One issue that is often left out of most popular narratives describing the Mongol conquests and the creation of their world-wide empire is the fact that the Mongols were also interested in the cultures of the great settled civilizations they conquered, for practical and ideological reasons. They generally took pains to preserve those societies’ artisans, craftsmen and technologists from slaughter and sent them to work throughout the rapidly expanding empire. In fact, a great deal of intellectual and technological exchange across Eurasia took place as a direct result of the Mongol conquests.²

One of the most important technologies that the Mongols acquired as a result of their expansion and conquest of others was a writing system and attendant literacy. As soon as Temujin, the future Chinggis Qan, began to expand his confederation beyond the Mongol tribes by conquering other tribes and states, he recognized the need for people in his administration who were “skillful in the laws and customs of cities.”³ It was one thing to conquer, quite another to rule for an extended period of time. In order for the nomadic non-literate Mongols to continue to enjoy the fruits of their success they had to administer and keep tabs on this increasingly diverse group

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² See Allsen 1997a for discussion of the distribution of cultural and technical specialists in the Mongol Empire.

³ Allsen 1997a, 6, citing The Secret History; see also Ratchnevsky 1993 for a general discussion of the process of confederation.
of subject peoples, most of whom were members of literate societies. This required, eventually, being able to function in the literate mode that their subjects were accustomed to, and for this the Mongols employed a whole host of translators and interpreters who could transmit their decrees to their subjects. As a result, official documents were issued in Chinese, Turkic, Tibetan, Persian, and Russian. But for several practical and ideological reasons the Mongols also needed to represent their own spoken language, Middle Mongolian, in written form. Temujin addressed that need by adopting the writing system used by the Uyghurs, one of the very first Central Asian kingdoms to submit to him voluntarily, as the first official script for the Mongol language, creating a type of lingua franca as a common imperial written language that could be used throughout his empire.

Temujin’s adoption of the Uyghur script to represent spoken Mongolian is widely known among historians, as is the story of the first Uyghur on record specifically involved in the transfer of that technology in 1204, a man by the name of Tatar Tongga (about whom see below). But Tatar Tongga was not alone in the task of teaching the Mongol princes how to use his native writing system. In fact, several members of the Uyghur elite who were brought into the Mongol confederation early on are specifically lauded in the sources for their familiarity with their own written language and for the fact that they tutored members of the Mongol imperial clan in that writing system. Apart from Tatar Tongga, studies of these Uyghurs have focused on their careers and achievements as civil and military leaders and administrators, not on their roles as technical specialists and advisers. This is an unfortunate omission since it seems clear that their proficiency in their native written language was one of the reasons, or one form of so-called cultural capital, that those Uyghurs could use to guarantee their survival as a powerful political elite in spite of the fact that they were now subjects who were dispersed away from their native land. The present article examines the stories of the persons who introduced the Uyghur script to Temujin and other members of the Mongol ruling elite.

These stories are important for several reasons: they flesh out the importance of a writing system to the maturation of the Mongol empire, they reveal the complex socio-political network of person-

4 See Hsiao 1995. See also Róna-Tas 1965, de Rachewiltz 1967, and Allsen 2000 on the multilingual characteristics of the Mongol empire.