

MONGOLIAN BORROWINGS IN DOCUMENTS OF YUAN CHANCELLERY

Scholars studying Chinese literature of the Yuan (i.e. Mongol) period often stress the point that Baihua (the written language of that time) is strongly influenced by Mongolian, the fact, which, in their opinion, is responsible for great difficulties in reading and understanding the Yuan texts. Some sinologists believe that Chinese transcriptions of loan-words, including many administrative and technical terms (often corrupted beyond any recognition), are to be found not only in the Yuan official documents, but also in plays and novels of the period. They also consider it rather interesting for historical linguists to collect and to study this lexical material in order (i) to trace the origins of numerous “barbarisms” in Baihua, and (ii) to estimate the effect they have had on the present-day Chinese language [1]. To answer these questions, two groups of Yuan texts — Chinese translations from Mongolian and original Chinese writings — can be drawn on.

The present research is based on a collection of inscriptions which was published by Cai Meibiao in 1955 [2]. Since only a few of them were published earlier most inscriptions have become open to public for the first time. The bulk of these inscriptions (engravings) are official documents translated from Mongolian. Their contents is reproduced from the prints of original Chinese stelae. Some of the prints have been produced directly from the stelae still available. However, the overall number of surviving stelae is very small, so the rest of the prints have to be looked for in different libraries or storehouses. From the linguistic viewpoint, the documents are of primary interest to the study of languages in contact, although the sphere of their linguistic investigation may be much broader.

The question of Mongolian borrowings in Chinese is directly connected with a wider problem of interaction between the two languages different in their structure. The Mongolian-Chinese interaction was not so much the result of a natural process of everyday oral contacts of the two languages, as was provoked by the language policy of Mongolian rulers in China. The language of Mongolian conquerors became the main official language of the country: Mongolian officials commonly communicated with the local population with the aid of interpreters to a great many of whom Chinese was not a mother tongue.

The interference process influenced but a narrow stratum of the Chinese language — the official speech — which developed in the womb of the Mongolian chancel-

lery in Yuan China (1280—1368), in other words, a language style used for translating documents from Mongolian into Chinese. (In other spheres of usage only traces of the Mongolian influence can be noticed.) The process of “mongolization” of the Chinese language was thus largely compelled, and it was no mere chance that this process considerably affected only those fields of written activities which were completely under Mongol control. However, this fact by no means diminishes the scholarly interest to the phenomenon, instead it makes it stronger, since the “mongolization” of Chinese presents an excellent example of a language interference which, due to legislative acts, established a “social hierarchy” of the conqueror's language and that of the subjugated local population. It is also important that a great deal of documents coming from the Yuan chancellery have survived, providing a broad field for study [3].

The same type of the language is presented in grants of the Mongolian court to temples and monasteries as well as in other inscriptions on stelae. These inscriptions, which were carved on stone in many Buddhist and Taoist shrines, were collected by Chinese linguists, and the Corpus of this palaeographical materials was published by Cai Meibiao in 1955 (see n. 2). The inscriptions have not been subjected to a thorough linguistic study hitherto, although they drew attention of historians and palaeographers as early as in the mid-nineteenth century. All the researches who have worked on these texts point out that the language of the documents is very peculiar and not easy to understand. Some scholars ascribe this to the translators' carelessness [4]. But this opinion can be refuted because, on the one hand, the style of the documents' language shows that it has to do with more than a single copyist or translator — materials of this kind were widely spread throughout the period — and, on the other, deviations from the Standard Chinese are not chaotic; they are instead rigidly regular. Strictly speaking, the language of the documents can be regarded as a variant of the language with its own norm since its formulae of a standardized character cannot be traced to any individual “creative” activity of a particular translator or copyist.

Specific features of the language of the Yuan documents can be explained if examined from the viewpoint of language interference. To this question my book “Mongolian-Chinese Interference” [5] is dedicated. For studying