

In limine

Esplorazioni attorno all'idea di confine

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A Boundless Text for a Boundless Author

The Representation of the Chinese World in Sadīd al-Dīn Muḥammad 'Awfī's *Jawāmi' al-Ḥikāyāt wa Lawāmi al-Riwāyāt*

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Abstract The inclusivity of New Persian literary canon, in which images of non-Muslim, non-Persian spaces and peoples play a central role, is well-known. Less explored, however, are the hows and whys of such inclusivity, which stem from a process of observation and translation into literary language of historic *realia* pertaining to the wide Eurasian horizon. An analysis of the textual space occupied by the Chinese world in 'Awfī's *Jawāmi' al-Ḥikāyāt*, a monumental thirteenth century literary encyclopaedia, may help us shed some light on the matter, providing an example of translation of several cultural items pertaining to the Chinese world into Persian literary language.

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Keywords 'Awfī. *Jawāmi' al-Ḥikāyāt*. Persian Literature. Qara Khitai. China.


1 'Awfī's *Jawāmi' al-Ḥikāyāt wa Lawāmi al-Riwāyāt* in the Twelfth Century Central Asian Context

The two anecdotes (*ḥikāyāt*) occurring in Sadīd al-Dīn Muḥammad 'Awfī's (d. after 1233) oceanic *Jawāmi' al-Ḥikāyāt wa Lawāmi al-Riwāyāt* (Collections of Anecdotes and Splendours of Traditions), the earliest and most complete Persian collection of anecdotes, in which the four greatest kings of the world – the Indian *rāy*, the Turkish *khāqān*, the Byzantine *qaysar* and Khusraw Anūshīrwān (531-579), the Iranian *shāhānshāh* – meet to share their opinions on life and kingship ('Awfī 2015, 1.1, ch. 8, 128-9) tell us much more than the relatively simple moral notions on good government they

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were meant to deliver. In fact, echoing the deep-rooted connections between the Chinese, Altaic and Indo-Iranian traditions of kingship of which pre-modern Persian authors such as 'Awfī were still aware, these stories open a fascinating window on what Stefano Pellò (2015, 40) recently called the “deep Eurasian foundations” of Persian literary imaginary.¹ The inclusive nature of such imaginary, in which the representation of non-Muslim, non-Persian spaces and peoples from all over the wide Eurasian horizon plays a central role, is well-known (Annemarie Schimmel 1992, 107-22; Riccardo Zipoli 2009). However, notwithstanding the importance played by cultural objects from all over the Chinese and Inner Asian world in the Persian literary canon even before the Ilkhanid period, when the Iranian plateau, central Asia and China briefly came to be united in a single empire, very few studies have been devoted to the complex representation of the eastern Asian world in Persian literature.² Recalling Wolfgang Iser's (1993, 3) theory of fiction, according to which “the act of fictionalising is a crossing of boundaries” between the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary’, I will try here to reverse this process in order to recover the main historical referents that underlie 'Awfī's literary representation of those spaces. Writing on the north-eastern frontier of the Persianate world during a neglected period of Sino-Persian relations, that is the period between the florid Tang-Abbasid exchanges and the Mongol conquest, 'Awfī and his work offer us a precious case study to clarify this issue.

Muḥammad 'Awfī was a versatile Persian intellectual born and educated around the middle of the twelfth century in Bukhara, where he received the typical education that would lead to a position in the court. He belonged to a family of scholars with important ties to the Qara Khanid court, who by then were subject to another more powerful dynasty, the 'Chinese' Qara Khitai, who had come to dominate a large part of central Asia. As the western branch of the Liao dynasty that ruled over Manchuria, Mongolia and part of North China for about two centuries (907-1125), the

1 On the possibly common origin of these traditions of sacral kingship see Sanping Chen (2002) as well as Paul Pelliot (1963, 652-61). Literary echoes of this tradition are found in other authors writing in the Persianate world as well as in 'Awfī. An exemplar cases is that of the Arabic-writing geographer Yāqūt (1861, 438), who describes a similar scene interestingly adding to the group the Chinese emperor known in Persian as *faghfūr*. Equally relevant is the case of Ibn Balkhī, who in his *Fārsnāma* (1921, 97) reports of the presence of empty golden chairs in the Sasanian throne room which were reserved for the Chinese, Roman and Khazar kings in a symbolic arrangement meant “to provide a tangible experience of the ideal world order according to the Sasanian royal imagination” (Canepa 2009, 143).

2 Studies on this subject were inaugurated by Asadullah Souren Melikian-Chirvani (1974) and recently developed by Pellò who advanced “archaeological and iconographic investigations in the philological field” (2015, 40; also see Pellò 2013) aimed at recovering allusions in Persian literary texts to a wider net of material and immaterial referents of eastern and central Asian origin, a research proposal to which this paper is inspired. On China in Medieval Persian literature also see Jalāl Khāliqī-Muṭṭlaq (1992).

non-Muslim Qara Khitai were actually regarded as a 'Chinese' dynasty both in China and in the Muslim world, as recently shown by Michal Biran (2005, 2013).³ Having completed his formation 'Awfī landed at the Qara Khanid court in Samarqand, where he was put in charge of the office of court correspondence (*diwān-i inshā*). This official position ensured that 'Awfī was well aware of the central Asian geopolitical context that, as we shall see, he textualized in his *Jawāmi*'.⁴ Besides this, however, there are more reasons of interests to 'Awfī and his work for the case in point. In fact, after having spent a few years working for the Qara Khanids, 'Awfī left the court and embarked on a series of travels that would lead him, for about twenty years, all over Khorasan and the Qara Khitai lands. As he writes in his *Lubāb al-albāb*, during his travels he studied under the leading Khorasanian intellectuals of his time and gained access to rare works, many of which he managed to copy or memorize and then used for the composition of his *Jawāmi*'. After his extensive travels he finally settled in the North Indian courts of the nascent Delhi Sultanate around 1220, probably driven away from central Asia, like many of his contemporaries, by the political turmoil that troubled the region at the dawn of Mongol invasion. There between 1220 and 1233 'Awfī composed his two major works, the *Lubāb al-albāb*, which is now considered the first Persian *tadkira*, and the *Jawāmi* ' *al-ḥikāyāt*, working first in Ucc at the court of the *amīr* Nāṣir al-Dīn Qabācha and then, after his defeat at the hand of the Delhi Sultan Iltutmish, at the court of the latter in Delhi, where he died sometimes after 1233.

Even though considered as a monument of pre-modern Persian prose the *Jawāmi*' is a sadly neglected text.⁵ Its critical edition, started in the

3 "Though firmly located in central Asia, the Qara Khitai or Western Liao dynasty is considered by the *Liao shi* to be a legitimate Chinese dynasty, whose basic annals directly follow that of the proper Liao. Contemporary Muslim authors, although usually referring to the Western Liao as Qara Khitai or just Khita, often denote its rulers as 'the Chinese'" (Biran 2005, 93).

4 It is useful to recall here that at the Qara Khanid court in Samarqand 'Awfī had actually joined his uncle, Majd al-Dīn 'Adnān Surkhkatī, a polymath who besides serving as personal physician for the Qara Khanid ruler Ibrāhīm b. Ḥusayn also authored an unfortunately lost history work titled *Tārīkh-i Turkistān*, which is one of the very few works dedicated to Qara Khanid history. Although lost, excerpts from this text survive in 'Awfī's *Jawāmi*' of which it is among the acknowledged sources.

5 The importance of the *Jawāmi*' in the history of Persian literature and of the Persianate world as a whole is certified by its diffusion as well as by the extent to which later Persian authors quoted from it up to the seventeenth century (over a hundred manuscripts of the text have been found all over Anatolia, Iran, central Asia and the Indian Subcontinent, Muhammad Nizamuddin 1929, 26-30). Given the overcomplicated history of its critical edition, I will sum it up here. First, the first three chapters of the first book were edited in two volumes by Muḥammad Mu'īn in 1956. About twenty years later, between 1973 and 1974, every chapter from the first half of the first book (ch. 15) to the end of the first half of the

seventies, is still ongoing, and the only major studies on it are the introductions to its two most complete Iranian editions ('Awfī 1953, 1, 1-79; 'Awfī 2007, 3.1, *nūh-sad o bīst o dū*) and the seminal study of Nizamuddin (1929), which is by now, however, almost a century old.⁶ In a few words, we could consider 'Awfī's *Jawāmi*' as a large literary encyclopaedia that gathers stories on the most different subjects, from history to geology, in a larger Islamic framework. Structurally the work is divided into four thematic sections (*qism*) of twenty-five chapters (*bāb*) each for a total of a hundred chapters and two thousands, a hundred and thirteen prose anecdotes of various length, from a few lines to over twenty pages in Karīmī's edition. Short poems, especially *qiṭ'as* and laudatory *qāṣīdas*, interpolate the text. As a whole the *Jawāmi*' is arranged under a principle of descending hierarchy in harmony with the nobility of the contents of each section. The first one deals with the knowledge of the Creator - which significantly constitute the subject of the opening anecdote -, the biographies of prophets and saints and then of the greatest kings and scholars. The second and third section are dedicated respectively to human virtues and vices, while the last one is a collection of various *mirabilia*. Fifteen chapters on the earthly world in the *ajā'ib wa gharā'ib* genre - unedited and, thus, available only in manuscript⁷ - close the *Jawāmi*', with a description of the countries of the world, its cities, the costumes of various people and, at last, various animals. To compose his *magnum opus* 'Awfī resorted to about a hundred written sources on the most disparate subjects, many of which hitherto lost or unknown, that he managed to gather during his

fourth book (ch. 10) was edited by Amīr Bānū Karīmī. Recently (2014-2015) the remaining chapters of the first book (chs. 4-14) have been published, once again in Karīmī's edition. Therefore, to the best of my knowledge, at present the *Jawāmi*' is divided into 12 volumes (2 edited by Mu'īn and 10 by Karīmī) while the remaining part, that is the second half of the fourth book (chs. 11-25), is available only in manuscript. To write this article I used the two volumes edited by Mu'īn in their first edition and, as far as the ten other volumes edited by Karīmī are concerned, a reprint (2007) by the Research Centre for Humanities and Cultural Studies in Teheran (*Pazhūhishgāh-i 'ulūm-i insānī wa mutālī'āt-i farhangī*) of the original 1973-4 edition, plus the new volumes published between 2014 and 2015.

6 Even though neglected as a literary work the *Jawāmi*' has been used as a source by historians, mostly for the history of North India under the Delhi Sultanate (see for example Iqtidar Husain Siddiqui 1992, 2010). As a fresh exception to this trend come the Italian edition of a representative anthology translated and introduced by Stefano Pellò, in print as I write, and a Russian-language anthology by the Kazakh scholar Timur Kasymovič Bejsembiev (2005). An English-language translation of the *Jawāmi*', although much needed, is unfortunately still lacking.

7 In his preliminary philological study Nizamuddin (1929, 105-25) described all the manuscripts of the *Jawāmi*' held in European libraries, individuating a fourteenth century manuscript from the British Library as the most reliable for establishing a critical edition of the fourth book of the *Jawāmi*'. Following Nizamuddin this is the manuscript (Ms OR 2676 in Charles Rieu's catalogue, 1895, 245-7) I used in writing the present article. Every quotation from the second half of the fourth book of the *Jawāmi*' comes from the aforesaid manuscript.

wide travels in central Asia, Khorasan and North India.⁸ Moreover, the acknowledged source of many anecdotes are reports and traditions gathered orally directly by 'Awfī from merchants and scholars between central Asia and the Indian Subcontinent and then collected in the *Jawāmi'*: the wide, rich heterogeneity of the materials gathered in this 'boundless' text, where hundreds of folk tales and lores are collected by an equally 'boundless' intellectual – whose encyclopaedic knowledge and wide travels reflect the Medieval Islamic ideal of encyclopaedic (*kāmil*) scholar (Jan van Gelter 1997) – alongside certified excerpts from great historians such as Ṭabarī or Tha'labī, is probably its distinguishing feature and marks its importance as a veritable mine of information.

In this paper I will analyse six anecdotes on China from the *Jawāmi'*, with reference to every other occurrence of Chinese elements found in the text. The first three of these stories have a marked geo-ethnographic dimension, allowing us to understand what 'Awfī meant with 'China' and who the 'Chinese' were to his eyes. On the other hand, the other three gather precious information on some religious and cultural elements qualified as Chinese, allowing a preliminary exploration of the textual space reserved to the Chinese world in the Persian literary canon.

2 More than Turkestan, Less than China: Political and Geo-Ethnographic Aspects of 'Awfī's China

The words *chīn*, *māchīn* and *chīnī* occur in 38 anecdotes of the *Jawāmi'*: 18 in the first book, 3 in the second, 8 in the third and 9 in the fourth. Generally speaking, in medieval Persian literature the words *chīn* and *māchīn* (from Sanskrit *Mahācīna*, "great China") are often used as synonyms and both terms are traditionally taken to mean "China". In the *Jawāmi'*, however, the word *māchīn* is mentioned only once, in the first book, where it occurs in hendiadys with *chīn* (*chīn wa māchīn*), to which it does not add any meaning. Therefore, it can be discarded. Semantically, the central term used by 'Awfī to refer to the Chinese world is the word *chīn*, as well as the derived adjective *chīnī*. The vast majority of these occurrences does not carry any specific geographic meaning, appearing in anecdotes where the only 'Chinese' elements are luxury objects such as precious pottery (*ṭarāyīf-i chīnī*, 'Awfī 2008, 1.2, 58) or a mirror (*āyīna-yi chīnī*, 83). However, by revealing the presence of artefacts of Chinese origin in the Persian courts of pre-Mongol central Asia, they open a window on the wider circulation of people and material and cultural objects between central and eastern Asia that is worth exploring.

8 For a detailed discussion of the sources of the *Jawāmi'* see Nizamuddin (1929, 33-105).

As a matter of fact, while references to high-quality objects coming from China⁹ are a common literary *topos* in Persian, explaining this many occurrences of chinoiserie only as formal allusions to more or less ‘archetypical’ objects pertaining to the poetic language would no doubt be reductive.¹⁰ Quite to the contrary, in fact, when mentioning these objects ‘Awfī is referring to the very concrete world around him. The Chinese origin of the Qara Khitai ensured the wide circulation in their central Asian empire of Chinese cultural motives and material items: reign titles and temple names for the emperors as well as honorary and administrative charges were of Chinese origin and Chinese language appeared on objects such as coins, seals and tables of authority, besides being used in the administration alongside Persian, Khitan and Uyghur. The Qara Khitai also retained the Chinese calendar and a unique dress (that in the case of the emperor was made of Chinese silk, something that undoubtedly struck a chord in the imaginary of Persian authors¹¹) that distinguished them from their subjects. On this historical background all the occurrences of Chinese objects in the *Jawāmi‘* find a new concreteness. When ‘Awfī (2008, 1.2, 58) defines as ‘Chinese’ the cups and glasses broken by the young nephew of the famous Kufan jurist al-Sha‘bī (seventh century) he probably has in mind the pre-Mongol Chinese pottery actually found at Samarqand (Sokolovskaia, Roguelle 1992), that might just have been sitting on his desk while he was writing the text, more than the archetypical ‘Chinese porcelain’ of the Persian poetic code. The same is true for the Chinese mirror that in the *Jawāmi‘* (2008, 1.2, 83) a Persian *amīr* gifts to the Abbasid Caliph al-Mu‘tazz (861-902), or for the Chinese ruby that the emissaries of Abū Muslim retrieve in China and present to their master (2008, 2.1, 84): at the Persian courts of twelfth century central Asia ‘Chinese’ luxury items were as much a brand as a reality. As this paper tries to show, the presence of apparently ‘topical’ images relating to the Chinese world in the

9 It is well known that in the medieval Islamic world high-quality objects coming from China were particularly sought of, to the extent that imitations of Chinese porcelains were produced in Iran and then ‘branded’ as Chinese to artificially increase their price (Biran 2013, 240). Chinese silks and silk textiles as well as cinnamon and musk, all of which found their way into Persian literary imaginary, were also in high demand.

10 On this see Pellò, who recalling the theoretical framework developed by Finbarr Flood (2009) to account for the ‘translation’ of ‘other’ cultural objects on the eastern frontier of the Persianate world – which is also relevant to the present article – remarks how “the issues related to notions such as conventionality and canon have to be carefully harmonized (to avoid anachronistic teleological interpretations) with the historical processes of cultural observation, interpretation and translation” (2013, 41).

11 For example, the great central Asian polymath Sharaf al-Zamān Ṭāhir Marwazī, one of ‘Awfī’s contemporaries, commented with astonishment on the silk tissues used by the Chinese in his *K. ṭabā‘i‘ al-ḥayawān* (1942, 16; 66 for Minorsky’s comment) in an excerpt quoted also by ‘Awfī in his *Jawāmi‘* (ff. 66r-66v).

Jawāmi‘ should be seen as the result of this process of direct observation and translation, and not just as mere following of literary conventions – while of course playing and interacting with them.

Even before the establishment of the Qara Khitai empire, however, information on the Chinese world and Chinese goods were circulating in central Asia. A well-known example of such Sino-Persian contacts in Islamic times is the joint embassy sent in about 1026 by the Liao emperor Shengzong (972-1031) and probably the Sarī Uighur ruler of Gansu to the Ghaznavid sultan Maḥmūd (998-1030), from which Bīrūnī obtained the data about the stages on the way to Qitāy and the coordinates of principal Far Eastern cities for his *Qānūn al-Mas‘ūdī*. An official report of this embassy was also used by Marwazī for the composition of his *K. ṭabā‘e‘ al-ḥayawān*. This, however, does not imply, as remarked by Biran (2013, 243), that Persian authors – even when of central Asian origin – were well informed on the Chinese world or even on their eastern Turkic neighbours. Yet, even while lacking the full picture, they sometimes came to have accurate pieces of information: to name but one example from the *Jawāmi‘*, while reporting that a Syrian king ordered to brand criminals with a permanent fire-mark on their forehead ‘Awfī briefly recalls that according to merchants who travelled to China the Chinese also practice this custom (2015, 1.1, ch. 6, 144). Since the act of marking criminals on the forehead with fire-heated brands as a punishment is mentioned in the *Youyang zazu*, a ninth-century Chinese miscellany (Reed 2000), in this case ‘Awfī’s reference reflects with great precision a custom actually practised in Song China.

As shown by the case of the aforementioned embassy, the nomad and semi-nomad populations living beyond the north-eastern frontier of the Iranian world were often the ones acting as a proxy between China and the Persian courts in Transoxiana. Thus to the eyes of the Persians these peoples, who were coming from unknown lands in the east carrying Chinese goods and presented physical and cultural characteristics, such as distinctive religious practices and beliefs, immediately recognisable as eastern Asian, were often identified as ‘Chinese’.¹² This helps us understand why in early Persian literature the word *chīn* is often used to mean ‘Turkestan’ besides China proper and the ‘Chinese’ are often, in fact, eastern Turks,

12 The fundamental ambiguity of the term ‘China’ among the Liao’s Muslim contemporaries has been noted also by Biran (2013, 230), who in her article on the mutual perception of Liao and Muslims in the late Saljukid era talks of “blurred boundaries between China and the Turks”. ‘Awfī then was not alone in perceiving the boundary between Turks and China as blurred – at the very least. The issue comes full circle if we consider for example the map drawn by Fakhr al-Dīn Mubārāk Shāh in his *tārīkh*, of which unfortunately only the eloquent title survives (China: A Map of Turkestan and Transoxiana’ [*Bilād al-Šīn: šūrat Turkestan wa Mā warā‘ al-nahr*], 1927, 61), and the fact that the Abbasid caliph bestowed on the Qara Khanids the title of ‘King of the East and China’ (*malik al-sharq wa al-Šīn*) thus provoking the jealousy of the Saljukid Maḥmūd of Ghazna, as reported by Niẓām al-Mulk (1960, 192, 343).

as in the *Shāhnāma* (Ja‘farī, Pāshāzānūs 2013).¹³ As we are going to see ‘Awfī, a Persian author born and educated at the frontier with the world of eastern central Asian Turks, fits perfectly into this pattern.

2.1 Reading the Past Through the Present: ‘Awfī’s ‘Chinese’ Hephthalites

The anecdotes in the *Jawāmi‘* where an ethno-geographic referent for the word *chīn* can be found may be divided in two major groups, on a chronological basis: those that refer to the pre-Islamic world, focused in particular on the history of the Sasanian empire, and those that refer to the Islamic era, particularly from the Abbasids to ‘Awfī’s time.¹⁴ As far as the first group is concerned, the anecdotes are in small number and all occur in the fourth chapter of the first book of the *Jawāmi‘*, which is entirely dedicated to a history of pre-Islamic Persia. A representative example to illustrate ‘Awfī’s identification of eastern central Asia with the Chinese world is his account on the military campaigns of Bahrām V Gūr (420-438) in central Asia.¹⁵

The anecdote is found in the fourth chapter of the first book (‘Awfī 2014, 294-6) and its source is, as for much of the chapter, the *Ghurār akbār mulūk al-Fārs* (A Concise History of the Persian Kings) (Tha‘labī 1900, 557-60), a well-known history of Sasanian Iran composed in Arabic by Tha‘labī (d. 1020), another Khorasanian. In the *Jawāmi‘* the story goes as follows: the Chinese king (*khāqān-i chīn*) crosses the Amu Darya at Termez with his army for the purpose of invading Iran. When the news reaches the Sasanian king Bahrām, the Iranian army is not ready to face the enemy, yet Bahrām is not worried: God will provide a solution. Instead

13 When writing about the mythical Iranian past ‘Awfī too follows this pattern, representing for example the mythical ‘Turanian’ kings as allied with the Chinese. Emblematic in this respect are the two anecdotes from the fourth chapter of the first book of the *Jawāmi‘* in which Afrāsīāb, well-known character from the *Shāhnāma* and mythical king of Turān, falls back to China after losing against Kay Kāwus (‘Awfī 2014, 117-33), being then chased there by Kay Khusraw (134-145).

14 This division actually reflects the two periods in which China and the Persian world were closer, that is under the Sasanians and under the Abbasids. It is well known that the Sasanians had frequent diplomatic and trade contacts with China and especially with the Tangs, a dynasty that in pre-Islamic times came to control central Asia. Surprisingly enough, Khorasanian writers of the twelfth century still had a clear memory of the Tang presence in central Asia, as shown admirably by Marwazī (1942, 18). As for the Abbasid period, China and the Islamic world had important trade relations. In the South trade with China via the oversea route through the Persian Gulf was flourishing at least until the sack of Guangzhou by Huang Chao in 879, when according to Arabic sources over 1200 Muslims, Christians and Jews were killed (Levy 1961, 109), while at the North-Eastern frontier diplomatic and trade contacts between the Liao and the *de facto* independent Persian courts were frequent.

15 For the historical background see Touraj Daryaee 2009, 22-5.

of facing the enemy Bahrām travels to Azerbaijan to hunt and pray at the local *ātishkada*, leaving the people in despair. The king is gone, probably seeking refuge at the court of the Byzantine emperor (*qayṣar-i rūm*), and the Chinese armies occupy Iran. Eventually, when the Chinese king is sure of his victory, Bahrām comes, launches a surprise attack at night on the Chinese camp with a small group of champions, crushes the Chinese army and kills their king, thus freeing Iran. Bahrām’s victory over the Chinese is then mentioned very briefly a second time in the second book of the *Jawāmi‘* as a conclusive proof of Bahrām’s virtue (‘Awfi 2007, 2.1, 333).

We do not know of any battle fought by Bahrām against a Chinese army. Yet, it is well-known that he campaigned widely in the region of Bukhara, where ‘Awfi was born, waging war against the Hephthalites, which he managed to defeat and whose king he killed. This anecdote, in which a population originally coming from beyond the north-eastern frontier of the Iranian world launches an attack against Iran becomes ‘Chinese’, is probably a literary reflex of this campaign. It should be noted that in Tha‘labī’s account, closely followed by ‘Awfi, Bahrām doesn’t defeat the Chinese but the Turks. It is ‘Awfi that in translating Tha‘labī’s account systematically substituted ‘Turks’ with ‘Chinese’, possibly reading the past through the present: the Hephthalites, coming from the east, conquered central Asia and moved towards the Iranian world just like the Qara Khitai, who had just attacked Samarqand and Bukhara in the first half of the twelfth century, did at ‘Awfi’s time.

In support of this hypothesis, it should be highlighted that what in Tha‘labī was a Turkish (in fact, Hephthalite) *khāqān* (*khāqān malik al-turk*) at least in another case becomes Chinese (*khāqān-i chīn*) in the *Jawāmi‘*. This second substitution is found in ‘Awfi’s report on the war for power that broke out between Balāsh and Qubād (‘Awfi 2014, fourth chapter of the first book, 315), sons of the Sasanian king Firūz (r. 459-484). Historically, following conflict over the Sasanian throne Qubād fled to the Hephthalites and lived among them for years, eventually marrying the daughter of the Hephthalite king and coming back to Iran to seize the throne with the army of his father-in-law (Litvinsky 1996, 140). Both Tha‘labī and ‘Awfi’s reports on this episode mirror this historical reality. Yet, while according to Tha‘labī “Qobādh s’enfuit chez le Khāqān, le roi des Turcs [*khāqān al-Turk*], pour lui demander aide contre son frère” (1900, 583), in ‘Awfi Qubād turns for help to the *khāqān-i Chīn*: once again to ‘Awfi the Hephthalites, possibly seen in the light of the Qara Khitai, become ‘Chinese’.

2.2 The Contemporary Landscape: Uyghurs and Khitans as ‘Chinese’

The central Asian political and ethnic context contemporary to ‘Awfi, where eastern populations such as the Uyghurs and Khitans often regarded by

Persian authors as ‘Chinese’ were playing a leading role, receives much attention in the *Jawāmi‘* and therefore should be analysed closely. Among the different anecdotes dedicated to this subject, the most significant is perhaps the one titled ‘On China and its People’ (*fī dīkr al-Šīn wa ahlu-hā*) occurring in the unedited geographical section of the *Jawāmi‘* (fourth book, chs. 16-8), which contains the most systematic account on China in the whole text. Having briefly described the whole world and its division in climates and hot and cold zones in the introductory remarks that open the sixteenth chapter (ff. 64v-65v), ‘Awfī orderly describes the lands assigned to various non-Iranian peoples, starting with the Chinese (ff. 65v-66v). The description of China contained in these *folia* amounts substantially to an abridged Persian translation of the richer account on the same country already drawn in Arabic by one of ‘Awfī’s most illustrious contemporaries, the physician and geographer from central Asia Šaraf al-Zamān Ṭāhir Marwazī in his *K. ṭabā’e‘ al-ḥayawān* (1942, 13-29).¹⁶

First and foremost, it is striking that in this anecdote ‘Awfī subscribes to Marwazī’s representation of Uyghurs and Khitans as ‘Chinese’ as he ranks them among the peoples of China (f. 65v: “In China there are different kinds of people, they have many cities and their land is divided in three major parts: China [*chīn*], Qanā [قنا] and Tughur [تغر]”, *chīn* here being China proper and *Qanā* and *Tughur* being respectively, due to a general carelessness in the use of dots by the copyist which is common in this manuscript, Qatā [قتا] and Yughur [يغر]). Significantly enough both also ascribe to the Chinese emperor, alongside the traditional title of *faghfūr*, the Qara Khanid one of ‘Ṭamghāj Khan’ (“the emperor, whom they address with the title of Ṭamghāj Khan and call Faghfūr”, f. 66r) which is Turkish for ‘The Khan of China’, a title that began to be widely attested in central Asia in the eleventh century (Biran 2005, 99-100). This is particularly interesting if we keep in mind that ‘Awfī had been working at the diplomatic office of the Qara Khanid court in Samarqand, and therefore was hardly unaware of the meaning of this title and of its Turkish origin. Equally, there is no doubt that what ‘Awfī has in mind when describing the ‘Chinese’ religious landscape still in this very anecdote is, once again, the world of the eastern Turks. In fact, concluding the anecdote, he writes:

The whole of the Chinese are Manichaeans with the exception of the Khitan and the Uyghurs, some of which are sun-worshippers [*āftāb-parast*] and some others are Christians [*tarsā*]. Every religion is found among them except Judaism, and most of them are Christians. Their customs

16 Given ‘Awfī’s chronological and spatial proximity to Marwazī, who wrote in the Persian courts of central Asia a few decades before ‘Awfī, the amount of information on China Marwazī was able to gather and his position as a leading intellectual of his time, our author’s reliance on his account is unsurprising.

and traditions of government are well known in these days, therefore the account on them shall be closed here.¹⁷ ('Awfī, f. 66v)

The mention of Manichaeism as the religion of the Chinese and the more general association of China and the Chinese with the heresiographic discourse, as we shall see later in greater detail, are common literary *topoi* in Persian literature. As to the information 'Awfī gives us about 'sun-worshipping' and Christianity being spread among Khitai and Uyghurs, not reported by Marwazī, they seem to appropriately reflect the beliefs of these people at 'Awfī's time. In fact, although when speaking of 'sun-worshippers' 'Awfī may just generally mean 'pagans', this reference may also reflect the importance fire had in the pantheon of the Khitans as remarked once again a few decades later by another Persian author well-informed on central Asian matters, Juwāinī (1997, 344). The Christians 'Awfī spoke of, in turn, must have been the Uyghurs, as Nestorianism prevailed among them and the Mongolian tribes. On the other hand, what 'Awfī fails to record is just as interesting as what he mentions: the fact that when describing the religions of the 'Chinese' 'Awfī only speaks of religions diffused among Uyghurs and Khitan in central Asia and does not even mention Buddhism, which was by far the most common religion in China, is telling of which cultural world his anecdote actually refers to. Up to this point, even though cutting some information and updating other, in writing his account on China 'Awfī had followed Marwazī's report. Having talked of the religion of the 'Chinese', however, unfortunately for us he felt unnecessary to keep translating Marwazī and decided instead to cut his text abruptly, as his public was certainly already aware of the rest ("Their customs and traditions of government are well known in these days, therefore the account on them shall be closed here", f. 66v). The choice of such a justification for this sudden interruption tells us much of the degree of confidence that Persian central Asian intellectuals had with the affairs of these peoples at the beginning of the thirteenth century, when the *Jawāmi'* was composed.

17 Here 'Awfī follows once more Marwazī, yet with a minor modification in the direction of an update of the contents. This tells us that 'Awfī's use of his source is not uncritical. While Marwazī simply reports that "all Chinese are of one faith which is the faith of Mani, contrary to the Qitay and Uyghur among whom are other faiths excepting (only) Judaism" (1942, 17) 'Awfī, who had more recent information, adds precious referents on fire-worshipping and especially Christianity being diffused among Khitan and Uyghurs. On the religious landscape of the Qara Khitai empire, which included Buddhism – which 'Awfī fails to mention – as well as the very little known Khitan tribal religion, see Biran (2005, 172-80).

2.3 The Qara Khitai: *Pisar-i Sāvijī*, a Literary Yelü Dashi?

The impression that when referring to ‘China’ (*chīn*) ‘Awfī, in harmony with the traditional Persian representation of the Chinese world already outlined, actually thinks of Qara Khitai central Asia and of the oasis of Turkestan (present-day Chinese Xinjiang), of Uyghurs and Khitans, is reinforced if we take into account the other occurrences of the word *chīn* in the text. Exemplar on this point is an undated anecdote occurring in the ninth chapter of the third book of the *Jawāmi‘* (‘Awfī 2007, 3.1, 299-307) and revolving around a raid on the city of Kashgar. The main characters of this anecdote are two central Asian khans, a certain *Pisar-i Sāvijī* and a certain Ṭamghāj. All ‘Awfī tells us about these characters of uncertain identification is that the first is either ‘Khan of Khotan’ or ‘Khan of China’ – in his edition of the anecdote Wilhelm Barthold (1898, 94-7) preferred ‘China’, while Karīmī has ‘Khotan’ – and that the second is ‘Khan of Kashgar’. In a few words, the story goes as follows. *Pisar-i Sāvijī*, who is described by ‘Awfī as a khan who was not born as such but instead seized power with force and, therefore, was lacking legitimisation, profits of the lack of defences of his ally, Ṭamghāj khan of Kashgar – who, to the contrary, is a noble khan whose ancestors had been rulers since the era of Afrāsīāb – to betray him and launch a raid on his city. The raid, however, fails miserably.

The fact that in some manuscripts *Pisar-i Sāvijī* is the khan of ‘Khotan’ while in others he is the khan of ‘China’ is already telling in itself of how the two terms could easily be seen as synonyms, but there’s more. Briefly commenting on this anecdote Biran (2005, 34) advanced the hypothesis that it represents a literary echo of the Qara Khanid defeat of the Liao (Khitai) lord Yelü Dashi at Kashghar in the 1130s. According to Biran *Pisar-i Sāvijī* would be a ‘literary’ Yelü Dashi, while Ṭamghāj khan – which more than a name, as we saw, was a title diffused among the Qara Khanids – would be the equally ‘literary’ transposition of the Qara Khanid ruler. There are two elements that Biran did not mention and that, in my opinion, would strongly substantiate her interpretation. First, *Pisar-i Sāvijī* is in fact a ‘speaking name’ just as much as Ṭamghāj khan, and second, in many manuscripts – and not the least reliable – *Pisar-i Sāvijī* is correctly identified as khan of Khotan. The key to understanding *Pisar-i Sāvijī*’s name, apparently meaningless, is to read *Sāvijī* as a first name. In this case *Pisar-i Sāvijī* would literally mean ‘Son’ (or ‘young man’) ‘of the line of Sāvvaḥ’, Sāvvaḥ being “a central Asian Turkish leader, also referred to as the emperor of China” (Dick Davis 2016, 978). *Pisar-i Sāvijī* would then be a ‘speaking name’ once again pointing in Turkestani/Chinese direction. As to its identification as either the khan of Khotan or the khan of China, Biran only quotes Barthold’s edition of this anecdote, in which *Pisar-i Sāvijī* is called ‘Khan of China’, and as such is unsure of his identification as a Khitai. As already pointed out, however, in the text established by

Karīmī – which is now the standard edition – *Pisar-i Sāvijī* is not a generic ‘Chinese’ khan but, more precisely, the ‘khan of Khotan’, a fact that supports Biran’s hypothesis.

Be that as it may, even if this anecdote only referred to a general raid on the city of Kashgar, besides showing quite clearly – with *Pisar-i Sāvijī*’s shifting ‘Chinese’ and ‘Khotan’ identity – how frequently the Persian word *chīn* could actually refer to the much more generic central Asian horizon. Moreover, it also represents a good example of literary translation of the many Khitan raids on Qara Khanid lands. In this tale the Khotan/Chinese khan becomes a khan of the line of Sāvvaḥ, mythical khan of Turkestan from the *Shāhnāma*, and, just like his ‘historical’ counterpart, is defeated by a great hero. Incidentally, this anecdote also offers a rare example of literary transposition of the raise to power of a Turkish nomadic tribe. To defeat *Pisar-i Sāvijī*, in fact, the khan of Kashgar turns for help to the local *dihqān*, Khidr Beg, who had grown stronger by raiding Uyghur farmers all over Xinjiang and thus managed to assemble a war band of nomad Turks, eventually conquering the city of Kocho. In exchange for his help against the Khotan, the khan of Kashgar bestows upon Khidr Beg the title of legitimate khan of Kocho. It should also be noted that in consequence of clashes between Muslim armies and Uyghurs and Khitans like the one I just outlined, among the latter captives were regularly taken and then employed as slaves in the Muslim world, were they were particularly sought of due to their exotic look. The literary transposition of this historical reality is the well-known topic of ‘Chinese beauty’, which is commonly found in Persian literature and to which ‘Awfī, echoing Marwazī, also hints in the *Jawāmi*’.¹⁸

3 *Kufr-i chīn*. Religious and Cultural Aspects of ‘Awfī’s China

The central Asian network of reference constructing ‘Awfī’s ‘China’ is not limited to political and ethnic aspects. Three anecdotes from the eighth chapter of the third book of the *Jawāmi*, dedicated to ‘those who claimed prophecy’ (*dar dīkr-i jamā’at-i ki da’wā-yi payghāmbārī kardand*), illuminate this point. The three anecdotes under examen are the fourth, fifth and seventh of the chapter and revolve around the claims to prophecy advanced by three ‘false prophets’, i.e. respectively by Mani and by two relatively well-known Khorasanis from the time of Abu Muslim, the Zoroastrian reformer Āfarīd (or Bihāfarīd) b. Māh-i Farvardīn and Hāshim Ibn Hakīm better known as ‘al-Muqanna’ (‘The veiled’ or ‘The masked one’). All three are

18 Consider the anecdote in which an extraordinarily beautiful slave sent by the Chinese king to the Buyid *amīr* ‘Aḍud al-Dawla (d. 983) distracts the latter from government to such an extent that he has no choice but to send her away from him (‘Awfī 1394, ch. 9, 154-6) or the short report on the beautiful eunuchs at the Chinese court (‘Awfī, f. 66v).

historical characters who either came up with their own religion (Mani) or claimed prophecy to restore former cults (Āfarīd), sometimes even starting military movements (Muḡannaʿ and, possibly, Āfarīd). Having already hinted at ʿAwfī’s representation of the Chinese as Manichaeans we shall start from his anecdote on Mani, which contains a short history of Mani’s predication and a compendium of Manichaean doctrines.

3.1 The Predication of Mani: China as the Realm of Aesthetics

The anecdote, of uncertain source, contains quite a detailed sum of the history and contents of Mani’s predication, from his birth in the region of Babylon to his death on the order of the Sasanian king Bahrām (ʿAwfī 2007, 202-8). Like every character in this chapter Mani is expectingly considered by ʿAwfī a ‘false’ (*mubṭal*) prophet. According to ʿAwfī, besides being an expert in the doctrines of Christians, Zoroastrians and ‘Dualists’ (*thanavīyān*) Mani is an extraordinary painter who “expressed his prophetic claims mostly through the pictorial science” (*wa daʿwā-yi u bīshṭar dar ʿilm-i naqqāshī būd*, 202). Having failed to convert to his religion the Sasanian king Shāpūr, Mani moved to India, Kashmir and Tibet building “idols” (*butān*), and “thanks to their deceiving images, driving many to error”. Then he moved to China and retired in a cave on a mountain where he produced his masterpiece, “a large roll of a paper-like material which as for thinness, purity and whiteness resembled the fragile inner skin of eggs on which he painted amazing images, representing every sin and the relative punishment” (205-206): it is the legendary *Arzhang*, a pictorial treasure so perfect that, when the people saw it, they had no other choice but to believe “since nobody could have done such a thing”. This work, writes ʿAwfī, is still held in the treasures of the Chinese emperor. Having converted Turkestan, China and India with the aid of his ‘deceptive’ pictorial masterpieces Mani tried to do the same in Iran, although failing and ending horribly killed at the order of the Sasanian king Bahrām.

The mention of Manichaeism as being widespread in China is topical in Persian literature. It is the literary transposition of the historical adoption of this faith as a state religion among the Uyghurs in the eight century and then, when Manichaeism lost such status among them a century later, of the survival of this faith in central Asia. The reference to Mani as a painter is common in Persian literature and has been recently analysed in depth by Pellò (2013, where he also comments briefly on this very anecdote raising some thought-provoking points, and 2015), therefore it will not be re-discussed here. More interesting is the link drawn by ʿAwfī between two Persian literary *topoi*: Mani teaching pictorial arts to the Chinese and their extraordinary ability in handicrafts. In the already mentioned anecdote on

China in the sixteenth chapter of the fourth book 'Awfī, following Marwazī, writes:

[the Chinese] are the most skilled in crafts and the greatest experts in work instruments, and no human group among the sons of Adam is their equal in those fields. In fact, even though the Romans [*ahl-i rūm*] are very good at this business, they can not match with the Chinese, so much so that the Chinese say that when it comes to crafts and handworks all the peoples are blind and the Romans are one-eyed. ('Awfī, ff. 65v-66r)

In fact, as 'Awfī writes a few lines later, the Chinese are so naturally gifted to be able to collectively draw a figure on a log with an hatchet striking only one hit each and without even first discussing what to draw. Moreover, elsewhere in the *Jawāmi'* ('Awfī 2007, 3.1, 590) an Egyptian princess so beautiful that even the brush of 'Chinese painters' (*naqqāshān-i chīn*) breaks when painting her curls is mentioned. The Chinese are frequently represented in Persian and Arabic literature as artistic geniuses, a representation that emerged from the high-quality handicrafts exported by China to Iran as well as to the well-known care that central Asian Manichaeans had for paper, books and paintings, a topic incidentally connected to that of the already mentioned *Arzhang*. To account for this representation 'Awfī quotes the predication of Mani, who taught to the Chinese the sacredness of images and arts:

According to their religion to draw images with a pen or other tools is a medium for expression [*'ibārat*],¹⁹ which has been prescribed to them by Mani who deceived them with the words of the philosophers. They say that this is philosophy: to imitate divine action proportionally to human power. ('Awfī, f. 66r)

19 'Awfī's choice of the Persian word *'ibārat* to translate the Arabic *ta'abbud wa taqarrub* ("divine worship and approach to God", Minorsky 1942, 15) found in his source, Marwazī, is somewhat peculiar. Differently from the Arabic words used by Marwazī, in fact, the word *'ibārat* does not deliver an idea of religious devotion as much as of pure linguistic expression, as registered by the Dehkhoda dictionary that defines *'ibārat* as *tafsīr* (explanation, interpretation) and *'ibārat kardan* as *bayān kardan* (to express, to say). Equally, in his dictionary Steingass mentions among the definitions of *'ibārat* "phraseology, style" and even "word". A suggestive hypothesis may be advanced to make sense of 'Awfī's word choice: 'Awfī would be explaining that, for the Chinese, painting images [*šūrat-garī*] with a pen [*qalam*] is an act of linguistic expression [*'ibārat*]. This would then be one of the few descriptions of Chinese writing (images [*šūrat*] painted with an ink pen [*qalam*]) in pre-Mongol Persian literature, the first possibly being the one found in the *Shāhnāma*, although as a late addition (Khāliqī-Muṭlaq 1992). Tempting though this hypothesis may be, however, it is easier to explain such peculiar translation as an error by the copyist, who mistaken *'ibārat* (عبارت) for *'ibādat* (عبادت) "divine worship, adoration".

Manichaeism, to ‘Awfī a false religion which is based on the illusionary power of images, could not be but the religion of the Chinese that, tricked by Mani, became themselves a people of artists so expert in their craft as to border deception and heresy.²⁰

3.2 The Predication of Āfarīd e Muqanna‘: Eastern Asian Religious Motives in Pre-Mongol Khorasan?

The link between the aesthetic genius of the Chinese and their heretic beliefs (*kufr-i chīn*, ‘Chinese infidelity’²¹) drawn by ‘Awfī in his anecdote on Mani is also stressed in the two remaining anecdotes on ‘false prophets’, which are exemplar in this respect. These two anecdotes, revolving around the figures of Āfarīd and Muqanna‘, are closely connected and therefore shall be analysed together. The source for both is Bīrūnī’s *Āthār al-bāqīya* (1879, 193-4) and both take place in Khorasan at the time of Abū Muslim. In the *Jawāmi‘* (‘Awfī 2007, 3.1, 226-8) Āfarīd is a man coming from a village in the region of Nishapur who at a certain point moves to China, where he spends seven years collecting marvellous Chinese objects.²² Among them is a green silken shirt, so thin and soft that one can hold it in his fist. Returned from China, Āfarīd hides on a mountain where he spends the night only to descend at dawn clothed in his silken Chinese shirt, amazing local farmers who were astonished at its sight. He calls himself *mughān*, proclaims his faith in Zoroaster and claims to be descended from heaven, to know the secrets of Heaven and Hell and to have been granted his marvellous shirt directly from God, thus gathering a group of followers in the region. He meets his fate when the local Zoroastrian

20 Descriptions of Chinese magic objects and talismans (*tilism*) in the *ajā‘ib wa gharā‘ib* genre or of such objects being made by Muslim sages acquainted with the Chinese world are fairly common in the *Jawāmi‘* (‘Awfī, ff. 72v, on a magical Chinese mirror in Alexandria; 75r, on a talisman imbued with magic power crafted by Abū Mutī Balkhī, jurist and *muḥaddith* of the ninth century from Balkh who according to ‘Awfī travelled widely in China; 75v, an anecdote setted in China and again on a magic talisman, this time crafted by the Greek philosopher from the first century Balinās, that is Apollonius of Tyana) and represent a logical consequence of the intertwining of the two *topoi* of the Chinese’s sublime skill in crafts and of Chinese heresy (*kufr-i chīn*). Just like Mani’s *Arzhang* cannot be but the product both of an heretic and of a real master in arts, as both infidels and natural artistic geniuses the Chinese cannot but make talismans and magic objects.

21 In Persian literature the Chinese are represented as the infidels *par excellence* and the expression *kufr-i chīn* is frequent in poetry, occurring once even in the *Jawāmi‘* (‘Awfī 2007, 3.1, 101).

22 ‘Awfī does not mention why Āfarīd moves to China and Bīrūnī (1879, 193), his source, is equally vague only reporting that “in the beginning of his career he disappeared and be-took himself to China”. Other reports talk of him as a merchant. On Āfarīd and Muqanna‘’s predication see Patricia Crone (2013, 106-60) and Biancamaria Amoretti (1975, 481-519).

community denounces him to Abū Muslim, who sends one of his officers on the Bādghīs mountains in northern Afghanistan, where Āfarīd and his followers were hiding, to kill him and disband his sect, the Āfarīdiyya.

As this brief report shows, the Chinese green silken shirt is central to ‘Awfī’s account of Āfarīd’s predication, as it is through this visual trick that he manages to convert the commoners, not differently from how Mani had converted the Chinese through the visual perfection of the paintings contained in his *Arzhang*. The link between the Chinese divine-like ability in handicrafts and magic and Āfarīd’s predication is implicitly drawn by ‘Awfī himself in the already mentioned chapter on China and its people occurring in the fourth book of the *Jawāmi*. In this anecdote ‘Awfī briefly mentions again the story of Āfarīd and his shirt (“As to Bihāfarīd, it has already been related in the section on those who falsely claimed prophecy that he brought a shirt from China”, f. 66r) right between a brief report on magical carts used in China by the merchants and the already quoted one on the Muslim ambassador who, at the court of the Chinese king, falls in love with one of the king’s beautiful eunuchs precisely because of the silken, see-through vest he wears.²³

Similarly, a magic object has a central role in ‘Awfī’s account of the predication of another pseudo-prophet that ‘Awfī connects to the Chinese world, Muḡanna‘, according to him a man from the Marw region who claimed to be God incarnated and gathered an army in Transoxiana. In ‘Awfī’s account (2007, 3.1, 229-31) Muḡanna‘ and his followers, the ‘White-clothed ones’ (*sifīd-jāmiḡān*), start a revolt turning to the Chinese khan for help. He had managed to gather many supporters by throwing a magic talisman in a well who radiated a green light at noon, thus tricking the people into believing to his divine nature. Even though Muḡanna‘ and most of his followers were killed after the siege of his fortress, writes ‘Awfī, some of them are still alive, call themselves ‘White-clothed ones’, think of themselves as Muslims and teach the Quran to their sons, even though there is no information as to the true nature of their beliefs.

Besides the magic element, what is particularly interesting to us in ‘Awfī’s report on Muḡanna‘ is that ‘Awfī speaks of Chinese where his source, Bīrūnī, that ‘Awfī follows very closely, speaks of Turks. We know that Muḡanna‘ owned his success to the support of the Turks, who assisted him in key moments of his campaign such as the conquest of Samarqand and not, quite obviously, of the Chinese. This substitution shows us, once again, how the central Asian Turks were identified with the Chinese by ‘Awfī.²⁴ In this case, however, there may be more to ‘Awfī’s reference to

23 Both these short reports come from Marwazī (1942, 15-6; 65-6 for Minorsky’s comment).

24 Bīrūnī (1879, 194) writes: “He [Muḡanna‘] passed the river Oxus and went to the districts of Kash and Nasaf. He entered into correspondence with the khāqān and solicited his

China than the ordinary superimposition between China and Turkestan: in fact, our author may be once again recalling the presence in Transoxiana of cultural motives of Chinese origin. Biancamaria Amoretti (1975, 513-4) already hinted at Chinese motives in the recurrence of the green colour in the reports composed by Islamic authors on Āfarīd and Muḡanna‘, hints recently recalled and updated by Patricia Crone in her study on the nativist prophets in Islamic Iran (2012, 121-8). Crone, in fact, advanced a fascinating hypothesis relating Muḡanna‘’s *sifīd-jāmigān* (Bīrūnī’s *Mubayyiḡa*) with another millenarian group, the Chinese Buddhist group of the Maitreya societies (on which see Seiwert, Ma 2003, 168-86), Maitreya being the ‘Buddha to come’ that would restore the true *dharma*. Both Muḡanna‘’s *sifīd-jāmigān*, mostly composed by Sogdians, and the Maitreya societies are non-Muslim millenarian religious groups described by sources as having a white colour-code. To further prove her hypothesis Crone shows the persistence of white-clothed movements in China up to 1257, at the same time showing the popularity of the Maitreya figure and the millenarian aspects with which it was charged among Turks and Iranians in central Asia and particularly among Sogdian merchants travelling on long-distance trade networks between Iran and China. If we accept Crone and Amoretti’s fascinating hypothesis, to which ‘Awfī’s reference to a Chinese element in both anecdotes seems to lay a hand, it becomes possible to further account for his insistence on the Chinese space as a ‘space of heresy’. Once more then ‘Awfī’s text offers us the literary transfiguration of a very concrete geopolitic and religious scenery.

4 Conclusion: ‘Awfī’s China, a Familiar Stranger

Borrowing the expression used by Jonathan Lipman (1998) to describe how Chinese Muslims were historically perceived by the general non-Muslim Chinese population, we may talk of ‘Awfī’s China as a ‘familiar stranger’. To ‘Awfī, in fact, China is a space connoted by clear marks of alterity. First there is religious alterity, which is exemplified by the three anecdotes on ‘false prophets’. In these stories the Chinese space is the space of religious difference, heresy (Āfarīd, Muḡanna‘), idolatry (Manichaeism) and magic. Moreover, being represented as possessing over-human ability in crafts

help. The sect of the Mubayyiḡa and the Turks gathered round him and the property and women (of his enemies) he delivered up to them, killing everybody who opposed him.” ‘Awfī’s version is shorter, and significantly replaces Bīrūnī’s Turkish *khāqān* with a Chinese one: “He crossed the Oxus river coming at Kash and Nasaf. He helped [*mumānnatī kard*, or either ‘he was similar to’, *mumāthalatī kard*: the text here is defective] the Chinese khan and asked him for help. The group of the *sifīd-jāmagān* gathered round him and treasures and women he delivered up to them, killing every army sent against him by the Caliph.” (2007, 3.1, 229)

and arts – which itself borders heresy being the consequence of Mani’s predication – and extraordinary beauty the Chinese are also “others” from a cultural point of view. As such, China in the *Jawāmi‘* is indeed a ‘stranger’. On the other hand, however, this stranger has a very familiar outlook. In fact, geographically ‘Awfi’s *chīn* is much more Xinjiang than ‘China proper’, politically it coincides with the Qara Khitai empire and with the eastern Turkic semi-nomadic populations of Xinjiang and ethnically it is distinctly Turkish looking. As we saw, this ‘familiarity’ of the ‘stranger’ that China was to Persian authors already in the pre-Mongol period is rooted in a history of continuous contacts and cross-cultural exchanges between the Chinese and the Iranian world that dates back to pre-Islamic times and often involved the mediation of eastern Turkish populations. The conquest of central Asia by the ‘Chinese’ Qara Khitai in the twelfth century, when ‘Awfi was born, confirmed this trend. On this background, it safe to say that ‘Awfi’s identification of the Chinese world with the cultural and geographic space of the eastern central Asian populations and the western frontier of present-day People’s Republic of China is consistent with the traditional representation of China found in earlier Transoxianan authors, such as Marwazī, while an illustrious literary precedent for this ‘Turkish-looking’ China is found already in the *Shāhnāma*. The arrival of the Qara Khitai in central Asia, once again, did not mark a break with the past.

Besides showing how simplistic the equation ‘New Persian *chīn* = China’ may be, the study of the textualization of the Chinese space in ‘Awfi’s *Jawāmi‘ al-ḥikāyāt* also offers a preliminary example of how all these ‘Chinese’ cultural motives, of which early Persian authors often had a direct experience, were textualized in Persian literary imaginary. Even though, as representative as a study on ‘Awfi’s *Jawāmi‘* may be, it does not give us much more than a glimpse of the general picture, this, however, should suffice at raising our awareness of the complexity of the Persian literary discourse on alterity. Further exploring this complexity is an urgent task if we are to really make sense of Persian literary texts, finally giving them the place they deserve in the wider Eurasian cultural history. Such a task would pass through the production of detailed studies on specific ‘other’ cultural objects in Persian literary imaginary and lexicography, such as the already quoted one by Stefano Pellò on the Persian word *Arzhang*, as well as through more general studies on the representation of ‘other’ cultural spaces by Persian authors from various eras and regions.²⁵

25 Two examples of possible researches in this direction are the case of the *faghfūr*, briefly mentioned in the introduction of the present article and the echo of which even reached Medieval Europe through Marco Polo’s *Devisement du Monde* (“Vrai est que la grande province du Mangi es la plus noble et la plus riche de tout l’Orient. En 1269 en était maître et seigneur un roi appelé Facfur, qui était très grand roi et puissant en trésors, en gens et en terres”, Polo 2011, 336, on which see the already quoted Pelliot 1963, 652-61) and the

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