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# Revisiting the “Inner Asianness” of the Qing Dynasty from the Perspective of Multilingual Composition

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Received 7 May 2024 | Accepted 21 May 2024 |

Published online 2 December 2024

## Abstract

Scholars of the New Qing History school in the United States argue that the use of multi-ethnic languages during the Qing dynasty played a crucial role in shaping its distinctive “Inner Asianness,” in contrast to earlier dynasties of the Central Plain. However, this perspective does not align entirely with historical facts. Firstly, the multilingual writing system of the Qing dynasty was largely influenced by the political and cultural traditions of the preceding Ming dynasty in the Central Plain, rather than being solely a product of Inner Asian influence. Secondly, the Qing rulers used multilingual composition primarily as a practical measure to govern a diverse empire, not as a means of emphasizing their Inner Asian identity. Furthermore, the Qing rulers identified themselves as the rightful successors of the Central Plain in terms of their political and cultural heritage. They used multilingual composition to establish a unified writing system centered around Confucian values, ultimately transforming the Manchu regime into a unified dynasty integrated into the China's broader historical narrative.

## Keywords

Qing dynasty – multilingual composition – Inner Asianness – state identity

The coexistence and integration of multiple ethnic languages and scripts were key features of the political culture of the Qing dynasty (1616–1911). This phenomenon, known as *kamcime* in Manchu, involved two or more writing scripts being used simultaneously in the same context or medium, with the content either contrasting or coordinating with each other. Scholars of the New Qing History (*Xin Qingshi* 新清史) school in the United States, including Pamela Kyle Crossley, Joanna Waley-Cohen and Evelyn S. Rawski, have shown a deep fascination with this aspect of the Qing dynasty. They see it as a significant representation of the “Inner Asianness” (*neiyaxing* 內亞性) that distinguishes the Qing from earlier dynasties of the Central Plain (*zhongyuan* 中原). Crossley has suggested that this combination of multi-ethnic languages symbolizes the Qing Emperor’s assumption of multiple roles, reflecting the simultaneous emperors of the Qing regime, representing the various identities of the Qing Emperor: the Son of Heaven (*tianzi* 天子) for the Han people, the Khan for the Manchu people, the Khagan of Mongolia, and the embodiment of Manjushri Bodhisattva (*wenshu pusa* 文殊菩薩) in Tibetan Buddhism.<sup>1</sup> Waley-Cohen pointed out that during the 18th century, the Qing regime often made inscriptions on monuments and tablets to commemorate their military victories. These inscriptions were written in a combination of Manchu and Han languages, occasionally incorporating Mongolian, Tibetan, and Chagatai. This practice not only asserted a claim to a “universal spirit” as well as “terrestrial overlordship,” but also “infused them with a distinctively Qing coloration.”<sup>2</sup> The perspectives outlined above underscore the significance of Mongolia, Tibet, and other border ethnic regions, representing significant revision and breakthrough in the conventional research on Qing history that has focused on “Sinicization” (*hanhua* 漢化) and the tributary system. While this shift represents a revision and advancement in the field, there remains considerable room for debate regarding whether the concept of Inner Asianness, characterized by the amalgamation of various ethnic languages, truly distinguishes the Qing dynasty from its predecessors in the Central Plain. This article aims to examine this topic from three key aspects: the historical continuity of multilingual composition in the Qing period; the underlying principles and motivations behind the promotion of multilingual composition; and the relationship between multilingual composition and the state identity of the Qing dynasty rulers.

1 Pamela Kyle Crossley, *Translucent Mirror: History and Identity in Qing Imperial Ideology* (Berkeley and London: University of California press, 1999), 11.

2 Joanna Waley-Cohen, *The Culture of War in China: Empire and the Military under the Qing Dynasty* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006), 35.

## 1 The Historical Continuity of Multilingual Composition

Scholars of the New Qing History school view the Qing dynasty's use of various ethnic languages to govern the Inner Asian border region as a distinguishing feature that sets it apart from previous dynasties of the Central Plain. They believe that this approach aligns the Qing dynasty more closely with "dynasties of conquest" such as the Liao (907–1125), Jin (1115–1234), and Yuan (1206–1368). These scholars also overemphasize the distinctions between the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing dynasties, portraying the Ming dynasty as a solely Han Chinese regime, while overlooking the Inner Asian influences on its governance. This approach, which represents a break with historical continuity, tends to overlook the evolution of multilingual composition after the Yuan dynasty.

On the one hand, it should be noted that the Qing dynasty, established by an ethnic minority that came to dominate the Central Plain, adopted a ruling style that closely mirrored the Liao, Jin, and Yuan dynasties, which indeed shows the influence of Inner Asia. The practice of multilingual composition was not unique to the Qing dynasty, but rather originated in Inner Asia, where it had developed organically due to long-term economic and cultural interactions. Initially devoid of political motives, this writing system can be traced back to the Khotan horse coins (*Yutian maqian* 于闐馬錢) circulating in the Western Regions during the 1st to 3rd century. These coins featured a combination of the Kharoshthi script from Central Asia and Han characters from the Central Plain, symbolizing the blending of Eastern and Western civilizations. The Liao dynasty, led by the Khitan nomads, was the first to adopt this combination of writing as the official mode of communication. Subsequently, the Western Xia (1038–1227) dynasty established by the Tanguts, the Jin dynasty established by the Jurchens, and the Yuan dynasty established by the Mongolians all followed suit, promoting this writing pattern throughout their respective reigns. It is noteworthy that the promotion of bilingual writing in the Central Plains served not only the political purpose of the ruling ethnic minorities in promoting their own scripts and asserting sovereignty, but also facilitated communication among various ethnic groups, thus taking on a dual function of symbolism and practicality. The early Manchu rulers of the Qing dynasty drew inspiration from the ruling techniques of the Khitans, Jurchens, and Mongolians, adopting this multilingual approach to writing as well.

On the other hand, it should not be overlooked that, although the Ming dynasty is often considered a typical Han regime by scholars of the New Qing History, it also used multilingual composition extensively, which had a significant influence on the subsequent Qing dynasty. Following the establishment of the Ming dynasty, Han characters were once again adopted as the unified

writing script, partially restoring the “uniformity of script” (*shutongwen* 書同文) tradition. Despite this, multilingual composition continued to be used in border governance, playing a crucial role in communication and education. As China’s territory expanded and its ethnic make-up became more diversified, the Ming rulers had to adopt many of the Yuan-era policies designed to rule a multi-ethnic nation. Take, for instance, the piece “Pudu Ming Taizu changjuan tu” 普度明太祖長卷圖 (Miracles of the Mass of Universal Salvation Conducted by the Fifth Karmapa for the Yongle Emperor), which was commissioned by Emperor Chengzu of Ming 明成祖, Zhu Di 朱棣 (r. 1402–1424). Currently housed in the Tibet Museum, the scroll consists of 49 groups of pictures, each accompanied by a summary written in a combination of five languages: Chinese, Chagatai, Dai, Tibetan, and Uighur Mongolian. The latter four were the primary ethnic scripts used in the realm of Tibetan Buddhism during that period. This blend of languages demonstrates the Ming emperor’s desire to show reverence for Buddhism in an attempt to garner the support of his subjects.

An important development that took place in the practice of multilingual composition during the Ming dynasty was the establishment of the “Institute of Barbarian Languages” (*siyi guan* 四夷館) by the imperial government. Its purview was to translate the languages and scripts of bordering ethnic groups and neighboring countries. The Institute was responsible for compiling the *Hua-Yi yiyu* 華夷譯語, which translated various Han characters into regional languages. This initiative underscores the significant influence Inner Asian elements had on the cultural conceptions of the Central Plain.

During this era, the function and significance of multilingual composition experienced notable transformations. While the multilingual composition practices of the Liao, Western Xia, Jin, and Yuan dynasties primarily served to promote the newly established script of the ruling dynasty and emphasize the ethnic characteristics of their political authority, they also functioned as crucial symbols of ethnic identity. By contrast, multilingual composition in the Ming period evolved into a sophisticated political strategy, serving as a tool used by the central government to effectively manage affairs in the border regions inhabited by a diverse range of ethnic groups. This shift highlights that the amalgamation of multiple languages in writing is not exclusive to Inner Asia, and therefore cannot be used as a definitive indicator of Inner Asian attributes within a political power.

Just as the Han-led Ming dynasty was able to carry on the political traditions of the Mongol-led Yuan dynasty, the Manchus also preserved numerous political systems of the Ming dynasty upon taking control of the Central Plain. The leaders of the early Qing dynasty held the institutional arrangements of the Ming dynasty in high regard. The Emperor Shunzhi 順治 (r. 1644–1661)

in particular admired the Emperor Hongwu 洪武 (r. 1368–1398) of the Ming dynasty, believing that his regulations and governance were unparalleled in history.<sup>3</sup> As a result, many systems of the Ming dynasty were directly inherited by the Qing dynasty, including their writing system. The Qing dynasty took over the Institute of Barbarian Languages from the Ming dynasty and renamed it the “Institute of Translation” (*siyi guan* 四譯館). They also continued to compile the *Hua-Yi yiyu*, surpassing the efforts of their predecessors in terms of variety and quantity. In terms of border governance, the Qing dynasty maintained the system used by the Ming dynasty. For example, the Shunzhi Emperor made this comment on Tibet: “As a vassal of China, it has already established practices and regulations. If you bring the appointment documents and seals issued by the Ming emperors, I will replace them with new ones and reissue them. All regulations will remain the same as before; no changes will be made.”<sup>4</sup> The documents issued to the leaders of Tibet during the Qing dynasty retained the multilingual composition practices of the Ming dynasty. However, the original Chinese and Tibetan languages were replaced with Manchu and Mongolian (later including Tibetan as well) to facilitate communication. According to Shen Weirong 沈衛榮, an expert on Tibetan history, “The rule of the Qing dynasty over Tibet was not purely a matter of military colonial expansion, but more a continuation and development of the negotiations between the Yuan dynasty, the Ming dynasty and Tibet.”<sup>5</sup>

From the analysis above it can be understood how scholars of the New Qing History consider the use of multiple languages by a dynasty as a key factor in determining its political characteristics. However, this perspective does not align with historical reasoning. In reality, nearly every dynasty in ancient Chinese history had some form of connection with Inner Asia. The multilingualism and border policies of the Qing dynasty can be seen as a continuation and evolution of the border governance practices established by the Ming dynasty in the Central Plain.

3 *Qing Shizu shengxun* 清世祖聖訓, vol. 71, Shunzhi shinian zhengue bingshen 順治十年正月丙申.

4 Zhongguo diyi lishi dang'an guan 中國第一歷史檔案館 et al., ed., *Qingchu wushi Dalai Lama dang'an shiliao xuanbian* 清初五世達賴喇嘛檔案史料選編 (Beijing: Zhongguo zangxue chubanshe, 2000), 17.

5 Shen Weirong 沈衛榮, *Dayuanshi yu xin Qingshi: yi Yuandai he Qingdai Xizang he zangchuan fojiao yanjiu wei zhongxin* 大元史與新清史—以元代和清代西藏和藏傳佛教研究為中心 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2019), 219.

## 2 Underlying Principles and Motivations

Scholars of the New Qing History contend that the Qing dynasty shared many similarities with the “Dynasties of Conquest” during the 10th to 14th centuries, as they all implemented bilingual or multilingual policies.<sup>6</sup> However, this paper argues that while the Qing dynasty, along with the Liao, Jin, and Yuan dynasties, used multiple languages for written communication, their underlying principles and objectives were not necessarily the same. Despite superficial similarities in their writing systems, these so-called multilingual regimes held vastly different political ideologies. This raises questions about how the concept of Inner Asianness may be understood.

During the Liao, Jin, and Yuan dynasties, promoting multilingual composition was essential for preserving the culture and identity of the respective reigning ethnicities. The Mongols, who ruled the Yuan dynasty, were particularly influential in this effort. The emperors and Mongolian ministers of the Yuan dynasty not only resisted learning Han characters and writing but also used a multilingual writing system to enforce the newly created “state script” (*guo shu* 國書) among the Han people and other ethnic groups across the empire. The script was known as the “Phagspa script” (*basiba* 八思巴). They aimed to translate all scripts, including Han characters, into the Phagspa script to establish it as the national language and writing system, thereby creating a new national identity. The development of multilingual composition in the Yuan dynasty closely paralleled the spread of the Phagspa script. Shortly after the creation of the Phagspa script, Kublai Khan (r. 1260–1294), emperor of the Yuan dynasty, issued an edict in the sixth year of Zhiyuan 至元 era (1269) mandating that, “From today onwards, all imperial edicts issued by the emperor will use the new Mongolian script, accompanied by the scripts of various places.”<sup>7</sup> In the eighth year of Zhiyuan era (1271), Kublai Khan stipulated once again that the Phagspa script should not be called “new characters” (*xin zi* 新字) and further expanded its scope of application.<sup>8</sup> This exemplifies the Mongols’ efforts to preserve their ethnic traditions in terms of cultural psychology after conquering the Central Plain. They strived to spread the influence of the Mongolian

6 Luo Youzhi 羅有枝 [Evelyn Rawski], “Zaiguan Qingdai: lun Qingdai zai Zhongguo lishi shang de yiyi” 再觀清代—論清代在中國歷史上的意義, in *Qingchao de guojia rentong: “Xin Qingshi” yanjiu yu zhengming* 清朝的國家認同—“新清史”研究與爭鳴, ed. Liu Fengyun 劉鳳雲 and Liu Wenpeng 劉文鵬 (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 2010), 15.

7 “Zhaoling: Xing Menggu zi” 詔令行蒙古字, in *Yuan dianzhang* 元典章, vol. 1.

8 “Xue Xiao: Menggu xue: Yong Menggu zi” 學校蒙古學用蒙古字, in *Yuan dianzhang* 元典章, vol. 31.

script by means of multilingual composition, while also aiming to promote recognition of Mongolian culture among the various ethnic groups across the empire.

The cultural assimilation strategies enacted by the Manchus were poles apart from those of the Mongols. The Qing rulers believed, "There is no need to force all under heaven to assimilate. Habits and customs vary according to differences in regional climates ... As for things like language, hobbies, clothing, diet, and daily routine, they follow the customs and conveniences of each place, allowing everyone to be at ease."<sup>9</sup> This demonstrates the cultural significance of tolerance displayed during the Qing dynasty. The Qing rulers actively promoted the use of multiple languages in their administration. Initially, their focus was on promoting the Manchu language and script to preserve their own traditions. However, they did not force other ethnic groups to adopt a Manchu identity. They rarely encouraged – and in fact they even discouraged – the learning of the Manchu language and script by other ethnicities. The adoption of multilingual composition was aimed at governing in accordance with local customs and using their respective writing systems. For instance, the imperial edicts inscribed on monuments in temples, monasteries, and Confucian academies throughout the Yuan dynasty were predominantly written in a blend of Phagspa script and Han characters. That being said, the Qing regime clearly stated that, "Scholars from other provinces are not familiar with Manchu and Chinese," requiring that schools in various places erect monuments according to local conditions. Inscriptions on the monuments did not have to use a combination of Manchu and Chinese; in fact, engraving in Chinese would suffice.<sup>10</sup> Thus, it can be seen that the rulers of the Qing dynasty did not deliberately promote and popularize the Manchu language among all their subjects through multilingual composition.

The approach to multilingual composition during the Qing dynasty differed significantly from that of the Yuan dynasty, primarily due to varying conceptual frameworks. In the Qing dynasty, the practice of multilingual composition involved the occasional incorporation of the Manchu language into the existing writing system as a means of highlighting the significance of the state language. Furthermore, there were instances where other ethnic languages, such as Chinese, were integrated into the Manchu language for practical purposes,

9 "Shizong Xianhuangdi shangyu baqi" 世宗憲皇帝上諭八旗, in *Wenyuange Siku quanshu* 文淵閣四庫全書, ce 413 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2003), 6.201.

10 *Qing Gaozong shilu* 清高宗實錄, vol. 724, Qianlong ershijiu nian shier yue jiaoshen 乾隆二十九年十二月甲申.



rather than with the intention of supplanting other languages with Manchu. The promotion of the multilingual composition system by Qing dynasty rulers was largely motivated by the practical necessity of governing a diverse and multi-ethnic nation. This approach closely mirrored the motives of Ming dynasty rulers, who also recognized the importance of accommodating multiple languages within their governance strategies.

In their adoption of multilingual composition, the Qing rulers were even willing to play down their “Manchu characteristics” if it meant they could achieve better outcomes in their governance. Take, for instance, typically Manchu government institutions such as the Eight Banners (*baqi* 八旗), the Imperial Clan Court (*zongrenfu* 宗人府), and the Imperial Household Department (*neiwufu* 內務府). Initially, official documents sent from these institutions to provinces were written in Manchu, requiring recipients to painstakingly translate them into Chinese. Recognizing the need for improved administrative efficiency, in the 48th year (1783) of the Qianlong 乾隆 Emperor’s reign (r. 1735–1796) the *Regulations of the Board of Civil Appointments* (*Libu zeli* 吏部則例) mandated that all Manchu documents from these government offices be translated into Chinese before dissemination, with the Chinese version being placed alongside the Manchu version.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the Qing regime translated and published numerous Manchu-Han Confucian classics, including *Man-Han hebi Daxue yanyi* 滿漢合璧大學衍義 and *Yuzhi fanyi Sishu* 御製翻譯四書. This initiative aimed to enhance the education of the Manchu people by integrating them with the traditional culture of the Central Plain. However, this process inadvertently eroded the cultural identity of the Manchus themselves.

The Qing dynasty and the Yuan dynasty represent two distinct stages in China’s historical development. If it can be claimed that the multilingual composition practices of the Yuan dynasty mainly reflect the Mongols’ efforts to maintain their self-identity, then clearly the Qing dynasty’s use of multilingual composition lacks the same pronounced Inner Asian characteristics. Zhang Fan, an expert on Yuan history, comments that the Yuan was a dynasty with relatively prominent characteristics of the ruling ethnicity. The New Qing History scholars conclude that the Qing dynasty’s promotion of multilingual composition was driven by a desire to preserve Manchu or Inner Asian traits. However, this analysis puts focus on appearance, rather than substance.

11 “Quanxuan hanguan: Baqi deng yamen shijian you bu zhuan xingwaisheng qing zi shijian yihanwen zhizhao” 銓選漢官·八旗等衙門事件由部轉行外省清字事件譯漢文知照, in *Qinding libu zeli* 欽定吏部則例, vol. 8.



### 3 Relationship between Multilingual Composition and State Identity

Another position held by scholars of the New Qing History is that the political culture of the Qing dynasty was heavily influenced by Mongolia. They argue that the relationship between the Qing dynasty and the Inner Asian frontier regions, particularly Mongolia, was crucial in shaping the political style and cultural traditions of the dynasty. Some even suggest that the Qing regime embodied the essence of Mongolian traditions, including the use of multiple languages for record-keeping.<sup>12</sup> This viewpoint clearly highlights the significant impact of Inner Asian influences on the political culture of the Qing dynasty, while downplaying the role of Central Plain civilization or Central Plain elements. This underscores the distinction between the Qing dynasty and traditional “China,” which typically centered around the Central Plain civilization. However, an analysis of the evolution of multilingual writing in the Qing dynasty reveals a process of “de-Mongolization” among Qing rulers. Over time, they gradually assimilated into Central Plain civilization in terms of cultural preferences and political identity. This transition is evident in the fluctuating status of Mongolian and Chinese scripts within the combined writing system before and after the Qing regime entered China proper through the Shanhai Pass and established itself as the dominant power of China.

Before the Qing entered the Shanhai Pass, the predominant practice in writing Manchu, Mongolian, and Chinese was to integrate all three scripts. Interestingly, Mongolian script even surpassed Chinese script at one point, becoming the second most important script in the combined system, following only Manchu. An illustrative example of this can be seen in the memorial archway commemorating the *xima bei* 下馬碑 (dismounting stele) outside the Mausoleum of Propitiousness of Nurhaci, also known by his temple name as Emperor Taizu of Qing 清太祖 (r. 1616–1626). Erected in the third year of Tiancong 天聰 era (1629), this archway features inscriptions in Manchu, Mongolian, and Chinese. In the first year of Chongde 崇德 era (1636) at the enthronement ceremony of Hong Taiji 皇太極 (r. 1626–1643), “Manchu, Mongolian, and Han officials each held a memorial in their respective languages, standing on the east side of the high platform, announcing to the people the emperor’s establishment of the state and the changing of the reign title.”<sup>13</sup>

12 Situ Lin 司徒琳 [Lynn A. Struve], “Shijieshi ji Qingchu Zhongguo de Neiya yinsu: Meiguo xueshujie de yixie guandian yu wenti” 世界史及清初中國的內亞因素—美國學術界的一些觀點與問題, in *Qingchao de guojia rentong: “Xin Qingshi” yanjiu yu zhengming* 清朝的國家認同—“新清史”研究與爭鳴, ed. Liu Fengyun 劉鳳雲 and Liu Wenpeng 劉文鵬 (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 2010), 327.

13 “Nei-wai zhuchen wei Tiancong han shang zun hao xingli ji Chongde di shuaizhong yi tiantan jitian” 內外諸臣為天聰汗上尊號行禮及崇德帝率眾詣天壇祭天, in *Neimi*

Thus, the practice of “writing three languages in parallel” (*santi bingshu* 三體並書) was officially implemented during state ceremonies. From that point on, all important documents, political texts, and records maintained by the government, inscriptions on palace structures, and various monuments were written in a blend of Manchu, Mongolian, and Chinese. Typically, the order of these languages would be Manchu followed by Mongolian and then Chinese, emphasizing the significance of Mongolia and representing the strong bond between the Manchu and Mongolian people.

However, upon entering the Shanhai Pass, the focus of the Qing rulers shifted, and their political and cultural identity evolved. This led to a departure from the previous practice of writing in three languages side by side. Instead, there was a noticeable surge in the use of a combination of Manchu and Chinese languages. This practice was evident as early as the first year of the Shunzhi Emperor's reign (1644), when the Qing court minted the Shunzhi Tongbao 順治通寶 coin which had “one side engraved with the word ‘Baoquan’ in Manchu and the other side engraved with the reign title in Chinese.”<sup>14</sup> Following this, a series of decrees were enacted to encourage the combined use of Manchu and Chinese script in governmental institutions at all levels, including both central and local offices. Concurrently, the influence of Mongolian and its Inner Asian components waned in the political sphere of the Qing dynasty. In the 13th year of the Shunzhi Emperor's reign (1656), the emperor mandated that the plaques of the Imperial Ancestral Temple (*taimiao* 太廟) “cease the use of Mongolian script and write exclusively in Manchu and Han characters.”<sup>15</sup> After that, the plaques on various altars, temples, royal palaces, and gardens “followed the precedent of the Imperial Ancestral Temple and removed the Mongolian script.”<sup>16</sup> This signified the gradual decline of Mongolian influence in the ritualization process of the Qing dynasty. The newly crafted plaque, written in a combination of Manchu and Han script, served as a public declaration by the Qing rulers to unite the Manchu and Han cultures, thereby solidifying the legitimacy of the dynasty's reign. This action stands in stark contrast to the New Qing History, which highlights the Qing rulers' steadfast adherence to the ways of the Manchus and Mongolians.

Evelyn Rawski, a prominent scholar of the New Qing History, argues that the worldview of the Qing dynasty rulers, particularly the Qianlong Emperor,

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*shuyuan dang'an* 內秘書院檔案, Chongde yuannian siyue shiyi ri 崇德元年四月十一日, Zhongguo diyi lishi dang'anguan 中國第一歷史檔案館, no. 01-01-04.

14 “Hubu liusan: Qianfay: Jingju guzhu” 戶部六三錢法一京局鼓鑄, in *Qinding daqing huidian shili* 欽定大清會典事例, vol. 214.

15 *Qing Shizu shilu* 清世祖實錄, vol. 105, Shunzhi shisan nian shier yue wuxu 順治十三年十二月戊戌, 821.

16 *Ibid.*, 826.

differed significantly from the Confucian beliefs of previous monarchs. While Confucian rulers aimed to educate all people and foster a cultural community, the Qianlong Emperor embraced and promoted the use of five official languages: Manchu, Mongolian, Tibetan, Uyghur, and Han.<sup>17</sup> Despite this linguistic diversity, the Qing dynasty rulers saw themselves as the rightful leaders of the Central Plain and strategically used multilingual composition to establish a unified writing system with Confucianism at its core. This innovative approach reshaped the concept of common writing, shifting its focus from the text itself to the underlying principles and values it conveyed. In essence, the evolution of unified writing during the Qing Dynasty reflects a dynamic interplay between linguistic diversity and cultural unity, highlighting the importance of understanding the deeper meanings embedded within written texts. For example, Ji Yun 紀昀 (1724–1805), the chief compiler of the *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書, proposed that, “The sound of words may change after passing through many places, but the principles conveyed by words have not changed vertically, whether in ancient times or now; and horizontally, there is no difference at home and abroad.”<sup>18</sup> The so-called “principles” discussed here are those derived from the moral education rooted in Confucian culture.

Under this backdrop, the Qing court launched a series of “writing unification” (*tongwen* 同文) activities centering around multilingual composition. For example, in the 48th year of his reign (1783), the Qianlong Emperor ordered that all wooden tablets for dismounting horses at Yongling 永陵, Fuling 福陵, and Zhaoling 昭陵 be replaced with stone tablets “engraved in the five scripts of Manchu, Chinese, Mongolian, Tibetan and Chagatai, to commemorate the grand unification of the cultural governance of our state.”<sup>19</sup> The Qing government actively promoted the mutual development of various civilizations through a significant compilation project of multilingual books. One of the most notable works to come from this initiative was the six-character multilingual book titled *Qinding xiyu tongwen zhi* 欽定西域同文志 which was published by the Hall of Military Eminence of the Imperial Book Bureau (*Huangjia shuju wuying dian* 皇家書局武英殿) in the 27th year of the Qianlong Emperor’s reign (1762). This groundbreaking book documented the six scripts officially recognized by the Qing court at that time: Manchu, Han, Mongolian, Tibetan,

17 Luo Youzhi 羅有枝 [Evelyn Rawski], “Qianlong shiqi de Qingchao” 乾隆時期的清朝, in *Zhongguo bianjiang minzu yanjiu* 中國邊疆民族研究, ed. Dali Zhabu 達力札布 [Darijab] (Beijing: Zhongyang minzu daxue chubanshe, 2011), 4: 359–60.

18 “Qinding fanyi wujing sishu tiyao” 欽定翻譯五經四書提要, in *Wenyuange Siku quanshu* 文淵閣四庫全書, ce 185 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2003), 1.

19 *Qing Gaozong shilu*, vol. 1188, Qianlong sishiba nian jiyue jihai 乾隆四十八年九月己亥.

Clear Script and Chagatai. It is recorded that, “The Manchu script serves as the central language, with detailed explanations provided in Han ... Thereafter, Mongolian, Tibetan, Clear Script and Chagatai are written.”<sup>20</sup> This can be interpreted as a symbol of the Qing dynasty’s establishment of orderly rule over a diverse range of ethnic groups. It is noteworthy that the annotations in the book are primarily in Chinese, which means that “anyone familiar with Han characters can comprehend the text and its significance.”<sup>21</sup> This illustrates that within the writing unification system, Manchu held a prestigious status, while Han characters – along with the civilizing and educative concepts they symbolized – were central.

It is crucial to understand that Han characters played a central role in the writing unification regulations of the Qing dynasty. The rulers of the Qing regime used Han characters as the primary criteria for determining compliance with these regulations. For instance, following the defeat of the Gurkhas (*Kuo'erka* 廓爾喀) in the 57th year of the Qianlong Emperor’s reign (1792), the Qing government decided to mint coins in Tibet. However, the emperor was displeased with the coin designs submitted by Fu Kang’an 福康安 (1754–1796) as, on both sides, “they lack Han characters and thus fail to meet the writing unification standards.” The emperor insisted that the phrase “Treasure of the Qianlong Emperor” (*Qianlong baozang* 乾隆寶藏) be inscribed in Chinese on the obverse and in Tibetan on the reverse.<sup>22</sup> This incident highlights the symbolic significance of Han characters in the writing unification regulations.

#### 4 Concluding Remarks

This article has reached a number of conclusions regarding the history of multilingual simultaneous writing in the Qing dynasty. Firstly, in terms of historical continuity, the multilingual simultaneous writing of the Qing dynasty not only emulated the Liao, Jin, and Yuan dynasties but was also directly influenced by the Ming dynasty. It can be argued that this form of writing was, to a large extent, an inheritance and evolution of the political and cultural legacy of the Ming dynasty of the Central Plain. This is attributed to the dual functionality of practicality and symbolism in multilingual composition. The practice served

20 “Qinding xiyu tongwen zhi tiyao” 欽定西域同文志提要, in *Wenyuange Siku quanshu* 文淵閣四庫全書, ce 235 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2003), 2.

21 Ibid., 1.

22 *Qing Gaozong shilu*, vol. 1418, Qianlong wushiqi nian shier yue gengwu 乾隆五十七年十二月庚午.

as a tool of governance for dynasties throughout Chinese history and was not a uniquely Inner Asian phenomenon.

Secondly, in terms of the concept and motivation behind the implementation of multilingual composition, the rulers of the Qing dynasty strongly advocated for it, primarily due to the practical necessity of governing a multi-ethnic nation, rather than upholding a kind of Inner Asian identity. A notable aspect is that in the state governance of the Qing dynasty, the practical utility of multilingual composition was leveraged extensively.

Thirdly, in terms of state identity, the rulers of the Qing dynasty consciously embraced the standard line of succession of the Central Plain since their inception. They sought to create a cultural order centered on Confucianism by using multiple ethnic languages in parallel. This fusion symbolized the continuation of cultural traditions within the Qing dynasty, with the condition that China's unification was recognized. It is important to note that not all languages were considered equal in the multilingual writing of the Qing dynasty; Han script – and the Confucian education it represented – occupied the central position.

In summary, the New Qing History school tends to focus solely on the Inner Asian attributes observed in multilingual composition, while overlooking the underlying significance. The blending of languages was merely a tool used by the Qing rulers to maintain the dynasty's legitimacy and strengthen political unity. Through this process, the Qing dynasty transitioned from a Manchu regime to a unified dynasty, solidifying its place in Chinese history.

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