

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Language Translation and the Treaty of Nerchinsk: Linguistic Aspects of Seventeenth-Century Qing-Russian Diplomacy

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This study of the 1689 Treaty of Nerchinsk within the context of Qing history focuses on the linguistic dimensions of the treaty-making process and emphasises the significance of language and translation in establishing the agreement, a relatively new focus in treaty scholarship. The study examines Qing-Russian court-to-court correspondence as part of Qing multilingual governance. It argues that cross-language translation was essential in overcoming linguistic barriers, enabling negotiation through intensive verbal exchange and the production of authoritative written texts that required sophisticated cross-linguistic understanding. Drawing on sources from both Qing and Russian archives, the research situates Qing-Russian correspondence within the broader linguistic framework of the Qing state and analyses the translation institutions of the Lifanyuan and the Grand Secretariat, which together formed a “linguistic bureaucracy” responsible for managing multilingual translation across the empire. The study addresses questions that have been little explored in existing scholarship, including why the Latin text was treated as the mutually agreed version of the treaty, why the Qing version was written in Manchu rather than Chinese, and why Mongolian, previously a principal translation language, was excluded from the final treaty texts. By reassessing the translation role of European Jesuits before and during the negotiations, the study highlights a form of seventeenth-century “linguistic globalisation” and reframes the Treaty of Nerchinsk as a case of global engagement in late seventeenth-century Qing history.

1689 年《尼布楚條約》的締結依賴複雜的多語翻譯機制，此機制尚無系統研究。清朝作為“翻譯帝國”，對俄交涉高度依賴它語轉譯。本文基於滿、俄檔案，考察清俄信函往來，聚焦滿、俄語先後借助蒙古語和拉丁語轉譯之實踐，揭示跨語溝通如何在互信匱乏中促成談判與文本達成。文章將清俄交涉置於清廷“翻譯官僚體系”框架中，分析理藩院與內閣翻譯機構運作，解釋為何拉丁文本終成雙方公認之條約正本；清方僅以滿文簽署條約（中文本為事後按滿文本補譯）；曾為主要中介語的蒙古語未入條約語種。文章還重審耶穌會士翻譯角色，指出該條約實為滿、俄、蒙、拉丁四大語言世界之互動產物，體現 17 世紀“語言全球化”特徵，屬超越雙邊外交關係的多邊國際參與特例。

Keywords: Treaty of Nerchinsk, Mongolian, Latin, cross-language translation, linguistic globalisation

關鍵詞： 尼布楚條約，外交信函，翻譯語言，蒙文，拉丁文，跨語翻譯，語言國際化

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Introduction

This study of the Treaty of Nerchinsk (August 28, 1689)¹ between the Manchu-ruled Qing Dynasty (1636–1911) and Romanov Tsarist Russia (1613–1917) does not revisit the treaty contents, translation of original texts, or the treaty’s impact on long-term bilateral peace, which have been extensively studied by scholars in the field.² Instead, it fully focuses on the unexplored or less explored linguistic aspects³ in the historical process that germinated, gestated, negotiated, and documented the Treaty during the first half of the Kangxi reign (1662–1722). From the linguistic perspective, the Qing was a “translation empire”⁴ involving multilingual communication among Manchu, Chinese, and various Inner Asian languages – Mongolian, Tibetan, Todo/Clear Mongolian, Uyghur, etc.⁵ As a critical part of governmental work, cross-language translation was the linguistic foundation for developing such a diverse empire. The relationship with Russia increased the existing language complexity in a different way from Inner Asia, and translation between Manchu and Russian in the two courts’ correspondence eventually led to the establishment of a unique treaty, which was a diplomatic rather than a Qing internal event. Isolating the Treaty of Nerchinsk from its language and

¹ This day is recorded the twenty-fourth day of the seventh month of the Kangxi emperor’s (r. 1662–1722) twenty-eighth year in *Qingdai zhong’e guanxi dang’an shiliao xuanbian* 清代中俄关系档案史料选编 (*Selected Archives of the Sino-Russian Correspondence of the Qing Dynasty*), compiled by the *First Historical Archives of China* and published by Zhonghua shuju in Beijing in 1981, 125. This source will be referred to as QD in this article. Different dates for the treaty’s conclusion have appeared as follows: August 27 [old style] (Donnelly 2008, 168), August 27, 1869 (Yakovleva 1958, 185), September 6, 1689 (Perdue 2010, 351, and Stephan 1994, 31), September 6, 1689 in the Gregorian Calendar, which was the twenty-fourth day of the seventh month of the Kangxi emperor’s twenty-eighth year in the Qing calendar and August 27, 1689 in the Russian calendar (*Zhong’e bianjie tiaoyueji* 中俄边界条约集 [Collection of Sino-Russian border treaties] 1973, 1), and October 19, 1689 (Ye 2010, 179).

² The representative publications are found in the quotations and bibliography in this article. It is worthy of note that the article written by Bu Ping listed thirty-five publications by Japanese scholar Yoshida Kin’ichi (吉田金一) on the Qing-Russian historical relationship (Bu Ping 1990, 34), providing a good representation of the extent of Japanese scholarship.

³ The use of “linguistic” in this article refers to languages and language-based communication through translation. It differs from the discipline of linguistics, which is the scientific study of a language including sound, grammar, meaning, language families, etc.

⁴ Credit for referring to the Qing dynasty as a “translation empire” should be given to Henrietta Harrison’s *The Perils of Interpreting: The Extraordinary Lives of Two Translators between Qing China and the British Empire* (Princeton University Press, 2021) and Lydia H. Liu’s *The Clash of Empires: The Invention of China in Modern World Making* (Harvard University Press, 2004). These two works have significantly contributed to this concept by discussing the critical roles of language and translation for the relationships between the Qing and the Western powers and the complex Qing systems for translation and multilingual management.

⁵ “Inner Asia”, according to Peter Perdue, “usually refers to the territories on the Chinese side of the border after the mid-eighteenth century (Manchuria, Mongolia, Xinjiang, Tibet), while Central Asia refers to those on the Russian side” (Perdue 1998, 264). Aligning with this definition, this article uses “Inner Asia” to stand for Qing Mongolia, Tibet, Todo-speaking northern Xinjiang, and Uyghur-speaking southern Xinjiang, including the multi-ethnic region called Qinghai in their midst.

The “Mongolian language” in this article means the standard Mongolian used by the Inner, Khalkha, Qinghai, Alashan, and Ejin (or Ejina in Chinese characters) Mongol groups (Hei Long, 2016, 89 Note 2). The Mongols of Kobdo, Dörböd, Torghud, and Khoshud used the Todo/Clear Mongolian which is “a modification and refinement of the UIGHUR-MONGOLIAN SCRIPT” (Atwood, 2004, 110-111) and requires translation to become standard Mongolian.

translation foundation has left important questions unanswered, such as why Manchu, rather than Chinese, was the official language from the pre-treaty Qing-Russian court-to-court correspondence to the written Qing treaty text, why Mongolian worked for third-language translation but was replaced by Latin, and why the treaty text in Latin was agreed as, according to Peter Perdue, the authoritative document (Perdue 2012, 510), while the two treaty texts of the negotiating countries in Manchu and Russian, were, according to Walter Fuchs, auxiliary documents (Fuchs 1940, 548).

In this article, the seventeenth-century Qing-Russian correspondence is investigated in the context of the Qing overall linguistic administration that linked the Manchu court to diverse populations and their societies within or surrounding Qing territory during the Kangxi reign. Linguistic management was run by a “linguistic bureaucracy” inside the Qing governing system, consisting of official routines operated by the language and translation agencies under the *turlergi golo be dasara jurgan* (Manchu for Ministry of managing the outer [non-Chinese] regions) or in Chinese Lifanyuan 理藩院 (Ministry of managing the outer [non-Chinese] regions) and the Neige 內閣 (Grand Secretariat). It was within this system that the Qing-Russian correspondence was processed, by following the Inner Asian model, which was third-language translation in multilingual communication. In this correspondence, however, an exceptional language (Latin) and exceptional personnel (European Jesuits as translators) oriented the Qing management of state-level communication with Russia away from the Inner Asian model. The language- and translation-based Inner Asian governance and treaty-making communication with Russia represent two tracks of empire-building, in relation to the external power of Russia versus the historically connected and gradually integrated Inner Asia. This study, aiming to position the Treaty of Nerchinsk as a linguistic project, is new to treaty scholarship.

Recent studies of language and translation in Qing history are taken as food for thought when examining the linguistic treaty-making with Russia as part of Qing statecraft. Deng Ke has discussed the “state linguistic capability” in the Qing administration (Deng 2022, 58), while Saarela has pointed out that languages “have a lot to tell us” about Qing history, so “how the language was used” should be “the subject of a detailed historical study” (Saarela 2024, 1). According to Gao and Moratto, “translation policy plays a pivotal role in governance” (Gao and Moratto 2024, 169), while “the shared preoccupation with Manchu brought Europe and East Asia closer” (Saarela 2020, 2). Mosca has emphasised the “linguistic capacities” and “the relationship between Europeans and the languages of the Qing empire” (Mosca 2019, 2). This study follows the call to correct the phenomenon that “the significance of translation has often been marginalized ... particularly within institutional frameworks” (Gao and Moratto 2024, 169).

This study uses the concept of “linguistic globalisation” to understand the Treaty of Nerchinsk based on the interaction of the four languages involved in the treaty-making – Manchu, Russian, Mongolian, and Latin – from four different linguistic worlds – East Asia,

Inner Asia, Eastern Slavic Russia, and the parts of Europe where Latin was the shared language of the educated class. Before Latin translation and the active engagement of the Jesuits came to mediate the court-level dialogue, the Qing and Russian courts in their separate linguistic worlds had no language professionals available for direct translation between Manchu and Russian. Mongolian mediation during the 1650s-1676 helped but did not resolve the language barrier. The use of Latin and the Jesuits changed this situation and facilitated mutual communication during 1676-1689, which paved the road to the treaty negotiation. During the negotiation, the Jesuits' Latin skills, with their consulting roles, enabled them to turn nearly hopeless disputes between the two sides – full of mutual distrust, disagreements, and hostile feelings – into a significant outcome, the “first treaty made by China with a European power and the first to be negotiated according to European diplomatic practices” (Donnelly 2008, 169; cf. Myasnikov 2012, 514). Without language and translation, the treaty-created peace between the Manchu-ruled East and Inner Asian empire and the newly emerged “major Pacific maritime power” Russia (Chapygin 2014, 1860) would not have been possible. The reciprocal treaty relationship (Zhao Qi 2019, 1908-1913) established by the Treaty of Nerchinsk helped the two empires develop into world powers in their own ways, making the 1689 treaty event a global pivotal moment. This outcome supports the statement that “the Treaty of Nerchinsk stands out in world history as a remarkable victory for diplomatic cross-cultural interchange” (Perdue 2010, 341).

The language context, the function of translation, the Qing Empire's multilingual governance, and linguistic global interaction form the essential core of this study of the Qing-Russian correspondence and the Treaty of Nerchinsk. In this case, the linguistic aspects guide the understanding of how language and translation could bring about a significant historical event.

Primary sources and research method

This study of the Treaty of Nerchinsk will focus on Section 1, Part 1 of the Qing archival sourcebook, *Qingdai zhong'e guanxi dang'an shiliao xuanbian* 清代中俄關係檔案史料選編 (Selected Archives of the Sino-Russian Correspondence of the Qing Dynasty) as its basic primary source. This sourcebook was compiled by the First Historical Archives of China and published by Zhonghua shuju in Beijing in 1981. It collected archives from several important historical collections: *Qingdai neige quanzong zhi qiju zhuce* 清代內閣全宗之起居註冊 (Qing Grand Secretariat Records: Court Diaries for All Reigns), *Like shishu* 禮科史書 (Historical Books of the Office of Scrutiny for Rites), *Bingke shishu* 兵科史書 (Historical Books of the Office of Scrutiny for War), *Pingding luosha fanglüe gaoben* 平定羅剎方略稿本 (Drafts of Strategies for Pacifying the Russians), and *Junjichu quanzong zhi Eluosi laiwen dang* 軍機處全宗之俄羅斯來文檔 (Grand Council Copies: Letters Coming from Russia in

All Reigns) (this last all in Russian), along with *Manwen chuosì dang* 滿文俄羅斯檔 (Russian Archives Written in Manchu), and *Heilongjiang jiāngjūn yamen quanzōng zhī Heilongjiang dìfāng dāng'ān* 黑龍江將軍衙門全宗之黑龍江地方檔案 (Records of the Heilongjiang General's Office: Heilongjiang Local Archives for All Reigns). The two hundred and eighty-five pieces of Qing correspondence to Russia written in Manchu are identified as the main documents. Many of them are followed by the corresponding Russian responses as *fùjiàn* 附件 (appendices) and by the Russian writings to the Qing that related to a Qing letter in content as *fùlù* 附錄 (addenda). Throughout the sourcebook, the Qing writings to the Russian court or authorities were originally written in Manchu, except for the attachments in other languages. The Russian writings to the Qing court or authorities, whether Russian-initiated or in response to the Qing, usually included equivalent copies in one or more of Manchu, Latin, and Mongolian. The Kangxi and Yongzheng (r. 1723–1735) courts translated Russian and Latin copies into Manchu; their translation into Chinese was prohibited. Scholars at the First Historical Archives of China translated them all into Chinese for publication of this Chinese edition of the archival sourcebook (QD 1982, 18) without attaching the originals in other languages. Although archival versions of documents are preferable to translated editions for scholarly research, this translated collection, compiled by reputable academies with strong expertise in translating Manchu archives, offers valuable information. The details about the language and translation of the Treaty of Nerchinsk have not been explored, at least not thoroughly, even after forty-four years since its publication. Progress in this area of scholarship need not be delayed until the original Manchu texts become publicly accessible, a date still unknown.

Yoshida Kin'ichi 吉田金一, a twentieth-century Japanese scholar specialising in the Qing-Russian relationship, highly valued the *Selected Archives of the Sino-Russian Correspondence of the Qing Dynasty*. According to him, this sourcebook had an archival coverage that exceeded that of earlier sources. Although it omitted some archival records of events that historians of his time knew about, the comprehensive scope of this collection deserves high credit (Yoshida 1983, 60). To this day, the QD volumes remain the most important repository for the linguistic study of the Treaty of Nerchinsk, yet no systematic exploration of it has been developed.

To avoid the limitations of the QD sourcebook and to verify, enrich, and provide context for the Russian-Qing correspondence recorded in the QD sourcebook, a Russian sourcebook has also been chosen, because it aligns with the Qing primary materials in time, content, contact events, and diplomatic visits. This Russian sourcebook is *Дипломатическое Собрание Делъ Между Россійскимъ и Китайскимъ Государствами съ 1619 по 1792-й Годъ* (*Diplomatic Meetings on Affairs Between the Russian and Chinese States from 1619 to 1792*), compiled by Nikolaï Nikolaevich Bantysh-Kamenskiï (1737–1814) and published in 1882 by the Kazan Imperial University Press (hereafter referred to as DA). It

contains the original Qing-Russian official correspondence stored in court-designated archival offices. It includes firsthand missives from the Tsar to the Qing emperor, and also the supporting documents that provided background information relevant to this correspondence. According to P. T. Yakovleva, a Russian scholar with expertise in the study of the Treaty of Nerchinsk, this sourcebook collected all of the letters from the Russian court to the Qing court and from the Qing court to the Russian court (Yakovleva 1958, 7). The Chinese translation of the Russian sourcebook, which is entitled *E-Zhong liangguo waijiao wenxian huibian, 1619-1792* 俄中兩國外交文獻彙編, 1619-1792 (Collection of diplomatic correspondence between Russia and China, 1619-1792; hereafter referred to as EZ) was published in 1982 by the Commercial Press in Beijing. For the sake of the scholars who read only Russian or only Chinese, this article will offer page numbers for both the Russian edition and the Chinese edition of this sourcebook.

There are other primary sources in both Russian and Chinese, such as, on the Russian side, “Русско-китайские отношения в XVII веке: Материалы и документы. В 2-х томах” (The Russia-China Relationship in the Seventeenth Century: Materials and Documents).⁶ On the Qing side, examples are *A Documentary Chronicle of Sino-Western Relations (1644-1820)*, published by The University of Arizona Press, 1996 (hereafter DCS), and *Gugong E’wen shiliao: Qing Kangqian jian E’guo laiwen yuandang* 故宮俄文史料：清康乾間俄國來文原檔 (Russian historical sources from the Forbidden City: The original archives of letters from Russia during the Kangxi and Qianlong reigns; hereafter referred to as GES).⁷ For the records on language use and translation in the Qing-Russian dialogue, however, QD and DA are the fundamental sources for the linguistic study of the Treaty of Nerchinsk.

Examining primary sources from the Qing and Russian empires concurrently and comparatively, rather than separately, helps avoid the issue of missing information from one side. The mismatched information between the two historical records can also offer clues to help analyse the interaction with language barriers or different perspectives of the two sides. All will help better observe the interactions between the rising Qing and expanding Russia, from their military conflicts in the Amur River region to their court-level diplomatic interplay. It was through language-based communication that the two courts worked on their discordant yet peace-seeking relationship. The full extent of multilingual translation in such communication underscores the linguistic diplomacy in the Treaty of Nerchinsk.

Neither the Qing nor the Russian sourcebooks for this research include the Manchu, Mongolian, or Latin originals, except for a few archival samples found in the Russian sourcebook. The unavailability of original archives in all languages, or their limited accessibility, again makes the research sources less than ideal. Still, this should not justify a further delay to this

⁶ Vol. 1: 1608-1683 (Moscow: Nauka, 1969) and Vol. 2: 1686-1691 (Moscow: Nauka, 1972).

⁷ Beijing, 1936, Preface 1.

important linguistic study, which the two translated sourcebooks can make possible, before the original language documents eventually become accessible.

The four languages present in these comparative records — Manchu and Russian in the original correspondence, and Mongolian or Latin in their translations — reflect the challenging dialogue in seventeenth-century Qing-Russian communication through third-language mediation. These details have not previously been carefully examined, analysed, and studied. The value of using these sourcebooks to fill this missing step will reveal, beneath the success of the treaty, confrontational sensitivities, competition for status and power, and underlying distrust hidden behind diplomatic language and translation during both the pre-Treaty decades and the negotiation process.

Behind language and translation in the treaty-making

The language and translation issues in the correspondence between the Qing and Russia are closely linked to several critical issues for the Qing Empire. Before examining details of the primary sources, it is important to address these issues to understand why the study of the Treaty of Nerchinsk should not be separated from the broader historical context. Four main subjects related to this context are discussed below: Qing-Russian relations within the Qing translation framework, Russian correspondence in the Qing linguistic bureaucracy, Russia's refusal to submit to a tributary relationship with the Qing, and global linguistic interactions in relation to the Treaty of Nerchinsk.

The Russian entry into the multilingual and translation empire of the Qing

From its beginnings as a regional state in Manchuria to its full development as the Qing Empire, the Manchu power was a multilingual polity where translation played a key role. In the pre-1644 Manchu State (called *Houjin* or Late Jin from 1616 to 1635, and Qing from 1636 to 1643), the Manchu-Mongol alliance, supported by Han Chinese serving the Manchu court, helped towards the establishment of the Manchu throne in China proper, where lived the majority of the Qing population — the Han Chinese. Language diversity was always part of political, social, and cultural life before and after the Manchu takeover of China proper in 1644. Manchu, Mongolian, and Chinese were the administrative languages of the expanding Qing Empire. Two of them, Manchu and Mongolian, were heavily involved in Qing dealings with Russia.

Before the Treaty of Nerchinsk in 1689, in addition to the challenges of using both Manchu and Chinese as official languages in China proper when not enough officials could handle both languages, the Kangxi reign faced more multilingual complexity on its way to bringing

the Khalkha Mongols into the Qing empire, engaging with Tibetan Buddhist leadership, sustaining ties with the Khoshud Mongols in Qinghai, and dealing with the threatening Zunghar power in Central Asia. Translation for communication with distinct languages was essential for the Manchu court to rule and develop the empire. In what was already a translation empire embracing Manchuria, Inner Mongolia, and China proper, the empire-building involved in integrating various parts of Inner Asia heightened the level of translation demands. Amid this situation, the arrival of Russia further intensified translation needs. The Manchu court had to have a workable translation system to manage its multilingual empire.

The post-1644 Qing territory was governed under three administrative regions: the eighteen provinces of China proper, the Manchu homeland in Manchuria, and the non-Chinese societies in Inner Asia. The integration of the Inner Asian regions occurred at different times up until the Qianlong reign (1736–1795), but the Kangxi court had communication and translation needs with almost every one of the Inner Asian groups. The Manchu court set up regulations and a management bureaucracy that would fit each language into the empire's governing system.

“When the Qing conquered China, Manchu was an established administrative language” (Saarela, 2024, 24) and “was a language of state in one of the early modern world's great powers for two and a half centuries” (Saarela, 2020, 1). In addition to Manchu, Chinese was another administrative language within the central government and in China proper. “The central government in Beijing was largely bilingual, with routine documents prepared in both Manchu and Chinese” (Saarela, 2020, 4). Manchu was used between the emperor and the court-appointed Manchu or Mongol governors and provincial governors. The communication between the emperor and civilian Han-Chinese provincial officials could be in Chinese. There were many memorials which combined Manchu and Chinese; these were of two kinds, *tiben* 題本 – memorials on administrative matters – and *zouben* 奏本 – memorials to provide the emperor with information (Uyumbiliq 2016; Wang Xiaohong 2011, Preface; and Zhu 2004). The key administrative institutions at court, the Six Boards, operated with dual appointments of officials – a Manchu and a Chinese in the same position – and daily government work in dual languages. Translation here was straightforward between Manchu and Chinese, without involving a third language.

The language capability of officials was a great challenge to the Manchu court. The Manchu officials “serving in top civil metropolitan and provincial posts did not all know Chinese well enough to read it unassisted.” Some “from the middle or later eighteenth century were still illiterate in Chinese” (Elliott 2001, 293–4 and 301). But the official documents sent from the Eight Banners, the Imperial Clan, and the Imperial Household Department to the provinces “were written in Manchu, requiring recipients to painstakingly translate them into Chinese” (Qiang 2024, 245) and it was not until 1783 that all Manchu documents from these government offices would have a Chinese version placed alongside the Manchu version (*ibid.*). On the other hand, “knowledge of either spoken or written Manchu was never generalized in Qing officialdom, let alone society at large,” and “Manchu did not play an important role in

the local Chinese civilian administration outside Beijing” (Saarela, 2024, 23). The dual appointment of officials aggravated this challenge (Wang Zhonghan 2004, 2105-6, Zhao Zhiqiang 1992, 23, and Liu Shih-Hsun 2016, 3 and 12-13). At the provincial levels, the Manchu to Han official ratio for *zongdu* 總督 (governors-general) was 63% banner officials, who were considered Manchu regardless of ethnic differences among Manchu, Mongolian, and Chinese, to 37% Han civilian officials. The ratio for *xunfu* 巡撫 (provincial governors) was 45% banner officials to 55% Han civilian officials (Liu Shih-Hsun 2016, 8, and Liu Ziyang 1988, 24-5 for local officials).⁸ The administrative work relied heavily on translation clerks (*bithesi* in Manchu and *bitieshi* 筆帖式 in Chinese; see below), who were assigned to all the court agencies and provincial offices (Zhao Yu’nan 2006, 64).

In Inner Asia, the relationships of different languages varied. The Manchu and Mongolian languages had the closest historical roots. From the fifteenth century, the ancestors of the Manchu, the Jurchen, used Mongolian after they had lost their own written Jurchen language (Ji 2009, 42). Under the “systematic Mongolian influence” on Manchu life, Mongolian written language served as “the standard means of communication” between the Manchus and the Mongols at the turn of the seventeenth century (Crossley 1997, 97). Under the first two Manchu emperors Nurhaci (r. 1616-1626) and Hung Taiji (r. 1626-1636 Late Jin, and 1636-1643 Qing), “the Manchu script had passed through two stages: 1599 – an adoption of the Mongolian script for writing down the Manchu word – and 1632 – a reform of this script and legitimization of the ‘circled and dotted script’” (Pang 1998, 170). The 1599-created “old Manchu” (which is differentiated from the circled and dotted “new Manchu”) followed the Mongolian script and writing principles, with many words directly borrowed from Mongol words (Chang 2023, 083 and Hei Long, 2016, 93). Thus, “The Manchu language in its lexicon and script evidences a strong connection to Mongolian linguistic culture” (Saarela, 2024, 19-23 and 23). They share many similarities in pronunciation and grammar. They also have numerous “shared words” both phonetically and in meaning (Gao 2005, Preface 3). Even though Qing Taizong’s (Hung Taiji’s) court already used written Manchu as “the medium for day-to-day administration and the expression of the ruler’s will” (Saarela 2020, 4), Mongolian remained the most similar language to Manchu and had great importance as a translation language in Manchu contacts with Inner Asia.

The post-1644 bureaucratic procedure was that the Qing court issued edicts and official documents written in Manchu to the Mongol groups. The Mongol banner leaders and nobles wrote back to the court in Mongolian. The same was true for the groups not yet integrated into the Qing empire. The Mongolian letters to the court were first delivered to the Lifanyuan. The Lifanyuan transferred them to the Grand Secretariat. The Grand Secretariat translated

⁸ These statistics exclude Sichuan, Shaanxi, and Gansu, where, bordering the frontier regions, banner officials dominated provincial-level appointments. See Liu Shih-Hsun, 13.

them into Manchu. The Manchu and Mongolian versions were presented together to the emperor (Hei Long 2016, 88).

In Qing Inner Asia, the Tibetan case represents an example of Mongolian mediation. Dating back to the Manchu State before 1644, Hung Taiji's Manchu court engaged with the Tibetan Buddhist authority through the Qinghai Khoshud Mongol leader Gushri Khan (1582–1655), and built the Shisheng (Real Victory) Temple 實勝寺 in Mukden in 1638 for the worship of a statue of Mahākāla, the warlike deity, a Protector of the Law in Tibetan Buddhism, that the Mongols took as the symbol of their sovereignty. This intimate relationship “had a long-lasting impact on how the Manchu Qing imperial rulers envisioned a multicultural empire within which Tibetan Buddhism played an important role” (Tuttle and Wu 2021, 291–3). This role relied for its effectiveness on Mongolian translation. Starting from 1637, the Manchu court used Mongolian to correspond with Tibet. The responses, written in Tibetan, were translated into Mongolian, and a second-round translation would turn the Mongolian version into a Manchu version for the emperor to read (Li Baowen 2011, 55). As Matthew W. Mosca has pointed out, “The Qing Empire, which rose to power in the early seventeenth century, was born speaking Manchu, Chinese, and Mongolian, and acquired capabilities in Tibetan even before its armies marched into Beijing in 1644” (Mosca 2019, 1).

During 1637–1652, the court corresponded with Tibet in Mongolian and received return correspondence in Tibetan if from the Tibetan authorities, and in Mongolian if from the Khoshud Mongols. In 1663, the Kangxi court started issuing edicts and documents with Manchu and Mongolian combined to communicate with the Tibetan authorities. The responses, written in Tibetan, followed the two-step translation from Tibetan to Mongolian and then to Manchu. The late Kangxi court further adopted triple-language writing, with the addition of Tibetan, to issue court documents to Tibet, though the Tibet-to-court responses remained in Tibetan only (Li Baowen 2011, 55). Before the court established the Lifanyuan Tanggut School (*Tanggute xue* 唐古特學) in 1657, lamas in the Tibetan Buddhist temples in Beijing were assigned the translation duties. Later, students from the Eight Banner Mongols in the Tanggut School took on the duty. At the School, they were trained to master Manchu, Mongolian, and Tibetan. After graduation, they became the major cohort of the translation professionals in the Lifanyuan and Grand Secretariat and translated official correspondence in these three languages (Ma and Uyumbiliq 2017, 89).

In Qing Inner Asia, “the expansion of the Qing empire into northern Manchuria, Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Tibet extended the official use of Manchu far into Inner Asia. ... Manchu was an important language of written communication between the Inner Asian regional authorities and Beijing” (Saarela 2024, 26). Beside direct translation between the Manchu court and the Khalkha Mongolian-speaking groups, Mongolian functioned as the translation language between the Manchu court and every other Inner Asian ethnic group. The Chinese language was prohibited in official communications and administrative work in Inner Asia.

Following these linguistic lines, the Manchu court established several translation routines for official communications. Court-issued edicts and instructions to every region of the empire were written in Manchu. The responding documents were in different languages, varying by region and ethnicity. Direct translation between two languages without a third language to mediate them existed between Manchu and Mongolian, Manchu and Chinese, and Mongolian and Tibetan. Mongolian was the translation language for Manchu-Tibetan, Manchu-Todo, and Manchu-Uyghur routes of official correspondence. Mongolian was also the translation language for other Central Asian languages such as Kazakh and Burut/Kyrgyz (Bahezuli 2023, 56–64). Among the three administrative languages, Manchu and Chinese worked for China proper, and Manchu and Mongolian worked for Inner Asia (Gao, Ren, and Moratto 2024, 4; Deng 2022; Deng and Xiu 2025, 8).

In the practice of the Manchu court, if the edicts and documents were sent to local offices in agricultural China proper, the court would alternatively use one or both of the two designated administrative languages, Manchu and Chinese. For local responses presented to the court, not every Chinese document required translation into Manchu. If the receivers were Inner Asian local authorities, the Chinese language was excluded. The court would send out the Manchu-written documents and use Mongolian to translate between Manchu and each native language. (Li Baowen 2011, 56 and Ma and Uyumbiliq 2017, 83–5, 87, and 89). Every document in an Inner Asian language that would be presented to the court had to be translated finally into Manchu. This management regulated the linguistic complexity and regularised official communications involving translation requirements.

The Russians entered the Qing world in 1643 through military conflicts in the Amur River region (Fuchs 1940, 546 and GES, Introduction, 2) and in 1655 the first Tsarist envoy visited the Shunzhi (1643–1661) court (QD, 18). They introduced a linguistic challenge to the Manchu court, different from any of the Inner Asian languages. Russian was completely foreign to the ruling Manchus. There was no historical familiarity with it and no translators available at the court before the 1680s. The Inner Asian model was applied to communication with Russia: Manchu was the primary language from the Qing court to the Russian court, Mongolian was the translation language for the correspondence since both sides had Mongolian readers available to help, and the Chinese language was strictly prohibited. But this Inner Asian model did not work well. From the late 1670s, the Manchu court made exceptional adjustments by replacing Mongolian with a European language, Latin, as the primary translation language between Manchu and Russian. The European Jesuits were called into the linguistic bureaucracy to act as translators for the Manchu court. Thus, Qing-Russian correspondence departed from the Inner Asian model.

This comprehensive background to the multilingual and translation context clarifies the Russian position in the Qing translation empire. It highlights the uniqueness of Russia in the Qing linguistic world and translation empire, which existing studies of the Treaty of Nerchinsk have not previously considered.

Language and translation in the Qing linguistic bureaucracy

“The Manchu bureaucracy grew as Qing power in China was consolidated in the second half of the seventeenth century” (Saarela 2020, 4). Establishing a linguistic management system was part of this growth. The Qing-Russian correspondence was placed into the “linguistic bureaucracy”, which refers to the offices and agencies in charge of translation procedures within the overall governing bureaucracy. These translation procedures facilitated government from the emperor to the court institutions and then to local regions.

Manchu was the leading language for the Qing administration. “As a written language, and even as a spoken language, Manchu had from the very beginning of its recorded history been tied to the political power of the Qing imperial house and its institutions” (Saarela 2020, 7). The According to Zhao Yuntian, the institutional setting for linguistic governance started as early as Hung Taiji’s court, where “officials in the bureaucracy relied largely on interpreters and translators” (Zhao Yu’nan 2006, 59) who bridged Manchu, Mongolian, and Chinese. These translation-specialised clerks, referred to above, were viewed as “men with knowledge” and were appointed to the newly established Six Boards in 1631 (*ibid.*). A group of translation officials, who were part of this *bithesi* team but bore a different title of *qixinlang* 啟心郎, were also assigned to the Six Boards, as well as to each banner commander, to assist with translation in cross-language communication. The appointees were scholars who knew both Manchu and Chinese. Beyond their translation duties, the Manchu emperor expected them to advise and supervise the ministers and banner commanders when the power of translation in their hands involved them in decision-making. This group of translation professionals helped the Qing court to meet the serious language challenges after 1644, when a large number of Han civilian Chinese officials, who either joined the Manchu banner forces or were selected through the examinations, did not know the Manchu language (Shen 2006, 31–6) and only a small number of Manchu officials could communicate in Chinese (Ji, 2011 Preface 2 and 2009, 41 and 46).

After entering China proper in 1644, Qing society and official administrative procedures were divided into different sectors along language lines. The Manchu-speaking sector comprised three basic parts of the general society. The first was the imperial family and its service personnel inside the palace or the Inner Court. The second was the entire population of the Eight Banners, spread over Manchuria, the capital city Beijing, and the banner garrisons residing in different parts of China proper. “The banner establishment had its own Manchuphone administration” (Saarela 2020, 4). The third was the overwhelming majority of the population in the Shengjing/Mukden area and the rest of Manchuria, with groups of non-Banner Chinese, some Mongolians, Koreans, Solon Ewinki, Oronchun, etc. speaking their own languages. For the government and administration, all Inner Asian affairs would need to be discussed and written about in Manchu. The court-appointed officials in Manchuria

and anywhere in Inner Asia with positions as military generals or grand ministers were exclusively Manchu or Mongol, with no civilian Chinese in these posts. It was mandatory that their written communication with the emperor should be in Manchu (Uyumbiliq 2016; Wu 2019; Wang Xiaohong 2011, Preface; and Zhu 2004). In sum, “Manchu dominated certain institutions, notably the bureaucracy of the banners into which Manchus and other longstanding servants of the Qing were enrolled, and the administration of Qing Inner Asia” (Saarela 2024, 23). In this Manchu-only sector, translation was not, or not heavily, needed in the initial stage of the Qing dynasty.

A large part of government work, however, relied on translation-communicated written documents, standardised procedures, and regulated protocols between the emperor and responsibility-specific ministries and other court agencies, and also between the court and provincial *yamen* (administrative offices) in China proper and Inner Asia (Chia 2012, 1–21). As it was in pre-Qing times, “China as an extra-large territorial state was made possible through the adoption of bureaucratic methods of governance” (Ebrey 2016, 37). The “multinational and multilingual government” of the Qing (Di Cosmo 1998, 288) raised much higher translation requirements for the operation of the bureaucracy. The Grand Secretariat was the institutional centre of the Qing’s overall “linguistic bureaucracy” for processing government documents in all languages. After the establishment of the Grand Council in the early eighteenth century, the Grand Secretariat continued to share these responsibilities, which were particularly important for Inner Asian affairs and also for correspondence with Russia.

The translation work for Inner Asian languages and Russian correspondence was largely the responsibility of the Lifanyuan, a Manchu-created court institution especially responsible for Qing Inner Asia. The Mongolian Archives under the Lifanyuan, called Menggu Fang 蒙古房, was at the centre of translation activity (Hei Long 2016, 89, and Li Baowen 2011, 55–56). The “Lifanyuan zone” has been referred to as the Manchu language administrative zone with Manchu as the mandatory language for administration, excluding the use of Chinese (Chia 2017a, 43–69, 2017b, 144–183, and 2023, 73–101). Russia was the only external power in this Lifanyuan zone. The linguistic rules for Inner Asia held sway in communication with Russia, with the court writing to the Russian Tsar in Manchu, the Tsar’s response coming in Russian, and Mongolian serving as the intermediary language (Hei Long 2016, 89). Later, in the 1680s, changes came whereby if the letters were written in Russian, the Russian banner-men serving at the Manchu court were called in for the translation, and if in Latin, Jesuits entered the translation process.

In 1670, the Kangxi Emperor added the Mongolian Translation Office (“Office of Mongol Memorials” alternatively), called Menggu Tang 蒙古堂, to the Grand Secretariat. The office was also named Menggu Fang 蒙古房 in Chinese. This office cooperated with the Manchu Documents Office *Manbenfang* 滿本房 and Han Documents Office *Hanbenfang* 漢本房, also inside the Grand Secretariat, to translate and store government correspondence in the

different languages (Zhang Deze, 2012, 9–11). A vital part of the Mongolian Translation Office was translating all the Inner Asian languages. (Hei Long 2016, 89 and 93 and Zhang Deze 2012 10–11). It drafted government documents on behalf of the emperor in Manchu and then translated them into the required languages. When the responses reached the court, its work was to translate them into Mongolian and then into Manchu. A large part of the official correspondence with Inner Asia was passed from the Lifanyuan to the Grand Secretariat and, after the translation work, issued to Inner Asia by the Lifanyuan. This Lifanyuan-Grand Secretariat linguistic bureaucracy processed the translation, resulting in a Manchu copy for the court and a distinct language version in an Inner Asian locale.

The Mongolian Translation Office of the Grand Secretariat was the primary centre for translating Russian correspondence. Later, when Latin became the intermediary language between Manchu and Russian, this office also took on that role (Zhang Deze 2012, 11). The translation process was no different from those used for the Inner Asian languages. However, in the 1680s, the Grand Secretariat began to engage different translators, outside of the Mongolian Translation Office, for this task. These included Russians who were captured in the Amur River region and organised into the banner system serving the Qing court in the capital, and European Jesuits who worked for the emperor. Unlike the Mongolian translators, who held appointed positions within the language bureaucracy, the foreign translators involved in Russian correspondence did not have staff titles within the translation agencies. Instead, they worked for the Lifanyuan-Grand Secretariat linguistic bureaucracy as needed whenever Russian correspondence arrived.⁹

Away from the Outer Court bureaucracy, the Kangxi emperor established the Inner Translation Office, *Nei fanshufang* 內翻書房. It directly served the Kangxi Emperor's personal needs for translation by drafting and translating edicts, Court Diaries, steles, congratulatory letters, condolences, etc. (Zhao Zhiqiang 1992, 4). This office further shows the importance of language translation in Qing governance.

All these translation offices ensured what scholars have proposed as “govern[ment] by translation” (Gao, Moratto, and Chao 2023) and “translation governmentality” (Gao, Ren, and Moratto 2024). The Inner Asian regions had a long history of interaction with China, but “the Qing dynasty was the first to bring all of these Inner Asian regions under the sovereignty of a central government based in China” (Di Cosmo 1998, 308). This integration had a linguistic foundation and at its summit was the Manchu language: “on various levels of government, documents were either composed in Manchu or translated into Manchu” (Saarela 2024, 24). In this system, but with exceptions, the Russian correspondence opened a diplomatic rather than a different, internal line of multilingual communication. The translation personnel reflected this fact from another aspect.

⁹ It is worthy of notice that the Office of Translating Foreign Documents or Translators College or *Siyi Guan* 四夷館 under the Board of Rites did not work on translating the Russian correspondence. See Deng and Xiu 2025, 9–10.

Gao, Moratto, and Chao's study (Gao, Moratto, and Chao, 2023) has pointed out five types of translation professionals who were spread throughout the Qing government institutions and regional offices. The first was *dorgi bithesi*, the inner translator or "secretariat drafter" working for the Grand Secretariat. In this office, there were Manchu, Mongolian, and Chinese drafters. The second was *bithesi* or translators and scribes in the Manchu, Mongolian, and Chinese languages. This position started from the pre-1644 Eight Banners, and after 1644 the Manchus, Mongols, and Chinese in this position were assigned to all governmental agencies in all central government offices and provincial *yamen*. Frontier officers' headquarters in Inner Asia had *bithesi* specific to the local language. The third type was *geren giltusi*, literally "a host of fortunate scholars". This was a group of Han Chinese scholars who had passed the metropolitan examination, and whom the Manchu emperors expected to master both the Chinese and Manchu languages. Known in Chinese as translation *shujishi* 庶起士, they "performed a variety of translation tasks in different executive and administrative institutions; they played an important role at all levels and were essential to the smooth operation of governmental agencies. The last two were *ubaliyambure hafan*, *fanyiguan* 翻譯官, who translated historical records and memorials between the Manchu and Chinese or Manchu and Mongolian languages, and *tongshi* 通事 who served as interpreters between the Qing authorities and people beyond Qing territory. The translators in these official posts "were indispensable in facilitating communication within the empire, maintaining imperial government" (ibid., 1.Introduction). The Grand Secretariat, for example, had 107 *dorgi bithesi* (75 Manchu, 19 Mongol, and 13 Han Chinese) working on document/memorial translations, and there were 1,919 *bithesi* in empire-wide translation positions during the Kangxi reign (ibid., 2.1). Those among them who worked in the Lifanyuan and Grand Secretariat were involved mostly in the Mongolian part of the translation of Qing-Russian correspondence. The European Jesuits, as regards the translation of the Russian correspondence, fell outside the five types of translation professionals, even though their work was set into the governing framework and procedure of the linguistic bureaucracy.

There were four forms of state-level Qing-Russian correspondence: letters between the Manchu emperor and the Russian Tsar, between the Lifanyuan and the Russian Senate, between high-ranking court officials and Russian Siberian or Far Eastern military governors, and between the Lifanyuan and the Russian military governors (Ding 2018, 80). The state-level correspondence took a very different form from the orally-based communication between local authorities in the Amur River region. The local communication and information exchange continued the "established linguistic tradition" (Deng and Xiu 2025, 6) of the *tongse* (Manchu for interpreter) or *tongshi* (in Chinese) system which supported Qing "multilingual governance, particularly within the tributary discourse inherited from previous Chinese dynasties under Han rulers" (ibid., 19), and the interpreters mediated between the local authority and the non-Chinese minority groups in border regions (ibid.). In the Amur River region, interpreters facilitated communication with the illiterate Cossacks and other Russian explorers, such as the "Albazinians" who, after being captured by the Qing troops in the middle of

the 1680s, had “nobody qualified to teach Russian” (Crossley 1997, 104). Information exchange between Qing local officials and Russian officials there could reach a certain level of understanding, but in formal written form, communication faced tremendous challenges (Ding 2018, 81). The Kangxi court expanded their internal linguistic governing systems and rules to handle the Qing-Russian relationship by using two (Manchu and Mongolian) of the three Qing administrative languages (Manchu, Chinese, and Mongolian). For court-to-court correspondence, the bureaucratic procedure involved the emperor’s instruction and approval, the Grand Secretariat’s translation work, the Lifanyuan’s engagement, the possible participation of other Boards, the designated translators’ assignments, document development by highly professional drafters, the draft examiners’ scrutiny, and document delivery and filing routines. Reception of the Russian letters went through another process of entry registration, steps of translation, translation review, translation submission, emperor-instructed discussion, and emperor-approved response. The *tongshi* level of oral interpreting was usually oral rather than organised documentary translation. It did not involve any of these procedures and, therefore, is not included in this study of state-level communication.

In the seventeenth century there were no linguistically-trained specialists in Manchu-Russian or Russian-Manchu translation in either the Qing or the Russian empires. It was not until 1708 that the Kangxi court established the government-run Russian language school called the *Ehuosi wenguan* 俄羅斯文館 (the Russian Language Institute) to produce future Russian translators. Under the supervision of the Grand Secretariat, the school selected twenty-four students from young bannermen in the capital city to undertake language learning and translation training (Han 2010, 42). It was not until 1727 that the Russian government sent students to the Qing capital to learn Manchu and Chinese for the purpose of communicating with the Manchu court (Mi and Su 1994, 17, Xu 2009, 91, and Liao 2015, 267–8). Thus, before the Treaty of Nerchinsk, direct translation between Manchu and Russian for state-level correspondence was impossible. Third-language translation was the only option. After Mongolian ceased to function as the primary translation language in the late 1670s, the Lifanyuan, the Grand Secretariat, and the translation agencies under them set up new arrangements to recruit translators. The Russian war captives from the Amur River region who had been organised into a Russian Company and served at the Kangxi court were given the job (Chen 2012, article). For Latin to Manchu translation, Jesuits at the court were assigned the task.

For the Russian court, the communication block before 1676 was due to the lack of a third language through which to translate. The Mongolian-mediated communication helped the Russian envoys reach China through the territory of the Mongols or the Mongolian-speaking Central Asians (Zhang Xuefeng 2009, 2), but it did not serve for court communication at state level. The problematic Russian-Mongol relationship and the Kangxi emperor’s friendship with the Jesuits at the Qing court were the major reasons for shifting third-language translation to Latin. The effectiveness of Latin as a translation language became the decisive

factor for the court-to-court correspondence moving towards the Treaty of Nerchinsk. Outside the Qing linguistic bureaucracy and outside Qing territory, the treaty negotiation took place in the Russian-settled Nerchinsk. Outside the regular Qing bureaucratic procedure, the translation work lay in the hands of the delegations from the two empires and under the heavy influence of the Jesuits, because of their translation capabilities. Current treaty scholarship has paid little or no attention to all these exceptional elements in the achievement of this Treaty, a situation which requires correction.

The linguistic aspect of the Qing-Russian relationship in the “Tribute Empire” of the Qing

The linguistic management of the Qing-Russian correspondence prompts us to consider the position of Russia in a “tributary empire” (Ebrey 2016, 37), as dynastic China always was. The early Qing court inherited both the Chinese and Inner Asian tribute traditions and placed Russia in the position of a tributary to the Manchu court (Chia 2022, 83–85). The Qing source recorded the Russian envoy’s 1655 visit as follows:

[T]he Ch’a-han Khan of Russia (O-lo-ssu) sent an envoy to ask after [His Imperial Majesty’s] health and to present native products of Russia as tribute. The envoy did not bring a memorial with him. However, because it was the first time that a Russian envoy had performed the courtesy of bearing tribute, the envoy was regaled and dispatched with an edict in which the Ch’a-han Khan was ordered hereafter to present tribute to us annually. (DCS, 15)

The 1842 *Comprehensive Gazetteer of the Great Qing* (Daqing yitong zhi 大清一統志) still identified Russia as coming to the Qing to present tribute, both before and after the Treaty of Nerchinsk (QD, 18 and *Jiaqing chongxiu yitongzhi*, 27238–9).

The vocabulary that both the Qing and Russian courts used for each other reflected each side’s view of the other as an inferior polity, of tributary status (Wang Heping 2008, 51). The Russian Tsardom advised the Kangxi emperor to submit to the Tsar, to be the tributary of the Tsar, and to receive protection from the Tsar (QD, 23, DA, 10, and EZ, 18). Thus, the Russian challenge was more than just the military collision in the Amur region. Tributary status defined behaviour under court protocol and the ranks of the participants in the rituals carried out when the Russian envoys came to the Qing court. Tributary status also determined the terms used to refer to the other’s monarch – a matter about which both courts were highly sensitive (QD, 27 and 29, DA 25, and EZ 41).

However, the expanding power of Russia that presented a territorial challenge to the Qing did not fit into the Qing concept of a tributary relationship. Along with the “tribute thinking” toward Russia, non-tributary arrangements outside Qing bureaucratic routines for tributary countries were offered to Russia, including the manner of court-to-court correspondence, the reception of Russian envoys in ways unlike those from the other tributary countries, and the employment of Catholic Jesuits from the West to facilitate court dialogue with Russia –

the top political concern of the Manchu court. The unprecedented bilateral treaty, negotiated by the two signatories on an equal basis, was the most extraordinary among the exceptions. These privileges separated Russia from both the tributary countries in East and Inner Asia and the European countries (Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, and Great Britain) that came under the Qing designation as tributaries during the Ming-Qing transition or the very early Qing (Chia 2017b, 163–168). They broke the general Qing linguistic rules and placed the power of translation in a European language rather than any of the Qing administrative languages.

In Nerchinsk, the Jesuits' Latin skills enabled them to turn the nearly hopeless negotiations into a surprisingly satisfactory outcome: the achievement of peace between the two empires so that each empire could focus on its priority battlefields on other fronts, as well as fulfilment of the Russian desire for trade in the Qing markets. Although the Treaty did not lead to any impact of Latin on the general Chinese linguistic culture, and the Jesuits' influence on the Kangxi court ceased after the death of Tomás (or Thomas) Pereira (1645–1708), a Portuguese Jesuit, in 1708 (Saldanha 2012, 144–216), the remarkable outcome of the treaty continued to affect the bilateral relationship as well as the future development of each of the two empires, thus showing the power of language as one way of making history.

Numerous studies have discussed the Qing tribute system as the major obstacle for Western countries in treating with China on equal terms and in establishing commercial and diplomatic relations with the Qing empire. The common conclusion has been that this situation did not change until the British defeated the Qing in the first Opium War of 1839–1842. The unequal treaty signed at the end of that war, the Treaty of Nanjing (1842), marked the breakdown of the Qing tribute system. This linguistic study of the Treaty of Nerchinsk, however, reaches a different conclusion. It reveals the Treaty as a distinct practice in the tributary empire of the Qing: the Manchu court retained the concept of tributary relations and referred to Russia in tributary terms, but the actual arrangements moved away from the tributary procedure and towards the diplomatic practices of the early modern world. This distinct practice has not been, but should be, a part of treaty studies.

The Treaty of Nerchinsk and linguistic globalisation

The languages and translation process involved in achieving the Treaty of Nerchinsk reflect the Lifanyuan's linguistic zone in interaction with other linguistic worlds of the time. This linguistic zone overlapped with the Mongolian language world, which encompassed the whole of Qing Inner Asia and mediated between the Qing and the Slavic language world through the court's communication with Russia. The adoption of Latin as the translation language further connected the Qing with the "Latin cultural world" of Europe (Stary 2015, 2). The Latin-speaking European Jesuits serving the Qing court and Latin-educated European diplomats serving the Russian court, through their translation work, built connections and promoted the engagement of these four linguistic worlds.

Qing empire-building, in Geoffrey Hosking's words, was "generated internally" (Hosking 1997, 9), driven by the peoples on two sides of the Great Wall, Inner Asia and China proper. Their long history of close interaction, whether through war or peace, led to the formation of the Great Qing Empire. This empire was not significantly affected by any form of European cultural influence before the Treaty of Nerchinsk. But in 1689, the Russian bannermen and the Jesuits, coming from other linguistic worlds but situated within the Qing empire, helped establish a new milestone as language translators.

Not from internal but from external, Russian pursuit of its envisioned status as a "European great power" was marked by the promotion of "Europeanisation" by Peter the Great, who ascended to the position of Co-Tsar in 1682 and became the sole Tsar in 1696. From content to method, "Europeanisation" was "borrowed from outside, from a culture and way of life which Russia had to imitate in order to compete with the European powers" (Hosking 1997, 9 and 40). Even though this pursuit reached full development only after Peter the Great became the sole Tsar in 1689, or after the Treaty of Nerchinsk, internal motivation for it had already grown in the Russian political centre during Peter's tenure as Co-Tsar. By then, Russian territorial expansion had far exceeded its previous geographical control in the East, unlike the Qing expansion, which stayed within the regions historically connected with it. Decades before 1689, Russia was already in a "hybrid position" with an "Asiatic empire" which "reached the Pacific Ocean by 1639 and established the harbor of Okhotsk in 1648, ... adding it [this Asiatic empire] to their existing ethnic and imperial claims in Europe" (Hosking 1997, 13).

From the above two different backgrounds in Qing China and Russia, Latin, an important language within the European Catholic world, whose roots went back to the ancient Roman Empire, impacted the Qing-Russian bilateral relationship through its function in translation.

Any study of the Treaty of Nerchinsk must address the possibility of using the captured Russian bannermen to meet the Qing court's urgent need for Russian translation. The primary source materials and some historical studies have suggested that the Qing court could have used these native Russian speakers to work on the treaty negotiation. Therefore, any study of the treaty study should answer the question of why the two courts chose Latin and the Jesuits instead.

The Kangxi Emperor's 1685 order to have forty captured Russians organised into the Upper Three Banners (QD, 56) initiated the privileged banner status, directly under the emperor's command, of the Russian captives in the Amur River region. Different captive groups were added, ultimately forming a "Russian Company" (Ertai 1727/1986, Vol. 1, 38). Besides these captured Russians, some deserters or those who voluntarily submitted in 1683 also served the Qing court (Chen 2012, 74–84) as members of the Russian Company (*oros niru* in Manchu), part of the prestigious Bordered Yellow Banner. "For a time, they assisted the court with Russian translation" (Saarela 2020, 183).

The QD sourcebook reveals that the availability of translation personnel improved Qing-Russian communication during the 1680s. A document from the Grand Secretariat, written on the ninth day of the tenth month of 1686, recorded the translators' names and their nationalities for the first time, providing evidence of native Russian speakers' participation in the translation service. For translation of Russian letters from the Tsar, the Grand Secretary had available two Russians, whose names are given as Hituban and Eguofan, and also an imperial guard named Luoduohun, who was a second-generation Russian in the Russian Company in Beijing (Ding 2018, 81). Translation of the Tsar's letters in Latin was assigned to the Jesuits Ferdinand Verbiest (1623–1688) and Tomás Pereira (QD, 77). From this document onwards, Russian translators' names were regularly recorded in the Qing archives, indicating a stable translation team working for the linguistic bureaucracy. Using the Manchu Palace memorials of the Yongzheng reign, Giovanni Stary's study of the Russian Company of the Manchu Banners discovered two Russian bannermen "who for sixteen years served as teachers of the Russian language and as translators of messages coming from Russia" (Stary 1999, 141). Since the Yongzheng reign lasted for thirteen years, from 1623 to 1735, their sixteen-year translation service may have overlapped the last years of Kangxi.

Tatiana A. Pang's study has pointed out that Russian diplomats considered the Russian Qing bannermen to be "traitors" and did not accept them as "fellow-citizens" (Pang 1999, 133–4). They were, thus, deemed untrustworthy for treaty negotiations by the Russian court. The Qing court had other reasons not to trust these Russians in treaty negotiations. In the third month of 1685, the court assigned six Russian captives to deliver the Kangxi emperor's "edict" to the Russian Tsar through Khalkha territory. In the seventh month of 1686, the court assigned a Russian captive, named Ivan Mihailuomoroduo (transliterated from the Chinese characters for Mikhail Molodov), to make a second attempt to deliver the Kangxi emperor's "edict", showing the urgency of discussing conflict resolution with the Russian Tsar. In the ninth month of 1686, the Kangxi Emperor stated that none of these captives had completed their task of delivery. Then the Qing court turned to the Dutch and Italians at the Manchu court to carry out delivery of the "edict" to the Russian Tsar (QD, 51, 59, 61, 66, and 77–8).¹⁰ Thus, despite the presence of Russians in the roles of court translators and Russian language teachers to the young bannermen, they were completely excluded from the treaty negotiations due to trust issues. In this situation, distrust on both sides prevented the Qing and Russian courts from using native Russian translators for direct Manchu-Russian communication. The decision to have European Jesuits mediate the negotiations and to use Latin as the official treaty language was a political choice.

This historical, comparative, and global look at the use of the Latin language in Qing-Russian treaty-making informs us that, starting from very different historical connections with the Latin language, both the Qing and Russia chose this language to assist their communication.

¹⁰ In the QD sourcebook, the Italian appears with the description *xijang* 西洋, "Western Ocean", i.e. European. His Chinese name was Min Mingwo 閔明我 (see QD 78), i.e. Claudio Filippo Grimaldi (1638–1712), an Italian Jesuit.

The transition from a period of language barriers to an effective language-mediated treaty-building dialogue was based on interactions in the second half of the seventeenth century among Qing East and Inner Asia, the vast span of Mongolia, Siberia, and the Russian Far East, European Eastern Slavic Russia, and Latin-literate Europe. Regarded as “a world language” in the seventeenth century (Mutschler 2025, 60), Latin’s influence on the Treaty of Nerchinsk further established it as “the world language of diplomacy” (Wassermann 1953, 83). Applied to the linguistic map in relation to the Treaty of Nerchinsk, the lens of linguistic globalisation uncovers the hidden reality of the interaction of different linguistic worlds. This interaction not only influenced the treaty itself but also positions the treaty more prominently in global history.

The four significant issues under discussion behind language and translation in the treaty-making – the Russian entry into the multilingual and translation empire of the Qing, language and translation in the Qing linguistic bureaucracy, linguistic aspects of the Qing-Russian relationship in the “tribute empire” of the Qing, and the Treaty of Nerchinsk’s relation to linguistic globalisation – have highlighted the unique aspects of the Qing-Russian relationship from a linguistic perspective. Addressing these issues when examining the source records generates new knowledge and new insights into the Treaty of Nerchinsk.

Language barrier stage: 1619–1676

Before the Manchu declaration of the Qing dynasty in 1636, there had already been direct contact between Russians and the Ming court. The Russian archival sourcebook records that a letter from the Ming Wanli Emperor (r. 1573–1620) to the Russian Tsar in 1619 remained unread until 1675, when an unidentified Russian military officer in Tobolsk translated it into Russian. At that time, the Russians learned from the letter that two Russian traders who had travelled to Ming territory were the reason for the Ming emperor writing the letter to welcome the Russian contact (DA, 20).¹¹ According to G. L. Penrose, “In 1616 the Tobol’s military governor, I. S. Kurakin, sent two men to the Mongols at Ubsa Nur on his own authority.” In spring 1617, intending to make contact with China, “he appointed Maksim Trubchaninov, the Eniseisk military governor, as leader, and attaching the interpreter, Ivan Petlin, to the

¹¹ Chinese scholar Ye Baichuan corrected this record by noting that the letter from the Ming Emperor was written in 1618 when Ivan Petlin was sent by the Tobolsk Governor to the Ming capital, and the translator in 1675 was a Chinese individual (Ye 2010, 16–21). The Introduction of GES counted this 1618 letter from the Ming emperor as the first epistolary contact from China to be received by Russia, but pointed out that some historians in both Russia and China have suspected its authenticity (GES, Introduction, 1–2). Bantysh-Kamenskiĭ’s sourcebook refers to another letter from the Ming Wanli Emperor to the Tsar in 1649, which was also translated in 1675. This record is problematic since the Wanli Emperor died in 1620, the Manchus took over China proper in 1644, and there was no Ming emperor in 1649. Because this second letter is not significant to this study, it will not be discussed here. On these two letters from Ming emperors to the Russian Tsars, see Zhang, 2009.

party after consultation with the Tomsk military governor, F. V. Boborykin. ... This Petlin ‘mission’ failed. ... [But] He did bring back a letter from the Ming that lay untranslated in Moscow for a half century.” (Penrose 1992, 363–4). Scholars on both the Chinese and Russian sides have questioned the veracity of this first epistolary contact (GES, Introduction, 2). Kong Yuan’s study clarified the historical facts and confirmed that Petlin was the very first Russian envoy to reach the court of China in Beijing (Kong, 2018, 27–43). This view was supported by Erika Monahan’s study (Monahan 2016, 54).¹²

When the letter from the Ming emperor was finally translated fifty-six years later, the Ming dynasty had already been replaced by the Manchu Qing dynasty for more than three decades. This long delay in communication between the two courts, simply because translation services were unavailable, highlights the significant change in translation during the fourteen years from 1675 to 1689. The change led to the Treaty of Nerchinsk, which required extensive mutual communication in verbal negotiation and written documentation for its finalisation.

The Qing archival sourcebook does not mention the Ming emperor’s letter. The Shunzhi Emperor viewed his “edict” to the Russian Tsar in 1655 as the Qing Dynasty’s first official contact with Russia. The court asked the Russian envoy Bishirikh to undertake its delivery (EZ, 18, Note 2). This short “edict” carried indications of Manchu knowledge about Russia at the time. The Manchu term for the Russian Tsar was *cagan han* (Gongzhongdang Manchu Memorial, Jigoubao Microfilm, page 2552), rendered in Chinese as *chahan khan* 察罕汗 (QD, 18, 51, 59, and 61). The Russian source described them as Чаганъ-ханъ (Chagan-han) in Russian. *Cagan* or *chahan* came from Mongolian and meant “white” (DA, 5 and EZ 19).¹³ There were many other terms which the Russians took from Mongolian, such as calling the Qing capital city Beijing Беджин (*bedzhin*) (DA, 5 and EZ 18). The “edict” described Russia as a distant polity in the northwest, never before having come to visit China. It took the view that the Russian envoy’s appearance at the Qing court showed a sincere attitude of submission and involved the presentation of tribute. Issuing this edict was a way to demonstrate the emperor’s grace toward such an attitude (QD, 18). On the Russian side, “the expedition of Vasilii Poiarko (1643–1646) and Erofei Khavarov (1649–1651) had increased Russian interest in those regions, and within thirty years (1654–1683) Nerchinsk, Albazin, and Aigun were established” as Russian settlement towns (O’Brien 2022, 105). The 1650s were the decade “when a sustained [Russian] expansionist drive truly began,” and the Tsarist

¹² According to Wang Zhixiang, the earliest arrival of a Russian at the Chinese court occurred in 1564 when Tsar Ivan V sent a Cossack to the Ming court (GES 1936, Preface, 1). But neither the Qing nor Russian sourcebook acknowledges this.

¹³ As the Qing sources have pointed out “Chagan” meant “white” with no further explanation, research on the Mongol epic heroes has suggested that the Manchu use of the “white khan” for the Russian Tsar likely came from the Mongols. Jonathan Ratcliffe states that a ruler in the Buryat epic of *Shono-Baatar* was called “Aryn Sagaan Khaan [The White Khan of the North], who is clearly the Russian Tsar” (Ratcliffe 2022, 282).

court was developing its “administration of its territorial peripheries” in Siberia and the Far East (Ledonne 2006, 581).

The Russian court under Tsar Alexis I (r. 1645–1676) did not acknowledge the Ming emperor’s 1619 letter either, according to the Russian sourcebook. The Russian delegation arriving at the Qing court in 1656 was said to be the first official delegation sent by the Tsar. Fedor Izakovich Baykov (or Fedor Isakovich Baikov) led the delegation, with six envoys and twenty military personnel under him (AD, 8 and EZ, 21). The second of the five instructions that the Tsar issued to Baykov was to deliver the Tsar’s letter directly to the Qing emperor (AD, 9 and EZ 23). In that letter, the Tsar traced his family origin back to the Roman emperor Augustus (63 B. C. – A. D. 14) and Grand Prince Rurik (Riurik) (A. D. 830–879), who founded the Rurik Dynasty (A. D. 862–1598) in Russia. He stated that his ancestors had a great reputation among surrounding nations, with written correspondence with the emperors of these nations, but they had not established such a connection with the Ming emperor. He desired to build a friendly relationship with China. Baykov, however, failed to deliver this letter to the Shunzhi Emperor due to his serious disputes with Qing officials over ritual protocol and his adherence to the Tsar’s instruction of in-person delivery, which Qing officials did not accept. Baykov was expelled from the Qing capital without a chance to deliver the Tsar’s letter (AD, 8 and 10–11 and EZ, 22 and 25).

Another member of the Baykov delegation, Seitkul Ablin, was soon sent back to Beijing on March 3, 1658, carrying another letter from the Tsar to the Qing emperor. After repeating the contents of the undelivered letter, the Tsar added an invitation to the Qing emperor to visit Russia (AD 12–13 and EZ, 26–27). The Russian source on Ablin’s mission briefly mentioned that the Russian court had no record of how the Qing treated the Russian envoys, but that there was a letter from the Qing emperor to the Tsar (AD 13 and EZ 27), without giving the date or delivered it. A note in the source clarified that this letter from the Qing emperor to the Tsar was taken back to the Qing court by Nicolai Gavrilovich Spafarii (Spatharii or Spathary and Spătaru) – a Moldavian literary man who had served “as a diplomat of the Tsar” a few years before (Adda, 2020, 2) – during his mission to Beijing in 1676. The reason for the return was to ask the Qing court to translate it into Russian so the Russians could understand the content. While he was in Beijing, Spafarii received an explanation of the Manchu emperor’s “arrogant letter” to the Tsar and was informed that the Qing emperor corresponded with emperors in different countries in this way and would never change his style (AD 13 and EZ, 27–28). During Spafarii’s 1676 visit to Beijing, the Belgian Jesuit Ferdinand Verbiest served as his translator between Latin and Manchu (Fuchs 1940, 550). Thus, Verbiest translated the Manchu emperor’s letter and held this dialogue with Spafarii, all in Latin.

These records reveal that the Qing emperor’s letters from the 1650s (or later) were not read until 1676 when translation became available during Spafarii’s visit to Beijing. Although the two courts had established a physical connection through Russian envoys to Beijing since 1655, there was no linguistic base for content exchange between the two courts. During this language barrier period, Russia under Tsar Alexis was “faced with major popular uprisings”

and “the brutal Thirteen-Years War” - the Poland-Lithuania war on Russia (1654–1667) (Riasanovsky and Steinberg 2011, 176–180). Dealing with the letter from the Qing emperor was not a priority. The ongoing military conflicts, however, wrecked Qing security in the Amur River region and threatened Manchu rule at the Kangxi court. Resolution of these difficulties required effective court-level communication with Russia. Spafarii’s 1676 visit to Beijing and his meeting with Verbiest became the turning point whereby Latin became the major mediating language and the Jesuits came to play a key role in translation. During the years 1676–1689, this change removed the language barrier between the Qing and Russia, and this improved court-to-court communication paved the way to the Treaty of Nerchinsk.

The Mongolian language in Qing-Russian correspondence

In 1670, Qing court officials stated in the document “A Russian Envoy Comes to China” (DCS, 46), “[W]e could not understand their language [Russian] at all.” Before the Manchu court started using Russian bannermen for translation in the 1680s, communication relied entirely on a mediating language. Both the Qing and Russia turned to the Mongolian language for this purpose. The Shunzhi court often included a Mongolian copy along with the Manchu letter sent to the Tsarist court. There were even attempts with letters written solely in Mongolian (Hei Long 2016, 89 and Li Baowen 2011, 56).

Russia’s use of Mongolian in translation can be traced back to the Russian contact with the Oiat or Western Mongols’ Central Asia, in the early seventeenth century. The Kalmyk, a branch of the Oirat Mongols, migrated to European Russia around the 1630s and became “Moscow’s crucial ally against the Crimea” in the early 1650s (Khodarkovsky 2002, 135 and Li 1989, 7–9). Before meeting the Manchus in the Amur River region in the 1640s, Russian explorers had already come into contact with the Khalka Mongols, who “were the first to build forts, settlements, and roads in Transbaikalia. ... Russo-Chinese border trade depended on the goodwill of the Mongol khans” (Stolberg 2000, 325). The visit of two Russian envoys to Ming China, which brought about the Ming emperor’s letter to the Tsar in 1619, was also assisted by the Mongols (Liu Dexi 2009). Before the Baykov mission to the Shunzhi court in 1655, reciprocal bilateral trade in the early seventeenth century (Cai Hong 2017, 1–2 and Zhao 2019) was based on the Russians entering the Chinese markets via the Mongol territories. The Mongols’ use of “Oros” for Russia and the Russians replaced the old Ewinki name “Loca” (Alateng Aorqir 2014). Using Mongolian as the translation language was more convenient than any other language.

With these historical roots, the Qing and Russian dialogue in the Amur River region relied on Mongolian translators (Wu, 2019). The Shunzhi Emperor’s 1655 “edict” to the Russian Tsar was written in Manchu and Mongolian (QD, 18, with note 2), indicating his expectation

that Mongolian would be used to convey his message. The Tsar's letter of 1654, which Baykov failed to deliver, was written in Russian and Mongolian as well (DA, 22 and 25, and Note 3 on 22). It implies the same expectation of using the Mongolian language to translate the Russian letter. However, the problem of the language barrier continued in their mutual dialogue when Mongolian was the only language used for translation. The source materials do not show it helping the Russian court to react to the Ming and Qing emperors' letters.

In 1660, the Tsar's special envoys Seitkul Ablin and Ivan Stelanovich Perthiliev arrived at the Qing capital after a three-year journey from Moscow to Beijing. They delivered a letter from the Tsar written in 1658 (DA, 12-13 and EZ, 26-28). The Qing archival source indicates that the Shunzhi Emperor and the court officials understood the letter's content as stating that the Tsar declared himself the Great Khan and used boastful and disrespectful language toward the Qing. The Qing officials suggested that the emperor expel the Tsar's envoys and refuse the Russian tribute (QD, 20, Note 2), which, in the Qing tribute culture, was a severe political and cultural punishment. This reaction to the Tsar's letter reveals the effect of the translation, even though no information about the translator was given. The magnitude of the language barrier is much reduced by comparison with the Shunzhi emperor's 1655 "edict" to the Russian Tsar. That "edict" was merely the Qing's own reaction to the arrival of the Russian envoy at the Manchu court. It did not include a single piece of information about what the Russian envoy had brought to the Manchu court, and there was no official discussion to follow up - obvious signs of a language barrier.

The Russian sources offer a clear contrast between the Manchu court's response to the Russian envoys in 1660 and the Russian reaction to it. For Ablin's return from his Beijing mission to Moscow, however, the Russian sourcebook (DA) does not show any information or comment. There was no reaction to the Qing "punishment" of the Russian mission. More importantly, the Russian court did not, or could not, read the Qing emperor's letter until a translation of it became available during Spafarii's 1676 mission to Beijing, and the translation was in Latin rather than Mongolian. It suggests that a Mongolian translation did not exist or was of no use at the Russian court. There is another case to support this suggestion. On the thirteenth day of the fifth month of his eighth year (1670) (QD, 21-22 and Note 2 on 22), the Kangxi Emperor wrote a "state letter" (*guoshu* 國書) in both Manchu and Mongolian, to request the Russian Tsar to return Gantimur (?-1686), a Tungus chieftain whose ancestral land lay in Nerchinsk, and who had fought as a Qing subject against the Russians in 1655, but changed sides to serve the Russians against the Qing in 1666-7. Until he died in 1685, he remained at the centre of the Qing-Russian conflict, with the Qing requesting the Russians to return him to the Manchu court, and the Russians repeatedly refusing (Perdue 1998, 267-271). On the Russian side, whether the Tsar read this letter through translation remains a question; there is no information on this in the Russian source.

A lengthy memorial presented to the Kangxi emperor by the Lifanyuan Minister Amhulang 阿穆瑚朗 on the seventh day of the seventh month of the fifteenth year (1676) reflects the complexity of the epistolary exchanges between the Qing emperor and the Russian Tsar

using Mongolian as the translation language. In their difficult dialogue, the Russian envoy Nicolai (Spafarii) informed Amhulang that a Qing official had previously brought the Qing emperor's letter to the Nerchinsk *voevoda* (the title of a military officer in a Siberian or Far Eastern settlement region) for him to transmit it to the Russian Tsar. Since nobody in Moscow knew enough Mongolian to understand the letter, the Tsar now instructed Nicolai to return this letter to the Qing court. Nicolai also brought a letter from the Tsar, which he was required to deliver in person to the Qing emperor. Amhulang, however, insisted to Nicolai that not he personally but the Lifanyuan should transmit the letter to the emperor, according to Qing regulations. To move the visit forward, Nicolai "violated" the Tsar's order and released the Tsar's letter to Amhulang. This letter from the Tsar aligned with his previous letters in expressing the wish to have a friendly relationship and opportunities of trade with the Qing, and it presented an invitation for a Qing delegation to visit Russia. Amhulang in turn raised the Qing emperor's request for Russia to return Gantimur and to stop the Russian raids on the Qing side of the Amur River region, stating that the Tsar had no reason not to be aware of these requests. According to Amhulang, the Qing had already sent an official, Mengde, to carry this letter from the Manchu emperor to Nerchinsk. After Mengde had reached Nerchinsk and heard that nobody there could read Mongolian, he had explained the emperor's requests multiple times and worked out a Russian translation to be taken by a Russian envoy from Nerchinsk to Moscow. Either by this document or orally, Amhulang argued, the Tsar should have been made aware of the Qing emperor's requests, and the Russian envoy should not avoid giving the Tsar's response to them. Nicolai swore that since nobody in Moscow understood Mongolian and no Russian translation had been delivered to the Tsar, the matter of Gantimur was unknown to the Tsar. Amhulang informed the Kangxi emperor about this, in his view, purposely false claim, but he also mentioned the language barrier as a valid point. He concluded that even though the Russian Tsar, in his letter to the emperor, had expressed friendly intentions toward the Qing, the court should not trust the Russians. Discussions among the Manchu Princes and Ministers supported Amhulang's reasoning (QD, 30-39). Regarding whether the Russians were able to employ a Mongolian translator at the Tsarist court, there was no way to reach a conclusion. Whether to keep Mongolian as the translation language to facilitate court-to-court communication thus became an issue.

According to the Russian source, the Nerchinsk *voevoda* issued instructions to a ten-person delegation from Nerchinsk to the Qing capital in 1670. The first of the three major points in these instructions was to advise the Qing emperor to submit to the supreme Tsardom by following many other monarchs who had come under the protection of the Tsar by such submission. The Qing emperor was also advised to pay tribute to the Tsar and to open up free trade for Russian traders. Secondly, the delegation should inform the Qing emperor of the Russian wish that he [the emperor] should write a "state letter" to the Russian Tsar acknowledging his political submission, the tribute payment, and the granting of free trade. If the Qing did not have the custom of writing "state letters", the Qing emperor should inform

the Russian delegation of his decision orally. The third instruction was guidance for the delegation on how to answer the Gantimur question in a way designated by the Tsar (QD, 22–24). These instructions fulfilled the Qing officials' suspicion that the Russians certainly knew about Gantimur, but were just trying to avoid giving a straight answer. The Russians' knowledge of Gantimur was reflected in Spafarii's 1676 report to the Tsar, which provided details about Gantimur's handsome appearance, his nine wives with more than thirty children, his status as a naturalised Russian citizen based on his conversion to the Orthodox religion, and his annual tribute to the Russian authorities of three sable pelts (AD, 15–16 and EZ, 30).¹⁴

These archival records from the two sides reveal that the Russians had no awareness of the Qing emperor's view of his universal rulership over all people under Heaven, a sign of the long-standing language barrier. Otherwise, the Tsar's request for the Qing submission to him would likely include an argument against Qing superiority. The archival information from 1670 to 1676 indicates that the frequent communication between local officials in the Amur region was less impeded by language issues than the communication between the two courts. As long as the Russian court claimed to be unable to read Mongolian, or to find a translator who could read Mongolian for the Tsar, the Qing court, even if they did not believe this, could not resolve the problem of communication with the Russian court. Finding a translation language other than Mongolian would avoid the insoluble debate over this matter. In addition, Russia's deteriorating relationship with the Mongols in the second half of the seventeenth century (Cai Hong 2017, 2–3) would cause trust concerns if a Mongolian was employed as a translator. That was another reason for the change from Mongolian to Latin for the translation language with the Qing. In this context, Latin emerged as the pivotal translation language in the Qing-Russian correspondence.

Latin in the Qing-Russian correspondence

Spafarii's 1676 mission to Beijing marked the turning point for Latin replacing Mongolian as the primary translation language. The Russian Tsar wrote a letter to the Qing emperor, signed on February 28, 1675, and appointed Nicolai Gavrilovich Spafarii as his official envoy to deliver this letter to the Qing emperor. Spafarii had formerly served as a translator in the Russian foreign affairs office. He had language capacities in Moldavian (his native language), Latin, and Italian. He learned Russian during his service in the Tsar's government. His delegation entered Beijing on May 15, 1676, and the Tsar's letter was then delivered.

¹⁴ Russia never returned Gantimur to the Qing. This Daurian chief died in 1686 as a Russian citizen and a convert to Orthodox Christianity, with a noble title granted by the Tsar.

Throughout the visit, however, the delegation had contentious conversations with Qing officials regarding a series of issues on which the two sides could not agree. On September 1, 1676, the Qing court expelled the delegation. Nonetheless, the records of this challenging mission provide valuable information for historians to examine the language changes in Qing-Russian communication. First, the Tsar's letter in Russian was accompanied by copies in Latin and in Mongolian, indicating that Mongolian was no longer the only translation language at this time. Secondly, before Spafarii departed for the Qing capital, the Tsar issued fourteen instructions to him, outlining the goals of his mission. The first instruction required Spafarii to inquire about which language the Manchu emperor would prefer if the Tsar were to write to him in the future. The Tsar expressed his own preference for the Qing emperor to write to him in Latin or Turkish in future, indicating that the Tsar favored Latin over Mongolian. In Beijing, thirdly, Spafarii used Latin rather than Mongolian to draft twelve Russian requests according to the Tsar's instructions which he presented to the Qing officials (DA 24-25 and 30 and EZ, 40-42 and 47-8). This means that at this time the Russians were already using Latin as the primary translation language into Manchu.

A memorial written by Fuciowan (in Manchu) or Fuquan 福全 (in Chinese), a Manchu prince of the first rank, on the twenty-seventh day of the sixth month, 1676, forty-two days after Spatharii's arrival, confirms this change of translation language from Mongolian to Latin. It stated that Spafarii had informed the Lifanyuan that no one in Russia could read the Qing emperor's edict written in Manchu and Mongolian. The Tsar had instructed him to take the Manchu emperor's previous edict (or edicts) back to the Qing court, to request it be translated into Latin by the Qing court, and to bring the Latin version back to Moscow so that the Tsar would know how to respond (this record was different from the previously mentioned source which said the emperor's letter should be translated into Russian). Furthermore, the Tsar suggested that subsequent Manchu letters from the Qing emperor to him be accompanied by a Latin copy. The tsar gave assurances that in future his letters to the Qing emperor would have a Latin translation along with the Russian copy (QD, 25-30). In 1686, the Co-Tsar Peter wrote a letter to the Kangxi emperor asking the Qing to lift the siege on the Russian settlement of Yaksa on the northern tip of the Amur River (Stephan 1994, map on 27). This letter was written only in Latin, with no Russian copy. The letter responded to previous correspondence from the Qing emperor, showing that the Russian court, at this time, had translation services, even though there was no mention of the translators. Peter also explained that it was because of the unstable situation of the neighbouring countries and the roads being blocked that the Tsar had not been able to answer previous letters from the Qing emperor (QD, 70-72). These instances demonstrate a clear trend of the Russians' choosing Latin for communication with the Qing court; information exchange between the two courts was consequently improved.

The Qing and Russia each had its own distinctive background for the use of Latin in their diplomatic communication. On the Qing side, the Kangxi emperor had shown increasing favour towards the Jesuits in the early part of his reign, with several Jesuits being invited to

travel with the emperor beyond the Great Wall (Menegon 2012, 279). These included the two men chosen as Latin translators in the Treaty of Nerchinsk negotiations, Tomás Pereira and the French Jesuit Jean-Francois Gerbillon (1654–1707) (Menegon 2012, 276). Having been tutored by Ferdinand Verbiest in his youth, “Kangxi considered the Jesuits as loyal men whom he could entrust with special tasks” (Collani 2024, 45–7; cf. Wardega 2012, xxi). More importantly, the Kangxi emperor had invited the Jesuits to learn Manchu, in which some of them had attained fluency (Fuchs 1940, 558–559). The Kangxi court had thus built up a team of trustworthy Jesuits capable of conducting communication with the Russian court and with the Russian delegation in the treaty negotiation.

Verbiest was “the first one of the Jesuits at the Chinese court to be acquainted with Russian diplomacy, and with the whole complex of problems that arose between the Russian state and Qing Empire in the early 1680s” (Myasnikov 2012, 512). Spafarii learned from Verbiest that the Manchu emperor had assigned him to compile a Latin and Chinese grammar book. This task was very challenging, and he was still in the process of compiling it (DA, 35 and EZ, 53). According to Joseph Sebes, “It was in 1676, during Spathar [Spafarii]’s mission, that the Jesuits intervened for the first time actively in the diplomatic transactions between Russia and China” (Sebes 1961, 78). The Kangxi emperor’s “openness towards the West” and warm relationship with the Jesuits (Wardega, 2012, xx) opened the door for Latin language to serve as the translation language through the Jesuits serving at the Qing court. As Fuchs concluded, the influence of the Jesuits in the Qing palace was the decisive factor in the use of Latin as the official mediating language between the Qing and Russia (Fuchs 1940, 549). The extraordinary practice in the Qing tribute empire of employing Europeans for diplomatic tasks led to the 1689 Treaty of Nerchinsk with Russia – the most significant early modern diplomatic treaty in East Asia.

On the other hand, the Russian approach to the Latin language and the employment of European Latin translators from other countries originated from a very different tradition. Different from the Western Roman Empire, where “the process of municipalization stimulated ... the adoption of Latin, the language of citizenship and imperial law” (Whitby, 2016, 135), the Greek-speaking Eastern (Byzantine) Empire influenced the language of Orthodox Christianity and the Church of Russia (Kislova 2018, 192 and 197). This separated Russia from most of Western and Central Europe, where, by late Medieval times, “Latin was not the first language of any native speaker” in Western Europe but was “learned as a language primarily for reading and writing.” It was for the most educated elite in administration, church, literature, and education, and no longer used in people’s daily lives (Moran 2019). Russia, however, was not absolutely isolated from Latin because Russia was not absolutely isolated from Western Europe. In the time of Vasilli III (1479–1533), for example, diplomatic documents translated from Latin were well-known in Russia. In the time of Ivan IV (the Terrible, 1530–1584), the Ambassadorial Chancery (*Posol’skii prikaz*), the foreign affairs office of the Tsardom in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, employed various foreign translators and interpreters, whose education included Latin (Petrova 2024, 273–4).

Peter the Great promoted Latin in Russia, for which most translators were of foreign origins (Rjéoutski 2018, 169 and Petrova, 2024, 277); it is therefore no surprise to have Nicolai Spafarii, a well-educated Mordovian, sent by the Tsar to the Qing court in 1675, and Andrei Bielobocki, a Pole educated in languages at the University of Cracow, appointed as Latin translator in Golovin's treaty delegation at Nerchinsk (Mancall 1971, 143).

Furthermore, Latin served as the language of the Orthodox clergy as a symbol of a Western type of culture in Russia before the Petrine reforms. After the reforms, Latin spread as their professional language (Kislova 2018, 192 and 197). Latin also attracted the Russian elite as a way to connect with European civilisation, a development in which the Jesuits played a part (Bennett 2020).

From the pre-Spafarii missions to Beijing, the Tsar's government had noticed the importance of Latin in communication with the Qing court. The selection of envoys for the new mission, then, considered their Latin capability (Zhang 2009). Even though Peter the Great, who became sole ruler in 1689 during Golovin's time at Nerchinsk, was not favourable towards the Jesuits himself, the rise of Latin as the translation language in the Qing-Russian communication made it important in the treaty negotiation between the two empires. Tomás Pereira and Jean-Francois Gerbillon became intermediaries and political actors for the Qing delegation (Sebes 1961, 104–106 and 109), while the Latin translator Andrei Bielobocki was part of the Russian treaty delegation.

On the Mongol side, the Mongol khans were concerned about Russian colonisation in southern Siberia, particularly "the growth of Russian population and authority in the Selenga Valley, where a large number of the members of Buryat, Tabungut, and Evenki tribes began paying *yasak* [tribute] to the newcomers. The Mongol khans responded to the challenge with both diplomatic and military activities" (Mancall 1971, 146). Incidents are recorded in which the Russian delegation faced Mongol attacks during their return journey to Moscow in 1661 (EZ 28 and AD, 13), and there were military conflicts between Russians and the Mongols in September of 1688 (Yakovleva 1958, 147); the Mongols also captured Russian delegation members in 1688 (QD, 106). Furthermore, on their way to the treaty negotiation in 1689, the Russian delegation feared that certain Mongol groups would ally with the Qing troops and destroy the Russian fortresses around Lake Baikal (AD, 59 and EZ 80).

In contrast to this Russian-Mongol relationship, Mongol princes including the Tushetu-khan were Manchu tributaries, and the Mongol envoy from Tushetu-khan to Russia even emphasised the close relationship between his khan and Kangxi, thus worsening Russian-Mongol relations (Mancall 1971, 147), but when the Qing treaty delegation passed through the Mongol region, the Khalkha Mongols welcomed them with presentations by their nobles of horses, camels, and other supplies (QD, 112). As the Mongols drew closer to the Qing and more estranged from Russia, the use of Mongolian for the Qing-Russian correspondence, which implied a reliance on Mongolian translators in the negotiation of highly sensitive issues, would have put Russia at a disadvantage. The Russian Tsar would prefer Latin, with which

the Kangxi emperor was also satisfied. Through treaty negotiations based on Latin translation, the Manchu court looked to meet their goal, in addition to border peace with Russia, of neutralising the Russian relationship with the Zunghars, who launched a war against the Khal-kha Mongols and threatened Manchu rule immediately before the Treaty of Nerchinsk. For the Russians, Latin as the translation language would significantly alleviate language complications in their urgent need to efficiently negotiate the desired treaty for peace with the Qing in the Far East. Thus vital role of Latin in the Treaty of Nerchinsk came about.

It should be noted that the rise of Latin did not bring an end to the function of Mongolian as a translation language in some of the Qing-Russian correspondence. A Lifanyuan letter to the Russian Albazin authority regarding regional conflicts and the matter of Gantimur, dated the ninth day of the tenth month, 1683, was written in Russian, Manchu, and Mongolian (DA, 37 and EZ, 56). Three years later, on November 15, 1685, the Qing court released two captured Russians, whom the Qing military commander Pengchun freed, having them separately deliver six letters to the Tsar and the Russian *voevoda* of Yasak/Albazin and Nerchinsk. These letters were written in Latin, Mongolian, and Russian (the source does not specify which language was used for which letter) (DA, 39 and EZ, 557–58). On November 12, 1686, a Lifanyuan official told the Russian envoy in Beijing that if their Tsar wrote to the Qing emperor, it would be better to use three languages: Russian, Latin, and Mongolian (AD, 47 and EZ, 66–67). On the next day, November 13, two letters from the emperor to the Tsar were given to the Russian envoy. The second letter was written in Mongolian (AD, 67–68 and EZ, 68). Between the two translation languages, however, Latin was chosen for work on the most important historical event – the first bilateral treaty. Even in the treaty negotiation, however, Mongolian was not entirely set aside. “Orthodox Russian suspicion of Roman Catholic Jesuits forced Golovin at one point to seek to communicate with the Manchus directly through the Mongolian language, but the Mongolian translators on each side were so poor that the negotiations reverted to Latin almost immediately” (Mancall 1971, 155–6). In this circumstance, Latin served as “the primary vehicle of communication, and as the language of the authoritative version of the treaty” (Perdue 2012, 510).

Languages in the treaty negotiation

The Treaty of Nerchinsk represents the highest level of language interaction in the Qing-Russian bilateral relationship up to 1689. As we shall see, the Latin interpreters bore the brunt of the frequent breakdowns in dialogue, as well as of military threats. Their experiences indicate the crucial importance of Latin as a mediating language and of the Latin-speakers’ constructive role as consultants in the often hostile negotiations.

The use of Latin as the translation language was accompanied by intensified hostility in the correspondence between the two empires, even though both sides desired to establish a

peaceful relationship. The prelude to the Nerchinsk meeting can be seen as part of the negotiation. Like the letters from the Manchu court to Russia, the Russian letters reaching the Qing court in the second half of the 1680s showed the same urgency for direct talks on conflict resolution. The communication was, however, full of disagreements. On the twenty-ninth day of the ninth month of 1686, the Princes and Ministers of the Deliberative Council, following the emperor's instructions, reviewed the Tsar's letter requesting the Qing to stop the siege of Yaksa/Albazin. They blamed the Russians for disturbing the Qing Amur region and listed a series of complaints when they discussed the Russian suggestion of urgent peace talks. The emperor accepted their suggested response and asked the Grand Secretariat to draft a letter to the Tsar. In the letter, the emperor claimed to be the master of the world and listed all Russia's evil deeds in the Amur region. He nevertheless expressed a wish for the Russians to come for peace talks (QD, 73-77).

Working towards peace talks with the Russians, the Kangxi emperor, on the seventh day of the tenth month in 1686, asked the Grand Academicians in the Grand Secretariat (whose official rank was as high as the ministers of the Six Boards) to collect and present to him all seven Qing "edicts" issued to Russia since 1655. One of them had been given to a Dutchman in Beijing to deliver to Moscow, one to an unidentified European, one to five released Russian captives, and the other four had been delivered by Russian envoys. The emperor reviewed all these "edicts" (QD, 77-78) in serious preparation for peace talks with Russia. On the Russian side, ten missions had been dispatched to China between 1608 and 1675, of which seven reached their destination. Not all of them were organised by the Tsar's court in Moscow. Those dispatched by Siberian governors were led by Cossacks rather than the court-appointed nobles who acted as the Tsar's envoys (Monahan 2016, 80-81). Information from the two sides indicates that whenever the Qing court received a letter from the Russian court, the Qing responded. After 1676, the use of Latin facilitated the Tsar's responses to the Qing court.

On the sixth day of the eleventh month in 1687, the Kangxi Emperor instructed the Deliberative Council of Princes and Ministers, along with the Lifanyuan, to draft a letter to the Russian Tsar, in Russian and Latin, to urge a Russian delegation to come for treaty negotiations. The Lifanyuan completed the letter on the same day, showing how efficient translation at the Qing court now was, and sent it off to the Khalkha Mongols to deliver to the *voevoda* of Selenge/Chukubaixing, located between present-day Ulan-Ude and Ulaanbaatar (QD, 80-81). The Tsar appointed Fyodor Alexeyevich Golovin as Ambassador Plenipotentiary for the treaty negotiations. Golovin wrote in Manchu to the Khalkha religious leader Jebzundamba and the Tüsheets Khan, informing them of the Russian delegation's date of departure for the negotiation site (QD, 82-83). In the fourth month of 1688, Golovin wrote a letter in Latin to the Qing Plenipotentiary Songgotu regarding the meeting location (QD, 105-108). When Golovin's envoy Stelan Yakolevitsch Korovin delivered this Latin letter to the Qing court, he presented a Manchu translation that the Russians had prepared for the Qing officials to read. After receiving this letter, the Qing treaty delegation set out on the

thirtieth day of the fifth month, 1688, for Selengge – the first selected location for the treaty negotiation – but due to the Zunghar-Khalkha war, the location was changed in the next year to Nerchinsk (QD, 84–86). In the fourth month of 1689, Songgotu wrote two letters to Golovin, informing the Russian delegation that he would depart for the negotiation meeting that month and arrive at the meeting location, Nerchinsk, in the sixth month. The two letters were written in Manchu (QD, 103–104). When Songgotu sent a letter to the *voevoda* of Nerchinsk asking him to transmit it to Golovin, the letter was written in Manchu and Latin (QD, 115). The Russian envoy sent by Golovin to Songgotu informed him that Golovin had read Songgotu's letter written in Latin (QD, 119). These records demonstrate a mature translation system between Manchu, Russian, and Latin. The information interchange between the two sides through language translation was ready for treaty negotiations to take place.

The fourteen-day treaty negotiation in the summer of 1689 was fully reliant on third-language translation. Yakovleva's study, based on the Russian archives, pointed out that the two sides agreed to use Latin for treaty negotiation (Yakovleva 1958, 164). Both the Qing and the Russian courts designated their trusted Latin translators to reconcile any conflicts in communication, namely Tomás Pereira and Jean-Francois Gerbillon for the Qing delegation (AD 61 and EZ 82) and Andrei Bielobocki for the Tsar's envoy Golovin (AD, 49 and EZ, 69). According to the Russian source, after the two delegation members had greeted each other, the Russians used Latin to announce the reason for this negotiation (AD, 61 and EZ, 82 and). Studies have proved that all the negotiations “were conducted in the Latin language” (Myasnikov 2012, 514), and the Latin-speaking translator-interpreters used Latin to work between the two delegations the entire time (Fuchs 1940, 451).

Latin translation and interpretation had to deal with a stormy dispute between the two sides, touching on the most sensitive matters of border demarcation, population settlements, trade arrangements, and diplomatic establishments. Rather than merely translating, the Jesuits engaged in raising new proposals in one round after another (AD, 62 and EZ, 82). Eventually, the written texts of the Treaty of Nerchinsk formed a unique document in world history. A third European-language text, in Latin, represented two texts in the native languages of the two negotiating Eurasian empires, Manchu and Russian. As the three texts varied in details and their numbering and order of articles were different,¹⁵ the Latin text was adopted as the official treaty document (Fuchs 1940, 548), with both the Qing and Russian seal stamps as visual signals of authorisation, while the Manchu and Russian texts each had a single seal as each empire's visual signal (Chia 2025). The Manchu and Russian texts were, in Sebes' words, “semi-official copies of the treaty” (Sebes 1961, 150). Through a thorny negotiation, the agreed treaty articles kept the peace for one hundred and seventy years. This “may be considered one of the most successful ever made” and yet “without the Jesuit brokers, the Nerchinsk negotiations would probably have been aborted” (Donnelly 2008, 172–3).

¹⁵ Ye, 2010, 189–199 has photographic images of the treaty texts in the three languages.

Neither Chinese nor Mongolian appeared in the finalised texts of the Treaty of Nerchinsk. In the Qing delegation to the negotiations, the seven high-ranking members who signed the Treaty on the Manchu text comprised six ethnic Manchus – Songgotu, Tung Guwe G’ang, Langtan, Sabsu, Mala, and Unda – and one, Bandarsha, an ethnic Mongolian from the Mongolian bordered white banner (*Qingdai guanzhi ziliaoku*) but also a member/commander in the Manchu Eight Banners. “No Chinese secretaries were attached,” and “no trace of the text of this treaty is found in any of the Chinese sources of the time” (Sebes, 1961, 120). The agreement between the Qing and Russian delegations was to have the article of the treaty concerning border demarcation engraved on a stone stele in Manchu, Russian, and Latin (QD, 124). When the Princes and Ministers of the Deliberative Council discussed erecting steles at the mouths of the Argun River and the Gorbitsa River to mark the newly demarcated Qing-Russian border in 1690, the Mongolian and Chinese languages were added to the stele inscriptions. The decision was to have one side of the stele carved with Manchu, Mongolian, and Chinese, with Russian and Latin on the other side (QD, 125). The Mongolian and Chinese languages were thus brought into direct relation to the Treaty of Nerchinsk, and Mongolian and Chinese versions of the treaty text, as translations of the Manchu text, came into being.

When the Treaty documents were officially translated into Chinese, even the *Veritable Records of Kangxi* (*Kangxi Shilu* 康熙實錄) had only the text of the inscription, which differed in some details from the original text (Sebes, 1961, 120). Fuchs collected a list of twenty-seven Chinese editions of the treaty text, starting with the 1690 *Kangxi Shilu* and continuing to 1935 (Fuchs 1940, 561–2). All the language texts of the Treaty of Nerchinsk differed from each other, including the original Latin, Manchu, and Russian versions, the numerous Chinese versions translated from Manchu, the European editions – the Portuguese (from Pereira) and French (from Gerbillon) versions – and the French, German, English, etc. versions produced through translation, (Wang Tieyai 1982, 2–3; *Zhong’e bianjie tiaoyueji*, 1973, 1–3; Sebes, 1961, 142, and 145–7; Fuchs, 1940, 549). There were even varying Latin, Manchu, and Russian editions of the texts (Fuchs, 1940, 553–569). A linguistic look at these treaty texts awakens us to the exceptional uniqueness of the Treaty of Nerchinsk in early modern international diplomacy.

Latin continued to serve as a translation language between the Qing and Russian courts up to 1757 in the Qianlong reign (Fuchs 1940, 550). During 1692–1694, four Qing letters to the Russian *voevoda* in Nerchinsk were written in Manchu, Russian, and Latin (AD, 69 and EZ, 89–90). In early 1694, the Lifanyuan passed two documents written by Songgotu to the Russian envoy Izbrant Ides, both written in Latin (DA, 72 and EZ, 93). A Russian letter regarding the visit of the first official Russian trade delegation to Beijing in 1699 was written in Latin (GES 1936, 8). At the same time, Mongolian also served as another translation language. In 1693, the Lifanyuan informed Izbrant (as the Lifanyuan called him) that from now on, Russian ambassadors to Beijing should bring with them translators for Latin and Mongolian (DA, 72 and EZ, 93).

Through their Latin language and translation capabilities, not by power in any form, the Jesuits performed an active part in the accomplishment of this treaty in the prevailing historical circumstances. In the treaty negotiations, they were members of the ambassadorial corps. They functioned as more than just translators, acting as consultants on many arduous issues. Inspired by their high goal of the Catholic cause, they devoted themselves to the tasks of translation and treaty negotiation, which helped bring the Kangxi court into the sphere of global diplomacy. In the process of working on the Treaty of Nerchinsk, the Jesuits enabled the Russians to become informed about the Qing and the life of Jesuits in Chinese society (Liu Ruomei 2020, 101–2). This treaty relationship not only provided the “gateway” between the Qing empire in East Asia and the European-based Russia. Through Russia, as well as by other routes, “Western Europe was also discovering the fascination of the Middle Kingdom” (Stolberg 2000, 334).

Conclusion

Language and translation must be counted into, rather than left out of, the study of the seventeenth-century Qing-Russian relationship. This exploration of language and translation in the Qing-Russian correspondence surrounding the establishment of the Treaty of Nerchinsk is situated within the broader multilingual environment and historical roots of the Qing Empire and its governance system for managing translation. By incorporating Russia — an emerging external power to the Qing world — into the Qing linguistic framework, this study highlights the linguistic foundation of Qing-Russian communication and provides a linguistic perspective on the Treaty of Nerchinsk. Through this perspective, the Treaty is redefined as more than just a bilateral agreement concerning diplomacy, borders, trade, and peace. It represents a relationship that transcended language barriers. The significance of the Treaty lies in its cross-language interactions, which were mediated by a third language and bridged through translation, marking an important moment in world diplomatic history. The significance of the Treaty in all other respects was contingent upon effective language communication. The use of third-language translation, which is not commonly practised in the modern and contemporary world, was essential for the Treaty of Nerchinsk to become a historical landmark.

This examination of the Latin language and the translating and interpreting role of the Jesuits in the Treaty of Nerchinsk offers a global perspective on the understanding of this Treaty. The Treaty was established through the linguistic interactions between East and Inner Asia (including the Manchu and Mongolian languages), Slavic Eastern Europe (Russian), and a significant portion of Europe (Latin) in the late seventeenth century. With this linguistic dimension, the study of the Treaty of Nerchinsk becomes more comprehensive and provides global insights. The Treaty of Nerchinsk can no longer be seen as merely a historical event

in Qing-Russian relations on the Eurasian continent: it is also an outstanding example of linguistic globalisation in world history.

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