko also figures that such a categorization would enhance our understanding of the complication in Tang international relations. State letters

4 Niu Zhigong (2002, pp. 422-423) wrote, "It was not until the eighth century that Japan developed her own written language, based on the Chinese writing system."

presented to medieval China from Asian states were also common topics of inquiry along Kaneko's argument. For instance, in the first full embassy to Sui China in 607, the Yamato envoy, Ono no Imoko 小野妹子 (or Su Yingao 蘇因高), produced a written communication from the monarch,⁵ Suiko Tenno 推古天王 (r. 592–628), which began:

日出處天子致書日沒處天子無恙:

The Son of Heaven, in the land of the rising sun, sends this letter to the Son of Heaven of the land, where the sun sets, and wishes him well. (Bielenstein's translation, 2005, p. 102)

This instance was most widely studied in Japan with respect to its subtle quest for an equal status with Sui China (Han and Liu, 2002). According to Hori Toshikazu 堀敏一 (1999, in Han and Liu, 2002), Japanese historians generally confirm that this letter was written, at the behest of Regent Shotoku Taishi 聖德太子, in Chinese. In fact, state letters from Yamato addressed to China in medieval times display a fine classical Chinese style, with rhetorical devices, such as rhymes, antithesis, and parallelism, widely practiced in the higher and learned society in sixth-century China. Considering the East Asian states' active learning from China—in language and literature, over the preceding centuries—and crucially, the absence of a written language in pre-eighth century Yamato, the observation that diplomatic correspondence was not translated, but written in Chinese, could hardly be challenged.⁶

5 Hori Toshikazu (in Han and Liu, 2002, p. 66) rightly points out that the style and rhetoric of this letter, in the opening phrase, bear much resemblance to the China-bound state letters from Xiongnu 匈奴 and Türk during the Han (206 BC–6) and Sui dynasties respectively. He therefore concludes that Regent Shotoku or his courtiers must have consulted previous diplomatic correspondence of this nature while drafting this state letter to China. Toshikazu suspects that the information might have been obtained through the help of Paekche and Koguryō, if not precisely from the Koguryō Buddhist monks or Chinese immigrants residing in Yamato then (*ibid.*, p. 67).

6 Hans Bielenstein (2005, p. 102) also believes that the letter in 607 from Yamato was “originals, composed at the Japanese court, and not translated and suitably rephrased at the Chinese court.”

Sharing a similar interest in the subject, Hori Toshikazu gives in-depth analyses of state correspondence to China from various East Asian countries and identifies some common textual patterns in these letters. He suspects that these identical features suggest either that certain phrases and syntactic sequences were parts of the norms in diplomatic writing in China then, or that the country states might have actively referred to earlier correspondence from other countries, while composing their own. Taking on a larger-scale study of diplomatic correspondence in East Asia, Michael Drompp (2005) approaches the Tang history and politics through examining Li Deyu's 李德裕 (787–850) writings—many of which were letters, drafted on behalf of the throne, ultimately delivered to the steppe countries—in his capacity as the Tang chief minister in the early ninth century.

In the historical records of China's diplomatic contact in ancient and medieval times, the word “*yì*” 譯 (literally, translation, or interpretation) was commonly used in the description of foreign envoys' tribute-paying journey (Hung, 2005; Li, 2002; Ma, 1999). In other words, the act of translating or interpreting was apparently crucial to China in facilitating the tribute mission, primarily because of the language barriers. The number of interpreters or the levels of interpretation employed, before the foreign envoys could communicate with the officials in China, was then considered a reference point to indicate how keen these foreign states were to establish ties with China (Hung, 2005). It is perhaps natural, therefore, for Chinese historical records to be overtly boastful of these glorifying diplomatic encounters, out of the sheer ego-centrism of imperial China. In numerous places in its dynastic histories, phrases, such as “employing relay interpreters,” “taking arduous journey and relying on three different interpreters,” or “by means of nine different interpreters” to pay tribute to China, were often found (Li, 1998, p. 206). Inarguably, these stock phrases do, indeed, sound suspicious. It is, in fact, quite inconceivable that nine interpreters were required to facilitate exchanges between foreign envoys and Chinese officials.⁷ What might be surmised was that, at least in classical

7 Although, as pointed out in the memoir of barbarians 諸夷傳 of *Liangshu*, the Hua state 滑國 [see Cen Zhongmian, 2004b, pp. 202–207

Chinese usage, numerals were not supposed to be taken at their face value. Rather, numerals may sometimes be understood as exaggeration. Notably, Madeline Spring (1986, p. 25) admits that “such exaggeration is a common characteristic of Chinese literary writings.” Considering the common knowledge that earlier Chinese historiography was “literary” by nature (Qian, 1986; Wu Huihua, 1994), the exaggeration theory seems quite fitting especially when these bragging texts were meant to boast China’s allure to barbarians, who, in the Chinese perspective, would not hesitate to bear hardships and linguistic blunders to present China with exotic gifts and state letters.

Eva Hung (2005) justifiably points out that “relay interpreting” (chongyi 重譯) in the Chinese history should not be understood simply as a pragmatic step to bridge the communication gap. The political significance of the term “relay interpreting” and the value the Chinese thrones placed on such similar terms were closely tied in with the persistent concept of China’s supremacy over barbarians. The barbarians’ move to rely on translators or interpreters in their China-bound tribute missions was honestly viewed as an act of submission to China. With reference to the ruling ideology of Sino-centric China, Eva Hung stresses that “since the submissive barbarians were different [in languages, among others] from those of China, it was up to the barbarians to accommodate themselves to the use of Chinese in their written or spoken communication with China” (Hung, 2005, p. 25). Moreover, according to Hung, China “could not care less about the barbarians’ communication adequacy and was even less concerned with the way in which barbarians tackled their linguistic problems” (*ibid.*).⁸

for its history], referred also as Yanda 嚙哒, or Hephthalites (in present-day Afghanistan), who had not developed any written language of its own, needed to ask its neighboring state to help compose a state letter for South dynasty China during the mid-sixth century. Likewise, Silla, who was yet to develop its own written language, solicited the help of Paekche to write to China around the same time.

8 While Eva Hung’s caution on Sinocentrism was useful in examining ancient texts about diplomatic encounter, I have some reservations over her generalization, concerning the use of translators in diplomatic

In reviewing the language situation of sixth-century China before the Sui unification, Arthur Wright (1978) points out the eminence of written Chinese in China proper despite the extended period of regional disunion. He makes overt references to the instrumental value of written Chinese, which was likened to Esperanto in diplomatic exchanges with China in medieval times. Wright says:

The most obvious element in this common substratum is a written language that permitted communication across all manner of political and cultural barriers. A letter, a poem, a pronunciamiento could be written in one corner of the Chinese subcontinent and be read and understood in the opposite corner. Written Chinese, thus described, would seem to resemble Esperanto—a language which indeed makes possible communication between men separated by distance and by culture. But the Chinese written by men of the sixth century communicated much, much more than the bare content of the message. By that time it had been continuously used and developed over a period of two millennia. And, as a result, almost every word and certainly every phrase carried with it from repeated historic use a rich freight of allusive meaning: echoes of men and events, references to places and times, to archetypal situations and much else. In all formal writing, specific historical allusions were omnipresent—used as argument to drive home a point or to refute one. Thus, tribal chiefs fresh from the steppe—once they had Chinese scribes to write communications for them—began to imbibe little by little the whole historic culture of China; and when their sons began to learn Chinese for themselves, the learning process was accelerated, and the moral and aesthetic appeal of the Chinese written heritage began to work upon them. (Wright, 1978, pp. 43-44)

encounters in ancient China. Although written correspondence between medieval China and its neighbors was mostly prepared in Chinese, there was little concrete evidence to suggest that the reliance on non-Chinese interpreters, if at all, in oral diplomatic encounters involving China, was a result of the ego-centric mentality in China. Instead, historical evidence to prove otherwise is plentiful, and this subject matter warrants detailed discussions in a separate article (Lung, in progress).

There are three points to take note of in Wright's foregoing observations about written Chinese as a language of power and prestige in medieval times. First, Arthur Wright acknowledges the complication of written Chinese in the political register, which might contain loaded literary allusions and metaphors and would probably defy comprehension for foreign readership. Second, in pursuing on-going communication with imperial China, foreign tribal chieftains often had "Chinese scribes" to compose (or translate?) letters for them to facilitate communication. Third, as a measure to maintain communication with China, sometimes, sons of these tribal chieftains, in the traditional format of "hostage princes" (zhizi 質子), would be arranged to learn Chinese, among other knowledge, in China and therefore provide another source of Chinese experts for diplomatic functions involving China in their home countries. It is possible that the Türks, who were, in theory, outside the East Asian cultural sphere, might have taken similar steps at the time, to master the Chinese language and culture, just like other members inside the sphere, who had been engaging in learning from China centuries earlier.

Türk and its Relations with Sui China

Türk, or Türküt, refers to a state of the Ašina clan (of Tiele 鐵勒 tribe by ancestral lineage) who broke away from the control of Rouran 柔然, another Türkish-speaking nomadic state, in 552. Türk emerged as the Ašina dominant power on the northern steppes for almost two hundred years until it was defeated by the Uighurs in 745 during mid-Tang China, and its history, thus, drew to an end. The Türks, under the leadership of Bumïn 土門, who named himself Yili qaqhan, rapidly established control over a vast territory "stretching from Manchuria west to the Aral Sea and from Lake Baikal south to the Chinese frontier" (Graff, 2002, p. 142). Rising in the northern steppes, during a period of disunion in China, Türk played along and strengthened itself from the enmity and suspicion of the different co-existing regimes, such as Zhou 周 (557–585) and Qi 齊 (550–577) in Northern dynastic (420–589) China.

The Türks were the nomadic tribes living on the Mongolian steppes between the sixth and the eighth centuries,

and the Türkic language they practised was of Ural Altaic origin.⁹ Unlike Chinese, the Türkic language was not a tonal language. Its word formation was facilitated by adding suffixes or affixes to stem words. Its basic grammar followed that of the Subject-Object-Verb principle (Yu, 1995). But it must be noted that the Türkic language was not exclusively used by the Türks. As Gerard Clauson (2002, p. 25) points out, the steppes were once occupied by small and disorganized tribes between the third and the sixth centuries when the region then was “a milieu exclusively Turkish-speaking.” In terms of Türkic writing, the Uighers and the Kirgizs had, at some points in their histories, used the Türkic script as well, on top of employing other scripts or alphabets in their written languages.¹⁰ Since the Türkic script was shaped like the Runic script developed by the Aramaic people, it was also labeled as the Türkic-Runic script. The close relation between the two scripts was documented by Clauson’s observations that, “the Runic alphabet was commonly used for writing Turkish” and was “the official alphabet of the Turkish empire” (*ibid.*, p. 101).

The Türks were primarily a pastoral people with some forms of agriculture. Besides practicing a half-nomadic lifestyle of hunting and being herdsmen, the Türks were also skillful in making ironware, such as farming tools and weapons. With these handcrafts, they started to “engage themselves in trading activities with China along her northwestern frontier” (Wu Jingshan, 1994, pp. 47-48). The commercial and diplomatic instincts of the Türks thus distinguish themselves from the other steppe peoples and explain their phenomenal presence in the East and the West within its short history in medieval times. While actively engaging themselves in intermediary trade between China and the Eastern Roman Empire, the Türks eventually managed to build a steppe empire extending westward into Central Asia and establish commercial contacts with Hephthalites, Byzantium, and Persia.

9 The Mongolian and Manchurian languages are also branches from the Altaic language family.

10 See Gerard Clauson (2002, pp. 33-54) for a detailed discussion of various scripts and alphabets used in the historical development of the Türkic language varieties.

But it was also the nomadic Türks who posed the most formidable challenge to newly unified China under Sui. The Türkish qaḡhan, then, Īshbara 沙鉢略 (r.581–587), wished to impede the consolidation of the Sui regime, lest the balance of power in East Asia should soon tip, decisively, in favor of a united China. He thus launched several attacks against China, but to no avail. Ultimately, Sui China successfully made the Eastern Türk, then, ruled by Īshbara, a vassal state by manipulating the tribal divisions of the Türkish polity. Not used to the transformed status of his tribal state, from a “rival state” (diguo 敵國) position to a vassal (father-son) relation with China, Īshbara still hoped to retain his grace and quest for an equal status with Sui. His agenda was echoed in the following letter he presented to Emperor Wen (r.581–604) in 584.

Example 1: Īshbara letter

從天生大突厥天下賢聖天子、伊利俱盧設莫何始波羅可汗致書大隋皇帝：皇帝是婦父，即是翁，此是女夫，即是兒例。兩境雖殊，情義是一。此國所有羊馬，都是皇帝畜牲，彼有繒綵，都是此物，彼此有何異也！（*Suisbu*, ch. 84, p. 1868)

As the Sage under Heaven and the great Türkish Son of Heaven, born from Heaven, Il-Kül-šad-baraišbara-qaḡan addressed this letter to the Great Sui Emperor: The Emperor is the father of his wife, and that makes him [the emperor] his father-in-law. He is the husband of [the Emperor's] daughter, and that makes him the [Emperor's] son. Although the physical situation of the [two] countries is different, [they are] tied by relation [with] and feelings [for each other]. The sheep and horses in his country are the Emperor's domestic livestock; [Sui China's] silk products are properties of his country. There is, indeed, no difference between his country and [the Emperor's] country. (My translation)

After Īshbara's death in 587, the new qaḡhan, Chuluohou 處羅侯 (r.587–588) was also showered with favors from the Sui court. About a decade later, another Türkish qaḡhan, Qimin 啟民 (r.599–611)—a Sui protégé—was not only backed by Sui militarily and financially, but also constantly received favors from the two Sui emperors. For instance, Qimin qaḡhan was married

subsequently to two Sui princesses, and he consistently relied on the Sui court to consolidate his rule over the Türkish tribes. In 607, he memorialized (suggesting his status as a vassal subject to China) Emperor Yang (r.605–618) and requested Sinicization of his tribes through the adoption of Chinese costumes.¹¹

Example 2: Qimin's letter

啟民可汗上表：已前聖人先帝存在之日，憐臣，賜臣安義公主，種種無少短。臣種末為聖人先帝憐養，臣兄弟妒惡，相共殺臣，臣當時無處去，向上看只有天，下看只見地，實憶聖人先帝言語，投命去來。聖人先帝見臣，大憐臣，死命養活，勝於往前，遣臣作大可汗坐著也。還養活臣及突厥百姓，實無少短。臣今憶想聖人及至尊養活事，具奏不盡，並至尊聖心裏在。臣今非是舊日邊地突厥可汗，臣即是聖尊臣民，至尊憐臣時，乞依大國服飾法用，一同華夏，臣今率部落，敢以上聞，伏願天慈不遺所請。(Suishu, ch. 84, p. 1874)

Qaqhan Qimin memorialized: During the time when the previous saintly emperor [Wen] was alive, his majesty pitied your subject (me) and gave the hand of Princess Anyi to your subject. Your subject is [thus] not short of [supplies]. Your subject's people were indeed raised at the mercy of the saintly emperor. [Yet] your subject's jealous and vicious brothers conspired to have your subject killed, leaving your subject nowhere to go at the time. [I] looked up and could only see the sky; while [I] looked down, [I] could only see the earth. In recalling the previous emperor's kind words, [your subject] came [to China] for protection. The saintly emperor met your subject and overwhelmingly felt for your subject, while insisting that your subject went on living and dwelled even better than before. The saintly emperor made sure that your subject sat tight with the position of prime qaqhanate and raised your subject and the Türkish people without any shortage of [supplies]. [Therefore] in reminiscence of the saintly emperor

11 Hans Bielenstein (2005, pp. 378–379) was particularly critical about the overt “sinocentric window dressing” of the record and interpretation of the Chinese historical sources about the event. Bielenstein argues that Qimin was not really submissive to the Sui court, but he gives no evidence against the validity of the Chinese memorial Qimin submitted to the throne.

and his supreme grace to raise [my people], [his grace] could never be adequately described and is always in my heart. Now, your subject is not a Türkish qaḡhan of the previous frontier region, but a subject and citizen of your saintly majesty. [Your subject here] begs for [your kindness] to allow [me and my people] to adopt [Chinese] clothing of your great nation and to be assimilated to the Hua-xia [culture].¹² Now, your subject and the tribe [he] leads humbly ask for your kind permission and modestly ask your heavenly kindness not to turn down [our] request. (My translation)

The Linguistic Argument

Whether these awkwardly-phrased letters should be considered, originally, pieces of Chinese writing, or translation, from the Türkic language, is still inconclusive. These two state letters were delivered from Türk to Sui China in 584 and 607 respectively. In a lapse of 23 years, what changes can be detected from the language styles of the two letters? Would these stylistic changes, in fact, tell us anything about the degree of Sinicization in Türk, and therefore, the impact of Chinese writing style in this steppe state? These questions are, of course, worthwhile paths for in-depth linguistic inquiry, but would be tasks way beyond the focus of the present article. Within the boundary of this article, I could only remark that these two letters both display features of unidiomatic Chinese usage and syntactic structure. But beyond these common features, there were some stylistic differences of which we should take note.

Linguistically, the third person narration style, such as, “his wife,” “his father-in-law,” and “his country,” as found in

12 The Huaxia 華夏 (widely known, after the establishment of the Former Han dynasty [206 BC–9 AD], as Han 漢) people created the Xia 夏 dynasty (2100–1600 BC), the earliest political entity in ancient China and considered the Yellow River Basin their base. They were further stabilized, as a prominent ethnic group, during the Qin 秦 dynasty (221–207 BC). Under the Former Han dynasty, the Huaxia people gradually became a leading ethnic group among many others in China and were labeled as ethnic Han because of their predominance in organizing the Han government. Here, the underlying meaning is the desire to be assimilated to the Chinese culture.

İshbara's letter, was typical of the Türkic scripts written around the eighth century (Pan, 1997; Xiong, 2006). Besides, the clumsy expressions in this letter about the relation of the Emperor and İshbara, evidently, gave away the limited competence of the Turkish translator or writer in classical Chinese. Such eminent Türkic stylistic presence and the ineffective Chinese usage, considered as a whole, could be taken to argue that the letter might have been translated into Chinese.

As compared to İshbara's letter, Qimin's letter displays a prominent first-person writing style, exemplified by the frequent use of first-person pronouns, as in "I," "me," and "your subject" (which was the humble variant of "I"), and distances itself from the typical usage of third person narration commonly found in the medieval Türkic writing (Yuan, 2001). This could be explained, partially, by "the effect of growing Sinicization and the increasing influence of Chinese writing on the Türkic correspondence over the past decades" (Wu Jingshan, 1994, p. 125). It is equally possible that the overt affiliation displayed by Qimin to China—represented by the frequent use of the submissive term, "chen" 臣 (literally, "subject [to a throne]")—can be more conveniently and effectively conveyed in the first-person, rather than the third-person, writing style. In connection to Arthur Wright's foregoing observation about the technicalities of the sixth-century classical Chinese, Qimin's letter to Emperor Yang appears to be a layman's work—either as a piece of Chinese writing or a Chinese translation—and this layman, not being competent in the Chinese rhetoric in the political discourse, transfers "no more than the bare content of the message" (Wright, 1978, p. 43).

Yuan Gang (2001, p. 482) points out that "the descriptive language style of Qimin's letter bears much resemblance to the eighth-century Türkic script," and he "feels that [Qimin's] letter was translated from the Türkic language."¹³ Both Hu Ji (1995) and Li Nanqiu (2002) share a similar view, based on the same linguistic argument. Nevertheless, without any concrete trace of the word "translation" in historical texts, we could just assume, at

13 This refers to passages of Turkish stone scriptures, made in the eighth century, and unearthed, in the late 19th century, in Mongolia.

best, that the Türkic syntactic style may be injected by the Turkish scribe, who was not entirely familiar with the Chinese rhetoric. The letter is comprehensible, but definitely remains far from the high style of official correspondence in sixth-century China. Its language style is of a plain and vernacular Chinese writing, as in 臣當時無處去，向上看只有天，下看只見地, (...leaving your subject nowhere to go at the time. [I] looked up and could only see the sky; while [I] looked down, [I] could only see the earth.), with quite a number of redundant and ineffective usage, such as 無少短 (is [thus] not short of [supplies] and without any shortage of [supplies]). Syntactically, the exotic sentence pattern in 並至尊聖心裏在 (the saintly emperor... is always in my heart), whereby the predicate 在 (equivalent to the preposition “in”) was placed at the end,¹⁴ reveals that either the writer of the letter was not proficient in Chinese, or the letter was “originally written in the Türkic language” (Li, 2002, p. 22) before being paraphrased or translated into Chinese.

Evidently, the linguistic features displayed in these two letters do throw some light on their possible “origins,” but nothing definite is confirmed yet at this stage. If the linguistic argument alone does not bring us directly to the probable answer, will the historical evidence of the linguistic situation of Türk offer any insights to the unresolved mysteries?

The Historical Argument

As mentioned before, Arthur Wright (1978) believes that Chinese scribes were often used by the non-Chinese tribal chiefs in medieval times, to help “compose” Chinese diplomatic letters, as a way to resolve the communication problem with China. Wright, however, did not dwell on the implications of the term, “compose”—either as a straightforward composition process, or as a translation process, in which “putting down in Chinese” was a part. Again, similar confusion was found at the end of the historical visit of a Chinese monk, Xuan Zang 玄奘 (596–664),

14 See Lin (1988, p. 117) for typical predicate-final syntax in the Türkic language.

to the tent of the Turkish Jabahu 葉護 qaghan in 640. On hearing that Xuan Zang was about to go on a pilgrimage to India:

可汗乃令軍中訪解漢語及諸國音者，遂得年少，曾到長安數年，通解漢語，即封為摩訶達官。作諸國書，令摩訶送法師到迦畢試國。(Xuan Zang, 645, in Cen, 2004b, p. 7)

...the qaghan then asked his military unit to locate someone with knowledge of the Chinese language and the vernacular of other states (in Central Asia). A young man was identified to have lived in Changan (the capital of China) for several years, and was able to understand Chinese. [He was thus] immediately bestowed an official title. [He was asked] to *come up with* letters for various states and was instructed to chaperone the Buddhist master to Kapisi (or Kapisa, present-day Afghanistan). (My translation)

Apparently, this young man, who not only understood Chinese, but was also able to write Chinese, was deployed as a scribe. The phrase 作諸國書 in the foregoing quotation was translated as “to *come up with* letters for various states,”¹⁵ but the ambiguity between writing in Chinese and translating into Chinese is still there. In short, there is an inherent ambiguity in the actual duties of scribes in the Turkish camp: did they write in Chinese, or did they translate into Chinese from a Türkic speech or script? Or did they do both? I conjecture that this particular scribe was more likely a translator, primarily because his young age would hardly make him a competent and professional writer for state correspondence. But again, this conjecture was merely confined to this very young scribe whom we are fortunate to know something about, and it should obviously not be unduly extended to the case of other Turkish scribes.

Nevertheless, theoretically, it is possible that the two Turkish letters might have been translated into Chinese by such Turkish scribes, who happened to acquire Chinese one way or the other. Regarding the earliest record of written language of Türk

15 A total of 24 letters (for various Central Asian states) were prepared for Xuan Zang to facilitate his pilgrimage in Central Asia (Cen, 2004b, p. 8).

in the early seventh century, the Chinese source in *Suishu* (Suishu 隋書, ch. 84, p. 1864) provides only minimal information with a passing mention of “突厥無文字，刻木為契” (Türk did not have a written language, and [therefore,] contracts were carved on wood).¹⁶ If there is no source [written] language to begin with, these state letters can *only* be said to have been drafted in Chinese, and theoretically not possible to have been translated into Chinese. The moot point, crucially, lies in the existence, if at all, of a written Türkic language by the end of the sixth century.

In a biography of Emperor Yang, Liu Shanling (2005, p. 68) analyzes İshbara's letter and conjectures, quite impressionistically, that “the state letter must have been written in Chinese.” However, Liu (*ibid.*, p. 60) earlier on makes quite an incongruent point, saying that “originally the Türks only knew the way to carve number on wood. It was not until Ašina Tümen took up qaqhanate that the Türks began to have their own [written] language, their country, and the freedom from the slavery of Rouran.” If we follow the argument of Liu, Türk must have begun to have its written language as early as the mid-sixth century, since Ašina Tümen took up qaqhanate in 552. If Türk did indeed have a written language by the mid-sixth century, as mildly claimed by Liu, Liu's conjecture “that İshbara's letter must have been written in Chinese” might be mistaken, theoretically. In short, one cannot entirely rule out the possibility that İshbara's letter might have been translated, from the written Türkic

16 In medieval times, many countries survived without any written languages. The memoir of barbarians in *Liangshu* (ch. 54, p. 812) documents that both the Hua and Silla states had the similar custom of carving contracts on wood. Both *Beishi* 北史 (history of the North dynasty, compiled in 659) and *Suishu* (compiled in 636) claim that “Türk did not have a written language,” but the statement contradicts with *Zhoushu's* 周書 (history of the Zhou [557–588] dynasty, compiled also in 636) claim that “Türk did have a written language, which was similar to that of the Hu” 胡 (literally means barbarians), a term often referred to Sogdian 康國 in medieval times. Similarly, the Greek and Roman authorities used the name “Scyth” for a number of barbarian tribes although these tribes were not even Iranian, and the Byzantine authority used the name “Turk” to refer to exotic tribes generally at some points in its history (Clauson, 2002, p. 6).

language, into Chinese, since, according to Liu, Türk had already had its language then.

As to the question whether Türk already had its own written language by the sixth century, Victor Xiong located more incongruent evidence from different historical sources of China:

As a people of the steppes, the Turks had unique customs that distinguished them from neighboring ethnic groups. (...) History has conflicting records about their written language at this early stage. While both the *Suishu* and *Beishi* claim they did not have their own written language, the *Zhoushu* refers to a Turkish script, akin to the Sogdian script. Epigraphical evidence suggests that early Turkish records were written in the Sogdian language. Their own Runic script, in which such famous epigraphs as the Kul Tegin Monument and the Bilga Qaghan Monument were inscribed, was invented later under the Eastern Turks. (Xiong, 2006, p. 208)

The exact entry of *Zhoushu*, on which Victor Xiong based his argument, is as follows:

突厥……輒刻木為數，并一金鏃箭，蠟封印之，以為信契……其書字類胡。(《Zhoushu》, ch. 50, p. 910)

The Turks carve numbers on a piece of wood, which, together with an arrow tipped with gold, is sealed with wax and serves as a contract... Their written language is similar to that of Hu. (Xiong's translation, 2006, p. 298)

Xiong claims that in the historical sources of China, "Hu" (barbarians) was often used as a generic term for barbaric ethnic groups in the North and the Northwest. In Sui-Tang times, it increasingly referred to barbarians west of China, especially the Sogdians. In this connection, we have reasons to believe that, as early as the mid-sixth century, a written language, which displayed a strong Sogdian influence, might have been in use as the initial form of the Türkic language among the Türks. This observation seems to be consistent with our foregoing analysis of Liu Shanling's claim about the existence of a Türkic language around the mid-sixth century. It is, therefore, possible that

İshbara's letter might have been translated, from the Türkic language, into Chinese.

In fact, a diplomatic correspondence, with the [loan] “use of some Sogdian [also known as Scythe] words” (Barthold and Pelliot, 1922, in Geng, 2005, p. 7; Chavannes, 1903, in Feng, 2004a, p. 210), was presented to the Eastern Roman Empire in 567. At that time, Emperor Justin of the Empire actually asked someone to translate this Turkish state letter for him. Subsequent to several diplomatic visits of envoys from both countries (Cen, 2004a, p. 35; Feng, 2004b, p. 214), a treaty was signed in 568 between the Roman ambassador, Zémarque, and İstami qaghan. The Eastern Roman Empire even requested that the treaty be reinstated in 576 when Emperor Tibérius succeeded Emperor Justin in the same year. One of the terms in the treaty was to attack Persia jointly (Wu Jingshan, 1994, p. 60), who was actively hindering silk transaction between the Türk and the Eastern Roman Empire by poisoning several Roman-bound Turkish envoys. Apparently, if a Turkish diplomatic letter (probably written in the Türkic language, since a translation service was required by the Roman emperor) was presented in 567, it is not unreasonable to assume that their other diplomatic correspondence, such as the ones presented to China in 584 and 607, might well have been *first* drafted in the Türkic language, before Chinese translation was rendered.

Both the Turkish state letter presented to the Eastern Roman Empire and its act of entering into treaties suggest that Türk was probably already using a written language, which consists of some loan words from the Sogdian language, as early as 567–17 years before İshbara's letter was presented to the Sui emperor. Paul Pelliot, an exceptional Central Asian historian, believes that İshbara's letter was a translation. He went further to claim that the Sogdian words in the Turkish state letter, presented in Constantinople, were “borrowed from an Iranian language” (1934, in Feng, 2004b, p. 114). Pelliot's view is not groundless since it is generally recognized that the Türkic language, along with the other languages then spoken on the steppes, “belongs to the Ural Altaic language family” (Yu, 1995, pp. 112–114), and it is only possible that there would be mutual linguistic

influence as a result of language contact in the region (Pelliot, 1934, in Feng, 2004b, pp. 112–113). Similarly, Lin Enxian (1988, p. 113) also conjectures that Išhbara's letter was first drafted in the Türkic language before being translated into Chinese. In his anthropological study of Türk, Lin (*ibid.*)—recapping the view of Paul Pelliot—explained that it was possible that the language contact situation in the Mongolian steppes actually facilitated mutual linguistic influence among languages of Rouran, Türk, Uighur, and Mongul. Lin also observes that these steppe languages did indeed share similar sounds for common cultural terms on the steppes, such as “qaqhan,” “wife of qaqhan,” “sun,” and “officials.”¹⁷

The existence of a written Türkic language by the mid-sixth century was further testified by a Türkic translation work of a Chinese official, called Liu Shiqing 劉世清, during the North dynasty (Cen, 2004a, p. 36). Being well-versed in the Türkic language, Liu was asked by the emperor of Northern Qi 北齊 (550–576) to translate a Chinese Buddhist sutra, *Nibbāna* (or, *Nirvāṇa*) 涅槃經, into the Türkic language, in 572,¹⁸ so that the translation could be presented, as a tribute, to Taspar 佗鉢 qaqhan.¹⁹ In relation to this translation project, the emperor even asked Li Delin 李德林, the secretariat receptionist 中書侍郎, to write a preface for the translation.²⁰ The act of producing a preface

17 Most historians of Central Asia would be reluctant to make claims about any possible existence of a written Türkic language before the eighth century since the earliest continuous Türkic texts unearthed, so far, were dated around this period. From then on, “the [Türkic] language was fully developed and capable of expressing anything that its speakers wished to express. It had an elaborate grammar with a well-developed accidence and syntax” (Clauson, 2002, p. 106).

18 See Lin (1988, p. 111) for more examples and the similarities in spelling among different languages on the steppes.

19 See *Beiqishu* 北齊書 [history of the Northern Qi], Cli, 1972, 636, ch. 20, p. 267.

20 The translation, regrettably, is not extant, but this tributary event suggests that a written Türkic language did indeed exist by the mid-sixth century. Türk was then such a powerful menace in Central Asia

for the translation, again, suggests that the Türkic translation of the Buddhist sutra was indeed completed. According to Gerard Clauson, translation into the Türkic language at this early period should “presumably be written in the Runic script” (2002, p. 108). If such a translation direction was possible in the mid-sixth century, the probability that the two Türkish letters presented to China, during the late sixth and the early seventh centuries, might be Chinese translations cannot be ruled out entirely.

Conclusions

In the absence of any positive identification of the “real identities” of the two letters, I would merely suggest the possibility that they could be Chinese translations, primarily based on the available linguistic and historical evidence. Contents of two China-bound state letters from Türk, presented in 584 and 607 during the Sui dynasty, were analyzed to examine the possibility that they might have been translated into Chinese from the Türkic language. The preliminary textual analyses carried out, separately, by Yuan Gang (2001), Li Nanqiu (2002), and the author of this article, did come to a general consensus that these letters might be translations. Arthur Wright usefully points out the instrumental presence of Chinese scribes and the returned “hostage princes” in the tribal camps to “produce” written material in Chinese for diplomatic purposes in medieval times. Although linguistic analyses alone are unable to confirm if these letters were translations, the discussion of their linguistic features, on which some historians have made claims about the letters’ “identity” as translation, remains highly relevant to the present research question.

On top of the linguistic argument, historical evidence from *Zhoushu* and *Beiqishu* suggest the existence of a written Türkic language by the mid-sixth century. This written Türkic language, having absorbed some Sogdian words, was said to be similar to the other written languages then practiced on the Mongolian steppes and was found to have been used in diplomatic contexts, when a state letter from Türk was presented

that the Northern regimes, such as Zhou and Qi, had to pay tribute to Türk to buy peace.

to the Eastern Roman Empire in 567, long before the two letters in question were presented to Sui China. It is noteworthy that the Türkish letter presented, and later translated, to the Roman emperor was written in a language with some Sogdian loan words. If a Türkish state letter was written, not translated (by the Türks), in 567, it would only be natural to assume that the Türkish state letters presented several decades later might also have been written (in a Türkic language, probably) first, before respective Chinese translation was solicited in the Türkish tribal camps.

More importantly, for the present inquiry, Liu Shiqing's translation of the Buddhist *Nibbāna* sutra from Chinese into the Türkic language, although no longer extant, was apparently completed in 572, and the presentation of this Buddhist translation to the Türkish qaḡhan, as a gift, does, in fact, lend support to the claim that a written Türkic language was already in use by the mid-sixth century. If there was indeed such a written language in Türk at the time, it is reasonable to assume that their state letters, presented to Sui China, might have been *first* written in the Türkic language, before being translated into Chinese. Notwithstanding the distance of the events in history and the scarcity of positive information at hand, this article has presented adequate justifications to argue in support for the claim that these letters are quite likely Chinese translations from the Türkic language.

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ABSTRACT: Was it Translated: Türkish Diplomatic Correspondence to China in Medieval Times — Ancient diplomatic correspondence to China from East Asian states has been a subject of research interest in Sinology, especially with respect to its relevance to historical politics and ideology in Asia. References to its implications to translation studies, if any, were, however, quite minimal. This article represents an initial attempt to examine China-bound diplomatic correspondence from the perspective of translation history. Diplomatic letters sent in medieval times by Yamato (known as Japan since 700) and the three Korean states (namely, Paekche, Silla, and Koguryö) were

generally confirmed to be written in Chinese, not translated. However, the case for China-bound diplomatic correspondence from Türk (on Mongolia steppes)—previously a rival state to China, and later on a vassal state—is still controversial. In this article, examples are chosen from two letters presented by the Turkish qaghans (tribal chieftains) to China during the Sui dynasty (581–618), to find out if these letters might have been translated from the Türkic language into Chinese. Evidence from standard histories of Northern dynasty China (*Zhoushu* and *Beiqishu*, among others) suggests the existence and use of a written Türkic language by the mid-sixth century. This written language, borrowing some Sogdian (present-day Uzbek) words, was said to be similar to the other written languages on the steppes, and was found to have been used in diplomatic and religious contexts, as early as the mid-sixth century. This article argues that if there was a written language in Türk at the time, it is reasonable to assume that the Turkish state letters presented to China might have been written in the Türkic language first, before being translated into Chinese.

RÉSUMÉ : La correspondance diplomatique türk adressée à la Chine au Moyen-Âge était-elle traduite? — La correspondance diplomatique des États de l'Asie de l'Est adressée à la Chine, au Moyen-Âge, a fait l'objet de recherches en sinologie, surtout en ce qui concerne sa pertinence en histoire de la politique et de l'idéologie en Asie. Cependant, les références quant à ses répercussions sur la traductologie, s'il y en a, sont minces. Cet article est une première tentative d'analyse de la correspondance diplomatique adressée à la Chine du point de vue de l'histoire de la traduction. Au Moyen-Âge, les lettres diplomatiques en provenance de Yamato (Japon depuis 700) et des trois états coréens (Paekche, Silla et Koguryō) étaient pour la plupart écrites en chinois, et non des traductions. Cependant, la correspondance diplomatique adressée à la Chine en provenance de l'Empire Türk (situé au cœur des steppes de la Mongolie), qui était au départ rival, et par la suite vassal de la Chine, prête encore aujourd'hui à controverse. Dans cet article, nous étudierons deux lettres envoyées par les qaghans türk (chefs tribaux) aux souverains chinois de la dynastie Sui (581–618), afin de découvrir si celles-ci sont des traductions chinoises de la langue türk. Des

sources historiques fiables provenant de la dynastie du Nord (dont *Zhoushu* et *Beiqishu*) suggèrent l'existence et l'utilisation d'une langue écrite türk au milieu du VI^e siècle. Cette langue écrite, qui empruntait des mots sogdiens (Ouzbékistan), et que l'on considérait similaire aux autres langues écrites de la région, était utilisée dans des contextes diplomatiques et religieux. Puisqu'il existait une langue écrite türk, cet article soutient qu'il est raisonnable de supposer que les lettres envoyées à la Chine étaient rédigées en türk d'abord, avant d'être traduites en chinois.

Keywords: history of translation, diplomatic correspondence, Türkic language, sixth-century translation, Chinese dynastic history

Mots-clés : histoire de la traduction, correspondance diplomatique, langue türk, traduction au VI^e siècle, histoire des dynasties chinoises

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