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MARCO POLO'S JOURNEY THROUGHOUT THE MONGOL YUAN
EMPIRE, AND HIS POSSIBLE (OR POTENTIAL) ENCOUNTERS
WITH KORYŎ OF THE KOREAN PENINSULA

1. Foreword: Marco Polo in China, and his Writing of the World

As well known, Marco Polo was born in 1254, and died in 1324. In 1271, from Venice he embarked on a trade journey, and arrived in China – specifically Shàngdū (上都) – in 1274, three years since he left home. He spent 17 years in China, and then finally decided to depart from Beijing (Dàdū/Dàidū, 大都) in 1291, arriving at the Ilkhanate in 1293 to drop off a Mongol Princess, and came back to Venice in 1295, marking the end of his twenty-five-year journey around the world.

As at the time the world was witnessing the formation and thriving of an unprecedented empire forged by the Mongols, Polo's journey – which would have initially been meant primarily for China – fatefully took him not only to the inside of China, but also to the outer most regions of the Mongol Yuan Empire. His journey also coincided with most of the reign of Emperor Qubilai (1260-1294), who was without a doubt the single most important figure who lived through this chapter of history for the Empire and the globe.

Following former travelers like Plano Carpini (b.1182-d.1251, journeyed in 1221-1248, est.) and William Rubruck (b.?-d.?, journeyed in 1253-1255, est.), Marco Polo yet again expanded the range of knowledge obtained by pioneers of the time, and laid ground for others such as Ibn Battuta (b.1304-d.1368, journeyed in 1325-1354, est.), establishing a foundation upon which others could carry on the task that Polo helped further shape.

The embodiment of Polo's such contribution, the *Writing of the World*, which contains information he collected during the entirety of his journey, needs no introduction. The book's composition itself shows us the magnitude of his travels. From West Asian regions to Central Asia, he portrayed what he saw and heard. Then describing what he felt and touched during his stay at the Empire's

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two capitals, he also depicts the political, economic and cultural life in China's Northern, Southwest and Southeast sections. Then he ventures out into other areas, first highlighting various regions located across the Indian ocean, and then showing us his visit to the Great plains.

Unfortunately, Polo's travels do not seem to have included either the Korean peninsula or the Japanese archipelago. There are some references to the latter (Japan) in his book, but he never said anything about Koryŏ (高麗, 918-1392), the dynasty that inhabited the Korean peninsula at the time. Quite possibly he knew nothing about it. But who knows? The Korean peninsula had already been known to – at least to some of – the people of both Central and West Asian regions, under the name of *Kaoli* or *Corea*, so Marco Polo may have conversed with people on the subject matter (Korea) while did not even realizing it.

In this article, I would like to introduce to readers first the Korean peninsula at the time of Marco Polo's activities in the Mongol Yuan Empire (1274-1295), and then highlight certain historical experiences that may have been shared by both Koryŏ on the peninsula, and Polo during his adventures. Shared cultural experiences that may have been unbeknownst to them, as well as mutual historical encounters that both parts may have been oblivious to, is what I would like to trace here as much as possible, and then leave the rest to readers and their own imagination.

2. Koryŏ on the Korean peninsula, at the time of Marco Polo's Journey in Asia

2.1 The Mongol shock to Koryŏ

The 13th century for Koryŏ began with an alien race arriving on its doorstep. A race called the Mongols, suddenly knocked on Koryŏ's doors in 1218 and proposed a joint military operation to squash a faction located on the outskirts of the Jurchen Chin dynasty, which was a blood enemy for Temujin, later Chinggis Khan. The operation, which Koryŏ only hesitantly agreed to, was successfully completed and both sides parted ways amicably, although probably suspecting that the next encounter between them would not be pretty.

As predicted, a bloody war between Koryŏ and the Mongols broke out only a decade later, beginning in 1231 with a full-scale Mongol invasion on the Korean peninsula which continued for thirty years – albeit on and off – till the year 1259. The damage inflicted on the peninsula was immeasurable, and countless souls were lost (Yun 1991). Then to make matters worse, the aftermath turned out to be more than a mess. An Imperial Branch Secretariat (征東行省) was installed on the peninsula to not only control the region previously overseen by the Koryŏ government (which was still kept intact even after the Secretariat's installation by the way), but also oversee preparations for the upcoming Japanese Campaign (Chang 1994).

Succeeding former Kings such as Kojong (高宗, r.1213-1259) – who had to endure the 3-decade war with the Mongols – and Wŏnjong (元宗, r.1260-1274) – who negotiated his own son's marriage to the Emperor Qubilai's daughter –,

Koryŏ King Ch'ung'ryŏl (忠烈王, r.1274-1308) was named as Governor of that branch secretariat. Then he used his another new status as the son-in-law of the Mongol Emperor, to navigate through all the Koryŏ-Imperial negotiations and secure the Koryŏ state's interest (Lee 1996). But changes were inevitable. The Koryŏ Government's structure was altered at Yuan's order, and Koryŏ officials began to receive Imperial posts and ranks, from not only Koryŏ Kings but the Mongol Emperors as well (Lee 2016b).

During this time, Koryŏ's economy also took a huge hit. As the war ravaged the peninsula, lands were rendered uncultivable, and numerous households were forced to leave their hometowns, reducing the revenue the government would normally expect of them to near zero. Meanwhile, harsh demands and summary collection of Koryŏ resources – which had already begun since the invasion ever started – only got worse after the war was over, in the form of systemic extraction of materials (other than official taxes) through institutional devices like garrison farms [屯田] and falcon ranges [鷹坊]. Sea stations (水驛) were deployed along the Western coastline of the Korean peninsula (1293-1303), as a potential prelude to more confiscations of Koryŏ materials, while Koryŏ merchants' foreign trades were virtually suspended for almost half a century, due to damages from the war (Lee 2013). Amidst all this, countless Koryŏ females were literally kidnapped from the peninsula. Even after the Mongol Yuan Empire secured the Chinese Jiangnan region and no longer needed Koryŏ materials as it did in the late 13th century, Koryŏ was forced to submit females throughout the early 14th century.

With this abruptly initiated unfair, unequal relationship with the Mongols, Koryŏ had to embrace itself for forced cultural alterations to their existing lifestyle as well. Koryŏ officials and civilians came to don Mongol hairstyles and outfits (Kim 2016), while Mongol, Uighur & Arabic culture continued to slip into the mainstream Koryŏ culture. Meanwhile, new Buddhist schools were introduced into Koryŏ (Kang 2001), and Neo-Confucianism, sponsored by the Yuan Imperial government itself, was actively disseminated through the aforementioned Chŏngdong Branch secretariat (Toh 1999; Koh 2001). As a result, the Koryŏ people and the Mongols came to share similar cultural elements, and even swap customs and conventions, across a wide range of areas such as food, attire, accessories and decoration, religion, philosophy and academic aspiration.

2.2 Other layers of Koryŏ's reality, at the time of Marco Polo in China

Political boundaries that traditionally existed between the Korean peninsula and China was being blurred in certain areas. Such fluctuation in previous divisions was manifested in a variety of formats, such as the Koryŏ Kings' new identity as Koryŏ-Mongol hybrids, or Koryŏ vassals' splitting loyalty between the Koryŏ king and the Mongol Emperor, or the officials' new careers in China, which led to expanded range of operations by Koryŏ kings and officials. Meanwhile, a revisionist view of the late 13th century Mongol intervention formed amongst Koryŏ intellectuals in the 14th century, and the Mongol invasion in

the 13th century's early half was conveniently omitted in 14th century Koryŏ diplomatic communiques to Yuan (Lee 2019).

However, the Koryŏ kings also took advantage of this new situation. Using their deeply cultivated relationships with the Mongol Emperors and high-ranking Imperial officials, they continued to represent Koryŏ Interests and resolve Koryŏ problems. They utilized Yuan political agendas and policies to reform age-old issues plaguing the Koryŏ administration, and even intentionally fused Koryŏ, Chinese and Mongol institutional elements altogether to enhance the Koryŏ institutions' effectiveness, devising a new dynamic for Koryŏ governance (Lee 2024a).

Prior elements of the Koryŏ economy were also retained, as Koryŏ's original currency (silver bullion [銀瓶] and textile currency [布貨]) survived not only the Mongol invasion but the aftermath as well, during which Yuan Imperial paper currency [寶鈔] entered the Koryŏ domain yet circulated in only a limited fashion and used mainly abroad.

In the meantime, Cargo aboard Koryŏ governmental expeditions and civilian ships entering Chinese harbors was considered to be 'foreign goods' by Yuan (and subjected to Imperial tariff), reflecting the reality that the Koryŏ market was indeed regarded as a separate entity from the Empire. Vibrant outward trade also resumed, and this time around on a much wider scale compared to before, utilizing the Imperial trade network no less. Koryŏ merchants especially benefitted from the information and expertise provided by the foreign merchants (*Hwehwe* [回回] and *Semu* [色目]) who had been operating on the trail of the famous *Ortaq* trades (an expanded form of traditional *Silk Road* trades across the globe), and amidst coming to the peninsula themselves on a variety of occasions¹, later served as proxies for the Koryŏ King and government (Lee 2017).

And then, interesting changes unfolded in the area of culture and society as well. Koryŏ's original legal infrastructure remained intact, even though the Yuan imperial authorities preferred Yuan Law to be embraced and observed in certain areas of Koryŏ. For example, took place at the time was a dispute concerning the issue of forcing Imperial precedence on Koryŏ, in cases of determining the social status of 'commoner-slave' couples' offspring. An apparent attempt to override Koryŏ customs in the process, led to the dismissal of a Mongol officer who led the charge, and his subsequent removal from Koryŏ. Coinciding with this rather aggressive response on Koryŏ's part toward any attempt to change Koryŏ

¹ *Koryŏsa* (高麗史). vol. 28, Chronology(世家) n. 28, King Ch'ung'ryŏl (忠烈王) reign, 2nd year (1276), Lunar March (Cheong'yu [丁酉] day), “元遣林惟幹及回回阿室迷里來採珠于耽羅”; vol. 31, Chronology n. 31, King Ch'ung'ryŏl reign, 21st year (1295), Lunar April (Kimi [己未] day), “元遣小云失不花來詔曰：‘自窩闊台皇帝到今以來，賣買人等貸出官錢，不以利錢還納，彼此隱匿者多矣。其內外官員尋捕賣買人，收取利錢依數交納泉府司。若有見賣買人隱匿首告者賞之。’”; *Dàyuán Shèngzhèng Guócháo Diǎnzhāng*(大元聖政國朝典章), Penal Section(刑部), vol. 19, Ban on usurping people(禁誘略：過房人口), “爲這船行了的上頭，歹人每將好百姓每的兒女，推稱過房爲由，車裏船裏多載着，往高麗等地面裏，貨賣去有[...]”.

norms, a sudden surge of love for 'Old Koryŏ things' also surfaced, leading to the resurrection of traditional Koryŏ practices, particularly in administrative institutions and ritual protocols. For example, the Dynastic memorial service for an old Chinese-turned-Koryŏ sage [箕子] was revived, and the Dynastic shrine [太廟] was restored and renovated to feature dual (both Koryŏ and Imperial) institutional heritages².

3. *What Koryŏ and Polo (may have) shared*

3.1 *Exchanges with Southeast and West Asian regions*

Marco Polo's closest reference to the Korean peninsula may have been certain comments made by him on the Japanese archipelago. Polo's description of Japan is limited to a handful of subjects though, such as Japan's being full of gold, or the country falling victim to the Mongol invasion.

At the time, Koryŏ and Japan were not on the best of terms, especially in the late 13th century. Koryŏ troops and ships were mobilized for the Japanese campaign (1274 and 1280-1281) (Yun 2013), and Japan's trauma from the invasion left Koryŏ very much concerned about the prospect of future retaliations (which later inconsequentially came to reality in the form of Japanese pirates' East Asian incursions, in the mid-14th century) (Yi 2011).

In the early 14th century, Yuan and Japan resumed their trades, but direct contact between Koryŏ and Japan remained seldom even after that, with Yuan-Japan trade ships only occasionally visiting the Korean peninsula. One ship sank near the Korean peninsula's Southwest coastline, and as it was harboring a considerable amount of cargo that included an extensive collection of valuable commodities, the ship itself is now named the *Shinan Wreck* (新安海底遺物船), and all the artifacts from it have recently been displayed to the public in a huge exhibition, honoring the 40th anniversary of its excavation from the sea (National Museum of Korea 2016).

Considering all this history between Japan and Koryŏ, Polo may have heard something about the Korean peninsula during his time in China. It is only frustrating that we will never know the extension of Polo's awareness of the Korean peninsula back then.

But Japan would not have been the only source of information from which Polo could have obtained knowledge or stories of the Korean peninsula. As said earlier, Polo traveled through regions that were quite diverse in terms of not only their domestic culture but their own foreign relationships as well, so his travels through Southeast and West Asian regions may have provided him with stories or tales of the Korean peninsula, especially because Koryŏ also cultivat-

² For all these fascinating aspects of the reality Korean peninsula was experiencing at the time, see Lee 2022. For various historical sources from which we could derive such aspects, see Lee 2023a.

ed a relationship with those regions in the 14th century, for the very first time in its own history.

The time for Marco Polo to expand his travels beyond the China proper came at the end of his time in Beijing. His party, alongside three Mongol emissaries, was authorized to depart the Imperial court with a mission to escort the Mongol princess to the Ilkhanate, to deliver her to Arghun (but eventually to Ghazan) as a bride. Their journey was made via sea, taking the ‘Mabar route’, enabling Polo to witness a diversity of features on the Indian ocean which he must have found worthy of chronicling. What especially stands out amongst them is Marco Polo’s description of India (specifically Mabar) and the Ilkhanate. For example, regarding Mabar, Polo refers to the region’s vast production of pearls, its own unique political structure, and its traditional import of horses. And for the Ilkhanate, Polo’s description focuses on the stories of former Sultan Abaqa and his son Arghun, and their conflict with Abaqa’s brother and Arghun’s uncle, Acmat.

We can see the information Polo had on these focal points in Southwest and West Asian regions were admittedly not unlimited and quite topical, so the probability of him learning some things about Koryō through them would arguably be not high. But as Koryō itself in the early 14th century received some unexpected visits from these regions (Lee 2016a), there is a slim chance that stories of Koryō were relayed to Polo through his encounters and adventures in those regions.

The first ever visit Koryō received from the Indian region today was from an emissary sent by a former Mabar official, who was actually living as of 1298 not in India but instead in exile at the Chinese city Quánzhōu (泉州). This official, whose name was Beihaili (孛哈里, also called Bohali [不阿里]³), sent an emissary to Koryō King Ch’ungsōn (忠宣王, r.1298; 1308-1313), to present the Koryō King with certain materials, including traditional Indian fabrics⁴.

At the time, Chinese and Indian merchants were experiencing certain drop in trades, due to a trade ban placed by Mongol Emperor Temur (成宗, r.1295-1307) in 1296 on civilian Chinese expeditions doing business with certain regions in the Indian ocean, so Beihaili’s visit to Koryō in 1298 may have been an attempt of the Quánzhōu-based Indian community, representing the Indian interest to a certain degree, to secure additional trade partners in Northeast Asia. It is not clear whether or not Koryō and the Indian community in China – or its mother land for that matter- were able to resume such relationship in later peri-

³ Mabar was a renowned trade outpost under the ruling of the Pandya kingdom located on the Coromandel coastline of the 13-14th century India, which vibrantly traded with the Mongol Yuan Empire. The name of this ‘prince,’ who was actually a former high-ranking minister of the Mabar state, is recorded as either “孛哈里” or “不阿里” in Chinese records, while it is believed his name would have been pronounced as either “Beihaili,” “Boahi/Buali” or “Sayyid Bin Abu Ali.” See studies like Chen 1980; Sen 2004; Chaffee 2018; Biran et al. 2020.

⁴ *Koryosa*. vol. 33, Chronology, n. 33, King Ch’ungsōn(忠宣王) reign, Enthronement year (1298), July, June (Eulchuk [乙丑] day), “馬八國王子孛哈里遣使來獻銀絲帽, 金繡手筓, 沈香五斤十三兩, 土布二匹. 先是, 王以蔡仁揆女歸丞相桑哥, 桑哥誅, 帝以蔡氏賜孛哈里. 孛哈里與其國王有隙, 奔于元, 居泉州, 至是以蔡氏故遣使通之.”

ods, but for Koryō it was an interesting encounter that must have left the country pondering on the prospect – and potential merits – of similar relationships with Southeast Asian regions (if forged ever), which later indeed came to reality – albeit with different states – at the end of the 14th century.

Then, roughly a generation later, Koryō received an envoy from the Ilkhanate, sent by Sultan Abū Sa'īd (r.1316-1335, 不賽因 in Yuan records), in 1330. Abū Sa'īd was from a long line of Sultans, including founder Hulegu, and later Abaqa, Arghun, Geikhatu, Ghazan, Oljeitu. He was also engaged in trades with Emperor Isun Temur (泰定帝, r.1323-1328) in Beijing, through which both parties traded exquisite Chinese and West Asian commodities.

This envoy to Koryō paid respect to King Ch'ung'hye (忠惠王, r.1330-1332; 1339-1343), grandson of former king Ch'ungsōn⁵, as Ch'ung'hye had a special relationship with the *Hwehwe* figures⁶, who were primarily Muslim merchants with a Central Asian background (Lee, Hi-su 2012). At the time, Chinese and West Asian merchants had recently suffered a temporary blackout in the ludicrous trade between them in 1328 and 1329 due to Isun Temur's predecessor's policy, and the envoy's purpose would probably have been to acquire new Northeast Asian connections and pathways leading to the Chinese market, as a fallback option in case such blackout would resume in the near future.

So, we can see Marco Polo and the Koryō dynasty had relationships with the same regions and entities in the Southeast & West Asian worlds. We cannot know for sure if Polo has acquired any knowledge or information through his contacts with these regions, but the historical background and circumstances surrounding the situation look realistic enough for us to be imaginative in envisioning such possibilities.

3.2 Appreciation of certain Trade items like Porcelain and Textile

What Koryō may have shared with Marco Polo does not end at inter-regional relationships. They may have shared their appreciation of certain objects, or a certain area of objects, which in my opinion must have been porcelain (celadon) and textile (fabrics).

Polo's references to Chinese porcelain are various, as there are several examples including the comment on the Tingju area (mentioned in Chapter 157. Caiton city [Quánzhōu, 泉州]) for having «so many porcelain». Undoubtedly, the comment would have been about not only the Chinese porcelain produced in that particular area, but also the ones created in many other Chinese regions and then circulated through that area, which must have all

⁵ *Koryosa*. vol. 36, Chronology, n. 36, King Ch'ung'hye(忠惠王) reign, Enthronement year (1331), September, “西北普賽因遣使來獻土物.”

⁶ *Koryosa*. vol. 109, Biographies(列傳) n. 22, Yi Cho-nyōn(李兆年), “忠惠王以世子入朝丞相燕帖木兒見之大悅視猶子。因忠肅辭位奏帝錫王命。時太保伯顏惡燕帖木兒專權待忠惠不禮。忠肅復位忠惠宿衛于元時燕帖木兒已死伯顏待忠惠益薄。忠惠與燕帖木兒子弟及回骨少年輩飲酒為謔因愛一回骨女或不上宿衛。伯顏益惡之目曰撥皮。”

boasted fine traditions and sheer beauty. From Polo's such remarks we could see he was setting his eyes on the merchandise as yet another exquisite cultural property of East Asia.

Meanwhile, Koryŏ was also famous for producing fine celadon with the most profound and abstruse jade green color, as well as other porcelain products featuring the impressive inlaid technique. As a result, Koryŏ porcelain had been more than welcomed in China, which led Koryŏ to export a lot of them to Chinese consumers, even before the advent of the Yuan Empire. Of course, later Koryŏ porcelain was heavily influenced by Imperial porcelain's shapes and patterns⁷, and Koryŏ created facsimiles of them for domestic usage (Kim 2006; Lee, Chong-min 2012), but the Koryŏ people still produced celadon created in the most traditional shapes and patterns, and chose to export them to foreign markets under Yuan control (Chang 2007). Polo may have witnessed at least some of them during his stay in China.

Then, Polo would reference yet another exotic item he witnessed and took hold of during his journey, and that would be the *Nasij*, which was reported to have been amongst his possessions at the time of his death. Polo must have come across so many exotic materials during his travels, and would have acquired at least some of them along the way. Found amongst what he owned ranged from jewelry to most weird things, and included in that collection was a «cloth with patterns sewn with gold threads (織金)», which is the definition of *Nasij*, a combination of Central and West Asian weaving traditions using metal-threads, and Chinese Silk manufacturing techniques. Such merge of expertise produced a rare, yet soon to be popular, hybrid of 'silk and gold,' with patterns sewn on the fabric surface with metallic gold and silver threads, which immediately caught the eyes and hearts of every Imperial citizen.

Koryŏ also embraced such new and exquisite fabrics, and even manufactured them themselves (Cho 1992; Shim 2002), but ended up inventing a unique version of them for exterior trades, as recreating them with the usual silk (as they were done in China) was simply too costly. So the Koryŏ people crafted their own variation: the Ramie *Nasij*, by combining the country's centuries-old expertise in ramie weaving and embroidery, with imported foreign metal-weave technique. King Ch'ung'hye was the one who led the task of producing them in a palace-turned-textile manufacturing facility, which was not unlike – or rather, resembled quite strikingly – a West Asian *Tiraz* (a Sultan/Khalif-controlled, fabric manufacturing workshop)⁸,

⁷ *Koryŏsa*. vol. 105, Biographies n. 18, Cho In-gyu(趙仁規), “[...]仁規嘗獻畫金磁器, 世祖問曰: ‘畫金欲其固耶?’ 對曰: ‘但施彩耳.’ 曰: ‘其金可復用耶?’ 對曰: ‘磁器易破金亦隨毀寧可復用?’ 世祖善其對, 命自今磁器毋畫金, 勿進獻.”

⁸ *Koryŏsa*. vol. 89, Biographies n. 2, Queens and Concubines 2, Princess Unchŏn Im (銀川翁主林氏), “銀川翁主林氏商人信之女丹陽大君之婢也賣沙器爲業王見而幸之有寵. 三年王將納和妃林氏妬之乃封爲銀川翁主以慰其意時稱沙器翁主. 王起三峴新宮其制度不類王居庫屋百間實穀帛廊廡置綵女有二女被選當入泣下王怒以鐵椎擊殺之又多置碓磑皆翁主意也.”

and sold them to *Hwehwe* merchants⁹. The outcome must have attracted the eyes of customers abroad¹⁰, which may have included those of no other than Marco Polo himself (Lee 2024b).

4. Closing remarks

When Marco Polo visited Japan, or at least discussed it with someone in China, he may have heard something, or anything, of the Koryō soldiers who were commandeered and mobilized for the Empire's Japanese campaign. Polo may have also heard stories of merchants operating out of 'some peninsula' attached to the Chinese proper¹¹, in his discussions with either Indian or Iranian traders, or political leaders and scholars throughout the empire for that matter, if he had the chance to converse with them on a variety of subjects. He could have encountered or come across certain Koryō merchandise or commodities in China, while he was walking the aisles and corridors of Chinese marketplaces, or even (unknowingly) met with some Koryō merchants, scholars, diplomats visiting Peijing or the Jiangnan region. Thinking about such possibilities really thrill this writer, as searching for unrecorded and undocumented encounters and relationships that would have existed and thrived in medieval Asia and Europe definitely falls under my job description as a historian. It was a fulfilling experience for me to attend the conference and to be asked to contribute this article. Special thanks to the conference organizers and Prof. Jung Imsuk for the opportunity.

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⁹ *Koryosa*. vol. 36, Chronology n. 36, King Ch'ung'hye(忠惠王) 2nd reign, 5th year (1344), January (Mujin [戊辰] day), “給布回回家取其利.”

¹⁰ *Koryosa*. vol. 35, Chronology n. 35, King Ch'ungsuk(忠肅王) reign, 9th year (1322), July (Pyōngshin [丙申] day), “帝遣蔡河中賜安妃滿殿香, 且求織紋苧布.” Ongoing extraction of the material by the Yuan Imperial government suggests the Mongols' and Chinese appetite for the material. See Lee 2023b.

¹¹ At the time, Korean merchants were engaged in vibrant trade operations in China. Their activities were becoming bigger and more frequent, so the Koryo government had to prepare them for any potential danger of being scammed or contingencies due to linguistic barriers. Hence a linguistic manual called *Nogoldae* was published by the Koryo government, containing conversation examples in Chinese and Mongol languages so that members of commercial expeditions slated to enter China could simply memorize them for basic communication in China. See Chōng 2004; Wi 1997.

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