

Transmission and Misconception:
A Crooked Sense of Direction in Geographical Writings as an Evidence of Mongols’
Agency in Cultural Exchange during the Mongol Empire

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In several geographical writings composed in China and Persia during the Mongol Empire, a crooked sense of direction is detected. In specific, when authors discuss affairs in Western Mongolia and Northern Xinjiang, they depict the places and the directions in a very mysterious way by which the real west is described as north, the real south is shown as west, the real east is indicated as south, and the real north is represented as east. This strange distortion of the direction has been studied by only one scholar, Oba Shoichi. According to him, this tendency of geographical writings was influenced ultimately by the tradition of Islamic cartography. If we read the *Secret History of the Mongols* closely, however, we can find out a more convincing explanation on this enigmatic phenomenon. Mongols have held a very distinctive sense of direction being starkly differentiated from their sedentary neighbors'. And, this distinctive geographical sense created a very interesting geographical understanding on the regions around the Altai Mountains, which is reflected in the *Secret History of the Mongols* and finally led to the misapprehensions on the part of the sedentary subjects of the Mongols. This fact strongly implies that geographical knowledge, at least on the regions around the Altai Mountains, was transmitted to Chinese and Persian literati through the Mongols or the Mongolian version of geographical knowledge. Therefore, it can be argued that the Mongols were active agents in cultural exchange, at least in the field of geography, during the Mongol Empire.