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The Muslim Vizier Rashīd al-Dīn and his Studies of China: The Birth of Sinology as an Islamic Science

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The vizier and scholar Rashīd al-Dīn al-Hamadānī (d. 1318) is a towering figure in Islamic intellectual history. His impressive scholarly output spans several fields and rivals that of the most illustrious Islamic thinkers in terms of depth, sophistication, and impact. Relative to his importance, however, scholarship about him is fairly limited. This is beginning to change, as in recent years monographs that explore his intellectual contributions in a number of key areas have begun to appear.(1) Until now, however, very little scholarship has treated one of the most original areas of his scholarly production: the study of China (Pers. *Chīn, Khatā'*), with specific attention to its geography, its past and contemporary history, its institutions, and its principal cultural achievements.

In this essay I will discuss Rashīd al-Dīn's contribution to this field. I examine his intellectual engagement with China and argue that he can be described as the first "Sinologist" in the history of Islamic civilization. I also relate the emergence of this great novelty in Islamic history to the unique circumstances in which Rashīd al-Dīn set out to investigate his subject, the realities of the Mongol conquests. This will be the subject of the first two sections of this essay. The first section discusses the Mongols' role in drawing the Middle East and China into a new relationship, which created the conditions for a veritable quantum leap in the level of Islamic knowledge of China. The second section places Rashīd al-Dīn's studies of China in this context, providing an account of the vizier's life and describe his intellectual output, with a specific focus on his studies of China. Having done this, in the third and final section I provide an overview of Rashīd al-Dīn's Sinological contributions in four key areas: geography, history, religion, and science and technology.

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(1) Jonathan Brack, *An Afterlife for the Khan: Muslims, Buddhists, and Sacred Kingship in Mongol Iran and Eurasia* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2023); Stefan Kamola, *Making Mongol History: Rashid al-Din and the Jamiʿ al-Tawarikh* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019).

1. Of Ilkhans and Great Khans: The Middle East Re-Oriented, 1250–1350

In the early thirteenth century, Eurasia experienced the rise of the largest contiguous empire in history: the Mongol Empire. Starting in Mongolia in 1206, the empire expanded rapidly under Chinggis Khan (r. 1206–1227) and his successors, eventually stretching from Korea to Eastern Europe and from Persia to Siberia only a few decades after its creation. Historians have traditionally emphasized how the Mongol conquests involved destruction on an unprecedented scale. In recent decades, however, scholars have increasingly highlighted the crucial role that this event played in facilitating mobility and exchange across Afro-Eurasia and even beyond, initiating an era of globalization that is sometimes seen as precursor to our own.(2) By uniting a significant portion of Eurasia under a single imperial system of government, the Mongols promoted peace and security. They also removed major structural obstacles to interregional and cross-continental mobility: borders, duties, tariffs, and so on. Just as importantly, they actively harnessed the human, material, and cultural resources of their subjects for their own benefit and for the benefit of the empire in general. This promoted even more movement and exchange throughout the empire and further developed pre-existing networks of interaction.

The new relationship that emerged between the eastern territories of the Islamic world and China exemplifies this development. Contacts between these regions had certainly existed for centuries, but they were reshaped and expanded during the Mongol period. This transformation was largely the result of the establishment of close ties between the Mongol courts of Iran, the Ilkhans (1256–1335), and of China, the Yuan dynasty (1261–1368).

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(2) Michal Biran, ‘The Mongol Empire and Inter-Civilizational Exchange’, in *The Cambridge World History*, ed. Benjamin Kedar and Merry Wiesner-Hanks, vol. 5 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 534–58. For a discussion of the Mongol era as the first episode of globalization in world history from the perspective of two scholars of modern globalization, see Ronald Findlay and Mats Lundahl, ‘The First Globalization Episode: The Creation of the Mongol Empire, or the Economics of Chinggis Khan’, in *The Economics of the Frontier*, ed. Ronald Findlay and Mats Lundahl (London: Palgrave, 2017), 173–221.

In 1251, amid tensions between the Mongol princes, the Chinggisid prince Möngke (1251–1259) ascended the throne of the Great Khan. To quell opposition and to direct Mongol efforts outward, Möngke launched large-scale campaigns to conquer the Middle East and China, both of which had not yet been incorporated into the empire. His brother Hülegü led the Middle Eastern campaign, while Möngke and another of his brothers, Qubilai, focused their attention on China. Hülegü's campaign was successful. Setting off from Mongolia in 1253, he swiftly defeated the Nizari Ismailis and the Abbasid Caliphate. But the political status of these conquered territories was unclear. Although Iranian notables accepted Hülegü as their ruler, he was designated an *il-qan* ("khan of a pacified area") of the imperial army, which limited his authority to governing the territory on behalf of the Great Khan.(3) Möngke endorsed Hülegü and allowed him to strengthen his control over the Middle East. However, the outbreak of civil war following Möngke's death while on campaign in 1259 between two of his brothers—Qubilai, who had established a dominion in China, and Ariq Boke—exposed Hülegü to threats from the other Chinggisid princes. To ensure his own survival, Hülegü aligned himself with Qubilai, who eventually won the struggle for dominance. This alliance led to a lasting bond between the two courts, which lasted from around 1260 to 1335. To support each other against rivals, the Ilkhanate and the Yuan court exchanged information, resources, and specialist personnel, as well as the cultural assets of their subject populations. The sustained cultural interchange between the Middle East and China that resulted led to an unprecedented influx of Chinese material and cultural products into the Middle East.(4)

Because the Mongols orchestrated this exchange for their own benefit, their desires, needs, and ambitions played a major role in shaping what traveled across the continent. Nevertheless, the exchange occurred on such a large scale that its effects were felt at all levels of society. The case of Buddhism illustrates this point. Hülegü, the first Ilkhan, had grown up a Buddhist, and his successors followed this faith until the end of the thirteenth century. Thus, the Ilkhans sponsored this religion extensively.(5) They lavished funds on the creation of monumental monastic complexes and on efforts to attract artisans, artists, and monks to their domain. This resulted in a resurgence of Buddhism in the Middle East some time after it had vanished as a result of the Islamic conquests.(6) While people came to the Ilkhanate from across the Buddhist ecumene, people from China appear to have been especially well represented. Rashīd al-Dīn reports that "Chinese sages, astronomers, and physicians came to Iran" came to the Middle East with Hülegü.(7) Given the Ilkhan's commitment to Buddhism, this cohort must have included a significant Buddhist contingent. More evidence of this is provided by the fact that in the 1270s the Ilkhanid ruler Abaqa appointed a Chinese Buddhist named Yaruq as a tutor for his nephew and the future Ilkhan, Ghazan. Chinese Buddhists, then, continued to occupy positions within the court even in the second half of the thirteenth century.(8)

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(3) For more on the term *il-qan*, see Michael Hope, 'Some Remarks about the Use of the Term "Īlkhān" in the Historical Sources and Modern Historiography', *Central Asiatic Journal* 60, no. 1–2 (2017): 273–99.

(4) Thomas Allsen, *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

Exchanges in this period also focused on state-building, as the Ilkhans facilitated the introduction of various political and military resources from the Yuan domain to establish and solidify their new political entity. The Mongol rulers clearly understood the value of human resources and regularly relocated specialists and even entire communities to areas where they felt they could best benefit the Empire.(9) As a result, one of the key East Asian "resources" used in the Middle East was people. The Mongols had initially relied on East Asian troops to conquer the region. They then deployed tens of thousands of laborers to repair the damage caused by the conquest and a variety of specialists, including administrators and experts in specific technologies, to establish the state. Chinese communities were thus formed across West Asia.(10) Equally important, the Ilkhans harnessed cultural resources. To construct and then administer their state, they introduced technologies, administrative practices, and titles from China.(11) And to demonstrate their state's splendor, they launched large-scale cultural projects, sponsoring remarkable buildings and artworks in which Chinese architectural and aesthetic forms featured prominently.(12) The palace built by Abaqa at Takht-i Sulāyman in present-day Iranian Azerbaijan, decorated with glazed tiles adorned with Chinese dragons and phoenixes that symbolize imperial power, is a prime example of these projects.(13)

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(5) For an overview of Iranian Buddhism, see Mostafa Vaziri, *Buddhism in Iran: An Anthropological Approach to Traces and Influences* (New York: Palgrave, 2012). On Ilkhanid Buddhism, see Johan Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam on the Silk Road* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 133–74; Roxann Prazniak, 'Ilkhanid Buddhism: Traces of a Passage in Eurasian History', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 56, no. 3 (2014): 650–80.

(6) These are shown on the map in Prazniak, 'Ilkhanid Buddhism', 653. Some of these complexes still exist in Iran. For an analysis of one such complex and some of its most prominent features, see Gianroberto Scarcia, 'The "Vihar" of Qonqor-Olong: Preliminary Report', *East and West* 25 (1975): 99–104; Giovanni Curatola, 'The Viar Dragon', *Quaderni Del Seminario Di Iranistica, Uralo-Altaistica e Caucasoligia Dell'Università Degli Studi Di Venezia* 9 (1982): 71–88.

(7) Rashīd al-Dīn, *Jāmiʿ Al-Tawārīkh: Tārīkh-i Aqwām-i Pādshāhān-i Khatāy*, ed. Muḥammad Rawshan (Teheran: Markaz-i Pazhuhishī-i Mīrās-i Maktūb, 2006), 5.

(8) Rashīd al-Dīn, *Rashiduddin Fazlullah's Jami'u't-Tawarikh: Compendium of Chronicles. A History of the Mongols*, trans. Wheeler Thackston (Cambridge (MA): Harvard University, Dept. of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, 1998), 585.

The remarkable influx of material, cultural, and human resources led to enduring changes in many areas of social life.(14) One significant but relatively underexplored transformation is the exceptional progress that was made in the Islamic understanding of China.(15) Under Mongol auspices, Islamic intellectuals gained far greater insight into Chinese geography and history, explored various fields of Chinese scholarship, and interacted with many aspects of Chinese culture, including the writing system and music. The writings of Rashīd al-Dīn, the scholar who best recognized and then realized the new opportunities for knowledge created by the Mongol conquests, epitomize this development.

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(9) On the Mongol practice of relocating subjects for state-building purposes, see Thomas Allsen, 'Population Movements in Mongol Eurasia', in *Nomads as Agents of Cultural Change: The Mongols and Their Eurasian Predecessors*, ed. Reuven Amitai and Michal Biran (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015), 119–51.

(10) Francesco Calzolaio, 'Chinese Immigrants in the Ilkhanate (1256–1335)' (Conference paper, Forgotten Voices from Mongol Eurasia, Seoul, 26 June 2024).

(11) One notable example is paper money, which the Ilkhanid court briefly implemented in their domains after learning of its success in Yuan China. See Karl Jahn, 'Paper Currency in Iran', *Journal of Asian History* 4, no. 2 (1970): 101–35.

(12) Michal Biran, 'The Mongol Imperial Space: From Universalism to Glocalization', in *The Limits of Univeral Rule: Eurasian Empires Compared*, ed. Michal Biran, Yuri Pines, and Jörg Rüpke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 220–56.

(13) These tiles are now dispersed among different collections. See Yuka Kadoi, *Islamic Chinoiserie* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 50–52.

(14) Scholars to date have focused on the impact of this development on Islamicate, particularly Persianate, visual culture, where the changes were most apparent. See Kadoi, *Islamic Chinoiserie*. In recent years, scholars have begun exploring other areas in which changes were equally remarkable but less obvious. One notable example is in political theology, with the rise

2. Rashīd al-Dīn's Studies of China: An Overview

Despite Rashīd al-Dīn's influence as a prominent official and his impressive literary production, information about his life is rather sparse.(16) He was born between 1247 and 1251 in Hamadan to a Jewish family of physicians. Sometime around the latter date, his family sought refuge with the Ismailis at the fortress of Maymūndiz, in the vicinity of Qazwin, possibly while attempting to escape the disruption caused by the Mongol invasion. But the fortress soon fell to the Mongols. Rashīd al-Dīn's grandfather and father then entered Hülegü's as physicians and the family relocated to Maragha, the new Ilkhanid capital. After studying there with his family for some time, Rashīd al-Dīn moved to Yazd to further his training as a physician, eventually establishing close ties with local notables. Then, around the age of thirty, he came back to the Mongol court, where he served as a physician under Abagha (r. 1265–1282) and his son and successor Arghun (r. 1284–1291).

In many respects, this was the cardinal period in Rashīd al-Dīn's life. First, it was at some point during these years that he converted from Judaism to Islam. Throughout his life, his opponents never ceased to accuse him of

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of new notions of sacred kingship influenced by Islamic encounters with Buddhism. See Brack, *An Afterlife for the Khan*.

(15) Karl Jahn, 'Wissenschaftliche Kontakte Zwischen Iran Und China in Der Mongolenzeit', *Anzeiger Der Phil.-Hist. Klasse Der Österreichischen Akademie Der Wissenschaften* 106 (1969): 199–211; Hyunhee Park, *Mapping the Chinese and Islamic Worlds: Cross-Cultural Exchange in Pre-Modern Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 124–60.

(16) For an intellectual biography of Rashīd al-Dīn, see Stefan Kamola, *Making Mongol History*.

Jewish sympathies, heresy, and of having undertaken a false conversion. For his part, Rashīd al-Dīn tells us surprisingly little about his conversion, which probably occurred in the last years of Abagha's reign. Moreover, contemporary biographical accounts tell us that Rashīd al-Dīn first came to the attention of the Mongol amīrs in this period. The Mongols famously held medical training in very high esteem and greatly valued personal loyalty. Trusted people were generously rewarded for their services. As a result, physicians like Rashīd al-Dīn, who possessed both a coveted set of skills and personal access to the Mongol élite, were uniquely positioned to climb the ranks of public service.

Rashīd al-Dīn's meteoric rise as an administrator is exemplary of this. His first major appointment was in the early years of the reign of Ghazan (r. 1295–1304), when he was appointed governor of Yazd. Then, in 1298, he was promoted to an important position in the court of Öljeitü (r. 1304–1316) as deputy vizier to Saʿd al-Dīn Sāwajī (d. 1312). Rashīd al-Dīn's exact title is unclear, as is the precise nature of the division of responsibilities between the two men. In his writings, Rashīd al-Dīn refers to Saʿd al-Dīn as "minister" and simply calls himself "the physician." Other sources from the time do not clarify the matter. They often refer to Saʿd al-Dīn as "minister" and to Rashīd al-Dīn as his deputy or, alternatively, a "counselor." These conflicting records testify to the complex administrative system of the Ilkhanid state, where appointed officials worked alongside trusted individuals who had personal connections to the ruling house in order to prevent any excessive consolidation of local power. In any case, there is no doubt that after 1298 Rashīd al-Dīn acquired impressive influence and considerable wealth. On the evidence of his will, it appears that he owned property in several cities as well as an important foundation in Tabriz, the *Rashidi Quarter* (*rabʿ-i Rashīdī*).(17) This foundation hosted, among other things, a hospice, a sufi-house, a tomb complex, and a library with an atelier for book production, which was responsible for publishing an Arabic and a Persian copy of his works every year.

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(17) Birgitt Hoffman, 'In Pursuit of Memoria and Salvation: Rashīd al-Dīn and His Rabʿ-i Rashīdī', in *Politics, Patronage and the Transmission of Knowledge in 13th–15th Century Tabriz*, ed. Judith Pfeiffer (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 171–86.

While the central practice of appointing shadow officials to prevent any single figure in the administration from wielding too much power at a local level may have worked as it was intended to, it simultaneously fostered a climate of competition and enmity among high-ranking administrators. This is apparent in the fractious relationship between Rashīd al-Dīn and Saʿd al-Dīn, which ultimately led to the latter's execution in 1312. In a context like this, it is perhaps unsurprising to learn that Rashīd al-Dīn's long career as a minister (1298–1318) was regularly punctuated by accusations and conspiracies. Indeed, the vizier fell prey to the kinds of machinations this system produced in 1318, when he was executed, together with his son, on charges of mismanagement, extortion, and, most sensationally, of having poisoned Öljeitü.

During his lifetime, Rashīd al-Dīn was less renowned for his scholarship than for his immense power and wealth. But his posthumous and lasting fame is the result of his remarkable contributions to literature and scholarship. A Persian manuscript from 1309 and a later Arabic translation produced in 1311 provide a description of Rashīd al-Dīn's oeuvre as the author himself saw it.(18) According to these texts, the vizier's collected writings consisted of fourteen works, divided into two broad categories: theology and natural philosophy, and history, narratives, and geography. All of these works contain original insights into Chinese civilization. Some of them, however, are specifically and consciously concerned with examining a variety of aspects of Chinese history, geography, and culture. These works can be divided into two groups.

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(18) Paris BNF arabe 2324, fol. 1v-2v; Istanbul Aya Sofya 3833, fol. 2v-5r.

The first group is comprised of a series of sections on China from his renowned universal history, the *Collected Chronicles* (*Jāmiʿ al-tawārīkh*). This work is a monument in the history of Islamic historiography and a crucial source for the history of the Mongol Empire. It is also one of the earliest examples of the genre of world history.(19) According to Rashīd al-Dīn's introduction to the work, the first volume—the *Blessed History of Ghazan* (*Tārīkh-i mubārak-i Ghazanī*), which covers the history of Mongols and Turks from their origins to the lives of Chinggis Khan and his successors—was commissioned by Ghazan but only completed after his death.(20) The second volume, commissioned by Ghazan's successor Öljeitü, is a "world history" (*ta'rīkh-i ʿālam*) that encompasses the accounts of pre-Islamic rulers, the Muslims from the Prophet to the end of the ʿAbbāsid caliphate, and the histories and stories of the various Eurasian peoples that the Mongols encountered in the formation of their empire. These include the Oghuz Turks and the Seljuks, the Jews, the Franks, the Indians, and the Chinese. Three of the two volumes' sections are dedicated to China. The first two appear in the first volume: a history of Qubilai and another of his grandson and successor Temür (r. 1294–1307).(21) The third and arguably the most significant section appears in the second volume: the *History of the Ruling Families of Cathay*, which is actually a history of China from the dawn of time to the Mongol conquest of the Song dynasty in 1279.(22)

The second group of Rashīd al-Dīn's works on China includes several works translated directly from Chinese under his supervision. In an autograph manuscript, Rashīd al-Dīn describes these writings as "books … that were not available in this kingdom before. Procuring the original manuscripts of these works required great effort, and they have been offered to men of learning to translate from Chinese (*zabān-i Khatā'ī*) into Persian." Four works are listed under this header:(23)

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(19) Karl Jahn, 'Rashīd Al-Dīn as World Historian', in *Yādnāma-Yi Jan Rypka* (Prague: Akademia, 1967), 79–87; John Andrew Boyle, 'Rashīd Al-Dīn: The First World Historian', *Iran* 9 (1971): 19–26.

(20) Rashīd al-Dīn, *Compendium of Chronicles*, 1–2.

(21) Rashīd al-Dīn, 415–57; 458–65.

(22) Rashīd al-Dīn, *Tārīkh-i Aqwām-i Pādshāhān-i Khatāy*.

1) *Scientific and Folk Medicine of the Chinese* (*Ṭibb-i ahl-i Khatā'ī az ʿilmiyyāt wa ʿamaliyyāt*),
2) *Simple Chinese Medicines* (*Adwiya-yi mufrada-yi Khatā'ī*),
3) *Simple Mongol Medicines* (*Adwiya-yi mufrada-yi Mughūlī*),
4) *On Chinese Government and the Management of the Chinese State* (*Dar bāb-i siyāsat wa tadbīr-i mulk-i Khatā'iyān*).

Of these works, only the first volume of one of the medical books survives: the *Treasure Book of the Ilkhans on Chinese Sciences and Techniques* (*Tanksūqnāma-yi Īlkhān dar funūn-i ʿulūm-i Khatā'ī*). This is an extensive treatise that covers the principles of Chinese medicine, physiology, and sphygmology (the study of the pulse).(24) In the introduction, Rashīd al-Dīn inscribes the book within a larger translation project that sought to introduce Islamic readers to the cultural achievements of the Chinese. This was the first project of its kind in the Islamic world.(25) Although the relationship between the *Treasure Book* and the other translations is unclear, Rashīd al-Dīn's comments demonstrate that it was produced as part of the same project that yielded the other translations.

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(23) Istanbul Aya Sofya 3833, f. 5r.

(24) The book survives in a single manuscript, Istanbul Aya Sofya 3596. A reproduction of the manuscript is available in Rashīd al-Dīn, *Tānksūqnāma, Yā Ṭibb-i Ahl-i Khitā*, ed. Mujtabā Mīnuwī (Teheran: Intishārāt-i Dānishkada-yi Adabiyyāt wa ʿUlūm-i Insānī, 1971).

(25) Istanbul Aya Sofya 3596, 2r-5r. On the *Treasure Book*, see Vivienne Lo and Yidan Wang, 'Chasing the Vermilion Bird: Late Medieval Alchemical Transformations in The Treasure Book of Ilkhan on Chinese Science and Techniques', in *Imagining Chinese Medicine*, ed. Vivienne Lo and Penelope Barrett (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 291–304; Yidan Wang and Vivienne Lo, 'Blood or Qi Circulation? On the Nature of Authority in Rashīd al-Dīn's Tānksūqnāma (The Treasure Book of Ilqān on Chinese Science and Techniques)', in *Rashīd Al-Dīn: Agent and Mediator of Cultural Exchanges in Ilkhanid Iran*, ed. Anna Akasoy, Charles Burnett, and Ronit Yoeli-Tlalim (London: The Warburg Institute, 2013), 127–72.

Although it is not explicitly devoted to China, another crucial source for reconstructing Rashīd al-Dīn's engagement with the country is his collection of scientific writings, the *Work and Beings* (*Āthār wa ahyā'*).(26) According to the author's own description, the book included twenty-four chapters on various subjects ranging from agronomy and arboriculture to meteorology, agricultural engineering, and mining. Unfortunately, only a portion of the book—primarily the chapters on agriculture—has survived. In its present form, then, the *Works and Beings* is best described as a work of agronomy. It reflects Rashīd al-Dīn's extensive knowledge of topics in agriculture, likely accumulated during his long tenure as an administrator. The portions of the text that relates to Chinese agriculture are especially important for reconstructing his Chinese studies. The data they contain is so extensive and detailed that it has been speculated Rashīd al-Dīn had access to Chinese agronomical texts.(27)

Rashīd al-Dīn relied extensively on Chinese sources, both written and oral, to produce these writings. This makes his work a veritable Sinological corpus with no direct precedent in the history of Eurasia. Somewhat surprisingly, though, these writings have mostly been used by scholars to illuminate specific points related to the history of the Ilkhanate, the Yuan dynasty, or the Mongol Empire. Moreover, despite the fact that they belonged to a coherent intellectual project, they have generally been approached separately. Rashīd al-Dīn's studies of China thus remain poorly understood, even among specialists. To address this problem, this essay offers an overview of Rashīd al-Dīn's Sinological investigations in four key areas: geography, history, religion, and science and technology.(28)

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(26) Rashīd al-Dīn, *Athar Wa Ahya*, ed. Manuchehr Sotudeh and Iraj Afshar (Tehran: McGill University Press, 1989). On this text, see A. K. S. Lambton, 'The Āthār Wa Aḥyā' of Rashīd al-Din Faḍl Allāh Hamadāni and His Contribution as an Agronomist, Arboriculturist and Horticulturalist', in *The Mongol Empire and Its Legacy*, ed. Reuven Amitai and David Morgan (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 126–54.

(27) Allsen, *Culture and Conquest*, 118.

(28) This is intended to pave the way for a future monograph that will explore these issues in greater depth.

2.1. Geography

The rapid political and commercial expansion of the Islamic world during the Abbasid era (750–1258) led to great advancements in the field of geography. Early Islamic geography was primarily based on the writings of the scholars of late antiquity, especially the Greeks.(29) Islamic intellectuals, though, sought to acquire new information to enhance their inherited view of the world. To learn more about China, they relied on the dense network of routes connecting Islamic Central Asia, Iran, and Mesopotamia to East Asia, which are best known as the “Silk Roads.” The merchants, soldiers, and diplomats who travelled these routes to China and back brought back valuable information, which they then shared with scholars. Islamic knowledge of the region’s geography remained murky, however. Authors worked with limited and often contradictory data. In this context, Rashīd al-Dīn’s writings represent a remarkable advance. An examination of the geographical knowledge of China contained in his surviving works, particularly the *Collected Chronicles*, reveals that he possessed extensive, detailed, and accurate information.

We can begin with the question of his familiarity with the fundamentals of East Asian geography, starting with its easternmost territory, Japan. The extent of Islamic geographers’ knowledge of Japan before the Mongol period is uncertain. However, Rashīd al-Dīn provides an early and accurate description. He refers to Japan as “Jimingū”—after the Chinese term *Ribenguo*—and characterizes it as a large, populous, and wealthy island in the ocean, near the coasts of Manchuria and Korea.(30) His reference to these territories implies at least some understanding of Northeast Asia, which does indeed figure prominently in his writings. Unlike earlier scholars, who refer to Korea in confusing terms as a kind of wonderful island somewhere in the farthest East,

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(29) Adam Silverstein, ‘The Medieval Islamic Worldview: Arabic Geography in Its Historical Context’, in *Geography and Ethnography: Perceptions of the World in Pre-Modern Societies*, ed. Kurt Raaflaub and Richard Talbert (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), 273–91.

(30) Rashīd al-Dīn, *Compendium of Chronicles*, 441.

Rashīd al-Dīn understands that Korea is a peninsula, separated from China by a gulf.(31) He also refers to Korea as “Kaūlī” rather than the outdated term “Sila,” which was commonly used in Islamic geographic texts.(32) He also mentions a particular city, “Junju,” which is possibly Chongja in the northern part of Korea or Chungju in the south.(33) West of the Korean peninsula lie the lands of the Inner Asian nomads, about whom he provides extensive information. Rashīd al-Dīn’s histories of the Turks and Mongols include a great deal of data on the mountains, rivers, and other natural features of their homelands, and often feature renderings of native toponyms. In fact, these passages are so accurate that they have been used by later scholars to clarify geographical data included in native sources.(34)

Rashīd al-Dīn’s treatment of China, however, is the most remarkable of his study of East Asia. Let us consider his efforts to clarify prevailing confusions surrounding Chinese geography. Drawing on late antique descriptions of geography and notions of civilization, Islamic authors portrayed China as a large territory in the East, associated with a great world empire. The Arabs referred to this great geographic, civilizational, and political entity as *al-Ṣīn*, while the Persians called it *Chīn*.(35) This image was challenged in the eleventh century when Persian authors learned of the rise of the Khitans and the subsequent establishment of the Liao dynasty (916–1125). Writing around the year 1000, the renowned polymath Bīrūnī (d. 1048) was the first to incorporate this new information into his works. He described China as divided into two large realms: *Khiṭā’* in the north, corresponding to the Liao dynasty, and *al-Ṣīn* in the south, corresponding to the Song dynasty (960-1279).(36) This discovery raised several questions for geographers: Was this new *al-Ṣīn* identical to the land indicated by this name in earlier geographical works? Which of the two entities corresponded to *Chīn*? And what of *Māchīn*, another toponym traditionally associated with China in Arabo-Persian sources? Did this term refer to *al-Ṣīn*, *Chīn*, or *Khiṭā'*, or was China now divided into three territories?

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(31) Rashīd al-Dīn, 434.

(32) The term “Gauli” corresponds to the Chinese *Gaoli*, which refers to the Goryeo Kingdom in Korea from 918 to 1392. “Sila,” meanwhile, refers to the Shilla Kingdom, which disappeared in 937. On Korea in Islamic geography, see Hee Soo Lee, *Korea and the Muslim World: A Historical Account* (Istanbul: IRCICA, 2020).

(33) Allsen, *Culture and Conquest*, 104–5.

(34) Nicholas Poppe, ‘On Some Geographical Names in the Jāmi’ al-Tawārīx’, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 19 (1956): 33–41.

(35) Clifford Edmund Bosworth, M. Hartman, and Raphael Israeli, ‘Al-Ṣīn’, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, 2012, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_1080.

Rashīd al-Dīn addresses these questions with remarkable erudition. In the introduction to his *History of the Ruling Families of Cathay*, he explains that China is divided into several regions and that each has different names in various languages.(37) According to this explanation, the most important territory is called *Khān-žū-jūn-tū*, which corresponds to the "Middle Kingdom" found in Chinese sources. This region, he continues, is identical to *Khiṭā'* and *Chīn*; the latter term is simply its name in Sanskrit. To the south of this then lies another region called *Manzī*—a calque from the Chinese word *manzi*, a derogatory term used by northerners and the Mongols to refer to the Southern Chinese. Because this land is ten times larger than *Chīn*, it is known in Sanskrit as *Mahachin*, meaning "Great China." Not knowing the meaning of this term, Rashīd al-Dīn notes, Islamic authors called this land *Māchīn*. He then proceeds to expand on this basic information by introducing a number of territories around China that were previously largely unknown to Muslims. These include the steppes of the Khitan and the Jurchen—two peoples with whom Rashīd al-Dīn is quite familiar—in the North, and the region of *Dāy Līū* in the Southwest, which corresponds to the Dali Kingdom (937–1253) in present-day Yunnan.

Moving beyond these fundamentals of geography, the *Collected Chronicles* also features extensive information on Chinese cities. In the section on the history of Qubilai, Rashīd al-Dīn reports that the Yuan empire is divided into

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(36) Park, *Mapping the Chinese and Islamic Worlds*, 78–80.

(37) Rashīd al-Dīn, *Tārīkh-i Aqwām-i Pādshāhān-i Khatāy*, 1–4.

twelve administrative divisions, which he correctly refers to with the Chinese term, *sheng*. This is followed by a list of the twelve divisions that includes the names of their seats of government, from the capital city of Dadu in the North to Guangzhou in the South.(38) The description is detailed and basically accurate. Both the administrative terminology and the place names are also given in renderings of their Chinese forms, most of which are readily recognizable. Throughout the book he also mentions many other cities. In most cases he simply gives their names and provides some basic information. However, in other cases he provides more extensive descriptions that span several lines or even pages. The longest of these segments include information on a particular city's shape, size, overall organization, and remarkable buildings found therein. His description of Qubilai's new capital, Daidu, is a case in point.(39) A preliminary analysis suggests that he describes around twenty to thirty cities, many of which had never before appeared in any Islamic source.(40)

Intriguingly, Rashīd al-Dīn states that the *Collected Chronicles* was intended to feature a section on geography. This section, he says, would have included maps of the various countries of the world based on "that which was known before in these realms, recorded in registers, and illustrated, as well as what the wise and learned of India, *Chīn* and *Māchīn*, the Franks and others have discovered in books during this era and reported after verification."(41) At least one of these maps would have been of China. In fact, he mentions a map of China in the book and directs the reader to it at the end of the text.(42) He also notes that the geographical section of his work featured an extensive description of the Yuan dynasty's postal system, the *yam*.(43) Unfortunately, this section has not survived. Some scholars have contended that it was planned but never actually completed. Other evidence suggests, though, that some copies of the book were in fact made that included this section.(44) If a copy were ever found, it would be an immense addition to our understanding of the historical geography of the Yuan domains and medieval cartography as a whole.

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(38) Rashīd al-Dīn, *Compendium of Chronicles*, 439–40.

(39) Rashīd al-Dīn, 434–35.

(40) Donald Leslie, 'The Identification of Chinese Cities in Arabic and Persian Sources', *Papers on Far Eastern History* 26 (1982): 14.

(41) Rashīd al-Dīn, *Compendium of Chronicles*, 20.

(42) Rashīd al-Dīn, *Tārīkh-i Aqwām-i Pādshāhān-i Khatāy*, 11–12.

(43) Allsen, *Culture and Conquest*, 105.

Rashīd al-Dīn's comprehensive and largely accurate description of Chinese geography invites the question of his sources. These certainly included a variety of Chinese books. As I will discuss in the next section, the *History of the Ruling Families of Cathay* was certainly based on a recent Chinese chronicle. Just as important, one of the books that Rashīd al-Dīn translated from Chinese ostensibly dealt with matters of state administration. These writings, along with others which were available at the Ilkhanid court but which the vizier does not mention, provided him with a great deal of original geographic information. This is only part of the story, however. Indeed, Rashīd al-Dīn also refers in his writings to several informants who had direct knowledge of China in the Yuan dynasty, the most prominent of whom was the Mongol Bolad (d. 1313).(45) Born into a family with strong connections to the Mongol royal house around the mid-thirteenth century, Bolad had a successful career as a state official in the eastern regions of the Mongol Empire during Qubilai's reign. Having gained the trust of the Qa'an, he arrived in the Ilkhanate in 1285 as Qubilai's representative. He played an active role in administration and politics there, which brought him into contact with Rashīd al-Dīn, who was himself a prominent administrator.(46) Surely, if we are seeking Rashīd al-Dīn's principal source for knowledge of Chinese geography, we need look no further than Bolad.

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(44) For an overview of this evidence, see Ono Hiroshi 小野浩, 'Ḥāfiẓ-i Abrū's Geographical Work, the So-Called Jughrāfiyā: Its Significance and Evaluation in Relation to Rashīd al-Dīn's Works', *Journal of Asian History* 49 (2015): 53–68.

(45) Thomas Allsen, 'Biography of a Cultural Broker: Bolad Cheng-Hsiang in China and Iran', in *The Court of the Il-Khans, 1290–1340*, ed. Julian Raby and Teresa Fitzherbert (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 7–22.

(46) On Rashīd al-Dīn and Bolad, see Allsen, *Culture and Conquest*, 72–80.

3.2. History

Rashīd al-Dīn is best known today for his work as a historian. It is not surprising, then, that his writings, and in particular the *Collected Chronicles*, provide a wealth of information on Chinese history. Indeed, the importance of his compendium in furthering Islamic understandings of Chinese history can hardly be overstated. While he expanded and updated knowledge from earlier periods in the field of geography, in the realm of history he genuinely broke new ground. Before the Mongol period, Islamic scholars knew almost nothing about Chinese history. In line with the global perspective that inspired their investigations, Abbasid-era scholars incorporated details about Chinese history into their writings. Some even dedicated substantial sections of their texts to this subject. Notable examples are al-Yaʿqūbī (d. c. 900) and al-Masʿūdī (d. 956), both of whom included a chapter on Chinese history in their historiographic compendia.(47) Yet, the information they had access to was limited and often imprecise, if not outright fanciful. The *Collected Chronicles*, by contrast, provides a comprehensive treatment of Chinese history spanning from the beginning of time to the present, all based on primary Chinese sources and informants.

Rashīd al-Dīn was fully aware of the originality of his achievements. This is clear from the preface to the *History of the Ruling Families of Cathay*, which is embedded in the second volume of his *Collected Chronicles*.(48) As he explains, because of the great distance between the two countries, Chinese scholars had never traveled to the Middle East, and local rulers saw no real reason to sponsor investigations into Chinese subjects. This changed, however, with the arrival of Hülegü, who brought “Chinese sages, astronomers, and physicians” with him. This stimulated Islamic scholars to become acquainted with Chinese scholarship, and this led in turn to the production of original writings that explored China in new ways, through native texts and informants. His history of China exemplifies this development. He reports that Öljeitü instructed him to collect the histories of all the nations of the world into a single compendium, as a way of showcasing the extent of Mongol sovereignty. To achieve this ambitious goal, the Ilkhan instructed the various “philosophers, astronomers, scholars, and historians of all religions and nations” in his service to provide Rashīd al-Dīn with their chronicles and to assist him in his work.(49) The section on China would accordingly have been completed in collaboration with two Chinese scholars, “Lītājī” and “Kamsūn,” who shared with him their knowledge of and historical books from their homeland. We do not know for certain which books these were, but a number of clues from the book suggest that his main source was a Chinese Buddhist chronicle from the late Song or early Yuan dynasty.(50)

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(47) al-Masʿūdī, *Les Prairies d’or*, ed. Charles Barbier de Meynard and Pavet de Courteille (Paris: Imprimerie impériale, 1861), vol. 1, 286–324; Ibn Wāḍiḥ al-Yaʿqūbī, *The Works of Ibn Wāḍiḥ Al-Yaʿqūbī*, ed. Matthew Gordon et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2018), vol. 2, 481–8.

(48) Rashīd al-Dīn, *Tārīkh-i Aqwām-i Pādshāhān-i Khatāy*, 5–6.

Rashīd al-Dīn’s version of the events leading up to the production of this work has long been taken at face value. But recent scholarship has challenged this and convincingly demonstrated that Rashīd al-Dīn appropriated much of the material for his world history from another court historian, ʿAbd Allāh Qāshānī (d. 1324), who had prepared it under the auspices of Öljeitü’s predecessor, Ghazan.(51) In the introduction to the section on China in his own world history, Qāshānī describes how Ghazan instructed him to include such a section in his compendium, and provides an account of its composition that is very similar to the one found in the *History of the Ruling Families of*

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(49) Rashīd al-Dīn, *Compendium of Chronicles*, 3.

(50) Francesco Calzolaio and Francesca Fiaschetti, ‘Prophets of the East: The Ilkhanid Historian Rashīd al-Dīn on the Buddha, Laozi and Confucius and the Question of His Chinese Sources (Part 1)’, *Iran & the Caucasus* 23, no. 1 (2019): 17–34; Francesco Calzolaio and Francesca Fiaschetti, ‘Prophets of the East: The Ilkhanid Historian Rashīd al-Dīn on the Buddha, Laozi and Confucius and the Question of His Chinese Sources (Part 2)’, *Iran & the Caucasus* 23, no. 2 (2019): 2.

(51) Osamu Otsuka, ‘Qāshānī, the First World Historian. Research on His Uninvestigated Persian General History, Zubdat al-Tawārīkh’, *Studia Iranica* 47, no. 1 (2018): 119–49.

Cathay.(52) This discovery takes nothing away from the historical and cultural importance of the latter work, however. It stands as one of the most striking testimonies to the depth of Sino-Islamic exchange in the Mongol period and the most complete history of China ever produced in the Islamic world before the advent of modernity.

Indeed, it would be hard to overstate the novelty of this work in the history of Islamic knowledge about China. As the title suggests, the *History of the Ruling Families of Cathay* is a continuous account of the successive dynasties that governed China from the beginning of time to the Mongol conquest of the Song dynasty in 1279. No doubt consistent with the format of its Chinese sources, the book presents each dynasty in a separate chapter, naming the founder and his descendants with their respective reign periods and then describing each dynasty's most prominent rulers and major events during their reigns. This enables Rashīd al-Dīn to present an impressive amount of new information. On the most basic level, the book features most of the dynasties that are familiar to modern historians, from the Zhou to the Tang and the Song, with all of their emperors in the correct order. But it also introduces mythical figures like Pangu, whom some Chinese cosmological myths describe as the first man and ruler;(53) discusses essential figures in Chinese intellectual history like Laozi and Confucius;(54) and describes more recent events, like the fall of the Southern Song dynasty, as those events had been reported by informants from the Yuan court.(55) It also introduces original information about the creation of roads and canals, the establishment of cities, and the arrival of foreign religions like Buddhism.

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(52) ʿAbd Allāh Qāshānī, *Zubdat al-tawārīkh*, Tehran University Central Library, MS 9067, 370r.

(53) Rashīd al-Dīn, *Tārīkh-i Aqwām-i Pādshāhān-i Khatāy*, 13. On Pangu in Chinese mythology, see Paul Goldin, 'The Myth That China Has No Creation Myth', *Monumenta Serica* 56 (2008): 1–22.

(54) Rashīd al-Dīn, *Tārīkh-i Aqwām-i Pādshāhān-i Khatāy*, 36–38.

(55) Rashīd al-Dīn, 69–71.

The text also includes elaborate illustrations that add a visual dimension to the information provided. Interestingly, the most exceptional illustrations are found not in a Persian manuscript but in an Arabic one, which is currently divided between the collection of Edinburgh University and the Nasser Khalili collection.(56) The Ilkhanate stretched as far south as the Arabian Peninsula and encompassed many Arabic-speaking people. It also sought to project its power outward; the rest of the Middle East was a prime target for its ideological outreach efforts. Thus, while the court itself adopted Persian as its principal language, it recognized the importance of Arabic and produced Arabic-language versions of court-sponsored scholarship for distribution both within the empire and beyond. The Arabic-language copy of the *Collected Chronicles* is exemplary of this effort. Created in 1314 at the Ilkhanid court, possibly in Rashīd al-Dīn’s scriptorium in Tabriz, it features large-format fine thick paper, elegant calligraphy, and opulently prepared illuminations.(57) The paintings included vary in technique. The China section contains full-page images of Chinese emperors and their attendants in a basically Chinese style. Inconsistencies between the representations suggest that they were created by local artists rather than Chinese painters.(58) Nonetheless, the costumes and headdresses of the figures demonstrate a degree of understanding of Chinese fashion and provide a glimpse of China for the Arabic-speaking readers for whom the manuscript was presumably intended.

While the *Collected Chronicles* provides a detailed overview of China’s distant past, it also encompasses more recent events. It provides an extensive account of the various states of the Mongol conquest of China. The section on the life of Chinggis Khan describes the 1211–1218 campaign against the

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(56) Edinburgh University Library MS. Or. 20; Nasser Khalili Collection MS 727.

(57) For a discussion of the manuscript, see Sheila Blair, *A Compendium of Chronicles: Rashīd al-Dīn’s Illustrated History of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

(58) Masuya Tomoko 桝屋友子, ‘Portraits of Chinese Emperors in the Jami’ al-Tavarikh by Ilkhanid and Timurid Painters’, 國立臺灣大學美術史研究集刊 [*National Taiwan University Journal of Art History*], no. 45 (2018): 109–58.

Jurchen Jin (1115–1234) in detail, meticulously recounting the various battles and sieges that ultimately led to the Jin defeat.(59) The climax of this narrative is the siege of Zhongdu, the Jin capital (present-day Beijing), during which the city's inhabitants faced starvation. These passages feature the names of many places and people in their Chinese forms, most of which are easily recognizable. Similarly, the sections on Ögödei (r. 1229–41) and Möngke describe the campaigns the two Qa'an launched against the Jin dynasty in 1230 and against the Song dynasty in 1251 respectively, as well as an explanation of events in China after Möngke's death in 1259.(60) Two sections on Qubilai and his successor Temür, which include extensive data on their lives and families and conditions in the Yuan domains during their rule, complete the story.

Rashīd al-Dīn had access to various sources for writing the history of China.(61) They must certainly have included oral traditions. As is often the case in tribal societies with highly restricted literacy, the Mongols cherished oral traditions and valued people who could act as living repositories of their history highly. The aforementioned Bolad, whose father had been part of Chinggis Khan's most elite military unit and who had himself served Qubilai in various capacities, was one such person. We can surmise, then, that Bolad and other officials with direct experience of life in the Yuan domains played an important role in supplying Rashīd al-Dīn with the "latest news" from China. The vizier could also rely on written sources. In his description of how he compiled the *Collected Chronicles*, he reports having relied on a variety of books and scrolls containing Mongolian histories.(62) Although information on these sources is scarce, they certainly included at least a few documents and narratives concerning the life and exploits of Chinggis Khan—especially the *Authentic Chronicle of Chinggis Khan*, a bilingual Mongolian-Chinese work—as well as diplomatic documents. This diversity of sources allowed Rashīd al-Dīn to provide readers in the Middle East with a detailed overview of China's recent history that informed Islamic historiography for centuries.

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(59) Rashīd al-Dīn, *Compendium of Chronicles*, 207–26.

(60) Rashīd al-Dīn, 299–342; 393–414.

(61) For a recent examination of this issue, see Christopher Atwood, 'Rashīd Al-Dīn's Ghazanid Chronicle and Its Mongolian Sources', in *New Approaches to Ilkhanid History*, ed. Timothy May, Dashdondog Bayarsaikhan, and Christopher Atwood (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

(62) Passage quoted in Allsen, *Culture and Conquest*, 89.

3.3. Religion

Religion is another prominent area of research in Rashīd al-Dīn's studies of China. With his background as a scholar-ideologue at the Mongol court of Iran, where Buddhism was widely practiced, arguably his most notable investigation into the religious landscape of China is focused on Buddhism, the main religion in China since the Tang dynasty (618–907).

The Iranian world was well aware of Buddhism when the Mongols brought it with them to the region in the thirteenth century.(63) Buddhism flourished in the eastern parts of Iran and Central Asia after being introduced to the region from India around the first century BCE. The seventh-century Islamic conquest of the Sasanian Empire and the subsequent expansion into Central Asia brought Muslims into contact with this faith both through artifacts and ruins and through the Buddhist scholars that they encountered across the region. By the eleventh century, though, Buddhism's existence had become more elusive. The vagueness of the available descriptions of the faith from around this period testify to this.(64) The Mongols changed this situation. Their activities produced a "second spring" for Buddhism across the Middle East, which then resulted in renewed and extensive Islamic-Buddhist interaction.(65)

Rashīd al-Dīn's discussion of Buddhism, included in the section on the history of India in the *Collected Chronicles*, is one of the most remarkable documents of this renewal.(66) The first part of his *History of India* treats the geography and history of the region; the second examines its religious landscape, with special attention paid to Buddhism. It provides a biography of the Buddha and describes the Wheel of Life and forms of worship of the Buddha Maitreya. It also features lavish illustrations of important episodes in the Buddha's life and landscapes of India.(67) Taken together, these passages are the most extensive and best-informed discussion of Buddhism in any Islamic source before the advent of modernity.

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(63) Richard Foltz, 'Buddhism in the Iranian World', *The Muslim World* 100, no. 2–3 (2010): 204–14.

(64) Daniel Gimaret, 'Bouddha et Les Bouddhistes Dans La Tradition Musulmane', *Journal Asiatique* 257 (1969): 273–316.

(65) One remarkable case study, that of sufi Alāʾ al-Dawla Simnānī, is discussed in Devin DeWeese, 'ʿAlāʾ Al-Dawla Simnānī's Religious Encounters at the Mongol Court near Tabriz', in *Politics, Patronage, and the Transmission of Knowledge in 13th-15th Century Tabriz*, ed. Judith Pfeiffer (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 35–76.

Overall, Rashīd al-Dīn's account of Buddhism is sympathetic. This is clear from his biography of the Buddha, which is a key element of his discussion of this religion. While his account adheres closely to the structure and contents of the classic Mahayana traditions, it also deploys Islamic terminology and concepts to cast the Buddha as a kind of monotheistic prophet. In this, he follows a pattern established by earlier Islamic scholars, who regularly sought to identify unknown prophets in foreign religions in terms of the Qur'anic assertion that "every community is sent a messenger."(68) According to Rashīd al-Dīn, Siva, Vishnu, and Brahma were also prophets in India before the Buddha, and each of them established religions named after themselves. The Buddha had denounced them as false prophets and brought a new message to guide followers on a "straight path," an image that occurs often in the Qur'an, including in a passage in the first *sura* that Muslims recite in daily prayers ("guide us to a straight path").(69) Despite his noble lineage, the Buddha had renounced wealth and power to live in poverty and had practiced traditionally Islamic virtues like mercy, compassion, and kindness. Interestingly, Rashīd al-Dīn also credits the Buddha with having written a book called the *Abidharma*. In fact, the *Abidharma* is not the Buddha's "holy book" but a collection of works on his teachings written by later Buddhist scholars. Whether Rashīd al-Dīn was aware of this fact is unclear. In any case, this detail is clearly less important to him than drawing a parallel between Buddhism and Islam and portraying the Buddha as a kind of Indian counterpart of the Prophet Muhammad.

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(66) Rashīd al-Dīn, *Jāmiʿ Al-Tawārīkh: Tārīkh-i Hind Wa Sind Wa Kashmīr*, ed. Muḥammad Rawshan (Teheran: Markaz-i Pazhuhishī-i Mīrās-i Maktūb, 2006). For an overview of the text's contents, see Karl Jahn, 'Kamālashrī - Rashīd al-Dīn's "Life and Teaching of Buddha": A Source for the Buddhism of the Mongol Period', *Central Asiatic Journal* 2, no. 2 (1956): 81–128. On Rashīd al-Dīn's engagement with Buddhism, see Brack, *An Afterlife for the Khan*.

(67) Sheila Canby, 'Depictions of Buddha Sakyamuni in the Jami' al-Tavarikh and the Majma' al-Tavarikh', *Muqarnas* 10 (1993): 299–310.

(68) M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, trans., *The Qur'an* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 10:47. For another instance in which an Islamic author, al-Shahrastānī (d. 1153), described the Buddha as a prophet in Islamic garb, see Bruce B. Lawrence, 'Shahrastānī on Indian Idol Worship', *Studia Islamica*, no. 38 (1973): 61–73.

(69) Rashīd al-Dīn, *Tarikh-i Hind*, 103.

The same sympathetic attitude characterizes Rashīd al-Dīn's descriptions of Buddhist beliefs and practices. One particularly striking example is his explication of Buddhist beliefs about the afterlife. Overall, the tone of the discussion is factual. At the same time, he emphasizes commonalities in beliefs with Islam rather than differences. He explains that Buddhists recognize six levels of existence, spanning from the hellish realms to the heavenly ones.(70) He provides a detailed description of the highest and lowest levels of existence—that is, the various heavens and hells of Buddhism. He notes that people who demonstrate exceptional piety, chastity, and freedom from egoism rise to the highest paradise, while those who inflict suffering on other living beings are consigned to different levels of hell based on the gravity of their wrongdoings. He also provides a detailed account of Buddhist beliefs about reincarnation and explains how good conduct in one's life results in a positive reincarnation and good fortune, while negative behaviors and attitudes lead inexorably to regeneration as a miserable human being, an animal, or even a demonic creature.(71) According to him, Buddhism and Islam are in broad agreement about what constitutes proper vs. improper behavior. He seems to go out of his way to present Buddhism as similar to Islam. For instance, he identifies the building of hospices (*ribāṭ*), schools

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(70) Rashīd al-Dīn, 130–37.

(71) Rashīd al-Dīn, 138–48.

(*madrasa*), and Sufi lodges (*khānqāh*) as meritorious acts in Buddhism that lead to a fortunate rebirth.(72)

Although his analysis of Buddhism is included in his history of India, Rashīd al-Dīn also acknowledges the religion's influence in China. The nineteenth chapter of his historical account provides extensive information on the spread of Buddhism across Asia.(73) After identifying Ceylon as the only purely Buddhist country, he then describes the religion's expansion throughout India, Central Asia, North China (*Khiṭā'* and *Chīn*), Southern China (*Manzī*), and the area that is now Yunnan province (*Qarajang*). The account of the Buddha's life and predication in the section on China emphasizes the importance of Buddhism in China further.(74) There, Rashīd al-Dīn again presents the Buddha as a monotheistic prophet who prepared the way for greater prophets like the Prophet Muhammad. He does this from a distinctly Sinocentric perspective, though, reflecting the views found in his Chinese sources. Thus, he includes specific details on the spread of Buddhism in China. He explains, for instance, that it first arrived in the realm in the twenty-fourth year of the reign of King Zhao of the Zhou dynasty (r. 977–957 BCE). After that Buddhism flourished in China, eventually becoming as widespread there as it is in its native India.

Rashīd al-Dīn's informed discussion of Buddhism raises, again, the question of his sources. Scholars have traditionally identified a Buddhist monk from Kashmir named Kamalashri as his main source on the subject.(75) However, this identification is problematic. Qāshānī describes Kamalashri as the head of a diverse team of monks that he tasked with the compilation of the section on India for his universal history, which Rashīd al-Dīn later incorporated into his own work, as I discussed above.(76) This account not only casts doubt on the extent of Rashīd al-Dīn's collaboration with the monk but also makes it difficult to identify the source of any particular information as any particular person. The description of Chinese Buddhist monks and sources in his section on China further supports this point. In fact, his discussion of Buddhism incorporates elements from a number of traditions: Sanskrit Nikaya, Chinese Mahayana Buddhism, Central Asian Buddhism, and Tibetan Buddhism.(77) This blending of traditions suggests that he drew from a variety of sources, both written and oral, making it impossible for him to make clear distinctions between different traditions. We should consider his account of Buddhism, then, to be a reflection of specifically Ilkhanid Buddhism: "a complex weave of many threads," as Roxann Prazniak put it, that resulted from the convergence of traditions from across the Buddhist ecumene.(78)

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(72) Rashīd al-Dīn, 143–44.

(73) Rashīd al-Dīn, 162–64.

(74) Rashīd al-Dīn, *Tārīkh-i Aqwām-i Pādshāhān-i Khatāy*, 33–35. For a detailed analysis of this passage, see Calzolaio and Fiaschetti, 'Prophets of the East (Part 1)'.

(75) Jahn, 'Kamālashrī - Rashīd al-Dīn's "Life and Teaching of Buddha": A Source for the Buddhism of the Mongol Period'.

Moving beyond Buddhism: Rashīd al-Dīn's presentation of the lives of Laozi and Confucius, the founders of Daoism and Confucianism, are the earliest to be found in any Islamic source. He introduces them in the section on Chinese history from the *Collected Chronicles*, immediately after his passages on the Buddha.(79) He places them in specific places and times, describes their apparently exceptional physical and intellectual qualities, and notes how pervasive their doctrines are in China. A comparison of these sections with passages from Chinese texts created within the same social and intellectual context as Rashīd al-Dīn's sources reveals that he replicated his sources closely, often using nearly identical language.(80) He also makes minor but significant alterations, however, to present Daoism and Confucianism in terms that would be familiar in an Islamic context, as he did in the case of Buddhism, discussed above. He portrays Laozi as a monotheistic prophet, for instance. He also describes Laozi's message and religious teachings using technical terms from Sufism, and he does this extensively in his discussion of Confucianism as well. Rashīd al-Dīn's sympathetic attitude towards Buddhism can most easily be attributed to the prominence of this faith at the Ilkhanid court. His efforts to cast Daoism and Confucianism in a favorable light seems to reflect a desire to build a conceptual bridge between his audience and China by introducing unfamiliar aspects of Chinese culture and thought in terms that his Islamic readers would readily understand.

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(76) Brack, *An Afterlife for the Khan*, 29.

(77) Brack, 29.

(78) Prazniak, 'Ilkhanid Buddhism', 651.

(79) Rashīd al-Dīn, *Tārīkh-i Aqwām-i Pādshāhān-i Khatāy*, 36–38.

(80) Calzolaio and Fiaschetti, 'Prophets of the East (Part 2)'.

3.4. Science and Technology

Rashīd al-Dīn was trained as a physician and it was his medical expertise that first brought him to the attention of the Ilkhanid royal household. Later, as a high-ranking state official, he was responsible for introducing a number of practical innovations to the Ilkhanate, including new crops and technological advancements. With this in mind, it is unsurprising that science and technology was another major area of focus in his studies of China.

We can begin with Rashīd al-Dīn's engagement with Chinese medicine. The Mongols greatly respected healers of all kinds; their abilities combined practical usefulness with an intriguing aura of mystery and spiritual power. The Mongols traditionally relied on their own healers, whose techniques were rooted in both empirical knowledge and magical beliefs. During the imperial period, though, the Mongol elite also tapped into the medical knowledges of their subject peoples. Members of the Chinggisid royal household assembled teams of personal physicians—some conscripted and others entering service voluntarily to seek fortune—who accompanied them on administrative and military missions. These court physicians were often relocated throughout the empire, so that in Mongol courts throughout the empire healers of different traditions mingled and interacted.(81) The first major systematic medical tradition that the Mongols encountered in their campaigns was the Chinese one. When they then journeyed to the Middle East, they thus brought Chinese physicians with them, along with their diagnostic techniques, therapies, medicines, and books. They also encouraged Islamic physicians in their retinues to familiarize themselves with the Chinese medicine that they knew and trusted.(82)

This is the context in which Rashīd al-Dīn was exposed to Chinese medicine. This is made clear in his introduction to his only surviving book on Chinese medicine, the *Treasure Book of the Ilkhans*.(83) As I noted above, this book is the only surviving text from a broader translation project that sought to introduce Islamic scholars to Chinese scholarship in a variety of fields, and especially medicine and pharmacology. In his introduction, Rashīd al-Dīn notes that Islamic scholars had traditionally built their knowledge on the basis of translated works from Greeks and Sanskrit. Either due to their inability to access primary sources and language barriers or because of prejudices regarding their quality, they had neglected Chinese works. This changed, he says, with the arrival of the Ilkhans, who introduced Chinese scholars to the Middle East, fostered collaborations between these scholars and Islamic ones at their court, and sponsored Sino-Persian translations like the *Treasure Book*. As an example of this development, Rashīd al-Dīn notes a project led by the polymath Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī (d. 1274), who was ordered by Hülegü to build an observatory and work alongside a Daoist master from China to create a new set of astronomical tables, thereby combining the findings of Islamic and Chinese scholars.(84)

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(81) Paul D. Buell, ‘How Did Persian and Other Western Medical Knowledge Move East, and Chinese West? A Look at the Role of Rashīd al-Dīn and Others’, *Asian Medicine* 3, no. 2 (2007): 279–95.

(82) Allsen, *Culture and Conquest*, 141–44.

(83) Istanbul Aya Sofya 3596, ff. 2v-41r.

(84) On this joint Sino-Islamic project, see Yoichi Isahaya, ‘Fu Mengzhi: “The Sage of Cathay” in Mongol Iran and Astral Sciences along the Silk Roads’, in *Along the Silk Roads in Mongol Eurasia: Generals, Merchants, and Intellectuals*, ed. Michal Biran, Jonathan Brack, and Francesca Fiaschetti (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020), 238–54.

We are able to appreciate the results of these efforts in the *Treasure Book* itself, which includes annotated translations of several Chinese medical works. Although the precise nature of the book's sources has been a matter of debate, it has now been confirmed that its principal source is the popular twelfth-century medical text *Maijue*, attributed to Gao Yangsheng (d. 1279).(85) Rashīd al-Dīn's decision to focus on a recent text suggests that his aim is to provide Islamic physicians with access to the "latest" Chinese medical discoveries. At the same time, this commitment to accuracy is balanced by an effort to adapt the contents of these sources to conform with Islamic principles, as a way of making them more palatable to Islamic physicians. His discussion of the flow of *qi*, described in Chinese medicine as a vital force and constituent element of all living entities, is a case in point.(86) In Chinese medical texts, *qi* flows through the body like water and its movement is regulated by appropriate bodily practices or the guidance of a physician. Rashīd al-Dīn saw similarities between this concept and the contemporary Islamic understanding of blood circulation, in which blood flows from the right ventricle of the heart to the left via the lungs. Thus, in the *Treasure Book*, the original description of the circulation of *qi* is transformed into a new theory about the circulation of blood that flows continuously throughout the body in an unending loop.

Like the *Collected Chronicles*, the *Treasure Book* also contains illustrations that greatly enhance its cultural and historical value.(87) The *Treasure Book*'s illustrations are derived from Chinese medical works, principally a 1269 edition of the *Classic of 81 Difficult Issues* compiled by the thirteenth century scholar Li

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(85) On the *Treasure Book* and its sources, see Felix Klein-Franke and Ming Zhu, 'Rashid Al-Din as a Transmitter of Chinese Medicine to the West', *Le Muséon* 109 (1996): 395–404; Wang and Lo, 'Blood or Qi Circulation?'; Lo and Wang, 'Chasing the Vermilion Bird: Late Medieval Alchemical Transformations in The Treasure Book of Ilkhan on Chinese Science and Techniques'; Guang Shi, 'Wang Shuhe Maijue in Iran', in *Non-Han Literature Along the Silk Road*, ed. Xiao Li (Singapore: Springer, 2020), 47–59.

(86) I rely here on Wang and Lo, 'Blood or Qi Circulation?', 154–59.

(87) For a detailed discussion, see Lo and Wang, 'Chasing the Vermilion Bird: Late Medieval Alchemical Transformations in The Treasure Book of Ilkhan on Chinese Science and Techniques'.

Jiong. They are some of the earliest surviving examples of Chinese divinatory, medical, and alchemical illustrations. Just as Rashīd al-Dīn adapted the original text at various points to align with what he understood to be the preferences of Islamic scholars, he also chose which images to include according to the same principle. Most of the images elucidate Chinese concepts related to the physiology of the inner organs, *yin* and *yang*, and the *mai*, a term which encompasses aspects of the pulse, blood vessels, and the body's muscular contours (figures 1 and 2). Some illustrations, though, are missing. One glaring example is the figures related to acupuncture, a practice that may well have seemed strange and perhaps even counterintuitive to Islamic physicians. Thus, as Persis Berlekamp says, while the *Treasure Book* and its illustrations reveal the extent of medical exchange in Mongol Eurasia, they also demonstrate its limits.(88)

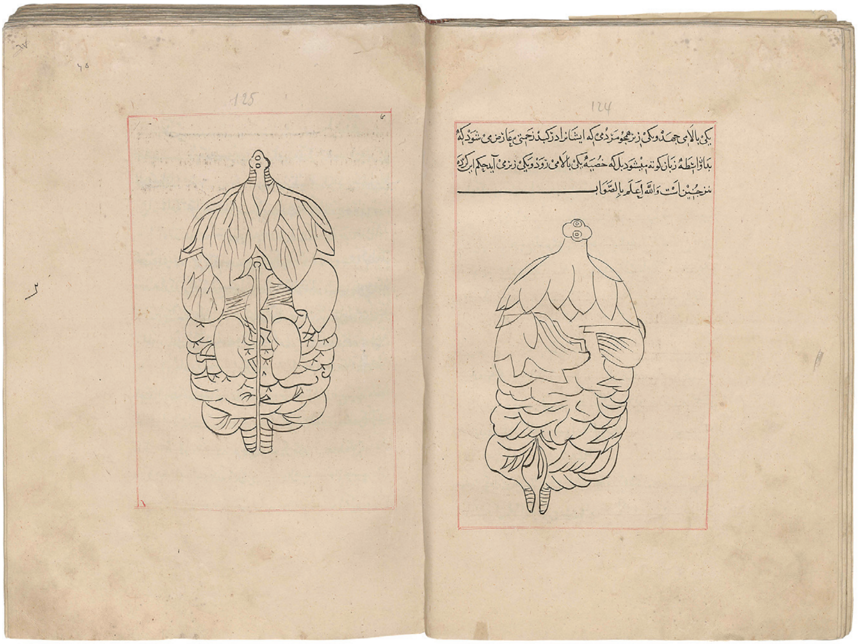

Figure 1: Rashīd al-Dīn's adaptation of Li Jiong's diagrams depicting the internal organs of the human body. *Tanksūqnāma*, fols 65r–65v.
© Süleymaniye Library, Aya Sofya Collection. Türkiye Yazma Eserler Kurumu Başkanlığı

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(88) Persis Berlekamp, 'The Limits of Artistic Exchange in Fourteenth-Century Tabriz: The Paradox of Rashīd al-Dīn's Book on Chinese Medicine, Part I', *Muqarnas* 27 (2010): 209–50.

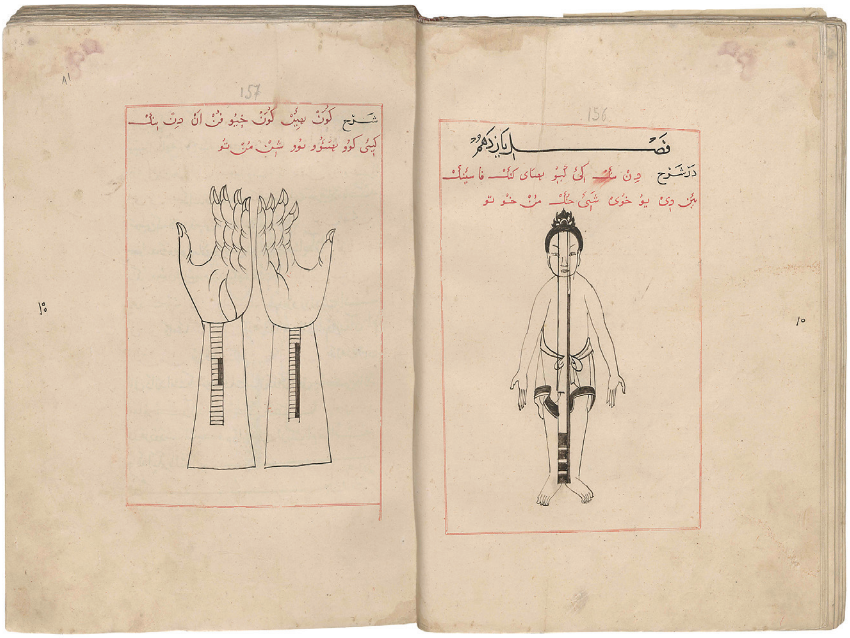

Figure 2: Rashid al-Din’s adaption of diagrams showing different anatomical locations on the forearms (left) and the entire human body (right). *Tanksūqnāma*, fols 81r–81v. © Süleymaniye Library, Aya Sofya Collection. Türkiye Yazma Eserler Kurumu Başkanlığı

While it is primarily a medical work, the *Treasure Book* also covers scientific topics beyond medicine. This is best seen in the introduction, in which Rashīd al-Dīn engages in an apology for the unique character of Chinese culture. Having established the importance and legitimacy of Chinese scholarship from an Islamic perspective, he then introduces some of the major Chinese achievements in science and technology, particularly those that are instrumental in ruling an empire. He discusses paper money, for example, the use of which was widespread in Yuan China but almost totally unknown in the Middle East. In his universal history, Rashīd al-Dīn describes the Ilkhans’ attempt to introduce paper currency in their realm and the backlash that followed.(89) However, in the *Treasure Book*, he supports this technology, and describes it as a sort of philosopher’s stone that can turn paper into gold.(90) He also expresses his enthusiasm for block-printing, an absolutely central technology in world history. He provides the most detailed description of block-printing to date in any language, including Chinese.(91) In his history of China we learn that the Chinese have important books copied onto wooden tables by skilled calligraphers, and that the texts are then verified by scholars. Next, engravers are summoned to cut out the characters. Finally, the carved plates are numbered and stored in sealed bags in a dedicated place. When someone wants a copy of a particular book, then, they can have a copy printed on demand for a specific price.(92) In this way, he adds in the *Treasure Book*, the Chinese can accomplish in a day what a scribe would take a year to do.(93) Thus, Rashīd al-Dīn was not only aware of this technology but also highly impressed by its potential; he even considered using it to reproduce his own works.

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(89) Rashīd al-Dīn, *Compendium of Chronicles*, 578–80.

(90) Istanbul Aya Sofya 3596, f. 20v.

Drawing on his experience with Chinese books, Rashīd al-Dīn’s most innovative examination of Chinese technology concerns the Chinese writing system itself and its basic units, Chinese characters.(94) Historical scholarship on the global reception of the Chinese writing system most often focuses on its discovery by Europeans in the sixteenth century. But the *Treasure Book* provides a detailed analysis of Chinese writing and its advantages and drawbacks vis-à-vis alphabetic writing systems more than two centuries prior to this. Rashīd al-Dīn is thus the first Western Eurasian scholar to study written Chinese.

Although Rashīd al-Dīn discusses the Chinese script in his history of China, his most important passages on the topic are found in his introduction to the *Treasure Book*. This discussion, which reflects his perspective as a vizier in the Mongol “world empire,” centers on its capacity to facilitate communication across vast distances, and thus its potential as an imperial technology. He describes the Chinese script is an ideographic system, comprised of as many pictures as there are words. He acknowledges that this system is clearly more cumbersome than an alphabetic one. But he argues that Chinese characters' unique ability to convey ideas directly to the mind through vision (that is, without the requirement of speech) makes them akin to mathematical notation. This means, he suggests, that anyone can express their thoughts in their native language simply by arranging the corresponding characters. He concludes that Chinese characters are an ideal tool for a multilingual empire, because they allow people to communicate in writing across linguistic and cultural boundaries. His analysis, which is based on the false premise that Chinese characters are an ideographic system of transcription, is—it must be said—inherently flawed.(95) Nonetheless, the depth and sophistication of his analysis is remarkable and reflects both the extent of his engagement with Chinese civilization and his intellectual stance as a Sinophile.

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(91) Allsen, *Culture and Conquest*, 179.

(92) Rashīd al-Dīn, *Tārīkh-i Aqwām-i Pādshāhān-i Khatāy*, 8–9.

(93) Istanbul Aya Sofya 3596, f. 19r.

(94) Istanbul Aya Sofya 3596, ff. 12v-19r. For a more detailed analysis of these passages, see Francesco Calzolaio, ‘Reconstructing Babel: Rashīd al-Dīn, Chinese Writing, and the Quest for a Universal Script in Mongol Iran’, *Central Asiatic Journal*, forthcoming.

Conclusions

Rashīd al-Dīn's pioneering scholarly studies of China are a groundbreaking development in Islamic intellectual history. They represent the advent of Sinology in the Islamic world and reflect the broader material, cultural, and intellectual exchange that the Mongols facilitated. The establishment of the Mongol Empire created unprecedented opportunities for cross-cultural interaction. The extensive investigations into Chinese civilization that Rashīd al-Dīn began in light of these connections have no direct precedent in world history. His contributions, in the form of the *Collected Chronicles*, the *Treasure Book*, and other works like the *Works and Beings*, provided his readers with original insights into Chinese geography, history, medical practices, and administrative systems. Rashīd al-Dīn's intellectual project did not simply concern the accumulation of knowledge; it was a systematic effort to integrate and present Chinese achievements to an Islamic audience. This makes him an enormously important figure in the history of the transmission of knowledge across cultural boundaries. Rashīd al-Dīn's Chinese studies are important monuments to the transformative potential of cross-cultural exchange in the Mongol period. His work laid the foundation for future scholarship, in particular the investigations of Timurid scholars (1370-1507), and demonstrates the interconnectedness of the Islamic and Chinese worlds. Further research into his contributions to Sinology will shed more light on this remarkable scholar and the broader intellectual developments of his time.

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(95) For a useful deconstruction of the "ideographic myth" and other misconceptions related to Chinese writing, see John DeFrancis, *The Chinese Language: Fact and Fantasy* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1984).

About the Author

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King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies (KFCRIS)

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The Center contains a library that preserves precious Islamic manuscripts and huge databases in the field of humanities. It also includes the Museums Department, which contains six valuable collections that the Center preserves, as well as the Museum of Arab Islamic Art. The Center contains the Al-Faisal Cultural House, its executive arm in the publishing industry, which publishes books, cultural and peer-reviewed journals. KFCRIS also includes Darat Al Faisal, which is concerned with documenting the biography of King Faisal and his family in addition to preserving his legacy.

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