Making sense of Yuan-era transcriptions of non-Chinese words

Historiography of the Mongol Yuan Empire
Outline

- The Target Language: Chinese historical phonology
- The Source Languages
- The Devices
The Target Language: Chinese historical phonology

- How do we know how Chinese characters were once pronounced? (Also known as What are our sources for the phonological history of Chinese?)
  - Direct or semi-direct attestation
    - Transcription into alphabetic scripts: Takes you back to Tang
    - Chinese transcriptions of known non-Chinese terms: Take you back to Han
    - Foreign readings of Chinese characters: Takes you back to Tang
  - Reconstructed attestation
    - Rhyming dictionaries: Takes you back to Han
    - Internal reconstruction from existing Chinese dialects: Takes you back to Tang
    - Character forms: Takes you back to Zhou
    - Tibeto-Burman comparison: Takes you back to prehistory
Studying Chinese historical phonology: transcription into alphabetic scripts

- Transcription may be popular (limited to target language phonetic resources) or academic (using special conventions to match source language phonetics)
- Transcriptions may be descriptive (based on one spoken dialect) or synthetic (aiming to synthesize a variety of dialects)
  - As a rule, only academic systems can be synthetic
- Some major systems
  - Pinyin: academic, Putonghua (Beijing-based), 1955-1958
  - Wade-Giles: academic, synthetic (approximates Beijing), developed 1859-1892
  - École française d’Extrême-Orient (EFEO) system: academic, synthetic (approximates Nanjing), 1700s-1902
  - Manchu system: academic, ?, Beijing Mandarin? 1632
  - Pagba Chinese: academic, ?, ?, 1271
  - Dunhuang Tibetan: popular, Shazhou (Dunhuang), 800-900
Studying Chinese historical phonology: Chinese transcriptions of known non-Chinese terms

- Major methodological hurdle: you already have to know something about ancient Chinese pronunciation to match it with attested Chinese transcriptions

- Again as with Chinese transcriptions, academic vs. popular, descriptive vs. synthetic

- By far the most important single body of this data is Chinese transcriptions of Sanskrit dharanis and other Buddhist terms
  - Studied most productively by W. South Coblin
  - Older ones N-S Dynasties
  - More recent ones fixed in Tang era

- Some geographical terminology goes back to Han dynasty:
  - Example Alexandria as *Wu-yi-shan-li* 烏弋山離 >> A-ye-shan-liai
Studying Chinese historical phonology: Foreign readings of Chinese characters

- Three main types
  - Sino-Japanese *kanji* 漢字: mostly Chang’an Tang, some Southern dynasties Wu
  - Sino-Vietnamese *chữ Hán* 字漢: mostly Tang (?)
  - Sino-Korean *hanja* 漢字: mostly Five Dynasties-Northern Song (?)

- In all three cases, pronunciation shaped by phonetics of receiving language at time of reception
  - For example, ancient Japanese had no *ts*, rendered all Chinese *ts* as *s*

- And by subsequent phonetic evolution in receiving language
  - For example, Japanese *p > h, f, or tu > tsu*
  - For example, Korean *ly, ny > y*
Studying Chinese historical phonology: The Reconstruction methods

- Rhyming dictionaries: Takes you back to Han
- Internal reconstruction from existing Chinese dialects: Takes you back to Tang
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“Use a star when you say that, pilgrim”

For example: *jian 監 < *klam
Studying Chinese historical phonology: Rhyming Dictionaries

- This the dominant body of data in Chinese linguistic reconstruction
- Rhyming dictionaries establish *classes*
- The linguist then reconstructs what those classes might have been, phonetically
- Kalgren introduced this to Sinology
- Pulleyblank is the latest summarizer of this data
- Rhyming dictionary data is:
  - Pervasively synthetic
    - Both synchronically (by space)—tries to create a standard that would make sense of all educated Chinese persons’ speech
      - “Three literati from Hangzhou, Nanjing, and Beijing walk into a moon-viewing party . . .”
    - And diachronically (by time)—tries to fit contemporary speech into historic speech patterns
  - As a result, it’s always more complicated than seems realistic
Studying Chinese historical phonology: Internal reconstruction from existing Chinese dialects (oops—Sinitic languages!)

Dartmouth’s dialect map

PRC’s dialect map

Map 4: Dialects of Mandarin and Southern Chinese

Mandarin
- Northern
- Eastern
- Northwestern

Southern
- Wu
- Gan
- Hakka
- Xiang
- Min
- Yue

National Capitol
Municipality

Language group boundary

Boundary representation is not necessarily authoritative.
Studying Chinese historical phonology: Internal reconstruction from Sinitic languages

Two ways of look at this:

- “conservative” regions vs. “progressive” regions
  - Implies conservative regions are speaking a language “just like” some past dynasty’s
  - At some point in the past (usually identified as Tang) Sinitic language was homogenous

- Evolving family, with different isoglosses and common trends

- Hardly any examples of non-prestige dialects being used as target language for transcriptions
Studying Chinese historical phonology: Character forms & Tibeto-Burman

- Neither relevant for our work
- But both are reconstructive and highly controversial
- Best guide (for my money): Axel Schuessler’s *Minimal Old Chinese and Later Han Chinese*
Application: Yuan-era Pronunciation of Chinese Characters

- Two main sources
  - *Menggu ziyun* 蒙古字韻
    - The first academic transcription of Chinese—ever
  - *Zhongyuan yinyun* 中原音韻
    - A rhyming dictionary—but one that appears to be shockingly descriptive
      - Note: it actually has a dialect in the title
- Debate: to what degree is *Menggu ziyun* synthetic?
- In my experience, the target dialect for transcriptions is accurately represented by *Zhongyuan yinyun*
Application: Yuan-era Divergences from modern Putonghua

- /j/ < /dz/ or /g/
- /q/ < /ts/ or /k/
- /x/ < /s/ or /h/
- /-n/ < /-n/ or /-m/
- /e/ < /o/ or /-au/
- /en/ < /in/, /eng/ < /ing/
- /uan/ < /on/, /uang/ < /ong/
- /ong/ < /ung/
- /ie/ < /iai/
- /ue/ < /io/
- /au/ < /au/ or /eu/
- /ou/ < /əu/ 

- NB: These are quite simplified reconstructions

- A number of them still found in later transcription systems
  - E.g. Yuezhou 岳州 > Yojeu
  - E.g. Jiangxi 江西 > Giyangsi

- But also note: later transcriptions have archaic elements not seen in (Daidu) Yuan Mandarin
  - E.g. Ngan-king 安慶
Application: Yuan-era Divergences from modern Putonghua

Note also:

There are a number of irregular developments

i.e. words jump from one class to another

E.g. Shuò 掘; cf. SHWAW 掙; cf. CHAU³a 掙 (p. 138); cho-chol (+T) (§§424, 505); cho-chō (p. 36)

Shuò 碩; cf. alternative Mandarin shí; cf. 碩徳八剌 < Tib. Siddhi-pa-la [Šidiibala]
The Source Languages

- What are the potential languages which can be source language of transcriptions?

- Conventional wisdom:
  - Mongolian was officially used, but really Persian and/or Turkic was the non-Chinese language the immigrants were all speaking

- I’m skeptical: Why?

- Both Persian and Turkic have the phoneme /z/; Mongolian does not
  - Every once in a while you see a transcription where /z/ is being represented
  - But it’s quite rare
  - So, Mongolian appears to be the dominant language (but note symbiosis with eastern Turkic dialects, Uyghur & Öng’üt)
The Source Languages

- Mongolian in the Uyghur script dominant
- Also Mongolian in the Pagba Script
- Uyghur & Öng’üt Turkic
- Persian
- Jurchen

Note: all of these also found in the *Hua-Yi yiyu* 华夷譯語 vocabularies from the following Ming dynasty, and other vocabularies
The Source Languages: Defining Source Language Vocabale sets

- That is, what dictionaries should you use?
- But since transcriptions are mostly names, name dictionaries particularly useful, as are atlases with alphabetical indexes
- Biggest desideratum is a Mongolian name dictionary that is not keyed to just modern Mongolian usage
- Like *Onomasticon Turcicum*
The Source Languages: Peculiarities of Uyghur (and) Mongolian

- Vowel Harmony
- Suffixation
- Phonotactics (syllable structure, vowels, consonants)
- Strong & Weak distinctions and lenition
Vowel Harmony

- **What is it?** Division of vowels into classes, such that any given vocable has vowels only from one class.
- **This extends to both derivational and agglutinative suffixes.**
- **Lexical assignment to the vowel-harmonic classes is extremely stable.**
- **Yuan-era Chinese academic transcribers follow vowel harmony, but not in rounded vowels.**
- **In Mongolian, /i/ is neutral.**
- **Uyghur has /i/ (masculine) and /i/ (feminine).**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Masculine/“Back” /Velar</th>
<th>Feminine/“Front” /Palatal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/a/</td>
<td>/e/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rounded vowels</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/o/</td>
<td>/ö/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/u/</td>
<td>/ü/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Consonantal allophones</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/q/</td>
<td>/k/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ç/ (γ, Γ or ğ, Ğ)</td>
<td>/g/</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Vowel Harmony in Chinese transcriptions

Question: what vowel harmony does 干 represent?

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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/o/</td>
<td>/ö/</td>
<td>那, 諾</td>
<td>那</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/u/</td>
<td>/ü/</td>
<td>奴, 弩</td>
<td>奴</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Consonantal allophones</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/q/</td>
<td>/k/</td>
<td>哈, 合</td>
<td>怯, 克, 可</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ɢ/ (γ, Γ or ǧ, Ğ)</td>
<td>/g/</td>
<td>哈, 合</td>
<td>哥</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Vowel Harmony in Chinese transcriptions: Suffixation

- Vowel Harmony determined by first syllable
- Derivational and agglutinative suffixes all have two forms: masculine and feminine
- Chinese transcriptions *frequently* use just the masculine form for all such suffixes.
- Sometimes even for just second syllables
  - May be connected to features of Mongolian phonetic realization

- E.g. 朱兒徹台
- E.g. 月哥察兒
- E.g. 禿滿 for tümen
Middle Mongolian Phonotactics

- syllable structure
  - CV or CVC
  - Initially C can be an unrepresented (virtually silent) glottal stop
- Vowels
  - /o/, /ö/ in second syllable only allowed following another /o/, /ö/
- Consonants
  - In syllable-final position, no strong/weak distinction, no affricates allowed
    - In other words no t-d, K-G (what's this? q-ġ, k-g), p-b minimal pairs, no final č, no final ĵ
    - Early convention was to transcribe them as strong, now as weak
Strong & Weak distinctions and lenition

- Most languages we work with have a two-way strong-weak distinction
- But three-way, even four-way distinctions found
- **BUT**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strong</th>
<th>Weak</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/k/</td>
<td>/g/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/q/</td>
<td>/ď/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/t/</td>
<td>/d/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/č/</td>
<td>/j/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ts/</td>
<td>/dz/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/p/</td>
<td>/b/</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Most languages we work with have a two-way strong-weak distinction.

But three-way, even four-way distinctions found

BUT how they are realized differs broadly.

Two simple version:

- Strong: unvoiced, weak: voiced
  - Continental European, Middle Eastern languages, Japanese
- Strong: aspirate, weak: unaspirated
  - Mandarin, modern Tibetan

Mixed versions

- Modern English, Middle Mongolian

Mandarin speakers tend to hear all intervocalic Mongolian plosives as weak

- Weakening is called “lenition”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspirate</th>
<th>Unaspirate</th>
<th>Voiced</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[tʰ] or [tʰ]</td>
<td>[t]</td>
<td>[d]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian t</td>
<td>Italian t</td>
<td>Italian d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persian t</td>
<td>Persian t</td>
<td>Persian d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pinyin t</td>
<td>Pinyin d</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English t</td>
<td></td>
<td>English d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(initial)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(initial)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mongolian t</td>
<td>Mongolian d</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(initial)</td>
<td>(initial)</td>
<td>Mongolian d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(intervocalic)</td>
<td>Mongolian t</td>
<td>Mongolian d</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Devices

- The standard character set
- Diacriticals
- How were systems transmitted?
- The concision tendency
- The logographic tendency
The standard character set

- Each dynasty uses a somewhat standardized character set for transcribing sounds
  - Partly dependent on sound evolution
  - Partly dependent on conventions
- Each dynasty, based on the dominant source language will select certain phonetic features in target language to stress and ignore others

- For example, let’s transcribe küsen
  - Early/mid-Yuan character set: 曲先
  - Qing character set: 庫森
- For example, let’s transcribe Mongolian sula “vacant, unemployed”
  - Yuan character set: 速剌
  - Qing character set: 蘇拉
- Contrast
  - Jurchen Jin: 薩合斡 Sahalian
  - Yuan: 曲憐居 or 起轍谷 Kürelgü
Diacriticals

- For Ming era transcriptions in *Hua-Yi yiyu* 華夷譯語 and *Menggu mishi* 蒙古秘史, systems with diacriticals preserved
  - Final non-nasal consonants (b, t, k)
  - Distinguish r and l
  - Distinguish q~ğ from h
  - Linked to academic transcriptions of full texts
How were the practices transmitted?

- Were there standard reference works?
- Survive from the Ming, what about in the Yuan?
- Or was it based on an apprenticeship situation?
The Concision Tendency

- The aim is to reduce the number of syllables
- Ways to do this
  - Omit final non-nasal consonants (esp. k, t, b, but sometimes r or s)
  - Represent final liquids (r or l) by -n
  - Use final nasal, but include reduced-size diacritical character to represent the exact consonant
The logographic tendency

- Common roots understood by transcribing scribes
- When making derivations, they would try to preserve the root

- E.g. tümen 禿滿
  - Tümeder 禿滿迭兒
  - Why is man 滿 transcribing /-me-/?