

One of the Last Documents of the Silk Road: The *Khataynameh* of Ali Akbar

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The patterns of trans-Asiatic communication and trade changed dramatically in the course of the fifteenth century. These changes can be divided into three major periods:

1) In the aftermath of Mongol rule in China and in Iran, the first emperors of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) and the Timurids (1370-1506) as well promoted commercial and political exchange on a large scale. Especially the leading Chinese economy of this period showed its attraction to other Asian kingdoms. Chinese overtures under the early Ming had thus a huge impact, and Chinese envoys who arrived in Samarqand, Herat and other cities of Central and Western Asia by land and others who called at ports of the Western Indian Ocean were well received by the local rulers. Envoys and merchants from these places repaid these visits in the Chinese capital.

2) However, China abandoned its sea expeditions in 1433 and refrained from sending more embassies to Central and Western Asia at around the same time. Consequently, the pattern of mutual communication changed, and henceforth the traffic flowed only in the direction of China. The Ming showed less and less interest in trade with the outside world and regarded the foreign merchants and envoys rather as a nuisance, one mostly tolerated due to the Ming's own policy of superiority but kindness towards foreigners.

3) Islamic maritime trade sustained much more difficulty at the end of the fifteenth century on account of European expansion, rather than from the

previous change of Chinese foreign policy. The Portuguese *Estado da Índia* supplanted the network of the Arabic and Persian traders, although it could temporarily recover in the middle of the sixteenth century, as did the traditional "Levant route." At first glance, these European colonial enterprises (first Vasco da Gama and Portugal, then the Dutch Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie) seem also to have been responsible for the decline of the Silk Road as a main artery of trans-Asian communication. However, inner Asian developments were rather to blame for the parallel deterioration of the overland route, i. e. the collapse of the Timurid Empire and the subsequent rivalry between the Sunnite Shaybanids in Central Asia and the Shi'ite Safavids in Iran which prevented smooth interrelations and interactions as in the centuries before.

Though it would be erroneous to assume a complete breakdown of trans-Asian overland traffic, embassies from Central and Western Asia arrived still in Beijing. We can even find embassies from a kingdom called "Lumi," registered in the Veritable Records (*Ming shilu*), offering their tribute since the 1520s for several times at the Chinese court. "Lumi" could well be a transcription of "Rum", i. e. the Ottoman Empire. These embassies might have been faked — there is no final proof that they really came from the far-away Ottoman Empire, but the interest in "Lumi" evidenced in many contemporary Chinese texts may indicate the genuineness of their origin. The interest of Asian merchants in trade with China did certainly not diminish, though the political situation did not support their eagerness.

One of the most important testimonies of this continuous interest in China is the "Khataynameh" (Book of China), written by 'Ali Akbar Khata'i in 1516 and issued in Istanbul in 1520. There are but a few manuscripts of this Khataynameh extant (one in the National Library of Egypt in Cairo, three in the Süleymaniye Library and one in the Aya Sofia Library of Istanbul, and another one in the University Library of Leiden). Already under the reign of Sultan Murad,

probably in the year 1582, Hoseyn Efendi translated the Persian text into Ottoman Turkish with some omissions and amendments, with the title "Qanunnameh-ye Chin va Khata" (Book of Canons of China and Khatay). Before I turn to a sketch of the modern research on the "Khataynameh", a brief outline of its content and some considerations on the author may be given.

The work is not a traditional travelogue like, for example, Ghiyas ad-Din's description of his journey to China as a Timurid ambassador in the beginning of the fifteenth century, but rather a description of China proper. It is divided into twenty chapters, where roads, cities, military, stores, prostitutes, eunuchs, administration, jails, law, agriculture and other matters are discussed.¹ Thus 'Ali Akbar's book gave a reader of the sixteenth century a fair impression of China, and it could well have served as a companion for merchants travelling there. However, the book was issued in Istanbul, and merchants on the Silk Road probably gathered there knowledge from themselves and did not necessarily need a guide book.

For whom was it then written? The question seems to be rather uncomplicated, because it was dedicated to Sultan Süleyman and 'Ali Akbar might have wished to make an impression on the Ottoman court. Lin Yih-Min describes 'Ali Akbar as a "Turkish businessman" (1983, p. 58) who probably travelled only to Central Asia, where he gathered the information for his book and returned then to Turkey. However, the name of the author indicates a Shi'ite background. Mazahéry (p. 95) gives justly a vivid sketch of the anti-Shi'ite movements and sentiments at the time of the battle of Chaldiran when the Safavid ruler Isma'el I was defeated by the Ottomans and when 'Ali Akbar wrote his book. The situation of a Shi'ite in Istanbul in that period was certainly not an easy one, and he might have had good reason to win the sultan's favour by producing a book on China to spur the geographical interest of the Ottomans. In accordance with Schefer's assumption (p. 34), a Central Asian origin of 'Ali Akbar seems rather likely, and 'Ali Akbar could even have been captured by the Ottomans in Chaldiran and saved his life by writing a book about his former experiences as a merchant.

The question of whether he had actually been in China² will not be discussed here, but it might be stressed that he reported at least the knowledge of China circulating among contemporary merchants dealing with China. This knowledge was by no means meager, as the "Khataynameh" proves, and one may wonder if it was not an incentive for the aforementioned embassies from "Lumi" to China.

The "Khataynameh" aroused considerable interest not only in the Ottoman Empire but also in Europe in the early nineteenth century. Matthaeus Norberg used the Turkish "Qanunnameh" for his Latin commentaries on China in the course of his translation of and research on Marco Polo's narrative. This "Qanunnameh" was also the basis of the studies of Zenker and Fleischer. It was Charles Schefer who discovered the Persian original in the Süleymaniye Library and translated three chapters of it. Paul Kahle started to make a complete translation with the assistance of Muhammad Hamidullah. This was in fact finished in manuscript but never published. Kahle even exchanged letters with the famous Chinese scholar Zhang Xinglang in order to invite him to Germany for work on the "Khataynameh", but due to the situation of Germany in the 1930s the journey of Zhang Xinglang proved to be impossible. A late fruit of this communication was the Chinese translation of Hamidullah's and Kahle's translation by the son of Zhang Xinglang, Zhang Zhishan. Only a few scholars worked later on 'Ali Akbar's book: Iraj Afshar, who produced a critical edition of the text and the Taiwanese Lin Yih-Min who translated the text into modern Turkish and wrote an English article about it. Aly Mazahéri then translated the text into French together with other Persian texts dealing with the Silk Road. Lastly, a student of Chinese Studies in Vienna, Christine Beckmann, wrote a diploma thesis on the basis of Hamidullah's and Kahle's text in comparison with Chinese material. The author of this note is currently working on a critical English translation of the "Khataynameh" which will be also compared with relevant Chinese texts.

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Notes

1. For more detailed descriptions see Kahle (1933), Lin Yih-Min (1983), or the translation of Mazahéry.
2. For conflicting views see Kahle (1933) and Lin Yih-Min (1983).