
Trade and Commerce on the Silk Road after the End of Mongol Rule in China, Seen from Chinese Texts

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Traffic and exchange on the Silk Road are generally perceived to have taken place more before and during Mongol rule in Asia than in later periods. That is, in this view the 'Silk Road' is a historical phenomenon which came to a halt sometime during the late 'European' Middle Ages. Few would think about merchants and envoys crossing Asia well after the Mongols, before the Europeans 're-discovered' Central Asia. This paper will discuss the traffic along the route after the Mongols in order to demonstrate that the Silk Road did not break off completely in the middle of the 14th century, but continued to function for a rather long time subsequently.

The historical documentation of trans-Asian contacts in Chinese texts started during the Han dynasty, when Emperor Han Wudi sent Zhang Qian, the first well-known traveller along the Silk Road, to the Yuezhi to propose a political and military coalition against the Xiongnu. Around the beginning of the Common Era, the Han conquered vast areas of the 'Western Regions' (*Xiyu*), and consequently the Han Empire stretched far into Central Asia. After the downfall of the Han, interactions between Western, Central and Eastern Asia persisted, though on a less institutionalized level. They rose again under the rule of the cosmopolitan Tang dynasty, when Sogdian and other merchants brought various exotics to China and exported Chinese silks and other products in exchange. For Peroz, son of the last Sasanian shah, China was the only haven

from the onslaught of the Arab Muslims. Already during the Tang, but much more during the following dynasties, direct overland contacts between Eastern and Western Asia declined to a certain degree; however, maritime trade increased enormously instead.

These circumstances changed under the Mongols, when travelers like John of Plano Carpini and William of Rubruck, not to mention Marco Polo and others, brought reports and narratives of Central and Eastern Asia under Mongol rule back to Europe and implanted the idea of (relatively) free travel and trade into the heads of their countrymen. Nowadays images of journeys on the Silk Road are mostly connected with Marco Polo and the Mongol period. Few people would probably think of the aforementioned Han ventures, Sogdian traders, and even less of persons like the Chinese official Chen Cheng, the Timurid painter Ghiyas ad-Din and the Portuguese Jesuit Benedict Goës, who crossed Central Asia decades and even centuries after the fall of the Mongols.¹ What were the motives of these latter travelers and what was the historical and political background of their endeavors?

The famous Great Wall of China, in the shape we can appreciate today, was built during the Ming period (1368-1644), and in the popular view it is still a symbol of Chinese seclusion (cf., however, Di Cosmo 2006). In fact though, according to a major historical source of this dynasty, the 'Veritable Records' (*Ming shilu*) as well as other texts, numerous

embassies arrived in China from Central and Western Asia during this period. They number 89 embassies coming from the Central Asian center Samarkand alone — the first arrived on 27 October 1387 and the last on 3 May 1618.² If we take the average, about one embassy from Samarkand arrived in either of the two Chinese capitals under the Ming (Nanjing and later Beijing) every three years, though we must admit that this calculation is partly incorrect because many more embassies came at the beginning of the dynasty than at its end.

The embassies arriving from Samarkand during the Ming dynasty seemingly reveal the close continuous contacts with Central Asia. However, Samarkand still lies in Central and not in Western Asia. If we turn further west (or better southwest), we find that 21 embassies arrived from Herat (in 14 cases written Halie and in 7 Heilou) between the years 1409 and 1484. Herat was the second capital of the Timurids after Shahrokh ascended the throne in 1405 and from this base he re-conquered parts of his father's empire from various rivals. Herat was the contemporaneous capital of Khorasan — and Khorasan can absolutely be regarded as a province of Iran.³ But Herat was not the furthest western city mentioned in the Ming records: three embassies came from Kerman, the important center of southeastern Iran, written in the 'Veritable Records' with different spellings (1415, 1424, 1425), and we also find five

embassies from Isfahan (1419-1483) and seven from Shiraz (1413-1484). The last three cities were (and are) definitely on what is considered Iranian soil and at least at the beginning of the 15th century they belonged to the Timurid Empire. Thus it seems that we may affirm commercial relations between Iran and China taking place well into the 15th century.

Relations between China and Western Asia apparently went even beyond the region of Iran: we learn of 23 embassies arriving from Arabia (or Mecca), which the Chinese called Tianfang⁴ (1433-1618), and of five coming from a country called Roumi (1423-1445) and finally eleven others from one pronounced similarly, namely Lumi (1524-1618). Roumi and Lumi should be both the transcription of 'Rum,' the popular term for Anatolia and *pars pro toto* for the Ottoman Empire.

According to Chinese texts, therefore, embassies from places as far as Samarkand, Arabia and the Ottoman Empire arrived in China during the whole Ming dynasty, though the numbers at the beginning of the dynasty surpass those in the second half by far. As a result continuous exchanges between Western and Eastern Asia seem to have taken place even centuries after the Mongols' conquests.

However, the real basis of the data gathered from the 'Veritable Records' can be doubted, and one may consider all or at least a number of these embassies to be 'fake embassies.' First, one may question whether embassies from Arabia and the Ottoman Empire still arrived in China in the late 16th and even early 17th centuries, because Asia was separated by political and religious obstacles during that period. Another reason for these doubts is the existence of various Persian credential letters to the Chinese Emperor which were found as attachments to Persian-Chinese glossaries of

the period. These glossaries were compiled by the 'Muslim Office' (*Huihui guan*), a sub-office of the 'Office of the Four Barbarians' (*Siyi guan*) which was in charge of translations from various languages and thus essential for diplomatic and commercial exchange. Linguistic inconsistencies and errors allude to the probability that the texts were written by corrupt Chinese officials for 'fake embassies.'⁵ These letters indicate that the embassies came from places much closer to China than they pretended in order to profit from the lucrative tribute system. Finally, the Chinese texts show that the Chinese officials themselves were often not sure of the veracity of many embassies. One early example recorded by the critics of the Supervising Secretary (*jishizhong*) Huang Ji on 26 December 1424 may be given here: 'Many of the envoys are trading barbarians who conduct their private businesses under a false pretext to bring tribute and under false authorization in order to attain an official position...' (*Ming shilu* 1966: *Renzong shilu*, j. 5, p. 160).

The reality of intense trans-Asian exchanges well after the fall of the Mongols in Iran and China may be doubted after these remarks. To illuminate this preliminary reasoning we will consider briefly the history of the region before we turn again to the embassies and put them in the framework of the broader political context of the period. Finally, we will address the question, 'Why did the Silk Road decline?'

When Zhu Yuanzhang defeated the Mongols and founded the Ming dynasty in 1368, he was forced to deal with areas across the borders of China, because the rest of the Mongol armies fled with the last Yuan emperor Toghan Temür into the steppes.⁶ Serious Mongol pretenders survived until 1388, some of them recognized even by the Chinese as having legitimate claims. Thus Zhu Yuanzhang had to include the regions north of

China into his strategic schemes. Furthermore, many people of Central Asia (the so-called *semuren*) had settled in China during the Yuan dynasty, and some of them were obviously brought back to 'Samarkand' as it is written in Chinese texts, but this toponym probably includes other places of Central Asia as well.

Timur came to power at about the same time as the first Ming Emperor; he founded a Central Asian empire with its capital at Samarkand. Though of Turkic origin, Timur stood in the tradition of the Mongols and legitimized his rule by marrying a woman with Chingisid lineage. His pretensions clearly aimed far beyond the area in which he grew up, the core of the Ulus Chaghatay dominion. He conquered Iran, led his army into India and far into Asia Minor where he defeated the Ottoman Sultan Bayazid, but the east, China included, was to be spared until the end of his rule. Finally, Timur gathered his army to attack China, but he died in the early stages of this campaign at Utrar, on 18 February 1405.

Both rulers saw themselves as possible successors of the Mongols, and their respective aspirations reached beyond the area they actually ruled. Thus it is not surprising to find them spying out the other's ambitions. In fact we cannot prove this statement, yet the texts handed down may lead one to assume it. Timur sent several embassies to the Chinese emperor, bringing the greatly desired horses as tribute with them and Zhu Yuanzhang also sent embassies to the ruler of Central Asia and Iran. We may suppose that Timur presented himself as a tributary to the Chinese in order to gather necessary information on the strategic conditions in early Ming China. The first of these embassies arrived in late 1387 and was sent by the 'son-in-law'⁷ Timur — thus state the Chinese texts. These Timurid embassies (some eleven can be counted) continued until

1396, and all of them brought with them relatively high numbers of horses which we will remember were the most sought after tribute item by the Chinese. Why they were brought to a temporary end is not quite clear. Fortunately, however, we can reconstruct the probable development of the relationship between the Timurids and the Ming of those years from a number of sources: first the aforementioned Chinese texts; second, Timurid historiographers who also disclose an amount of important information; and third even Europeans, namely the Castilian Ruy Gonzáles de Clavijo and the Bavarian Johann Schiltberger, who both sojourned in Samarkand at the turn of the century. They did not leave much, but it is all the more valuable information because of this.

A letter, allegedly sent by Timur himself, seemed to have been crucial for the interruption of relations between both empires (Kauz 2005, 64-67). In this letter, which was received in late 1394 at the Chinese court, Timur unconditionally acknowledged the suzerainty of China in most obedient terms. As a result the Chinese government sent an embassy under the leadership of the official Fu An and others, among them the eunuch Liu Wei,⁸ to Samarkand to thank Timur for his submission. Chinese and Timurid texts differ completely in telling the story. According to the first, Fu An refused to kowtow to Timur and was ordered to travel around the Timurid Empire to realize its size. Strangely enough, the Timurid Sharaf ad-din Yazdi gives a much more favorable impression of the reception: Fu An was allowed 'to kiss the carpet' — a high favor — and was graciously dismissed. Whatever happened, the embassy must have been a failure, because out of 1,500 accompanying soldiers only 17 returned in 1409.

Zhu Yuanzhang died in 1398, and his death was followed by years of struggle for the

succession. The victor of these struggles was Zhu Di, son of the first Ming emperor and governor of Beijing. His rule of 22 years (1402-1424) as the Yongle Emperor may be considered one of the most remarkable reigns of Chinese history. Zhu Di pursued an expansionist foreign policy. The movement of the capital from Nanjing to Beijing, close to the Mongols who were still a threatening enemy, can be seen as the symbol of this policy. The most important objectives of this policy were:

- Large-scale campaigns against the Mongols with participation of the emperor;
- Occupation of Vietnam;
- Maritime expeditions to the Western Indian Ocean under the leadership of admiral Zheng He;
- Active foreign policy towards Central Asia.

It is certainly the last objective which is of interest here, but the Central (and Western) Asia policy can only be seen in the context of the overall foreign policy. One example of this is the presence of Timurid envoys travelling overland and Hormuzian envoys travelling overseas to Beijing at the same time in early 1421! Zhu Di had woven a close net connecting the major parts of Asia with China at its center. This is certainly an extraordinary feature in the history of Chinese foreign relations.

Before we turn to the peak of these relations, their rather disastrous beginning must be revealed. Only a short time after his inauguration, Zhu Di sent an embassy 'to Samarkand, Herat and other places to present the emirs there with brocade' (*Ming shilu* 1966: *Taizong shilu*, j. 15, p. 270). Thus goes the official reason; the factual motive, however, was probably to inquire after the remainders of the former Chinese embassies and to resume tributary relations. According to the accounts of the Europeans already mentioned, Clavijo and

Schiltberger, this mission probably had a disastrous outcome. Clavijo tells us that the Chinese should be hanged (Clavijo 1928, 223-225), and we read nothing of the return of these envoys in Chinese texts. Timur wanted to deliver the tribute in person and he started to organize a campaign against China in late 1404. The motives behind his plans remain obscure; his self-exculpating words about leading his army against non-believers should be doubted. His main objective was more likely directed against the Moguls, who possessed the eastern part of the former Ulus Chaghatay; against China the campaign might have been a raid similar to the one he led against India some years before (Kauz 2005, 75-78). Luckily for the Chinese, the campaign came to no avail, because, as we have seen, Timur died in its early stages.

Timur's successors did not continue his aggressive politics, but pursued instead peaceful exchanges with China: Fu An and also Chen Dewen, another Chinese envoy, were allowed to return home with the rest of their respective entourages. The following years witnessed the most intensive exchange between the two empires. This exchange was documented in both Chinese and Timurid sources, which allow us to give a fairly exact picture of the interactions. It was the Chinese Emperor Zhu Di who was the driving force behind them; his probable aims were to propagate his rule and legitimize it by the numerous audiences given to foreign envoys. Possibly a military alliance against the continuing Mongol attacks was also part of his scheme. The Timurids on the other hand were primarily interested in the various Chinese exports such as silks and porcelain, though we know at least one occasion when Shahrokh, the Timurid ruler until 1447, wanted to impress Chinese envoys by ordering the extensive decoration of his capital Herat.

Some letters which were exchanged between the two rulers have survived in Chinese and Timurid sources and have become the object of various translations and research (e.g., Fletcher 1968; Kautz 2005, 93-129). They show that diplomatic misunderstandings were overcome by rather pragmatic responses: in particular the Chinese Emperor did not insist on his alleged superiority — which was of paramount significance for the Chinese political system — and acknowledged the Timurid ruler as (nearly) his equal. An almost modern system and network of diplomatic and political exchanges between Western, Central and Eastern Asia developed for the few decades of the Yongle reign. This regional network was certainly connected with the international network under Ming guidance.

However, further developments show that these interactions depended almost exclusively on the foreign policy of Emperor Zhu Di. After the death of this emperor on his return from a campaign against the Mongols in 1424, the Chinese embassies to the West met with increasing difficulties. It seems likely that they never reached their destinations in the West, although embassies from the West continued to arrive in rather large numbers. Thus, mutual contacts continued, albeit in a rather one-sided manner. One example may be given: the 'Veritable Records' tell of envoys arriving at the Chinese court from Qi'erman (Kerman), Roumi (Rum/Ottoman Empire) and Kuncheng (Kun-City = Qom?) on 14 September 1425. They brought horses and the ubiquitous 'local products' as tribute with them and received silks, brocades and cloth in return (*Ming shilu* 1966: *Xuanzong shilu*, j. 7, p. 184, j. 8, pp. 205, 216). Here we may challenge again the credibility of this embassy: it is possible that Kerman and Qom sent envoys to China because both cities were within the sphere of the Timurid

Empire, but envoys from the Ottoman Empire seem much less likely, since it was rather more orientated towards Europe in those years. However, it is not altogether impossible that Ottoman merchants/envoys travelled through the whole of Western Asia and joined their Timurid colleagues somewhere in Central Asia. We may recall that Schiltberger returned in these same years on a similar route back home to Bavaria.

Chinese texts record embassies from Western and Central Asia until the very end of the dynasty, whereas the number (and success) of Chinese embassies declined rapidly after the death of Zhu Di. We may thus turn to these efforts from the Chinese side before we consider again the West. During the Xuanzong era (1425-35), the foreign policy of Emperor Yongle was not yet completely abandoned: one last maritime expedition was sent to the Western Indian Ocean (1431-33), and three embassies were sent to Central Asia. However, the first succeeded, whereas the latter three in all probability did not. Their orders were all given in the second half of Xuanzong's rule, but they met with difficulties at the Chinese borders where Tatars and Tibetans maltreated the local population and no doubt also foreign missions, though it seems they might have been less severe on the Central Asians than on the Chinese (Kautz 2005, 162-172). It is not clear at exactly which part of the route the Chinese envoys decided to return, because all incidents are badly recorded. These records do not support a definite conclusion — they just allow a most probable assumption that the embassies did not cross the borders of China. The insecurity at the borders and the Chinese military incapability obviously hindered their passage beyond China.

However, the tribes in China's west were not the major menace for China; the attacks of the

Mongols had much greater impact. The Oirats or Western Mongols became the most important source of danger for the Ming in the 1440s, even managing to capture the Chinese emperor Zhu Qizhen in the battle of Tumu in 1449. Nevertheless, the Chinese government was still capable enough to react quickly and installed his half brother on the throne. After their captive lost his political importance, the Mongols released the former emperor, and the Ming faced the awkward situation of housing another possible emperor inside the walls of the capital. A number of military and civil officials finally overthrew the Jingtai Emperor in 1457 and installed the former emperor to take up his reign again under the title 'Heavenly Harmony' (Tianshun).

Zhu Qizhen had obviously learnt his lesson from captivity by the Mongols and considered preventive measures again, possibly even further assaults on the Mongols. Two further intended Ming embassies (1457 and 1463) to the Timurids must probably be regarded as parts of these political schemes, especially because both of them had to be conducted under military guidance. However, the course of these missions shows the almost complete structural military and administrative incompetence which made sending any more envoys to the West out of the question. It had proved to be difficult to obtain even the necessary horses for the undertaking. The envoys and their entourages struggled hard to reach Hami or, in the case of the second mission, did not even arrive at this oasis close to China. Maybe the latter did not even leave the capital (Kautz 2005, 211-219). Thus the last Chinese attempts to exchange embassies with the West came to an end.

This did not mean that the traffic collapsed completely. The Central Asian side had obviously far less difficulty sending envoys and merchants to China. One large

embassy which arrived in early 1453 deserves special mention because the Chinese texts relate that no fewer than 121 towns sent envoys — it seems that the whole Middle East and Central Asia sent their men to China. The reason could have been the inauguration of the aforementioned Jingtai Emperor. Their great number seems to nourish our suspicion that we are dealing with fake embassies just adopting names of foreign places. Fortunately, one imperial Chinese edict written in 1453 in Mongolian and Chinese has survived in Turkish archives. The recipient was a 'small vassal kingdom' named La'er, probably the transcription of Lar in southern Iran, a trading center of medium importance in the Western Indian Ocean region. This document proves that contacts between China and rather small principalities in the Middle East actually existed.

However, the Chinese administration gradually lost control of the various tribute embassies arriving in the capital. The number of envoys increased (sometimes dramatically), but the tribute they brought was lacking both in quality and quantity. Also embassies came more often than they were entitled to do and stayed much longer in China than before. Central Asians obviously lived more comfortably in China than they did back home; this assumption is also confirmed by numerous requests of 'people of Samarkand'⁹ to settle down in China. But it must be acknowledged that far fewer embassies arrived in China from the middle of the 15th century until the end of the dynasty than in the preceding hundred years or so, the ratio being approximately 35 to 75. For the last period the annals of the Ming dynasty made the following comments: 'In the reign of Wan li (1573-1620) the intercourse with Samarkand was still animated, for those foreigners liked to carry on trade with the Chinese people. Besides this, it

was the custom that when they had entered China, the Chinese government took charge of their maintenance' (Bretschneider 1910, Vol. 2, 267).

Thus the history of the interchanges between Western, Central and Eastern Asia under the Ming dynasty can be roughly divided into two major periods: the time until the mid-15th century and the period afterwards. In the time around 1500 the Middle East and Central Asia saw a number of major changes: the Shi'i Safavids came to power in Iran and partially blocked the traffic between the Sunni rulers in the East and in the West of their dominion. The Timurids perished, though they found a successor in Babur who conquered northern India in 1526, and were replaced by the Uzbeks, who, however, could not establish an empire as strong as Timur's. It can generally be said that the political and economic importance of Central Asia declined rapidly after 1500. The discovery of the maritime route to India and China by Vasco da Gama and the following European expansion towards the Indian Ocean did not have much influence over the Silk Road traffic.¹⁰

To conclude, the embassies from Timur to the new dynasty in China received a favorable response, mainly because they brought much desired horses with them. However, when China reciprocated and sent Chinese envoys to Samarkand, these were made much less welcome, probably because of the Chinese attitude to degrade Timur to a mere subordinate of the Ming Emperor. The relations between the Timurids and the Ming developed very well only after Timur's death, and the Ming initiatives proved paramount for the development of intercourse on the Silk Road. The Chinese side was rather more interested in the propaganda of its superiority, whereas the Timurid side favored commercial aspects. China

stopped sending embassies to the west after several failures disclosed its military and administrative incompetence. The Timurids and their successors continued to send embassies, though these were exclusively commercial in character. It is most probable that a number of these embassies did not come from Central Asia at all, but started somewhere near the borders of China and just disguised themselves as coming from places further away. However, it may be confirmed that the traffic towards China carried on almost until the very end of the Ming dynasty, although on a rather lower scale.

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Notes

1. For an English translation of Chen Cheng's account, see Rossabi 1963; for Ghiyas-ad-din, see Thackston 1989, 279-297; for Goës, Yule and Cordier 1916, 198-254, and on-line at <<http://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/texts/goes.html>>.

2. I used Watanabe 1975 to count the number of embassies from Central and Western Asia to China in the period mentioned. The numbers might not always be correct to the last digit, but differences are minor.

3. It is always difficult to apply toponyms to different historical periods. When I speak of Iran in this article, I mean the region whose borders roughly encompass the modern country.

4. According to the hitherto unpublished Chinese glossary 'Zengxu zazi' Tianfang is the country of the 'Kingdom of the Kaaba' (*mamlakat-e ka'beh*).

5. Some of these letters were already published in 1789; see Amiot 1789.

6. For an overview of Chinese relations with Inner Asia beginning under the Ming, see Rossabi 1975.

7. Chinese *fuma*, a translation of the Mongolian word *kürgän*, as Timur called himself. Son-in-law of Chingis Khan is meant, thus legitimating his rule.

8. Eunuchs played a crucial role in diplomatic and tribute relations during the entire Ming dynasty.

9. 'Samarkand' was here also used as a collective term for Central Asia as a whole.

10. On the decline of the overland trade, cf. Rossabi 1990.