

**Impressions of early 13th century Central Asia as seen through  
the Poetry of Yelü Chucai 耶律楚材 (Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai) (1190-1244)**

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First I would very much like to thank Professor Liu Yingsheng, Professor Hua Tao, Yang Xiaochun and others at Nanjing University for inviting us here to give this lecture. I speak for my colleague Prof. Qiu Jiangning as well, in expressing our deep appreciation to you for giving us this opportunity to present our work on this topic.

Last year, when Prof. Qiu Jiangning was a visiting scholar at the University of Cambridge's Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, we presented a paper together on Yelü Chucai's poetry on Central Asia at the Central Asia Forum, which is part of the Cambridge University Centre of Development Studies, where there is a weekly series of lectures by guest speakers on various topics related to Central Asia. Prof Qiu teaches Yuan dynasty literature at Zhejiang Normal University. She subsequently published the results of her research in Cambridge on this topic in an article entitled "Hai, Lu Sichou zhi lu de tuotong yu Meng-Yuan shiqi de yiyu shuxie" 海，陆丝绸之路的拓通与蒙元时期的异域书写 (*Wenyi yanjiu* 文艺研究, 2017 (8): 66-75).

The paper we presented in Cambridge contained a large amount of introductory material, not only about Yelü Chucai himself, but also about the rather complicated historical context in which he lived. Due to the nature of this distinguished audience here at Nanjing University, it is not necessary for me to describe the historical context in great detail, though I will mention a few aspects that are relevant to this discussion. In what follows, I shall suggest a new theoretical approach that could be taken to his poetry and travel account. Then I shall set the poems in the context of his life and the particular setting of the Western Campaign, before focusing on the poems themselves.

### **Theoretical Background**

The main aim of our paper as presented in Cambridge was to introduce the poems that Yelü Chucai wrote while accompanying Chinggis Khan as an adviser on his Western Campaign (1219-1227). Our audience was almost totally unfamiliar with Yelü Chucai and his work. Therefore our goal was only to convey the impressions that an official from Eastern China had of Central Asia in the 13th century. However, since most of you are quite familiar with Yelü Chucai, and have probably also read his poems, we wanted to add a slightly more sophisticated dimension to the discussion for this audience, by analysing the poems in the context of a new theory about travel literature developed by Chen Leilei.

As you all know, I have worked on various Chinese travel accounts in the past, including those of Zhang Qian, Faxian, Chen Cheng and Zheng He (via Ma Huan), and have continuously wondered whether travellers more often tended to notice the things that were different about the new culture they were exposed to, or those that were the same as their home culture. My general impression was that they noticed both, at different times, and I was

unable to decide which was most prevalent. Recently I came across a book by Chen Leilei called *Re-Orienting China: Travel Writing and Cross-Cultural Understanding*, which sheds some light onto this question. This book mostly concerns modern (20th-21st century) travel accounts, but it offers what seems to be a rather profound insight into intercultural encounters, such as those expressed in Yelü Chucai's poems. In it the author speaks of "the transformative power of travel that results from interacting with the foreign", which she describes as follows:

Negotiation with otherness unsettles familiar ideas and allows the traveller to re-see what is considered "normal" at home, with fresh, critical eyes. The traveller becomes re-oriented to home. To unlearn preformed ideas about home and abroad means to comprehend the radical difference previously conceived to be between them; it also means to reimagine the foreign as relatable and the other as affiliated with the self. Finally, in one's departure and then arrival in another place, one is able to find him/herself as "the human subject dwell[ing] between."<sup>1</sup>

The last phrase is from another quotation: "The only place in which the human subject dwells is between."<sup>2</sup>

From this idea, it seems that we can break down the process of cultural encounter into three stages: (1) observing the foreign detail as something detached from the self, and commenting on it as either the same or different from home, (2) looking back at one's own culture from the new perspective of having seen that detail or difference, and finally (3) seeing one's own culture differently and readjusting one's own place in it. Thus the "other", the "home" and the "self" form three corners of a triangle which interact with each other dynamically. The self, in addition to being one of the three corners, is also floating between the various points in the midst of the interaction. Thus there are perhaps two versions of the self: the corner of the triangle is the persona of the self in the poem, perhaps an instance of the self in the moment of composition, while the self floating in the midst of the interaction is the longer-term emotional self of the writer, standing outside the immediacy of the poem, trying to make sense of the interaction in the context of his entire life. This is the dynamic self, making observations, adjusting to them, re-examining the familiar, and reconsidering itself. It seems that we can see this process operating in the poems Yelü Chucai wrote during and after his travel to Central Asia during the Western Campaign. Before proceeding to his poems, however, I shall provide some background about Yelü Chucai himself.

### **Yelü Chucai's life (1190-1244)**

As you well know, Yelü Chucai was born in 1190 into a Khitan noble family. He was the ninth grandson of Yelü Abaoji 耶律阿保機 (872-926), the first chief of the Khitan tribal confederacy and the founder of the Liao dynasty (947-1125). He was thus of royal lineage in the house of Liao. Abaoji's son Yelü Bei 耶律倍 (909-946) became Prince of the Eastern Khitan state of Dongdan 東丹. Five generations later, in 1125, the Jin 金 (1115-1234) conquered the Liao, and Yelü Chucai's grandfather went over to serve the Jin. Yelü Chucai's

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<sup>1</sup> Chen Leilei, *Re-Orienting China: Travel Writing and Cross-Cultural Understanding* (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2016), pp. xvii-xviii.

<sup>2</sup> R. Radhakrishnan, *History, the Human, and the World Between* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008

father Yelü Lǔ 履 (1131-1181 or 1191?) served in a number of high posts in the Jin, including Right Assistant Director of the Department of State Affairs (*shangshu youcheng* 尚書右丞). The family tradition continued with Yelü Chucai, who also served as an official in the Jin government. Thus Yelü Chucai came from a long line not only of Liao royalty but also of competent Jin administrators.

Yelü Chucai's given name (Chucai) comes from a passage in the *Zuozhuan* 左傳, which remarks that many of the talented scholars in the state of Chu were employed by the state of Jin (*Chu sui you cai, Jin shi yong zhi* 楚虽有材，晋实用之). In choosing this name for his son, Yelü Lǔ was thus implying prophetically that his son's many talents would be used by another state, as those of his father had been – being originally from the Liao, he was employed by the Jin. Talents in prognostication were thought to be a family trait, and the historical sources record another occasion when his father predicted his son's eminent achievements in the service of a different regime:

“I have just reached the age of sixty, and now I have a son. He will be the swift horse of our family. Some day he will be a pillar of the state, and will be employed by another state” (*Wu nian liushi er de zi, wu jia qianli ju ye. Tuori bicheng weiqi, qie dang wei yiguo yong* 吾年六十而得子，吾家千里驹也，他日必成伟器，且当为异国用).<sup>3</sup>

Yelü Chucai was said to have inherited his father's astrological talents.

When the Mongols began their invasion of the Jin in 1211-1213, many people of Khitan ethnicity, then in the employ of the Jurchen Jin, went over to the Mongol side, forming part of the Mongol vanguard. They defected out of resentment against the Jin for destroying their motherland, the Liao. At this point, Yelü Chucai's career prospects were limited due to the political turmoil of the time. Despite his high level of education and ambition to serve the Jin government, he may also have considered joining the other side. However, he had just embarked on his official career as a Vice Prefect (*tong zhi* 同知) in Kaizhou 開州 (in present-day Henan province). Therefore, not knowing exactly which way the winds were blowing, he did not retreat southwards with the Jin court, but instead stayed on in Kaizhou for a couple of years.

Chinggis Khan's second Mongol offensive against the Jin in 1213 was just when Yelü Chucai's official career was taking off. He had arrived at Zhongdu (Beijing) and taken up the important post of Vice Director of the Left and Right Offices of the Secretariat (*zuoyou si yuanwailang* 左右司员外郎). When the Jurchen court suddenly fled from Zhongdu south to Kaifeng, he was left without a court to serve.

Having snatched Zhongdu from the hands of the Jurchen Jin in 1215, Chinggis Khan realised that he needed to recruit people with experience in government and commerce to help administer the complex sedentary society of China and exploit the agricultural and urban populations under their control. He thus issued an edict recruiting former Jin government officials to work for the new regime.<sup>4</sup> Yelü Chucai may have been tempted to join him at that

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<sup>3</sup> Funerary inscription for Yelü Chucai by Song Zizhen 宋子贞, “Zhongshuling Yelü gong shendao bei” 中书令耶律公神道碑.

<sup>4</sup> According to René Grousset's *The Empire of the Steppes* 格鲁塞《草原帝国》. Chinese source for this?

point, but he was so appalled at the killing and destruction he witnessed when the capital fell to the Mongols that he took some time to reconsider what he should do. He spent the next three years in reclusion, practicing Buddhist meditation with the famous Buddhist master Wansong xingxiu 万松行秀. In the end, however, it is said that his Confucian sense of duty to use his talents in the service of the common people eventually won out, and he responded to Chinggis Khan's call for help from former Jin officials in 1218.

This is the background behind his first meeting with Chinggis Khan, when the famous conversation took place in his tent in July 1218. Yelü Chucai arrived at the Mongol ruler's camp in the region north of the Gobi desert (Mobei 漠北) after a three-month journey. Chinggis Khan is reported to have said to him, "The Liao and Jin have been enemies for generations; I have now taken revenge on your behalf" (*Liao yu Jin wei shi chou, wu yu ru yi bao zhi yi* 辽与金为世仇, 吾与汝已报之矣).<sup>5</sup> As noted earlier, Chinggis Khan was particularly interested in taking advantage of the resentment that Khitans and other previously defeated peoples felt against the Jin, their first conquerors, when he recruited them into his service. However, Yelü Chucai's reply to Chinggis Khan reveals his complex feelings of divided loyalty: "My father and grandfather have both served [the Jin] respectfully. How can I, as a subject and a son, be so insincere at heart as to consider my sovereign and my father as enemies?" (*Chen fu zu yilai jie chang beimian shizhi. Ji yi chen zi, qi gan fuhuai erxin, chou jun fu ye?* 臣父祖以来皆尝北面事之。既为臣子,岂敢复怀二心,仇君父耶?).<sup>6</sup> Chinggis Khan was apparently impressed by the intelligence, frankness and loyalty shown in this reply – loyalty to the Jin regime that Yelü Chucai and his family had served. The Mongol leader, placed a high value on loyalty, exacting severe punishment for any betrayal.

Legend has it that Chinggis Khan was also impressed by Yelü Chucai's appearance – he was very tall and had a magnificent beard. According to Peng Daya 彭大雅 of the Southern Song, the Mongols were especially impressed by full beards because they were not able to grow them themselves (*Taren shao ran, hu duo bi gui ye* 鞑人少髯, 胡多必贵也).<sup>7</sup> One of Yelü Chucai's poem, "In Praise of Myself" (*zizan* 自赞), mentions this striking feature: "My beard was long, it reached all the way to my waist" 髯髯垂到腰间.<sup>8</sup> Chinggis Khan even nicknamed him "Urtu Saqal" (*wutu saheli* 吾圖撒合里),<sup>9</sup> meaning "Long Beard" in the language of the Mongols.

In addition to his lineage, loyalty, talents, appearance and personality, Chinggis Khan was also impressed by Yelü Chucai's knowledge, particularly of law and government. Another trait that appealed to him was Chucai's skills in astrology and divination. Not only do we hear of this proficiency in Song Zizhen's 宋子贞 stone funerary inscription,<sup>10</sup> but Yelü Chucai also mentions it himself in one of his poems. In "A Hundred Rhymes Sent to Zhang Minzhi, Reminiscing about the Past" (*Huaigu yibai yunji Zhang Minzhi* 怀古一百韵寄张敏

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<sup>5</sup> Igor de Rachewiltz, "Yeh-lu Ch'u-ts'ai (1189-1243): Buddhist Idealist and Confucian Statesman" in Arthur F. Wright and Denis Twitchett, *Confucian Personalities* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962), pp. 189-216, esp. p. 193.

<sup>6</sup> Rachewiltz, "Yeh-lu Ch'u-ts'ai, p. 193

<sup>7</sup> *Hei ta shi lue* 黑鞑事略 (Brief History of the Black Tatars).

<sup>8</sup> 《湛然居士文集》卷八“自赞”。

<sup>9</sup> [source?](#).

<sup>10</sup> This inscription is included [at the end of Yelü Chucai's collected works](#), and also online at this address: <http://www.4hn.org/files/article/html/0/666/44471.html>.

之),<sup>11</sup> he refers to his first meeting with Chinggis Khan obliquely, saying, “Ever since [the Son of] Heaven clearly sent out the call, / He knew I understood the arts of divination” (*Zi tian ming xia zhao, zhi wo su tong shi* 自天明下诏, 知我速通著).<sup>12</sup>

The result of this encounter was that Yelü Chucai was chosen from among others and recruited on the spot; subsequently Chinggis Khan asked him to accompany him on his Western Campaign. On this campaign Yelü Chucai served as a scribe and a secretary, as well as an astronomer and astrologer, and ultimately became a vigorous adviser and administrator. He was the first of Chinggis Khan's Confucian retainers to formulate policy during the Mongol conquests, and he also introduced many administrative reforms in North China during the reign of Chinggis Khan and his successor Ögödei. The next section provides the context for the Western Campaign.

## The Western Campaign

Chinggis Khan launched the Western Campaign to Khwarezm (Hualazimo 花刺子模), sometimes called the conquest of Khwarezm, in 1219. As you know, the reasons for this campaign can be traced back to an incident that happened in 1215. The Naimans had rebelled against the Mongols in 1208, and their prince, Kuchlug (Quchulü 屈出律), fled west to usurp power in Qara Khitai. This move attracted Chinggis Khan's attention. It occurred just as word of the Mongol conquest of the Jin reached Sultan Muhammad, ruler of Khwarezm. Meanwhile, Chinggis Khan had also noticed the commercial attractions of the Silk Road in Central Asia, which may have provided an additional impetus for him to move in a westward direction.

Seeking to avoid conquest, Khwarezm sent a diplomatic embassy in 1215 to Chinggis Khan in North China, where he was stationed. Chinggis Khan cordially welcomed the ambassadors, expressing his desire for peaceful relations and commercial exchange. The Mongol ruler then reciprocated by sending a trade caravan, complete with 450 merchants and 500 camels, to Khwarezm. However, as the Mongol caravan crossed through the Khwarezmian city of Otrar, it was seized by the city's governor, who ordered a massacre of the hundreds of merchants and some officials in the caravan, and seized all of their merchandise. Only one person from the caravan escaped and returned to report the event.

This incident thus became a flashpoint for the war between the Mongols and Khwarezm, marking the end of their brief period of peaceful diplomacy and commerce (which had even involved signing a peace treaty). It also marked the beginning of the Mongols' first Western Campaign. By 1220, the Mongols had driven straight into Central Asia and occupied Samarkand, the capital of Khwarezm.

Yelü Chucai accompanied Chinggis Khan to Central Asia on this expedition, serving in the capacity of secretary and astrologer. In his travel account, *Xiyou lu*, he explained that the campaign was launched in response to the violent acts committed in Otrar. However, it is clear that he also thought this campaign would be futile (**reference**), and he was worried that

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<sup>11</sup> **reference**.

<sup>12</sup> *Shi* 著 is the word for “yarrow stalks” used in divination, and *su* 速 refers to his quick speed in determining the results of the divination.

it would cost many lives. This is the context for the legend of the unicorn, which he invoked supposedly to dissuade the Great Khan from prolonging the campaign.

Both the “Annals of Emperor Taizu” (*juan 1*) and the “Biography of Yelü Chucai” (*juan 146*) of the *Yuan shi* (Official Yuan History) record the appearance of a unicorn (*jiaoduan* 角端) in the 19th year of Taizu (1221) when the Emperor went to **Eastern India** (*dong yindu* 东印度).<sup>13</sup> One of the passages says,

When the Emperor was heading to Eastern India, and was stationed at **the Iron Gate** pass (Tiemen guan 铁门关), a single-horned animal appeared, with the body of a deer and the tail of a horse. It was green in colour, and able to talk. It said to the guard (*shiweizhe* 侍卫者), “Your ruler should go back immediately.” The Emperor asked Chucai about this, and he said, “This is an auspicious animal. Its name is *jiaoduan* (unicorn). It can speak all languages. It loves life and hates death. It is a sign from Heaven sent to warn you. Your Majesty is the first-born son of Heaven. The people in the Empire are all your children. If you wish to follow the mind of Heaven and fulfill the people’s destiny, Your Majesty should retreat (*banshi* 班师) immediately.

甲申，帝至东印度，驻铁门关，有一角兽，形如鹿而马尾，其色绿，作人言，谓侍卫者曰：“汝主宜早还。”帝以问楚材，对曰：“此瑞兽也，其名角端，能言四方语，好生恶杀，此天降符以告陛下。陛下天之元子，天下之人，皆陛下之子，愿承天心，以全民命。”帝即日班师。

This version of the story follows the stone stele tomb inscription by Song Zizhen mentioned above.<sup>14</sup> It gives similar traits for the animal -- deer’s body, horse’s tail, green in colour, and able to talk. Song Zizhen’s version says that it had a single horn, hence the English identification of it as a unicorn. **According to Song Zizhen**, the Emperor thought it strange and asked the Master (Yelü Chucai) about it. He said,

This animal is called a unicorn. It can walk 18,000 li in a day, and understand all the languages of the world. It is an omen, which means to despise killing. Heaven has sent it to warn Your Majesty. If you wish to follow the mind of Heaven, and show leniency to the people of this state and let them live, Your Majesty will have boundless good fortune. The Emperor then immediately issued an order to retreat.

Because Song Zizhen was an advisor in Dongping 东平 province, and had close contact with Yelü Chucai, it is thought that this information was reliable.<sup>15</sup> Invoking this omen

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<sup>13</sup> It is interesting that he uses the term **Eastern India** instead of the more traditional Dong Tianzhu 东天竺

<sup>14</sup> The text of the inscription can be found in *juan 57* of a collection of Yuan writings called *Yuanwen lei*, under the title “Zhongshuling Yelü Chucai shendao bei”. (**move this note earlier**)

<sup>15</sup> In Su Tianjue’s *char*, *Yuan shichen shilue char* (Brief Biographical Sketches of Yuan Officials), *juan 10*, under the entry “Pingzhang (Minister) Song” (Minister Song), it says: “In the beginning, Yanxingtai top of the court (Governor in charge of Dongping), always listened to servants, not officials, but not until the Grand Councilor (*chengxiang*) Master Yelü expressed his counter opinion (*wei yan* 违言 = quarrelling words, unreasonable words), urging the *xingtai* (= Chinggis Khan?) so politely and reasonably (*tongqing hao*), did it. .... In all matters he took counsel, reported to and petitioned the emperor (*zi bing*); and didn’t dare disregard Yelü Chucai’s advice? (*shi bu gan zhuan*). Master Yelü was happy, (*yi shenxiang jie na*) and very thankful for?”

seems to have been effective, because at Yelü Chucai's persuasion, Chinggis Khan eventually withdrew his forces in 1224 and retreated from this campaign. Yelü Chucai stayed in Central Asia until 1227, however, continuing to serve in Bokhara. It was supposedly there where he wrote his travel account and compiled his poetry about Central Asia.

## Yelü Chucai's Xi You Lu 西游录

Yelü Chucai's travel account, *Journey to the West (Xi you lu 西游錄)*, records in prose his experiences and impressions while in the service of Chinggis Khan. This account has been translated several times into Western languages, first appearing in English in the translation by Emil Bretschneider, under the title *Si yu lu*, and included in Bretschneider's two-volume work, *Medieval Researches*, originally published in 1888. Bretschneider was aware that he was using a shortened version of the text, but thought the complete version was lost. It turned up in 1926, however, in a Japanese edition. This version was translated by Igor de Rachewiltz and published in *Monumenta Serica* in 1962.<sup>16</sup>

Only the beginning of the account concerns his travels, and this part is quite short. In the edition translated by Bretschneider it was 800 characters long, and the Japanese edition has an additional 580 characters.<sup>17</sup> The account describes the route he took with Chinggis Khan's troops on the Western Campaign. It thus enables us to map the routes he took there and back across Central Asia. It also describes the landscape, products, and ways of life in Central Asia. It traces his route across the Altai mountains, through the Gobi Desert (Han hai 瀚海) on the southern side of these mountains, and then from Bishbalik (Bieshiba 別石把, Bieshibali 別失八里, Bechbaliq) through Būgūr (Luntai 輪臺 county), Hezhou 和州 (or Tulufan 吐魯番, the Turfan depression), and Bole (Bula 不刺, Bole 博樂) south of the Yin mountains (Yin shan 陰山). He arrived at Almaliq (Alima cheng 阿里馬城, Alimali 阿力麻里) via Sayram Lake (Sailimu hu 賽里木湖, Yuan chi 圓池), and then crossed the Ili River (Yili he 亦列河, 伊犁河), reaching Gus Ordo (Husiwoluduo 虎司窩魯朵), the capital of Qara Khitai. He then continued westward through the cities of Talas (Talasi 塔刺思, Daluosi 怛邏斯), Khojend (Kuzhan 苦蓋), Bap (Bapu 八普), Kasan (Kesan 可傘) and Balan 芭欖 (Kangi-badam). From northwest of Khojend, he then travelled 500 li (about 167 miles) to Otrar (Huadala 訛打刺). Just west of Otrar was Samarkand (then called Xunsigan 尋思干), which began to be known as Samaerhan 撒馬爾罕 in the Ming period. He spent a number of years there, and then went further west to Bokhara (Bohua 蒲華, Buhala 布哈拉). His account also describes other regions, though it is not clear whether he visited them all personally. He says that across the river Amu Darya (Amu he 阿姆河, the Oxus), and west of this river was Gurganj (present-day Kuniya wuergenqi 庫尼亞烏爾根奇 Kunya-Urgench, also called Wulijian cheng 五里犍城, Yulijian 玉里健、Wuerdachi 乌尔达赤、Wuergechi 兀尔格赤), the old capital of Khwarezm (Yulongjiechi 玉龍傑赤). Then south of this city is

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deeply received the emperor's compliance?). Both Chinese and foreign sides were pleased by this eventuality (Zhongwai jiaohuan 懽), and the various camps were respectful of the decision (zhuzhen yazhong – yazhong = cultured and sedate?)”

<sup>16</sup> reference to Rachewiltz.

<sup>17</sup> Xiang Da.

Balkh (Balahei 巴里黑, in present-day Afghanistan), which faced the river, and further west is Kerduan (Bocheng 搏城).

### Yelü Chucai's "Poems on The Western Regions" ("Xiyu shi" 西域诗)

His travel account is so short and sketchy, and it is therefore fortunate that we can supplement his account with the poetry he wrote during and after these expeditions. Of the approximately 500 poems contained in his collected works, *Zhanran jushi wenji* 湛然居士文集, about 50 poems describe the geography, weather, scenery, local people, customs, agriculture, food and ways of life in the parts of Central Asia he visited.

These poems add many dimensions not included in the travel account – not just the route he took and the places he visited, but also what strikes him about the landscape, food, customs, and so forth, especially those things he notices to be different from his homeland. His poems also describe his own inner life – the effect that the long journeys and rigorous demands on him, his exhaustion, and feelings of homesickness, loneliness and desolation. Professor Qiu Jiangning has stressed another aspect of the poetry in her paper: the intensification of the feeling of homesickness due to being outside one's own language environment, away from one's own mother tongue. She uses the term *gezhe muyu de xinzhou* 隔着母语的乡愁 (homesickness due to being separated from one's mother tongue) to express this idea. This emotional state is evident in a number of Yelü Chucai's poems. In addition to the difficulties he experienced in going about his daily life, it captures the idea that if one is not even able to express one's feelings of homesickness to another human being, one tends to feel even more desolate and unhappy.

With these ideas in mind, the remainder of this paper will examine ten short poems by Yelü Chucai, which form a series called "Xiyu Hezhong shi yong" 西域河中十詠. According to Wang Guowei,<sup>18</sup> they were all written in 1222 while he was in Samarkand. the city of Samarkand is here referred to as Hezhong 河中 of Hezhong fu 河中府 (literally, "between the rivers"). Interestingly, each poem in the series begins with the same line, "Desolation in Hezhong fu" (Jimo Hezhong fu 寂寞河中府). It is initially unclear whether he means by this line that Hezhong fu is a desolate place, or whether he is describing his own feelings of desolation. Because his precise meaning is ambiguous, the translation of the line "Desolation in Hezhong fu" is also left ambiguous. This feeling colours the way the city appears in his eyes. It is as if he sees Samarkand (and perhaps by implication the Western Regions in general) through a set of glasses coloured by his feelings of desolation.

It is somewhat unusual for a Chinese poet to place an expression of emotion right in the beginning of a poem. It is also very unusual to repeat the same line, let alone the first line, in a series of poems. Usually the poet begins with a description of something external – a landscape or an object – and ends with an expression of personal emotion. There are other poems by Yelü Chucai that use this more common sequence. The fact that he violates this convention so blatantly suggests that he is making a deliberate effort to call attention to this emotion, and make it the topic or starting point of this series of poems, instead of its final point or conclusion. This means that something else is the main point of these poems and the

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<sup>18</sup> reference to Wang Guowei's nianpu.

reader has to figure out what that is. This question will be considered as we go through the poems.

### Poem 1

寂寞河中府，	Desolation in Hezhong fu,
連薨及萬家。	With its rows of roofs and myriad homes.
葡萄親釀酒，	They make their own grape wine,
杷欖看開花。	And admire the almonds in bloom.
飽啖雞舌肉，	They fill up on chicken tongues,
分餐馬首瓜。	And share the horse-head sized melon among them.
人生唯口腹，	If life was only about filling one's belly,
何礙過流沙。	Why would I consider crossing the shifting sands an obstacle?

The first poem looks at the city from an outsider's point of view. The author first mentions the rows of houses (literally, eaves [*meng* 薨]) and homes in the city. What is the association between the feeling of desolation in the first line and the rows of houses in the second? Perhaps it is because everyone here seems to have a home and family; only he does not. The rest of the poem also hints at the people's active social life – making wine, admiring blossoms, eating chicken tongues and sharing melon. His is thus the feeling of loneliness in a crowd, the loneliness one can feel when one is surrounded by others. This feeling is then contrasted with the mention of four types of food and drink found here but not in China: wine made from grapes, almonds, chicken tongues and melons the size of a horse's head. While these are delicious, he seems to be looking at them as an outsider, he is not part of the community that prepares these foods for consumption or enjoys their life cycle. Making wine is a group activity, and the almond flowers are beautiful to look at, but perhaps they too are best enjoyed in the company others. People may share the chicken tongues and melon with him, but in the end, although the food is delicious, he is not completely satisfied. Life is not only about filling one's belly. If it were, he would not mind having to cross the shifting sands to come here or go home again. He would not feel so far away from home. The shifting sands are a reference to the mountains and deserts of the Yinshan and Jinshan, which he crossed during his journey here, a journey of 30,000 li. Ultimately, he tries to comfort himself with thoughts of the beautiful foods and sights. Yet even these do not make him happy or make the feeling of desolation go away.<sup>19</sup>

### Poem 2

寂寞河中府，	Desolation in Hezhong fu,
臨流結草廬。	Next to the river are a cluster of thatched houses.
開樽傾美酒，	Lifting their goblets, they down the lovely wine,
擲網得新魚。	Casting their nets, they catch their fresh fish.

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<sup>19</sup> There are other poems too where he mentions beautiful foods and interesting landscapes, and then ends with the feeling of homesickness, such as the poem, “Zeng Gao Shanzhang yibai yun” 贈高善長一百韻 (A hundred rhymes for Gao Shanzhang”, whose last couplet is very similar to the ending of Poem 1: *Rensheng wei kou fu*, / *Hebi si wu xiang* 人身为口腹，何必思吾乡 – if life were only about filling one's stomach, why would I need to think of home (feel homesick)?

有客同聯句，	If I have a visitor, we can write matching lines,
無人獨看書。	If no one comes, I'll read my books alone.
天涯獲此樂，	To have this joy at the edge of the horizon,
終老又何如。	In my whole life, what else will ever compare with it?

This poem portrays the pleasant life enjoyed by the people who live in the city of Samarkand. Their houses are next to the river so they have access to water; they have delicious wine and fresh fish. In this environment, he'd be happy with or without visitors, but although he says this, one has the feeling that he would prefer to have a visitor, and that he rarely has one. Whether they do or not, he is fine; he can either write poetry with his guest or have time to read his books. He is trying to look on the positive side – at least he has plenty of time to read books. It should be a peaceful, enjoyable experience, but if this is the only joy there is, he's still sad; it is not very fulfilling. Yet, the last couplet does express a sincere feeling of joy, which seems surprising in such a remote place, in the middle of a war, even to him.

### Poem 3

寂寞河中府，	Desolation in Hezhong fu,
遐荒僻一隅。	Far away in a remote corner.
葡萄垂馬乳，	The grapes are as big as a horse's teat,
杷欖燦牛酥。	The almonds shine like butter.
釀春無輸課，	There is no tax on fermented wine,
耕田不納租。	No rent is charged for farming the land.
西行萬餘里，	Having travelled over 10,000 li to the west,
誰謂乃良圖。	Who says it was a good idea?

This poem begins on a pessimistic note, not only with the loneliness that begins each of the poems, but also with the feeling of distance and isolation. However, the two middle couplets are quite positive. First, he mentions the unusual foods again, the large grapes and the shiny almonds. Then the reference to advantageous social customs compared to China: no tax on wine and no need to pay rent on farmland. In China wine was expensive because it was made from grain, the main taxable commodity because of being a food staple; and peasants had to pay a land tax. Thus life is better here than in China because of these two conditions. The last couplet turns negative again, as he mentions how far he travelled to come here and questions whether it was a good idea. Nevertheless, he does not blame anyone else for the decision.

### Poem 4

寂寞河中府，	Desolation in Hezhong fu,
生民屢有災。	The residents experience frequent disaster.
避兵開邃穴，	They dig tunnels to hide from the fighting,
防水築高臺。	And build tall towers to protect themselves from flood.
六日常無雨，	In the 6th month there is often no rain,
三冬卻有雷。	And thunder sounds unexpectedly in the late winter.
偶思禪伯語，	If one happens to think of Zen koans,

不覺笑顏開。            One cannot help breaking out in laughter.

The first half of this poem has a chilling timelessness, evoking the adaptability of the people to war and disaster as a way of life. The strategic location of Samarkand made it the site of frequent wars and natural disasters. The people were constantly digging holes or tunnels underground to hide from marauding armies; then they would emerge from their hiding places and rebuild their cities and villages, until the next war came along. The third couplet describes the climatic differences from China, with no rain in summer (the sixth month) and the unnatural occurrence of thunder in winter. Despite these difficult situations and unfamiliar conditions, it is surprising that he ends the poem on a light note; a Zen koan (or some other story, poem or song), can still make him laugh. This is something from his own culture that he carries in his mind; he thus show an inner resourcefulness not seen in the earlier poems.

### Poem 5

寂寞河中府，	Desolation in Hezhong fu,
頽垣繞故城。	Ruined walls surround the old city.
園林無盡處，	The plants and trees keep on growing,
花木不知名。	The grasses and trees have not seen a soul.
南岸獨垂釣，	On the southern shore a lone man dangles his fishhook,
西疇自省耕。	In the western fields a single farmer ploughs alone.
為人但知足，	If only you are content in your heart,
何處不安生。	You will find peace anywhere.

This poem continues the war-torn theme of the previous one. The people live among ruins; there is no time to rebuild the cities and houses or the surrounding city wall from one war to the next. The second couplet echoes Du Fu's poem about the aftermath of war, where the grasses and trees have overgrown the battlefield and there is no sign of humans. The third couplet emphasises the decimation of population, only one fisherman and one farmer are in view where once there would have been many. Realising that the contentment in the hearts of these people is their secret to peace, Yelü Chucai seems to learn from the survivors' resilience how to find contentment in his own situation.

### Poem 6

寂寞河中府，	Desolation in Hezhong fu,
西流綠水傾。	The rivers flow west instead of east.
衝風磨舊麥，	Wind mills provide power for grinding wheat,
懸碓杵新粳。	Hanging pestles are used to pound fresh rice.
春月花渾謝，	In the spring, the flowers wither and die,
冬天草再生。	In the winter, the grass begins to grow again.
優游聊卒歲，	I'll take it easy and live out my days,
更不望歸程。	And think no more of going home.

He continues the theme of the “world turned upside down” with a series of striking contrasts between Samarkand and his homeland. Here, the rivers flows west instead of east. The energy for grinding rain comes from wind-power rather than animal-power, and an unfamiliar contraption described as a “hanging pestle” is used to grind grain. The seasons effect nature differently from in China: the flowers wilt in spring and the grass grows in winter. However, Yelü Chucai has decided not to let it bother him; he will take it easy, live out his days; he resolves to think no more of home. He decides to keep to his own rhythm, live in the present and make the best of his life. Although there is a sense of sadness, there is a sense of peace at the same time because he has accepted his situation. Yelü Chucai had no idea when his tour of duty in the Western Campaign would be finished or when he would return home.

### Poem 7

寂寞河中府，	Desolation in Hezhong fu,
清歡且自尋。	Pure happiness is something one must find oneself.
麻牋聊寫字，	I will write my characters on these hemp slips,
葦筆亦供吟。	And use reeds as brushes to pen familiar words.
傘柄學鑽笛，	I will make umbrella handles into a flute,
宮門自斲琴。	And fashion the old palace doors into a lute.
臨風時適意，	In the face of difficulty, one must do what comes natural,
不負昔年心。	And not turn one’s back on one’s past identity.

This poem is clearly different from the others. He is completely resourceful, relying on himself for everything, including his own happiness. Previously he tried to find happiness outside himself in the new environment, but was not successful. Now he adapts objects in the new place to the activities of his own educational background and culture, in such intangible activities as music and writing. He can enjoy these by adapting the things around him, the hemp slips, reed brushes, umbrella handles and palace doors. He now realises that happiness comes from within, and takes comfort in the things that bring him back to his roots. Thus he does what seems natural to him and preserves his own identity.

### Poem 8

寂寞河中府，	Desolation in Hezhong fu,
西來亦偶然。	Coming westward was something that happened by chance.
每春忘舊閏，	Every spring they forget about the old intercalary month.
隨月出新年。	They follow the months to determine the New Year.
強策渾心竹，	They make strong whips from bamboo that is not hollow,
難穿無眼錢。	It is difficult to string coins that have no holes.
異同無定據，	There is no set standard for similarities and differences,
俯仰且隨緣。	In whatever I do, I accept the way things are.

He begins this poem by saying that he came west by chance; it was unplanned. This seems to contradict his last line, which suggests the hand of fate with the use of the word *yuan* 緣. However, the strongest feeling of the poem is that of acceptance and resignation. The second couplet refers to the different calendars used in Samarkand and China; the Muslim calendar is

used in Samarkand, and a year is simply twelve months long. The Chinese calendar is also lunar, but an intercalary month is added at intervals so as to accord with the agricultural year. The different calendars provide another source of disorientation for Yelü Chucai as he tries to live in the midst of a Middle Eastern culture. He has even lost his sense of time. Additional differences from his homeland are the familiar lack of holes in non-Chinese coins, and the use of solid wood instead of hollow bamboo as crops. The similarities and differences seem arbitrary, and he is still haunted by the question of why he came on this expedition in the first place.

### Poem 9

寂寞河中府，	Desolation in Hezhong fu,
聲名昔日聞。	I had heard its reputation in the past.
城隍連畎畝，	The temples to the city-god are beside the fields.
市井半丘墳。	They have tombs in the middle of the marketplace.
食飯秤斤賣，	Rice is sold by the <i>jin</i> (or catty).
金銀用麥分。	Wheat is used to measure gold and silver.
生民怨來後，	The locals resent the fact that since we've arrived,
簞食謁吾君。	Baskets of food must be requested from our leader.

He begins this poem by speaking of Samarkand's reputation; he had heard of it long before he came. However, it is strange to him that they would place their "city-god temples" (i.e. mosques) beside their fields; this is in complete contrast to China where the realms of human and supernatural are more clearly separated. Even stranger is that they would have tombs in the middle of the marketplace. In China the dead are buried outside the city in places carefully chosen for good wind and water – *fengshui* – where plants and trees can grow, and where graves back against a hill or mountain and face the water. These Middle Eastern customs are quite shocking to him. The *jin* or catty is a small unit for purchasing rice, reflecting the relatively small quantity produced in the region. It is puzzling how wheat can be used to calculate money, perhaps for its weight or as some kind of measure. The last couplet is the first to express the impact of the presence of Chinggis Khan's army on the local people – they complain that the Mongols are taking their best food.

### Poem 10

寂寞河中府，	Desolation in Hezhong fu,
遺民自足糧。	The survivors provide sufficient food for themselves.
黃橙調蜜煎，	Yellow oranges are dipped in honey and fried,
白餅糝糖霜。	White cake is frosted with sugar.
漱旱河為雨，	When there is drought, river water takes the place of rain,
無衣攏種羊。	When they run out of clothes they use cotton from the kapok tree.
一從西到此，	Since coming here on this expedition to the West,
更不憶吾鄉。	I don't think about my hometown any more.

This poem begins by emphasising the resilience and self-sufficiency of the local population. The people are admirable because despite all the wars and devastation, they are still able to produce enough to feed and clothe themselves, and even enjoy certain special treats. The residents of Samarkand have been an inspiration to Yelü Chucai; he has learned resilience and self-sufficiency from them. He has also learned to enjoy the local delicacies, such as yellow oranges coated with honey and white cake covered with sugar. These bring spice to life in what he still sees as a desolate place. The people also use river water for irrigation instead of rain, and cotton from the kapok tree (also called *mumian* 木绵, “wood cotton”) for clothes instead of silk. The kapok tree is called Longzhongyang 纛種羊, because the locals think it is a type of sheep that grows on trees, half tree and half sheep. Yelü Chucai, too, has become resourceful. He has now adapted to this distant land and, according to the last line, no longer feels homesick. This may or may not be true – by mentioning homesickness, it is clear that he is still aware of it. At least he feels better than before. The resilience of the people has inspired him to be resilient himself, to overcome his loneliness and desolation and enjoy what he can in this environment. In the last couplet it is clear that he has found some measure of comfort, he is calm and resigned to the situation and views it positively. He is now settled in this place. By implication, the series of poems ends here; he no longer needs to speak of his “desolation” in Hezhong fu.

Thus we have seen in this series of poems that he has gone from feeling disoriented, like a stranger in a strange land, where so many things are different from his homeland, to a sense of resignation, coupled with resilience and resourcefulness. He sees these qualities in the local people and recognises them as part of the human will to survive. The experience of the people among whom he is living – having constantly to rebuild their lives – inspires him to accept the way things are and move forward, to seek out the elements of his own culture that give him pleasure, while also taking what he needs from the life and resources in Samarkand.

## Conclusion

We mentioned earlier that the author’s blatant expression of desolation at the beginning of each poem in the series translated above is so unusual in Chinese poetic practice that it suggests a deliberate effort to achieve a special effect. The desolation itself is not the author’s final message; otherwise he would have expressed it more subtly. Instead, it is a starting point for each poem, and for the series itself, a topic which he will develop and on which he will comment. Desolation is an inevitable feature of the poet’s life while he is on the Western Campaign. It forms the backdrop to the poems, part of the emotional landscape, and also a springboard from which the author develops his main theme: the discovery of coping mechanisms that enable the persona in the poems eventually to find ways of comforting himself and achieving a sense of inner peace and harmony even in the midst of a foreign environment.

These means of coping do not come fully formed at the beginning of the series, but evolve as part of the process of writing the ten poems that comprise it. Throughout the series, he goes through various stages of dealing with his feelings of homesickness, loneliness and desolation. He first thinks of the foods he enjoys. Almost every poem mentions some type of food he likes in Samarkand – wine, almonds, chicken tongues, enormous melons, fresh fish, oranges coated with honey and cakes covered with sugar. Yet these foods do not completely satisfy him, otherwise he would not have minded travelling all that way to come here (Poem 1). Second, he tries to appreciate and make do with what is available in this foreign land, as

well as looking on the bright side. Although he would like to have a visitor to keep him company, with whom he could compose matching poems, if no such visitor arrives, he can still read books and consider this a kind of joy (Poem 2). Although some aspects of life in Samarkand are improvements on the situation in China – such as the low price of wine and reduced tax burden on the farmers, he still questions his reasons for coming on the Western Campaign (Poem 3). Thus his third way of coping is to reconsider why he came there, and take responsibility for the decision himself. No one else is to blame; he enlisted voluntarily. In Poem 4, the Zen koans represent stories from his own culture that make him laugh. Thus, humour is another way of coping with the desolation.

His most effective means of finding comfort is revealed in poems 4-5, where he observes the resilience of the people who live in Samarkand. They have experienced so much war and devastation, and their population is therefore severely reduced, yet they somehow find contentment. It is from them that he learns the lesson which he then applies to himself: "If only you are content in your heart, / You will find peace anywhere" (Poem 5). After this point in the series, the poet seems to resign himself to the situation he is in, and introduces the idea that he is no longer preoccupied with going home, although this statement (Poem 6) itself suggests it was still on his mind. He then makes use of local materials – hemp slips of paper, reed brushes, umbrella tubes and palace doors – to engage in activities like calligraphy and music, which form part of his cultural background and nourish his nature and identity (Poem 7). He learns to accept the differences in the calendar, materials, customs and practices – and no longer questions his decision to come on the campaign (Poem 8-9). Finally, it is clear that he has learned from the self-sufficiency and resourcefulness of the people – their use of river water to irrigate their fields and cotton-like material from the kapok tree to make clothes. Thus he goes through various stages of appreciation, adaptation, acceptance and resilience, finally pronouncing an end to his homesick feelings in the last poem.

The desolation itself is not a quality of the place but of the person. Apart from the ravages of war evoked in poems 4 and 5, Samarkand is animated with positive features in the poems: the neat houses, community activities, lovely foods and delicacies, availability of water, fresh fish, and so forth. Even the ruins in poems 4 and 5 are viewed positively, symbolising the people's resilient spirit and strength of character in their willingness to go on, rebuild, and find contentment in the midst of the rubble. It is not the city itself that provides the desolate feeling, but the homesickness, exacerbated by the distance of the author from China, symbolised by the shifting sands in Poem 1 and the 10,000 li in Poem 3. As in the description of Chen Leilei, the traveller is trapped between two cultures, neither here nor there, not being part of the new culture but being away from the old; and not knowing when it will end, when he will be able to go home.

The poet is surrounded by so many things that are different from China, and it is largely the protracted sense of disorientation that produces the uneasiness and dissatisfaction in the mind of the poet. Some of these differences, such as the cheap availability of wine and the fact that farmers are not taxed to farm the land, are even improvements on the situation in China. The differences are not necessarily disagreeable in themselves. Some are just observations: the coins have no holes, the bamboo is not hollow, rice is sold by the catty and wheat is somehow used to calculate money. It is perhaps the cumulative effect of so many differences that contributes so profoundly to his sense of disorientation and dissatisfaction. The seasons, the calendar, the placement of tombs in the marketplace and temples next to the farmland, the sources of energy and type of equipment used to process grain and even the direction in which the rivers flow are all strange and unusual.

Just by virtue of his role in Chinggis Khan's Western Campaign, he is alienated from the local people, unable to become part of their community. In all ten poems a single couplet in Poem 9 explains this alienation: "The locals resent the fact that since we've arrived, / Baskets of food must be requested from our leader." Thus the local people must not only hand over their produce to Chinggis Khan and his army, but also request some of it back to feed themselves.

Finally, one of the chief mechanisms he develops for coping with his feelings of desolation and homesickness is to compose these poems themselves. This gives him the chance to enumerate the differences he finds, and express his emotions. Writing these poems was probably one of the few outlets he had for his feelings and opportunities for cathartic release.

Taken together, his poems constitute both an objective record of the things he saw and experienced, and a subjective account of his impressions of what he saw, as well as of his own personal feelings. They are full of images, artistic expressions, and emotion, which give a well-rounded picture of his encounter with Central Asia in the early 13th century. These poems not only deepen our understanding of his experience of serving under Chinggis Khan in the Western Campaign, but also of his life and role on these expeditions. They let us glimpse his inner life and his personality, and enhance our understanding of what it must have been like for a traveller like Yelü Chucai to experience first hand life in such a distant land and encounter such different cultures.