Translation officials of the Tang central government in medieval China

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The article documents and differentiates two kinds of translation officials in the central government of the Tang dynasty (618–906 AD) in medieval China: translators in the Court of Diplomatic Reception (*Yiyu* 譯語) and translators in the Secretariat (*Fanshu Yiyu* 蕃書譯語). The distinction between them is essential because they are often mentioned in the scholarly literature indiscriminately. Given the scarcity of historical records and the absence of focused discussions about translators in Tang times, their differences were usually either toned down as minimal or misinterpreted by modern scholarship over the past decade. Although some researchers have recently made reference to the two translator titles and agreed that their translation and interpreting duties were somewhat different, the nature of these differences has not been clearly established. Analysis of standard historical records suggests that, in fact, these two types of translators had distinct job duties. Translators in the Court of Diplomatic Reception interpreted primarily for foreign envoys, while the Secretariat's translators chiefly translated state letters from foreign envoys. This article presents evidence to substantiate this observation and explain why such an apparently straightforward categorization has not been put forward thus far.

Keywords: history of interpreting, translation officials, medieval China, diplomatic interpreting, oral translation

Introduction

Researchers in translation studies show an increasing awareness of the relevance and yet, ironically, the under-representation of interpreting research in the discipline. Maria Tymoczko (1990), for instance, laments that the wider neglect of oral tradition in literary translation decidedly limits the scope and horizon of translation studies. André Lefevere (1998) insightfully reiterates that both the Western and the Chinese translation traditions are rooted in the mediation of spoken

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languages, but have ended up heading for opposed tracks; the Chinese tradition chose to stay close to orality — as exemplified by Lin Shu's reliance on the oral translation of interpreters in his translation of western literature — and, to a certain extent, compromised faithfulness, a crucial yardstick in the western translation tradition for a very long time.

The lack of "communication" between interpretation and translation research is reflected in the historical study of interpretation and translation as well. In fact, this should not be the case, since the history of interpreting informs and complements the historical study of translation in many ways. For example, Lung (2008) analyzes evidence of interpreting activities in first-century China and locates the subsequent Chinese translation of some tribal poems (originally sung in a Qiang 羌 dialect without a standard written form) dedicated to Emperor Ming (r. 58–75 AD) of Latter Han China (25–220 AD). This translation registers as the second oldest piece of literary translation in China and is of interest to historians of translation in two respects: possible manipulation of the translation astutely engineered by the interpreter for a political cause; and textual traces from the translation that suggest a possible manipulation of meaning and style.

What often went unnoticed was that the study of the history of interpreting in antiquity inadvertently echoes an intriguing link with translation. At certain points in ancient times, the two activities were intertwined. For example, in medieval Central Asia, a people without its own written language would solicit assistance from its literate neighbor state to compile a state letter to China, using, of course, the language of the neighbor state. Similar idiosyncratic practices, possibly found in other language cultures, have been identified in ancient interpreting activities in China. Their relevance to both the theoretical and the historical study of translation is too important to overlook.

Traces of the earliest interpreting activities can no doubt best be culled from archival records. It is only natural that the primary method for researching the history of interpreting is to study the raw data in histories (Hung 2005). Trained as a historian and egyptologist, Alfred Hermann (1956/2002) located traces of interpreting events in ancient civilizations, with special reference to central administration, military expeditions, and diplomacy. Particularly noteworthy are Hermann's generalizations about the ancient Egyptians' view of foreign races as "wretched barbarians" and "inferior people" (1956/2002: 15), and about the barbarians' speeches sometimes being distorted, in relation to "the host culture's ego" (1956/2002: 16). In particular, the way in which alien speech was "rephrased" to blow the horn of the host culture also finds expression, quite frequently, in the records of interpreting events in the history of China (Lung & Li 2005). Whereas western documentation of the ancient history of interpreting is often based on interpreters' work in diplomatic activities (Bowen et al. 1995; Roland 1999) as

archived in personal letters and autobiographies (Pöchhacker 2004), Chinese evidence about interpreters in antiquity comes from more systematically collected records in standard historical sources. This article represents an attempt to capitalize on the extensive collection of Chinese history and to try grounding the core data — some related directly to inter-lingual discourses, some not — in these historical sources, supplemented by textual analyses. Although the principal concern here is to differentiate two translation titles — translators in the Court of Diplomatic Reception (*Yiyu* 譯語) and translators in the Secretariat (*Fanshu Yiyu* 蕃書譯語) — in Tang China,[1] many subsequent observations, to be discussed below, relate quite significantly to the historical study of translation in general.

This article comprises three main parts: first, an introduction to foreign relations in Tang China and to the core framework of the Tang central government offices in which translators were incorporated; second, a discussion of the duties of these two types of translation officials in the central government; and finally, presentation of evidence of their fundamental differences, which modern scholarship often neglects.

Foreign relations and translation officials in Tang China

The early seventh century witnessed the collapse of the Sui (581–618 AD) dynasty and the succession of the Tang dynasty in China. Militarily, the rise of Tang resulted in the subjugation of the Eastern Turks (present-day Manchuria and Korea) and the Western Turks (Chinese Turkestan) in China's attempt to pacify the northwestern frontier. Chinese garrisons subsequently established in these frontier regions made possible the exchange of population and goods with neighboring states.

Ever since the establishment of the Tang Empire, China increasingly saw itself as the epitome of civilization. This Sinocentric sense of superiority was sustained by China's remarkable military conquests in Central Asia and East Asia and its unprecedented territorial expansion,[2] which pushed beyond the traditional confines of China proper. Contrary to China's time-honored dynastic perception of foreigners as uncivilized barbarians, Emperor Taizong (r. 627–649 AD) actively promoted his view of the world being a family and commanded his government to protect and, possibly, acculturate tributary or satellite states in a Confucian fatherly or brotherly manner.[3] This idealistic and yet Sinocentric worldview of a divine universal ruler continued throughout the history of imperial China, and may even be considered justifiable when China was strong politically, economically, and militarily, as in the seventh century when extensive conquests took place. During its three-century rule, Tang China was active in improving relations with neighboring states or tribes, sometimes by force, but mostly by generous gifts,

without compromising its national dignity. Diplomatic ties were then established with around eighty states in Africa, Inner Asia, and East Asia. Due to the nationwide dissemination of such "liberal" diplomatic ideals towards foreign nationals, there were unprecedented integration and contacts with foreigners at all levels. In line with Emperor Taizong's policy of peaceful co-existence with foreigners, an elaborate central administrative framework was put in place, catering to the crucial need, among other things, to deal with the phenomenal presence of foreigners in China. With millions of foreign visitors in the country, the workload of the central administration was understandably enormous.

Foreigners in Tang China

The unprecedented prosperity and glory during Tang times attracted millions of non-Chinese to either trade or actually settle down in China. Yangzhou and Canton, for instance, were then booming commercial centers with sizeable non-Chinese populations. The capital city of Chang'an 長安 (near the present-day city of Xi'an 西安) was reported to have almost two million taxable residents who primarily came from the Northern and Western tribes, such as Turks, Uighurs, Kirghizes, Khitans, Tibetans, Tocharians, and Sogdians. Sources suggest that there were around 200,000 foreigners in Canton alone, mainly from Japan, Korea, Java, and Malaysia (Schafer 1963; Adshead 2004). Three predominant types of visitors to China in Tang times were the envoys, the clergy, and the merchants, reflecting the foreigners' interests in diplomatic ties, religion, and commerce, respectively.

One can only imagine that the frequent influx of foreigners,[4] especially those coming to fulfill diplomatic missions, into China naturally posed huge language and communication problems for the Chinese government. Of course, it was possible that envoys paying tribute to China may have brought along translators, but the Chinese government was already equipped with translation officials to serve communication needs, both spoken and written, with foreign envoys. In fact, the presence of sizeable numbers of foreigners in Tang times, many of them already settled for generations and probably Sinicized to various extents, no doubt provided a stable pool of translators for the government, if not for the visiting envoys. Therefore, a typical feature of Tang government translators was that they were mostly non-Chinese in ethnicity,[5] but displayed a good command of spoken Chinese. In support of the prominent presence of such multilingual speakers in Central Asia at the time, Victor Mair (1986) points to the presence of a polyglot community that "existed all along the Silk Road (starting even in Chang'an)". Mair suspects that many of its members "would have been conversant with one or more of such languages as Khotanese, Sogdian, Uighur, Tibetan, Chinese, and Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrits or Prakrits" (1986: 41). Besides, Ma Guorong (1999) suggests

that government translators in Tang China were mostly foreigners of Inner Asian ethnic origin who had long been staying in China and were quite familiar with the Chinese culture. Their linguistic and cultural knowledge naturally enhanced their competitive edge for translation positions, official or civilian.

Central government offices dealing with foreigners

The central government model adopted by Tang China was tried and developed for almost a century, having been passed on from the Northern and Southern dynasties (420–589 AD). It was well defined in its power hierarchy and functions, which were based on the core values of cooperation and coordination across departments. Typically, a tripartite ministerial framework operated under the emperor, namely, the Secretariat (*zhongshu sheng* 中書省, for making and drafting ordinances), the Department of Chancellery (*menxia sheng* 門下省, for assessing and discussing ordinances), and the Department of State Affairs (*shangshu sheng* 尚書省, for executing ordinances).[6] Together with the emperor, they functioned as the core group of decision makers and coordinated the administration of all aspects of state affairs.

The most prominent government office for handling foreigners in China was the Court of Diplomatic Reception (*honglu si* 鴻臚寺,[7] hereafter, "the Court"), a part of the Bureau of Receptions (*zhuke si* 主客司, literally, the reception of foreign dignitaries) under the Ministry of Rites (*libu* 禮部) in the Department of State Affairs. This Court was the first point of contact with foreign envoys on their arrival at the capital. Its duties were to welcome and receive tributary envoys and to take care of, and provide for, their stay in China.

The Court, headed by the chamberlain (*qing* 卿), coordinated all foreign activities with relevant branches in the central government, with the help of around two hundred assistants of various ranks in the Court (Yuan & Pan 1997: 506). The position of the chamberlain, as a third-rank official, was usually filled by someone, often of non-Chinese ethnicity with a naturalized Chinese background, with experience in handling foreigners and frontier military activities.[8] His major duties were to coordinate activities of the visiting envoys as well as making diplomatic visits in order to maintain ties and collect strategic information for China.

The Court normally recruited twenty translators (Yuan & Pan 1997: 42), who ranked no higher than the seventh tier in the traditional nine-tier hierarchy (with the first being the superior one). The fact that translators accounted for almost ten percent of the Court staff speaks of their importance to its operation.[9] In spite of their minor rank, these translators' actual contributions to the work of the Court must have been rather indispensable.

Two kinds of translation officials

Duties of translators in the Court of Diplomatic Reception

The twenty translators, among others, in the Court of Diplomatic Reception primarily interpreted for the central government officials and foreign guests. According to Li Hu (1998: 323), a prominent historian specializing in medieval China, officials in the Court were "to receive foreign envoys and their state letters (*biao* 表) on behalf of the throne" (my translation).[10] Li (1998: 336) assumes that the Court translators may have translated these state letters into Chinese. Nevertheless, there was no concrete evidence to suggest that the Court, assisted by its translators, did anything more than receiving and submitting these state letters to the Secretariat. Li Hu's conjecture, therefore, cannot be validated.

Li Fang (1994) rightly points out that the Court translators were assigned to mediate language barriers in its dealings with foreign envoys subsequent to increased diplomatic contact with exotic states and tribes in Central Asia. Since the primary duty of the Court was to receive tribute-paying envoys from all directions, the Court translators were actively involved in receiving these foreign guests. Li Hu (1998) believes that the Court translators worked primarily as interpreters and mediated for foreign envoys in their dealings around the capital. In this sense, their duties were, indeed, comparable to those of official escorts conversant in languages other than Chinese.

Some other historical evidence, in fact, furthers our understanding of the interpreting function of the Court translators, who worked both inside and outside the Court, their permanent office. Specific interpreting duties, to be performed outside the Court, included interpreting for foreign envoys in and around the capital.

> 鴻臚當司官吏以下，各施問籍出入，其譯語掌客出入客館者，於長官下狀牒館門，然後與監門相兼出入。 (*Tang Huiyao*, vol. 66, ch. 606: 849)
>
> Officials below the supervisory ranks in the Court of Diplomatic Reception were given entry permits [to accede to the Court guest house in which visiting envoys stayed]. The Court translators and concierges were required to obtain certifying documents issued by their superiors and have them presented to the reception at the guest house before they could enter and leave the premises, chaperoned by the entrance guards. (My translation)

This quotation suggests that translators may have made frequent visits to the Court guest house, where foreign envoys resided during their visits in China (Han 2003). It is possible that the translators' trips to and from the guest house were made to chaperone the envoys on their visits outside the Court. This measure must have been in place partly because of the language barriers the envoys were likely to face

in the city. Actually, the Court translators, in principle, chaperoned the envoys wherever they went in the capital and took care of their well-being by resolving their language problems.

This does not, however, mean that foreign envoys could go anywhere they liked in the capital. Their access to certain premises of importance, in fact, required special permission. For instance, when Japanese envoys were authorized to visit the Confucian temple in 717 AD, official guards were dispatched to chaperone the visit (*Cefu Yuangui*, vol. 974: 11445). Although it was not stated in this text, the Court translators must also have come along to mediate between the guards and the envoys. When it came to formal occasions, such as imperial audiences, the Court translators probably acted not only as interpreters, but also as those charged with ushering the guests in and coaching them in proper etiquette (to be further discussed below).

Wuyun Gaowa (2001) believes that interpreting duties of the Court translators were mostly about general subject matter, but further evidence shows that the scope of their interpreting duties went beyond this. One of the less documented functions of the Court translators, even in modern scholarship, was mediation in the interviews with foreign envoys in the Court. As a required practice during Tang times, whenever foreign envoys arrived at the capital, it was customary that they be interviewed in the Court. In such situations, the Court translators must have been pivotal in conducting and coordinating the interviews. Besides, the Court was obliged to incorporate accounts of foreign states, from interviews with the envoys, into memoranda, and to have them submitted each month to the Bureau of Historiography, under the Secretariat, with copies retained and filed in the Court. It is noteworthy that although these document submissions did not seem to have involved translation, information collected from these interviews was probably solicited with the active assistance of the Court translators. The need for linguistic mediators was particularly acute, considering the participation of various government officials in the interviews. In fact, following the reorganization of the Bureau of Historiography in Tang China (see Xie Baocheng 1995: 70), various government agencies and ministries were required to submit specific information about exotic states regularly for historical documentation (see Twitchett 1992: 27ff). In this regard, the Court was no doubt the most direct channel for soliciting such information. *Tang Huiyao* [Collections of Important Documents of the Tang] notes that

> 諸司應送史館事例：蕃國朝貢（每正遇，臚勘問土地風俗衣服貢獻，使道里遠近，並其主名字報），有即勘報使館，修入國史。如史官訪，知事有堪入史者，雖不與前件色同，亦任直牒索承牒之處，即依狀勘，並限一月內報。(*Tang Huiyao*, vol. 63, ch. 606: 802f)

> Departments are required to report the following to the Bureau of Historiography: Appearance at Court of tribute-bearing missions from foreign countries. Whenever such a foreign mission arrives, the Court of diplomatic reception should examine them on the natural conditions and customs of their country, on their dress, and the products brought as tribute, and on the distance and route by which they have come. These facts are to be reported together with the names of their leaders [...] All the above matters should be investigated and reported to the Bureau of Historiography as they occur by the responsible authority specified in the appropriate section. (Translation in Twitchett 1992: 27, 29.)

This quotation provides clear evidence that the Court was sanctioned to interview visiting envoys and to submit relevant reports on the countries concerned to the Bureau of Historiography. It seems that the interview was typically structured around a series of standard questions about the landscape, customs, dress codes, and current rulers of the foreign countries concerned. Such information about a country's geographical landscape and customs certainly falls under the heading of technical discourse, at least more so than day-to-day matters. Wuyun Gaowa's (2001) assumption that the Court translators only handled general and simple conversational exchanges in everyday-life contexts for visiting envoys was therefore an understatement, if not a misrepresentation of their work. Evidently, the Court translators did cope with technical contents of various kinds in such interviews.

However, since the above quotation made no reference to translators at all, we cannot rule out the possibility of multilingual officials in the Court who may have coordinated the interviews quite independently without the presence of translators. Nonetheless, given the fact that a Court of two hundred staff requires twenty translators, which is an extremely high ratio, the logical conclusions would be that the number of multilingual officials in the Court may have been quite limited, and that these interviews were most likely conducted in the presence of translators. In the discussion that follows, we will see that officials from other departments also attended these interviews. Either way, translators were deemed indispensable in these contexts in order for everyone present to be informed about and be understood in the exchanges with foreign envoys.

Since the interview reports were presumably compiled on the basis of notes (jotted down by either translators or other officials in the Court) taken during the translators' mediation in the interviews, these reports may have been the only first-hand information about exotic countries available in the capital. The duty to interview or assist in interviewing foreign envoys was therefore unique to the Court translators, and undoubtedly called for interpreting skills and competence in technical as well as general subject matters.

In Tang practice, officials from other departments would be deliberately dispatched to these interviews to collect first-hand information of importance to

their specific operations. The opportunity to interview envoys from exotic countries enabled the Chinese government to collect much-coveted geographical and strategic information. In addition to written accounts about these countries, maps and drawings of foreign peoples were also essential. The operations division in the Department of Arms, for example, was chiefly responsible for making maps of foreign countries, attending in particular to their surrounding landscapes.[11] Edward Schafer remarks that

> This important office [*honglu* 鴻臚], quite aside from its basic responsibilities, served also as a clearinghouse of information about foreign countries, which was of great value to the nation, especially to the strategists of the army. A special agent of the department of arms was sent to interview the envoy immediately upon his arrival. He was interrogated about the geography and customs of his native country, and a map was constructed from the information supplied. (Schafer 1963: 26f)

The interview mentioned above may well refer to the one conducted in the Court, in which case it can safely be assumed that the interview panel also included officials from outside the Court. We do not know, however, if the special agent from the department of arms was an active interviewer or a passive participant in the interview. But his presence certainly called for interpreting services in the Court's interviews with foreign envoys.

The interpreting function of the Court translators was further verified in the historical account of the Kirghiz in *Xin Tangshu*, the new history of the Tang dynasty. When Kirghiz envoys arrived at the Tang court in 843 AD, Emperor Wuzong asked the Court translator to interview them about their geography and customs. Afterwards, a painting of these envoys was drawn, and an account of the Kirghiz nation was compiled (not extant). The crucial document that points to the presence and work of a translator in this particular interview with the Kirghiz envoys was documented.

> 會昌中，阿熱以使者見殺，無以通于朝，復遣注吾合素上書言狀。行三歲至京師，武宗大悅，班渤海使者上，以其處窮遠，能脩職貢，詔宰相即鴻臚寺見使者，使譯官考山川國風。有詔以鴻臚所得繢著之。(*Xin Tangshu*, vol. 217: 6150)

> During the middle of the Huichang reign period, a Kirghiz envoy was killed [by a Uighur fugitive] on his way to paying tribute to China. Later, Zhu-wu Alp Sol was sent with a letter [from the Kirghiz ruler] to explain the mishap. [Zhu-wu Alp Sol] spent three years on the road before [he] arrived at the Tang capital. At the audience with Emperor Wuzong, he was placed by imperial protocol in front of the envoy from Parhae.[12] The emperor was delighted that the Kirghiz envoys had come a long way from their remote country to pay tribute to him. He then asked the

> chief minister [Li Deyu] to meet the Kirghiz envoys in the Court and instructed the translation official to inquire about the [Kirghiz] landscapes and customs. It is also an imperial order that an illustrated publication [about the tribute mission of the Kirghiz envoys] should be produced based on the information collected by the Court. (My translation)

The above evidence confirms that a translator was assigned to inquire about the landscapes and customs of the Kirghiz people during the interview in the Court. It also ascertains that the presence of the translator and his questioning of foreign envoys in the Court interview seemed to be a regular practice. It is not entirely certain if the translator would be making written records while he questioned the envoys and mediated exchanges for Chinese officials attending the interview. It is possible that someone else from the Court took down the mediated account during the interview. What interests us here is that the Court translators, with their knowledge in foreign languages, were actually entrusted by the emperor with the task of collecting exotic information by *direct enquiry*, not just as mediators of interpreting events (Lung, forthcoming).

To sum up, the Court translators were primarily interpreters for visiting envoys. They worked both inside and outside the Court in mediating exchanges for the envoys to the capital. Most importantly, they mediated and coordinated interviews with foreign envoys in the Court, and facilitated the compilation of written accounts about foreign countries. The nature of their interpreting duties, therefore, ranged from simple everyday-life exchanges to technical topics involving geography, culture, and politics.

Duties of translators in the Secretariat

Coordination and cooperation were key features of the hierarchy of the Tang central government. While the Court of Diplomatic Reception facilitated the work of other departments, these departments in turn supported the Court's work in foreign affairs. In principle, the Court was a designated (*zhuanzhi* 專職) office to handle foreign envoys, while the Secretariat was a related (*guanshe* 關涉) office in matters involving foreign relations (Li 1998). What then did the translators in the Secretariat do to lend support to the Court's work in handling foreign envoys?

There were a total of ten translators, or *fanshu yiyu* 蕃書譯語 (literally, foreign letters / writings translators), in the Secretariat. Apparently, their duties were quite distinct from those of the Court translators. As the title suggests, these translators were responsible for translating state letters or diplomatic writings from visiting envoys which were to be verbally presented to the emperor during imperial audiences.

> 中書掌受四方朝貢及通表疏，故有譯語人。 (*Zizhi Tongjian*, vol. 199: 1337)
>
> The Secretariat was responsible for the reception of tributary gifts and the translation of state letters or petitions from the four directions. It was therefore necessary to have translators in the establishment. (My translation)

These state letters were usually submitted by the Court on the envoys' arrival at the capital. The time lapse between their arrival and the scheduled imperial audiences for the envoys would then allow the Secretariat's translators to complete the Chinese translations of these letters. Some of them may have been written in Chinese, but some were not. Naturally, for state letters not written in, nor translated into, Chinese, the Secretariat's translators were required to provide relevant Chinese translations before oral reports of these state letters to the emperor could be prepared. According to imperial Chinese etiquette, imperial audiences with foreign envoys were arranged and scheduled in advance, as was the envoys' formal presentation of their state letters. The day before the imperial audience with foreign envoys, the envoys were assigned their positions. Specific protocol for the presentation of state letters was stipulated as well.

> 前一日， 有司於殿中設位。其日，儀仗齊備，有司引客立於閣外西廂。皇帝出即御座，客入內，立定。中書侍郎率持案者至客前，受書，置於案，回奏於皇帝。 (Ren 1995: 68f)
>
> The day before [the presentation of state letters], the responsible official assigns a position [for the envoy concerned] in the imperial court. On the day [of presentation], officials attire properly and line up neatly. The envoy will be ushered in by the responsible official to stand at the west chamber outside the court. As soon as the emperor takes his seat, the envoy will be [ushered] inside the court and be required to stand still. The vice-director of the Secretariat, followed by an attendant official holding a tray, approaches the envoy, receives the state letter, and places it on the tray. [The letter is] then read to the throne. (My translation)

The responsible official mentioned above was most likely a translator or an etiquette official from the Court of diplomatic reception. He was there to usher the envoy to the proper position to stand, and to advise him of the sequence of events in the imperial audience. The formulaic transfer of the letter from the envoy to the vice-director of the Secretariat in the imperial court was apparently a routine procedure to highlight the formal reception of state letters. We do not know if the state letter formally transferred in the imperial audience would be the original or a Chinese translation. It is quite likely that the emperor would be listening to a verbal report of the state letter, read in Chinese by the vice-director of the Secretariat. If this was the case, it is probable that the translation had been completed well before the imperial audiences.

Unlike the Court translators, there was far less information about the Secretariat's translators. The discrepancies in historical coverage may be a reflection of their distinct functions. The Court translators often participated in interpreting jobs that involved officials from other divisions, and were thus more often recorded in various connections. As such, we noticed references to the Court translators scattered in biographies on foreign countries, court diaries of emperors, and accounts of other departmental officials coming in contact with foreign envoys. However, since the duties of the Secretariat's translators were, primarily, to provide Chinese translations of state letters or diplomatic writings, which were considered less dynamic, with limited interaction with other departments, their desk-bound work was understandably less often documented.

Distinctions between the two kinds of translation officials

Recapping from a Japanese article, Wuyun Gaowa (2001: 166) noted that the term "*yiyu*" 譯語, as documented in East Asian historical archives, may have three meanings: interpreters, a translating event, or the act of translating between languages. Since the term itself can refer to any of these three meanings in interpreting as well as translating events, it makes the immediate distinction between the Court translators (*yiyu*) and the Secretariat's translators (*fanshu yiyu*) even more difficult.

One confusing area related to their duties is that both *received* state letters on behalf of the throne. In particular, it was hardly ever clarified that the Court translators were among the first few officials to have been in contact with foreign envoys, and they, most likely, were the first to receive state letters from these envoys. These state letters would then be submitted to the Secretariat in preparation for a verbal report to the emperor during imperial audiences with the envoys. It was but a generic statement, if not a procedural measure, to suggest that both categories of translators received state letters *from* visiting envoys; in fact, the Court translators would receive the letters earlier and more directly than the Secretariat's translators did. However, the Court translators did not translate these state letters; they merely received them and transferred them to the Secretariat for further action, which may also have involved the provision of Chinese translations for subsequent verbal reports to the throne.

The other confusion regarding their job specification is whether the Secretariat's translators were required to interpret for foreign envoys, as were the Court translators. Li Hu (1998) believes that the Secretariat's translators had to interpret and translate in the office. Wuyun Gaowa (2001: 171) concurs, and concludes that both must have been "required to interpret on their jobs" (my translation). It seems that both Li Hu and Wuyun Gaowa agree that the two translators did not differ

in any material respect, but neither of them, unfortunately, offers any evidence to justify or substantiate their statements. One cannot help wondering, however, if this was really the case, why both types of translators were needed in the central government in Tang times? In this context, the views of Li and Wuyun seem refutable. One may legitimately argue that both types were needed simply because these translators worked in separate divisions in the administration. However, one of the overwhelming features of the Tang government structure was that duties were clearly defined and divided. It would have been quite perplexing if the Secretariat's translators were also responsible for interpretation, which indeed was the designated duty of the Court translators. This duplication in interpreting duties, if it occurred at all, would indeed run counter to the operational philosophy of the Tang central government: clear division of labor and specific lines of authority.

Li Hu, as mentioned above did not put forward any concrete evidence in support of his claim that the Secretariat's translators provided interpreting services. Wuyun Gaowa, however, gives a more elaborate account of her conjectures on this matter. She assumes that since the Court translators were involved in quotidian interpreting for foreign envoys, they could easily cope without knowledge of any written languages. What mattered in performing their duties was the ability to mediate effectively between speakers of spoken Chinese and of other languages. Her view is insightful since few of her predecessors, except Denis Sinor (1982), had made any distinctions between the written and spoken competencies of these translators in Tang times. In this regard, she has taken Li Hu's view about the duties of the two types of translators a step further.

When Wuyun talks about the possible interpreting function of the Secretariat's translators, we must note that she postulates a scenario wherein certain visiting envoys came from countries that had not yet developed a written language, and therefore could not produce any state letters to present to the Chinese emperor. In this situation, according to Wuyun, the Secretariat's translators "had to provide simultaneous interpreting when the envoy was delivering his oral message" (Wuyun 2001: 171; my translation). At the same time, Wuyun assumes, "there must have been someone around to put down the interpreted speech of the envoy into written Chinese" (ibid.), which would be a *quasi* state letter to be submitted and reported to the throne in the imperial audience. It is in this connection that Wuyun concludes that the Secretariat's translators only needed to be competent in spoken Chinese and other languages, but did not require any knowledge of written languages.

This argument is problematic, in fact, since the Secretariat's translators were primarily responsible for translating state letters from incoming envoys. It is inconceivable that they would have no knowledge of Chinese, at least in its written form. The other baffling issue worth considering here is this: if a Chinese transcription

of the interpreted record of the envoy's oral message was required at all, why not approach the Court translators to mediate and interpret on the envoy's arrival? Why wait until the envoy had come to the Secretariat, when the Court translators and other officials in the Court were quite capable of managing the interpreting and writing tasks effectively? Wuyun did not address these questions, however. She certainly has a good understanding of the language situation in medieval Asia when she points out that some states had yet to develop their written languages and may have had to deliver their state messages to the Chinese officials orally during their tributary visits. Unfortunately, her proposals, interesting though they are, were not grounded in historical evidence, and do not take into account all of the evidence or all possible interpretations. I shall deal with this point more fully below.

Bridging language barriers in medieval times

In historical records of China's diplomatic contacts in ancient and medieval times, the word "*yi*" 譯 (literally, translation, or interpretation) was commonly used in the description of foreign envoys' tributary journeys to China (Ma 1999; Li 2002; Hung 2005).[13] In other words, the act of translating or interpreting in facilitating the tribute mission, primarily because of the language barriers encountered, was typical of China. The number of interpreters or the levels of interpretation employed for foreign envoys to communicate with officials in China was then considered a reference point to indicate, symbolically, how keen these foreign states were to establish ties with it (Hung 2005). It is perhaps natural, therefore, to find overtly boastful statements about glorious diplomatic encounters in Chinese historical records, out of the sheer ethno-centrism of imperial China. Dynastic histories included many self-dramatizing phrases, such as "employing relay interpreters", "taking an arduous journey and relying on three different interpreters", or "by means of nine different interpreters" to pay tribute to China (Li 1998: 206; my translation). Without doubt, some of these stock phrases were nothing more than an exaggeration. It is extremely unlikely, no matter how remote these exotic countries were, that nine interpreters would have been required to facilitate exchanges between foreign envoys and Chinese officials. However, relay translation and interpretation were in fact quite common in diplomatic scenes of medieval Asia. The Hephthalites 滑國,[14] for example, had not yet developed a written language at the time, and ended up asking the neighboring state to compose a state letter for a tributary visit to China during the Liang dynasty (502–557 AD).

> 無文字，以木為契。與旁國通，則使旁國胡為胡書，羊皮為紙……其言語待河南人譯然後通。 (*Liangshu*, ch. 54: 812)
>
> [The Hephthalites] had not [developed their] written language, and [therefore] contracts [in the form of tallies] were carved on wood. Being on good terms with their neighbor state, [the Hephthalites] asked their neighbor to compile a letter [to China], using the language of their neighbor state, on a sheep's skin [to resolve the language problem] […] their spoken language was only understood through the interpretation of people from Tuyuhun 吐谷渾. (My translation)

In an attempt to establish ties with China, the Hephthalites resolved their language problems, both spoken and written, through relay translation and interpretation by neighboring peoples. According to *Liangshu* (ch. 54: 812f), envoys of three small neighboring states to the Hephthalites, namely, Karghalik 周古柯 (a state in Tibet), Kabadiyan 柯跋檀, and Kumedhan 胡蜜丹 (states in the former USSR) (Kaneko 2006), journeyed to China in 520 AD together with envoys from the Hephthalites to pay their respects. It could be any of these three states that the Hephthalites solicited linguistic assistance from in order to come up with a *quasi* state letter to China. The fact that these four states decided to make the trip to China together suggests that they all faced a language problem. Apparently, it was not an isolated incident for envoys from different states to travel to China as a group. Silla 新羅, for instance, also included its envoys in the tributary trip of Paekche 百濟 (both of them then kingdoms of present-day Korea) a year later, to China in 521 AD. One of the motives of the joint trip to China may have been related to language barriers faced by Silla. At the time, Silla, which had yet to develop its own written language, solicited the help of Paekche to communicate with China during the early sixth century.

> 無文字，刻木為信。語言待百濟而後通焉。 (*Liangshu*, ch. 54: 806)
>
> [Silla] had not [developed its] written language, and [therefore] contracts [in the form of tallies] were carved on wood. [Its] spoken language was only understood through the mediation of Paekche. (My translation)

The examples of the Hephthalites and Silla indicate that medieval states that had not yet developed their own written languages did not simply pay diplomatic visits to China without state letters. In order to appear respectful, these foreign states would actively approach their "literate" neighbors to compose state letters to China on their behalf. Although these letters were not necessarily written in Chinese, the symbolic significance of state letters from tributary states, as a clear sign of respect for China, was crucial. The foreign states knew too well that it was poor diplomatic etiquette not to present state letters during tributary visits to China, which was known to place a premium on etiquette. As such, even in the desperate

situation of the absence of written languages of their own, these foreign states would scrupulously come up with state letters to China in order to conform with the required diplomatic etiquette. In this connection, Wuyun Gaowa's conjecture about the oral translation scenario for the Secretariat's translators may still be possible, but was probably not a regular practice in medieval times. If indeed such an oral translation service was called for back in medieval China, why did the envoys not make these oral translation requests at the Court of Diplomatic Reception, where they were first received and accommodated in the capital? After all, the Court, equipped with twenty translators, was the first point of official contact with envoys visiting the capital, and this office was supposed to receive state letters from visiting envoys first, before submitting them to the Secretariat for further action, such as translation. Was it really necessary to delay these oral translation requests until they came to the Secretariat? My conjecture is that the Secretariat's translators routinely received state letters from the Court and provided Chinese translation accordingly, where necessary, in preparation for verbal reports in imperial audiences with relevant envoys. What the Secretariat's translators provided, as far as translation was concerned, was written translation into Chinese alone. Judging by the available historical evidence, no interpreting service seems to have been provided by the Secretariat.

In fact, since the Court was supposed to submit state letters presented by foreign envoys to the Secretariat, the absence of such state letters from states that had not developed their own written languages would certainly have been the Court's prime concern. It is quite possible, then, that the translators and other officials in the Court would volunteer to address these problems by transcribing the oral messages of these envoys into written Chinese. If oral translation were required at all, the mediating event would most likely take place, in the Court, with the presence and active assistance of the Court translators and other relevant officials. It is not easy to find clear and positive indications that this was indeed the sequence of events, but one further piece of evidence, which seems to support my conjecture, may be noted — an ad-hoc mechanism in the Court, which may easily have gone unnoticed. Without any state letters to submit and without any neighboring states to seek help from, some foreign states may have relied on their envoys to pass on *verbal messages* to China on behalf of their state rulers. Notably, when foreign envoys arrived at the Court, its officers were entrusted with drawing up reports on their behalf if they had any matters to present to the emperor.

> 蕃客奏事，具至日月及所奏之宜，方別為狀。 (*Xin Tangshu*, vol. 48: 1258)
>
> If foreign guests have something to report to the throne, [officers in the Court] should write it down in detail, with dates specified, in the form of a memorandum. (My translation)

This specific duty is open to interpretation of course, but it certainly has an important bearing on the subject of our inquiry in this article. For one thing, some envoys may suddenly have come up with something to report to the throne beyond what was already mentioned in their state letters, but this would presumably not be the primary motivation for the ad-hoc scripting mechanism. The other thing to consider, in relation to this mechanism, is that this particular task of the Court seems to fit well with the situation in which envoys came from countries without written languages and had no way of resolving the communication problem on their own, therefore relying on the Court translators, directly or indirectly, on their arrival to provide written Chinese accounts of their spoken messages in the form of letters to be presented to the Chinese throne during the imperial audience. There is, of course, no way of settling this question with absolute certainty, but since the relevant instruction was so specific about the *writing task* of the Court, I am more inclined to believe that it had something to do with envoys who had problems producing state letters for their tributary visits. Alternatively, if we borrow Wuyun Gaowa's assumption that the Court translators may not have been well-versed in written Chinese because of their non-Chinese ethnic background (Sinor 1982), given that the gap between vernacular Chinese and classical written Chinese is as large as that between two different languages,[15] they may have acted simply as verbal mediators between visiting envoys and the Court officials. This way, the Court officials could, as the previous quotation specifies, write up the envoys' messages in Chinese, possibly based on the translator's mediation, in the form of letters, for presentation to the Secretariat. Unfortunately, I can find no further information about this specific duty of the Court and have no means of verifying either scenario.[16] Still, I have yet to discover any evidence conflicting with my conjecture.

Conclusions

Discussions of the Court translators and the Secretariat's translators in Tang China did not receive much attention until the last decade, and differences between them have not been of much interest to modern scholarship. In the absence of extensive coverage about translators in Tang times in historical records, there are still numerous blind spots in our understanding of their exact tasks. Thanks to insights and research efforts, mainly by Li Hu and Wuyun Gaowa, regarding these two types of government translators, we are in a better position to enhance our understanding of these topics. Building on their studies, this article has presented essential differences in the nature of the work of these two types of translation officials in Tang times.

Regarding the interpreting function of the Court translators, I have pointed out that the subject matter of their interpreting tasks may have been quite technical, considering their regular roles in conducting, coordinating, and mediating interviews with foreign envoys in the Court. On the moot question of the interpreting function, if any, of the Secretariat's translators, I have presented evidence against such a proposal by specifying the Court's duty as drawing up reports for foreign envoys who came to China to pay tribute without the linguistic means to produce state letters on their own. We still have rather limited knowledge of the nature of these two types of translators. Further efforts are needed to review their exact job profiles, through critical exploration and examination of more historical evidence, not only from China, but from historical archives of other East Asian countries as well.

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Notes

1. Interestingly, 譯語 is now used to refer to "target language" exclusively in the modern Chinese lexicon.

2. The Sinocentric mentality was also referred to by many authors as "culturalism", a unifying force in Chinese history distinct from what would become "nationalism" in post-Westphalian Euro-American political thought, which would later be imposed on modern and contemporary China.

3. Since Emperor Taizong was commonly honored by many Central Asian states as the "Heavenly qaghan", the Tang Empire had since adopted a patrimonial approach in dealing with them. In principle, these states were not regarded as uncivilized or inadequate; they were like members of a family in the Chinese empire, and love and mutual support were the central themes in this ideal world order in Asia.

4. Tributary groups from some states, such as Japan and Tibet, could number between 200 and 600 people.

5. Almost all translators working in the Secretariat mentioned in Tang standard histories had exotic names, which were likely Chinese transliterations. These foreign-sounding names indicated that they were probably all non-Chinese by ethnicity.

6. There were a total of six ministries in the department: Rites, Justice, War, Revenue, Civil Service, and Public Works.

7. The name of the office, "Honglu 鴻臚" (literally, to loudly announce [the presentation of somebody] and guide), "the Grand Honglu", or "the Court of Diplomatic Reception", was first found in historical records as early as 104 BC during the early Han (206 BC–8 AD) dynasty, in the reign of Emperor Wu (140 BC–87 BC). Such offices set up to handle foreign relations lasted in China until the late Qing dynasty (1644–1911).

8. See Pan (1997: 78f) for specific examples of the appointments of chamberlains.

9. Little has been said in the literature about the linguistic competence of the Court staff. I suspect that not all of them were competent in foreign languages, since only ten percent were translators. Besides, the chamberlain was usually appointed on the basis of his achievements in military ventures, not his linguistic competence.

10. According to He (2003: 68), "*biao* 表" was the letter visiting envoys presented to the Chinese emperor on behalf of their rulers. Proper diplomatic etiquette required the superiority of the Chinese emperor to be clearly recognized and stated in the letter. Foreign envoys would probably not be received by the emperor if this rule was not adhered to. For example, in 607 AD during the Sui dynasty, envoys from Yamato (later known as Japan) were denied an audience with the emperor simply because Yamato presented itself as an equal to the Chinese empire, in its use of "unacceptable" terms of address in its state letter, which reads, "The Son of Heaven in the land of the rising sun [referring to Yamato] sends this letter to the Son of Heaven of the land where the sun sets [referring to China]". Emperor Yang read the letter with great displeasure and instructed the chamberlain of the Court to stop presenting to him letters from the "*Yi* 夷" (barbarians) who had no sense of proper etiquette (*Suishu*, vol. 81:1872 [Eastern Barbarian]). In the history of imperial China, meanings of "*Yi* 夷" carry the more neutral connotations of "foreign" or "strange" as well. See the various uses of this term as discussed at length in Liu (2004).

11. The Court of Diplomatic Reception has a detailed record of foreign states along the Chinese frontier. While interviewing foreign envoys about the topography of their places of origin, Jia Dan 賈耽, a Court chamberlain and, later on, a chief minister, compiled a book charting the routes between Tang China and these foreign countries. (*Xin Tangshu*, vol. 43, monograph of geography).

12. Known as Bohai 渤海 in Chinese, Parhae was a state in eastern Manchuria in the northeastern neighborhood of China.

13. See Cheung (2005) for the development of the term "*yi*" 譯, which initially referred to a government functionary to communicate with tribes from the north [of China], into a generic reference to interpreting activities and the translation of Buddhist sutras into Chinese, around the Former Han dynasty.

14. The Chinese terms for the Hephthalites (present-day Afghanistan), then, were *Hua* state 滑國 or *Yada* 嚈噠. The Hephthalites, also known as the Ephthalitai or the Nephthalitai, was a powerful state (484–570 AD) in Central Asia for almost a century.

15. On the complexity of classical written Chinese, Arthur Wright (1978: 43), a Sinologist of medieval Chinese history, remarks that "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".

16. Pan (1997: 76f) claims that one of the duties of the office of reception (*dianke shu* 典客署) and the ceremonial office (*siyi shu* 司儀署) was "to write up reports on behalf of visiting envoys if the envoys have matters to present to the emperor", but I can find no supporting evidence, from her quoted sources, to validate her claim.

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