

From Chen Cheng 陳誠 to Ma Wensheng 馬文升: Changing Chinese Visions of Central Asia¹

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In her book *A Translucent Mirror*, the Chinese historian Pamela Crossley has written that

(... t)he Ming empire (1368–1644) was perpetually engaged in a struggle against various people along its northern borders.²

She could have added that the fifteenth century witnessed the Ming's deterioration, partly due to its foreign policy failures but also to its declining domestic institutions. The lives and careers of Chen Cheng 陳誠 (d. 1457) and Ma Wensheng 馬文升 (1426–1510) attest to the Ming's change in status. Both were government officials who dealt with Central Asia in critical periods, and each wrote an account of his experience, which dramatically reveals the differences in the Ming's relations with its neighbors in what is now Xinjiang and the Central Asian countries bordering on China. One principal difference between them is that Chen was a low-level civilian official while Ma was Minister of War and had had a long and distinguished career. Chen traveled all the way to the Timurid capital in Herat, but Ma mostly stayed within the northwestern borders of China. A brief consideration yields a portrait of the Ming's position in the region.

The early Ming had inherited an uncertain relationship with Central Asia. In the early thirteenth century, Chinggis Khan (r. 1206–1227) had prompted the submission of the Uyghurs, the dominant group in Xinjiang, and had conquered and somewhat devastated such more distant towns and cities as Samarkand and Bukhara. His son Chaghadaï (d. 1221) ruled Central Asia and maintained a good relationship with his brother the Great Khan Ögödei (r. 1229–1241), who governed the empire from the newly-established capital of Khara Khorum in Mongolia. However, by the time of Khubilai Khan's (r. 1260–1293) accession to power in 1260, relations had deteriorated considerably, partly because the Central Asian Khanate

1 Note that this is an interpretive essay based on research conducted since 1970. I offer a new interpretation of data I have presented in previous essays and books. Thus the documentation is light. For the original documentation, see my publications listed in Rossabi (1998), 221, footnote 1.

2 Crossley (1999), 57.

had supported Khubilai's brother Arigh Böke (d. 1266) in the struggle for succession to the position of Great Khan. In 1269, war erupted between Khubilai and his Central Asian cousin Khaidu (1236–1301), a conflict that persisted even after Khubilai's death in 1294 and Khaidu's death in 1303. Khubilai's successors as Emperors of Yuan China encountered so many domestic problems that they could not focus on Central Asia. Similarly, the Chaghadaï Khanate itself continued to lose control over Central Asia throughout the fourteenth century, and by 1369, Temür (or Tamerlane, r. 1370–1405) had occupied Samarkand. Chinggisid descendants were no longer dominant, and no single political entity could, as the Mongolian Great Khanate did, lay claim to universal rule.

Thus when the Hongwu 洪武 Emperor (r. 1368–1398) founded the Ming dynasty in 1368, relations between China and Central Asia were unsettled. After three centuries of alien rule over parts of China and almost a century of foreign governance over the entire country, Hongwu adopted a policy of semi-isolation, with ever more restrictions on tribute and trade relations with foreign states. Unlike the Yuan dynasty, the Ming imposed limitations on trade and diverged from the all-inclusive commercial policies of the Mongolian era. Hongwu and all but one or two of his successors would limit contact with the outside world and would conceive of the Mongolians as the gravest threat to China's security, a stance which proved to be mistaken. The Mongolians were riven with internal rivalries and conflicts, could not unite, and did not invade China.

Yet Hongwu had to establish regulations on contact with peoples along China's northwestern frontiers and the more distant Central Asian regions. Part of his rationale for maintaining relations with neighboring groups was to elicit intelligence about threats posed by Central Asian leaders. Another was to have these nearby regions serve as buffer zones against invaders from Central Asia. Hongwu and his Court remembered the turbulence Khaidu generated in the northwest. Thus in the 1390s the Court dispatched two embassies to Central Asia to announce the establishment of a new dynasty in China. It had no knowledge about the growing Central Asian Empire which, by that time, had conquered Iran and much of West Asia and had defeated a Golden Horde army in south Russia. The Chinese emissaries brought with them a message which treated the Central Asian ruler as a vassal or tributary. Temür did not appreciate this slight and detained both envoys and their escorts. He decided to avenge this insult and was bolstered in his determination when he heard rumors of alleged discrimination against Muslims in China. The Ming Court was unaware of Temür's intentions. The *Shilu* 實錄 (or *Veritable Records*), a day-to-day description of activities at Court, makes no mention of this Central Asian threat. The Court did not prepare to de-

fend itself against such an attack. Meanwhile Temür made elaborate preparations for his military campaign and seemed ready to encroach on Chinese territory and to face scant resistance from a relatively minor force stationed along the borders. Fortunately for the Ming, Temür died in February of 1405 while en route for an attack.

Two years earlier, Hongwu's son Yongle 永樂 (r. 1403–1424) had usurped the throne from his legitimately-appointed nephew, setting the stage for new policies. Meanwhile a succession struggle arose after Temür's death, and three years elapsed before Shahrukh Bahadur (r. 1405–1447), one of his sons, became the ruler of the Timurid domains. He too had a differing agenda than his father and appeared more interested in an accommodation which guaranteed an exchange of goods with China rather than conflict. Similarly, Yongle wanted as many foreign envoys as possible to arrive and to profess themselves to be tribute bearers in order to bolster his legitimacy. His logic was that if foreign envoys accepted him as Emperor, then his own people should, despite the irregularities which characterized his accession to the throne. Both sides had a vested interest in mending their relationship.

Shahrukh took the initiative by sending an embassy to China, which responded with a mission of its own. The pace of exchanges then accelerated over the next few years. From 1408 to 1413, the Timurids sent nine embassies to the Ming Court. Each offered horses, and some also presented camels, jade, leopards, and lions. One mission brought 550 horses for the Court. The Ming, in turn, provided gifts of silk, robes, and paper money which could be used to purchase goods in China. Relations had been repaired, despite each side's dispatch of indiscreet, even insulting, missives, portraying itself as superior and the other as a vassal.

The culmination of these harmonious relations was Yongle's decision to send Chen Cheng to lead a mission to the Timurids. Born in Jiangxi 江西, Chen was one of the first to obtain a *jinsshi* 進士 degree after the restoration of the civil service examinations. Receiving it in 1394, he was repeatedly assigned to tasks which required contact with foreigners. He founded military Guards in Anding 安定, Aduan 阿端, and Quxian 曲先 along China's northwestern frontiers. He resolved a frontier disagreement between Guangxi and the King of Annam. In addition, he served in the Ministry of Rites where

(...) he doubtless encountered envoys from far and near and became acquainted with court ways and the running of government.³

3 For more on Chen Cheng, see Rossabi (1976) and Richtsfeld (1985).

He was well versed in foreign customs and institutions and was not averse to dealings with the scorned “barbarians”. This attitude probably prompted the Court to send him on three separate occasions as its ambassador to Central Asia.

Chen departed from China on February 3, 1414 and did not return to the Chinese capital until November 30, 1415. On his return, he presented to the court a diary of his journey to Shahrukh’s capital in Herat and an account of the lands to which he traveled. He stayed in the capital for several months and had several meetings with Shahrukh. He apparently gained admittance to the inner chambers because he supplied a seemingly accurate account of the ruler’s bedroom. His descriptions offer an extraordinarily informative view of Timurid civilization at its height. He tells us about the *divan*, the *bazaars* (which, in particular, fascinated him), and the region’s natural resources. He comments that the horses were of fine quality and were carefully bred and reared, a significant observation for the Chinese who needed to import foreign steeds. His account also focuses on religious observances, including the simplicity of mosque services, the fasting during Ramadan, and the appearance and actions of dervishes. He noticed the strict prohibitions on liquor, the veils worn by women, the rest areas and inns for weary travelers, the irrigation system, the bathhouses, and what he perceived to be quacks selling medicines in the bazaars.

Chen’s report concentrated on economic practices and unusual practices which he observed. It offered valuable guides for merchants seeking to foster trade with Central Asia, but it did not provide military intelligence. He may have presented an oral report on military matters, but he appeared to have emphasized trade concerns. In any event, his favorable account promoted relations between the Ming and its neighbors to the west. Yongle seemed to have been so pleased with Chen that, within a year, he sent his envoy back to Central Asia. On July 13, 1416, Chen departed from the court and in April of 1417 reached Herat where Shahrukh and his son Ulugh Beg (r. 1447–1449) met and entertained him and his men. The letter Chen presented to the Timurids on this occasion was less haughty than earlier ones and called for uninterrupted trade and tribute relations. Coupled with this conciliatory message, Yongle presented Shahrukh with gifts of silver, silk, brocades, falcons, and porcelains. Chen repeatedly assured the Central Asian monarchs of the Ming’s eagerness for unimpeded commercial relations. To ingratiate China further with Shahrukh, Chen presented him with a painting of a white horse, which the Central Asian ruler had earlier offered as tribute to Yongle. The Timurids eventually responded with an embassy of their own, which arrived in Beijing on December 14, 1420. The painter Ghiyath al-Din

kept an account of this mission and the cordial reception Yongle accorded the envoys, cementing relations even further. Finally, Yongle sent Chen on a third expedition to Central Asia on July 22, 1420. Little is known of this expedition, but it doubtless contributed to the good relations between the two powers.

Chen's three expeditions had proved to be extremely useful. Diplomacy rather than warfare had prevailed. Moreover, both sides had learned more about each other. Both empires were at their height, and a conflict would have been catastrophic. Instead harmonious relations, based on trade, characterized the relationship. The number of so-called tribute embassies reaching China during the Yongle period attests to success. Twenty delegations from Samarkand and Herat and thirty-two embassies from other Central Asian towns, not to mention forty-four missions from the nearby northwestern oasis of Hami, arrived at the capital. Wars had been averted, and Chen represents the triumph of diplomacy and commerce.

At the same time as the successful establishment of good relations, partly via Chen Cheng, with the Timurids, Yongle sought similarly good relations with Hami, the closest northwestern oasis and the so-called gateway to the Western Regions. In 1405, he made a wrong decision by attempting to install a certain Toghto as the ruler of Hami. Having been reared at the Ming Court, Toghto did not have the proper training for a man seeking to govern illiterate herdsmen and relatively unsophisticated merchants in an oasis deprived of the amenities of a great civilization. The hapless Toghto aroused the animosity of the local populace through his grandiose demands and desire for a luxurious lifestyle. Fortunately for Ming-Hami relations, he died in 1410, and his much more competent cousin was enthroned. The accession of an able and respected ruler ushered in a period of harmony and mutual profit between Hami and China. The Ming and Hami exchanged embassies, one of which provided more than 3,000 horses in a mission that reached the Chinese Court on October 4, 1419. Such good rapport between the Uyghurs, the Hui 回, and other groups in Hami and the Ming fostered beneficial economic relations. The rulers of Hami offered tribute while Yongle provided gifts in reply. Merchants from Hami also traded in markets established at the Chinese frontiers. Peaceful relations between the gateway to the Western Regions and China enabled merchants and ambassadors from distant Central Asian towns, such as Samarkand, to travel unhindered to the Ming capital, resulting in extensive commercial, tributary, and diplomatic exchanges. Thus, Yongle's policy in Hami succeeded.

By the end of the fifteenth century, however, these favorable conditions, as well as the harmonious relations between China and its neighbors to the northwest, had been overturned. A Minister of War had replaced the envoy Chen Cheng as the dominant figure in Ming relations with Central Asia. Fewer embassies were exchanged, and indeed the Chinese sources fail to record a single Ming mission to Central Asia. Many fewer trade and tribute embassies arrived, via the northwest. Conflicts, which were sometimes violent, replaced cooperation and harmony in China's relations with Central Asia.

What caused this transformation? One important change was a series of disastrous military expeditions. Yongle himself had led five military campaigns into Mongolia, which scarcely made much of a difference. Although the Chinese sources describe these ventures as smashing successes, Yongle hardly fought a battle because the Mongolians simply eluded Ming forces and fought in what could only be described as guerrilla warfare. Yongle's incursion into Vietnam also failed. Three years after his death, Ming troops abandoned this decades-long encroachment into that Southeast Asian land. The Mongolian capture of the Ming Emperor in 1449 was the culmination of these foreign policy catastrophes. At the same time, the Ming military forces were plagued by corruption, demoralization (or loss of *esprit de corps*), and commanders using funds for their personal wishes rather than to provide supplies for their troops, and the Court's difficulties were exacerbated by growing eunuch power and tax evasion by the wealthy and the powerful. Facing revenue shortfalls, the Ming was compelled to rely on military colonies along its borders. The troops based in these colonies provided their own sustenance, as well as their own military supplies. Naturally, they could be better off if they grew more crops, and generally the more time they worked on the land, the more they could produce. The more time they devoted to their farmland, the less time they had to maintain their military preparedness. Their military skills eroded, leaving the Ming military in a precarious position.

One byproduct of the Ming's deterioration was the court's attempt to limit trade and tribute missions from the northwest because of the cost. As early as 1464, the Minister of Rites proposed that Hami be allowed only one tribute mission per year and that the number of men on each embassy be drastically reduced. Hami's reaction was negative, and many welcomed the incursions of the increasingly powerful Moghuls of Turfan as a counterbalance to the Ming. Ali, the ruler of Turfan, occupied Hami in 1473 and defeated a Ming force sent to rescue its neighbor. Only in 1482 did Hami regain its independence and only due to the pressure from other groups to the west on Turfan. The turbulence in Hami, al-

readily recognized as the gateway to the Western Regions, deterred more distant Central Asian regions from dispatching tribute missions and traders. Herat did not send a single mission during the Chenghua period (1464–1488); Samarkand reputedly sent three, but these embassies may have originated from areas closer to China than the old capital of Temür's domain.

The Ming had imposed its own candidate on the throne – an Uyghur who was not in the good graces of the local population. His installation provided a fine pretext for Ahmad, probably Ali's son, to attack the town. Stating that the Uyghur leader was “of humble ethnic origin”⁴, Ahmad devised a plan to remove him. In 1488, Ahmad arrived on the outskirts of Hami and sent a message proposing a marital alliance. The Uyghur leader responded enthusiastically and permitted Ahmad and his troops to enter the town. His gullibility proved to be disastrous because Ahmad had no intention of allying himself with an independent Hami. Instead, as soon as he gained access to Hami, Ahmad killed the unfortunate Uyghur and plundered the town. He then reported to the Ming court that the Uyghur ruler had died of natural causes and asked to be enfeoffed as Prince of Hami in order to quell the chaos after the previous ruler's death.

Ma Wensheng, the Minister of War, made his appearance at this point. A graduate of the civil service examinations, Ma had served in the northwest on a number of different rotations. In 1485, he had been appointed Minister of War for about a year and was then reappointed in 1489. Knowing conditions in the northwest, he was not deceived about Ahmad's actions and intentions. He persuaded the Emperor to send a letter rebuking Ahmad for his raid and demanding that his troops evacuate Hami. Faced with this threat, Ahmad sought advice from his commanders. His most important subordinate declared that

(...) Hami is located more than one thousand *li* from us... It is better that we avail ourselves of this opportunity to return the city and the seal to appease the Ming and then we plan for the future.⁵

Ahmad acquiesced, and on January 20, 1492 an embassy from Turfan returned Hami's seal and reported that its troops had withdrawn from the town. Ahmad applauded his underling for his sound advice.

Tributary and commercial relations continued to bedevil the Ming and Turfan. For example, the court learned that an envoy from Turfan

4 Lam (1990), 111.

5 Lam (1990), 113.

had purchased prohibited goods, including tea and satin. The Emperor, at Ma's instigation, immediately ordered his Chinese escorts to be punished and the Chinese merchants who sold unauthorized goods to be investigated and also punished. At the same time, Ma advised the Emperor to adopt a forceful policy and to appoint Shamba, a very capable descendant of Hami's royal family, as the new ruler of the town. Unwilling to countenance a strong ruler in Hami, Ahmad again attacked the town early in 1493 and captured Shamba. Again, upon Ma's advice, the Emperor appointed Xu Jin 許進 (1437–1510) to pursue a more aggressive policy. In November of 1495, Xu set forth for Hami, which he reached in December, and overwhelmed the detachment Ahmad had left to guard the town. However, Ahmad continued to raid the town.

Ma decided that China needed a different strategy to defuse the threat Ahmad posed. With the Emperor's support, he suspended all trade and tribute from Central Asia to China. Ma's strategy worked because both the region's oasis dwellers and its pastoral nomads, who depended upon or profited from trade and tribute with China, vented their frustrations and animosities at Ahmad. The ruler of Turfan finally gave in, and he dispatched an embassy which returned Shamba and then requested the resumption of trade and tribute relations. The Ming court agreed and provided lavish gifts for the envoys. At that point, Ma was reassigned.

After Ma's departure, the Ming position continued to deteriorate. Its forces were weak and its diplomats other than Ma ineffective. In 1513, after considerable turbulence, Turfan's ruler marched into Hami, which would be lost to the Ming for the rest of the dynasty.

In summary, judging from the Ming's relations with Central Asia, the fifteenth century was a watershed. A prosperous and stable dynasty when Chen Cheng departed for Central Asia, the Ming had declined precipitously by the time Ma Wensheng sought to oust Turfan interlopers in Hami. Under the Yongle Emperor, its military forces had installed its own candidate as Hami's ruler. That influence on Hami, the gateway to the Western Regions, permitted envoys to travel to Bishbalik, Herat, and Samarkand to elicit Central Asian trade and tribute embassies. The trade routes were generally peaceful, and caravans had no compunctions in traveling through daunting deserts and lofty mountains to reach Ming China. A mutually beneficial exchange between China and Central Asia developed, with China dispatching mostly silk and cloth and receiving badly needed horses. However, in the course of the fifteenth century, Ming armies declined, corruption plagued the Court, and interest in foreign relations diminished. Ma Wensheng sought to protect China's borders and its contacts with more distant areas in Central Asia. He succeed-

ed temporarily, but history was not on China's side, mostly due to the problems previously mentioned. In 1513, Turfan finally detached the important oasis of Hami from China's influence, sharply reducing the Ming's interactions with Central Asia.

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