

## The *Semu ren* in the Yuan Empire – Who Were They?

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Most non-Mongols and non-Chinese in the Yuan Empire were categorized as *Semu ren*. Comparatively little work has been done on identifying exactly who they were, where they came from, how many of them there were, and what roles they fulfilled. In the absence of precise data, a number of misconceptions have crept into common circulation. It seems often to be assumed that they were predominantly Muslims, and that many of them were Persians. It has commonly been believed that Persian was a *lingua franca* of the Yuan Empire. My researches have clearly shown these assumptions to be false. In fact, the largest group of *Semu ren* was almost certainly Turks, of various kinds, both Muslim and non-Muslim, and Turkic must have been much more commonly spoken than Persian. Many *Semu ren* held military posts. They were prominent in the *keshig*, from an early date, and held administrative positions of various kinds, at various levels. To what extent they became “sinicized”, absorbed into the Chinese population, is another question that requires much more research. Some of them remained “different” to the end of the dynasty, while others became almost indistinguishable from the Chinese literati.

The issue of who exactly the *Semu ren* were is one that is fundamental to understanding cross-cultural contacts under the Mongols. This paper will almost certainly raise at least as many questions as it answers. It is hoped that it will stimulate further research in this essential area.