

The Mongol Empire in China and the Mongolian Influence on Chinese Language

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Contact with Non-Han Conquerors in Chinese History

Throughout Chinese history, a number of non-Han ethnic groups with languages belonging to various language families have resided in or occupied the northern Chinese territories. Two groups occupied all of China for significant periods of time. The following is a brief account of the major non-Han groups (Fairbank and Reischuer, 1978:153):

- Xiongnu (the Huns?): a Turkish-speaking group, founded the first steppe empire in the third century B.C. on the grasslands of northern China and were conquered by the Han in the first century B.C. and first century A.D.
- Rouzhi: probably an Indo-European-speaking group, sought by Han China as allies against Xiongnu in the second century B.C.
- Xianbei: a Mongolian-speaking group, resided in eastern Mongolia in the third century A.D. and invaded China in the fourth century.
- Tobgach (Tuoba): largely Mongolian language speakers, founded the Northern Wei dynasty (386-534 A.D.) in North China.
- Turks (Tujue): a Turkish-speaking group, established an empire in China c. 581 A.D.
- Khitan (Qidan): a Mongolian-speaking group, founded the Liao dynasty in North China and adjacent area from 947 to 1125 A.D.
- Jurchen (ancestors of Manchus): a Tungusic language group, founded the Jin dynasty in North China from 1122 to 1234 A.D.
- Tanguts: a Tibetan-speaking group, founded the Xixia Kingdom in Northwest China from 1038 to 1227 A.D.
- Mongols: a Mongolian-speaking group, founded the Yuan dynasty over all of China from 1271 to 1368 A.D.
- Manchus: a Manchurian-speaking group, founded the Qing dynasty and occupied all of China from 1644 to 1911 A.D.

Of the non-Han ethnic groups described above, the Khitan, Jurchen and Tanguts occupied areas in the north or northwest of China; the Mongols ruled over all of China for ninety-seven years.

The Mongol Empire in China



The Mongol takeover of China was completed under Chinggis Khan's ablest grandson, Khubilai (1215-1294), who became Great Khan in 1260 and the emperor of China in 1271. Khubilai named his dynasty "Yuan" ('the First Beginning' or 'Origin').

The Mongols were markedly different from the Chinese, not only in language but also in social status, customs, dress, food, and culture. In ruling China, the Mongols instituted a four class system that divided the inhabitants of China into four separate groups: (1) Mongols, (2) "Semu ren"—Western and Central Asians, (3) "Han ren"—Northern Chinese, Jin and other groups of people from North China (conquered in 1234), and (4) "Nan ren"—Southern Chinese (ruled by the Southern Song before coming under Mongol control in 1279). The class distinctions were not rigidly enforced but they did become a cause of much contention and had implications when it came to privileges, appointments and taxation.

As the ruling class attempted to maintain separation between ethnic Mongols and Chinese by applying separate systems of law and other policies to each group, the actual conditions of Chinese life under the Mongols' control present a mixed picture. Taking language as an example, on the one hand, the Mongols instituted the Mongolian language as the official language; on the other hand, a very limited number of Chinese (such as those serving in the court) found it necessary to learn the Mongolian language. As the ruling house did not use the Southern Chinese in the government, many thousands of Chinese scholar-gentlemen were unemployed by the state and thus free to pursue private ends. A good number of these intellectuals and elites became leaders in their communities and preservers of the Confucian Way (Fairbank and Goldman, 1998:124). Naturally, they continued to use Chinese in both their oral and written communication. In this way, we may say that the Mongol regime stimulated private Chinese scholarship to a certain degree and created a situation which allowed for the continued use of the Chinese language relatively free from Mongolian influence.

In order to foster communication with the Chinese, the Mongols used a mixed Chinese and Mongolian language referred to as *Yuan baihua*, or “Mongolian Chinese.” Some linguists consider this language a pidgin or creole. Unlike other mixed languages that contain a **fixed** level of linguistic features from one or the other language, *Yuan baihua* appears to have varying degrees of Mongolian influence depending on the status of the speakers. That is, there are more Mongolian characteristics appearing in the *Yuan baihua* of the nobles than in the speech of the non-noble classes. This *Yuan baihua* became extinct not long after the Mongols lost their power to the Chinese, and no trace of it can be found in the documents and texts of the subsequent dynasties, the Ming and Qing.

Yuan baihua

Yuan baihua can be found in almost all of the Yuan dynasty texts including the Yuan zaju (Yuan drama), Xiaojing zhijie (The Commentary to the Book of Filial Piety), Yuan dianzhang (The Law Book of Yuan), Yuan inscriptions on steles (“Yuan baihua bei”), as well as Menggu mishi (The Secret History of the Mongols) and Laoqida (a Chinese language textbook used in the Yuan dynasty). The extant copies we have of the last two documents are from the Ming dynasty, but we believe that they were first published during the Yuan dynasty.

The following three pictures will show: (1) where the inscriptions on steles are generally located. (in a Chinese Taoist place or Buddhist temple), (2) a sample of a stele; (3) the side with the Chinese inscriptions on the stele (Mongolian inscriptions are on the back of the stele).







The following are some examples of the typical syntactic structures of *Yuan baihua*:

- A. Yuan inscriptions on steles (“Yuan baihua bei”) –Each stele has inscriptions in Mongolian on one side and Chinese on the other side. The characters in the examples below marked with **red** = **predicates** and **blue** = **objects**.

1. 这少林长老根底拿着行的**圣旨****给了**。

Zhe Shaolin zhanglao-gendi nazhe xing de **shengzhi** **gei-le**.

DEM Shaolin elder-CASE MARKER hold carry-out DE **imperial-edicts** **give-LE**
(PERFECTIVE ASPECT MARKER)

(The emperor) gave the imperial edict to the Shaolin elder for him to take it and carry out.

2. 赍把行的**圣旨****与了也**。

Lei ba xing de **shengzhi** **yu-le-ye**.

Hold hold carry-out DE **imperial-edicts** **give-LE** (PERFECTIVE ASPECT)
- PARTICLE (SENTENCE FINAL)

(The emperor) gave the imperial edict [to the monk] for him to carry out.

3. 五嶽、五鎮、四海、四渎咱每的神祈有。

Wuyue, Wuzhen, Sihai, Sidu, zanmei-de shen qi-you.

Five mountains, Five Areas, Four Seas, Four Lakes our god(s) pray-PARTICLE
(ASSERTIVE)

[You, the Taoist practitioners go to] worship the gods of ours [who are in charge of] the Five Mountains, Five Areas, Four Seas and the Four Lakes.

4. 速古儿赤马扎儿台、大夫罗锅、汪家奴……等有来。

Sugu'erchimazha'ertai, daifuluoguo, Wangjianu...deng you-lai.

Sugu'erchimazha'ertai, daifuluoguo, Wangjianu...and so on present- PARTICLE (“PAST TENSE”)

[Those who] were present are Sugu'erchimazha'ertai, daifuluoguo, Wangjia nu...and so on.

The word order in the above five examples is SOV and yet Chinese is an SVO language. There are other Mongolian characteristics in the *Yuan baihua* such as case markers, plural markers, and so on.

- B. Yuan dianzhang (The Law Book of Yuan)—This book contains imperial edicts and other legal documents of the Yuan dynasty, including legal cases.

(The places in red = Mongolian linguistic features)

1. The deposition of a commoner:

有本社亂山裏老郝娘娘，並伊次男郝又，引領伊重孫女郝醜哥，前來元處告說：“有後母韓端哥，不知主何情意，用鐵鞋錐于俺孫女郝醜哥舌頭上，烙訖三下；脊背上，烙訖七十二下。小廝郝罵兒也烙了七錐子。”（百姓）

2. The deposition of an official:

這張千戶與本縣裏姓崔的達魯花赤，又一個姓陳的令史每的頭兒，一處做一心，這吳縣令根底謊告著呵，那裏的官人每，這每根底監著問底其間裏，這張千戶姓趙的禁子根底與了三定鈔肚皮，那個根底說：“晚夕吳縣尹睡著的時分，你教我知者，我殺那個。殺了呵，‘他自抹死也。’麼道你官人每根底說者。”兩個這般商量了呵，晚夕那吳縣令睡著呵，那禁子“睡著也。”麼道來說呵，這張千戶起去了，著刀子把那吳縣令抹死了來。（官吏）

3. The imperial edict of an emperor:

“那達魯花赤是甚麼人有？”麼道聖旨問呵，回奏：“姓崔的漢兒人有。”麼道奏呵，
“事從這的每起有。敲了者。”麼道，聖旨了也。（聖旨）

All of the above three quotes are from Yuan dianzhang (The Law Book of Yuan). From the number of places marked in red, it is obvious that the higher the social status of the speaker, the more Mongolian characteristics appear in the speech.

The examples in Group A are to demonstrate the Mongolian language characteristics in *Yuan baihua*, while the examples in Group B show the varying degrees of Mongolian features found in the speech of people of different social status.

Conclusion

The impact of language contact is closely tied to social factors. The situations of different societies in different historical time periods as well as the attitudes of one ethnic group toward the other can affect the degree of influence one language has on another. Even though the Mongols controlled China for almost one century, their attitudes and policies toward Chinese could be one of the main reasons for the extinction of *Yuan baihua*.