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## Libraries of Arabic and Persian texts in late imperial China

**Libraries of Arabic and Persian texts in late imperial China** owed their existence to the mobility of people across Asia. Changes in China's engagement with Arabic and Persian texts were shaped by the socio-political environment and attitudes in China towards foreign knowledge in general and knowledge from the Islamicate world in particular.

The earliest application of the Chinese term Hui (translated here as "Arabo-Persian") appears to have been to the Uyghur population, but the meaning changed in the early centuries of the second millennium to encompass the cultural, linguistic, religious, and geographical features of the Islamicate world. When used to refer to written texts, the term denoted both Arabic and Persian (and from the twelfth/eighteenth century onwards also Eastern Turki) texts in China.

China's engagement with Arabic and Persian texts has a long history. As an early example, Ibn al-Nadīm's *Kitāb al-fihrist* (376/987) mentions a Chinese student of Muḥammad b. Zakariyā al-Rāzī (d. 313/925 or 323/935) who wished to copy Galen's sixteen-volume work, presumably in its Arabic translation, in order to take it back to China after completing his studies.

The Mongol conquest of China, during the thirteenth century, and the sweeping movements of people, texts, and artefacts across the vast Mongol empire were significant in China's importation of Arabic and Persian texts. The Mongol Yuan dynasty (r. China 1279–1368) established imperial bureaus to apply Arabo-Persian knowledge in fields such as astronomy and medicine. These imperial bureaus housed libraries of relevant Arabic and Persian texts. A list of Arabic books (and perhaps also their Persian translations) that were housed in the northern branch of the imperial astronomical observatory in Xanadu dates to the tenth year of the Zhiyuan reign (672/1273). It gives the transliterated titles—represented phonetically by Chinese characters—and their Chinese translations of twenty-two works, including Arabic translations of Euclid's (d. 286 B.C.E.) *Elements*, Ptolemy's (d. c.168 C.E.) *Almagest*, and 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Ṣūfī's (d. 376/986) *Ṣuwar al-kawākib* (Tasaka, 1546–7; Ma Jian, 194; Yang and Yu, 179–81).

In 769/1368, the troops of Zhu Yuanzhang, a rebel leader who fought the Yuan and eventually united China under the Ming dynasty (r. 1368–1644), took over the Yuan capital Dadu (present-day Beijing). The imperial libraries of the Yuan were then transferred to the newly established Ming capital, Nanjing. Amongst these books were reportedly hundreds

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01 Temmuz 2021

proven strategy she creatively explores. Another notable elegy is no. 18, for which al-Aṣmaʿī expressed admiration. Besides her elegies, however, she is also accredited with (tribal) boasting (*fakhr*), panegyric (*madīh*), and invective (*hijāʾ*). The most famous example of the last of these genres is her retort to al-Nābigha al-Jaʿdī's (d. 60s/680s?) attempt to shame her into silence with a sexually charged poem (no. 34, which sometimes is quoted as a part of no. 33). The most interesting of Laylā's compositions overall, however, is arguably her polythematic ode (*qaṣīda*, no. 4) reportedly addressed to the Umayyad caliph Marwān b. al-Ḥakam (r. 64–5/684–5), perhaps during his tenure as governor of Medina, but judging by the poem itself, to his son, the caliph ʿAbd al-Malik (r. 65–86/685–705). Laylā's foray into this high-status—and supremely male—genre, whose gendered conventions she manages both to masterfully dominate and creatively adapt to her own female voice, is a unique achievement.

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## Libraries (up to 1500)

The importance of the written word in the premodern Middle East meant there was no scarcity of books, and, accordingly, **libraries** were a salient feature of the urban topography (much less is known about rural areas). Especially with the book revolution of the third/ninth century (Gründler), collecting books and making them accessible became a widespread cultural practice, with further impetus from the subsequent popularisation of the written word from the sixth/twelfth century onwards (Hirschler, *Written word*).

Libraries in the Middle East came in two main forms: Those in private ownership and, especially from the sixth/twelfth century onwards, those that were endowed (*waqf*, pl. *awqāf*). This legal differentiation does, however, not fully map onto the actual social role, in terms of “private” and “public” libraries: Palace libraries, for instance, were in the private ownership of the respective ruler, yet they could play a very salient public role. Endowed libraries, in contrast, could be endowed for the benefit of the endowing family (*waqf ahlī* or *dhurrī*), and it is often not clear to what extent such libraries were actually open to a wider reading public. For the period covered here, the almost exclusive term for a library is *khizāna*, but this term could refer in a narrow sense to a piece of furniture used for storing books or to a larger collection, in the actual sense of “library.” *Khizāna* can thus refer to collections of various sizes, ranging from a full-fledged library with several thousand volumes, to a mere book chest or several shelves for storing manuscripts. At the same time, the term *khizāna* never denoted an institution in its own right, but always a collection within a house, palace, mosque, *madrasa*