

THE TUMU INCIDENT AND THE CHINGGISID LEGACY IN INNER ASIA

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One of the most pivotal military defeats in Chinese history was the Tumu Incident of 1449, during which the Oirad ruler Esen Khan not only decimated the Ming 明 army at Tumu 土木 (50 miles northwest of Beijing 北京), but also captured the Zhengtong 正統 emperor. Indeed, many scholars have claimed that this debacle changed forever the course and nature of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644).

To begin, the loss of life, was staggering: in the hundreds of thousands. So much so that the court felt it imperative to hold a massive Buddhist “hungry ghost” ritual to appease the dead.¹ Whether such rituals helped is unknown. However, as was to be the case with the Civil War in America and the Taiping Rebellion in China, such wartime demographic disasters had profound social consequences (Gilpin Faust 2008; Meyer-Fong 2013). Chu Hung-lam (1989, p. 9), for example, has argued that the psychological and cultural impact of this defeat changed forever the Ming intellectual world. Timothy Brook (2014, p. 274), moreover, has recently pointed out that the Tumu Incident also played a fundamental role in the subsequent Ming turn inwards. Thus, rather than continuing with their global adventures – as well evidenced in the voyages of Zheng He 鄭和 – the Ming dynasty instead famously put an end to such exploits at precisely the same time as the Europeans were venturing forth. So in pondering the age-old question about the “rise of the West,” we need to recognize that the Tumu Incident played no small part.

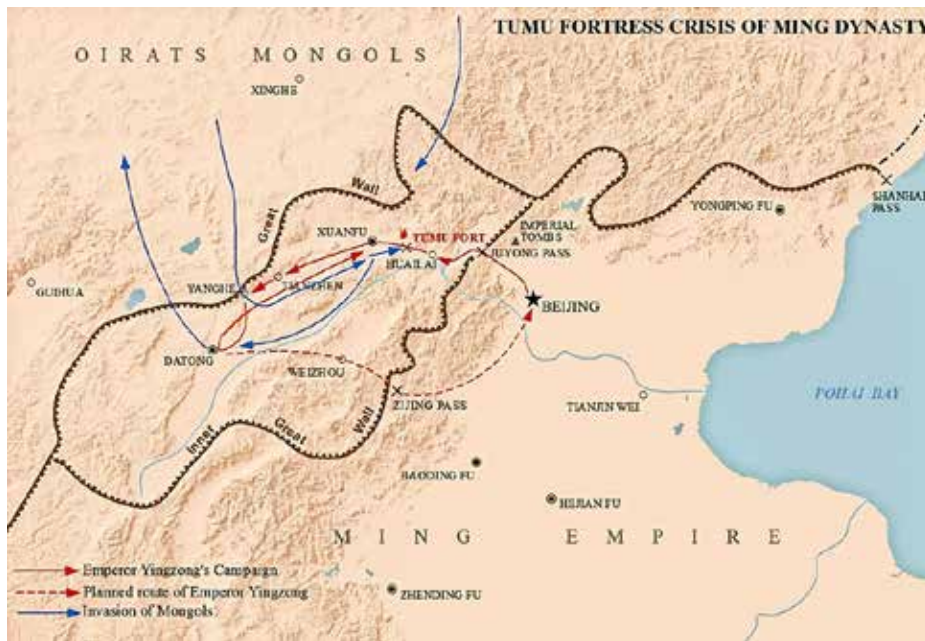
The point of this article, however, is not to explore the global dimensions of the Tumu Incident. Its aim is far more limited in scope. Rather, since the bulk of scholarship on the Tumu Incident is based on Chinese sources, this article seeks to explore how the other major players in this event – the Oirads and the Mongols – came to understand this particular episode in their own historical traditions. By so doing it therefore hopes to address one of the long lingering questions about the Tumu Incident, namely, why did the Oirads not take more advantage of this stunning victory (Mote 1974, pp. 265–72)? Or, in other words, why did Esen Khan not immediately invade Beijing, crush the Ming, and thereby recreate the Mongol empire?

The Incident

When the Xuande 宣德 emperor died suddenly after an illness at the young age of thirty-six in 1435 his eldest son Zhu Qizhen 朱祁鎮 was put on the imperial throne. Yet, his being only eight years old, there quickly developed a regency consisting of the empress dowager, three grand secretaries, and three eunuchs to help him rule. In short order, however, this regency was largely in the hands of the emperor’s tutor and leading court eunuch Wang Zhen 王振 (?–1449). Wang, building on his close relationship with the young emperor and deft political maneuvering, quickly came to be the most powerful person in the imperial court. As such he came to be the leading voice advocating for the emperor to go into the field against the northern threat, which, of course, culminated in the debacle at Tumu.

Why he did so is unclear. Some have suggested it was simply to further enhance his own power. Others have suggested that Wang Zhen actually thought that the Ming army could defeat the Oirads, since they had recently had victories in the southwest and suppressed a rebellion in Fujian 福建. Moreover, there was the historical precedent of the Yongle 永樂 emperor (r. 1402–1424), who had famously led five campaigns into the steppe against the Mongols. Whatever his assumptions may have been, the fact is that his decision was based on the reality of an Oirad incursion on the northern border in the summer of 1449. The reason for that incursion is slightly unclear. Chinese sources claim it was on account of the Oirad ruler’s being denied both trade relations with the Ming, and an imperial daughter for his son in marriage. In any event, Esen launched a three-pronged invasion: one group attacked Liaodong 遼東 in the east, another attacked the military garrison of Xuanfu (a hundred miles northwest of Beijing), and Esen himself attacked Datong 大同 a little further to the west.

On account of there not being a “Great Wall” at this time – only garrisons along the frontier – this invasion was a direct assault on the front and largely last line of defense of the Ming’s northern border (Waldron 1990). The court quickly recognized the existential threat that this invasion posed. Thus in short order they amassed an army of half a million men, which,



Map source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f1/Tumu_Crisis.jpg

Fig. 1. Map of the Tumu campaign.

on the insistence of Wang Zhen, was led by the twenty-two year old Zhengtong emperor. The idea was to march northwest, first to Xuanfu, then Datong, whereupon, ideally having defeated Esen and his forces, the emperor and his army would triumphantly return by a southern route through Shanxi 山西 province.

It did not go as planned [Fig. 1]. Leaving the capital on 4 August, the army was immediately bogged down by heavy rain, which resulted in the generals recommending the army to halt at Juyong Pass 居庸關, and then later at Xuanfu. Wang Zhen, however, dismissed both of these suggestions and the army moved north in the worsening conditions. Thus by the 12th the situation was so tense that some courtiers recommended assassinating Wang, bringing the emperor back to Beijing, and letting the army go to Datong under the command of Chinese generals. Of course, this did not happen either. Rather, as the army marched northwest they passed numerous battlefields that revealed the true extent of the horrific loss of life that Esen had caused. Thus upon reaching Datong, they realized that going into the steppe after Esen was a lost cause and decided instead to return the way they had come.

By 27 August the totally disordered army reached Hsüan-fu. On 30 August the Mongols attacked the rear guard east of Hsüan-fu and wiped it out. A powerful new rear guard of cavalry was sent to guard the imperial entourage. Its commander, an elderly and incompetent general, Chu Yung, led it straight into a Mongol ambush at Yao-erh-ling: this force too was annihilated. The Mongols were now only 15 miles behind the main army. On 31 August the army camped at T'u-mu post station. The walled county town of Huai-lai was only eight miles farther

on, within easy reach, and the officials urged the emperor to take refuge in the city. But Wang Chen again refused, since this would have meant abandoning his own huge baggage train, and overruled the ministers. [Twitchett and Grimm 1988: p. 324]

Instead he ordered the army to camp at Tumu, where there was no water for either the troops or the horses. Esen therefore sent a battalion to block their access to a river in the south and thereby gradually surrounded the bedraggled Chinese army.

On the morning of 1 September the Oirads prevented the army from breaking camp and offered to negotiate. Wang Zhen dismissed these overtures and ordered the army to move towards the river, whereupon the Oirads attacked, killing half of the original force, as well as all the leading generals. Wang Zhen was apparently killed by his own officers, and, of course, the emperor was captured. And on 3 September he was sent to Esen's headquarters near Xuanfu.

Thus ended Wang Chen's, and the emperor's, dream of glory. The whole expedition had been unnecessary, ill-conceived, and ill-prepared, and Wang Chen's irresponsible decisions had led it into total disaster. Esen for his part was quite unprepared either for the scale of his victory (according to some sources the battle of T'u-mu was won by an advance guard of only 20,000 Mongol cavalry) or for the quite fortuitous capture of the emperor. Peking now lay before him, open and undefended. What he might have done had he pressed home his advantage is incalculable. As it was, he decided to keep the emperor hostage as a bargaining counter and to turn back with all the booty his men could carry to regroup his own forces. [Twitchett and Grimm 1988, p. 325].

Esen Khan, the Oirads, and the Mongols

To begin to understand Esen Khan's decision to hold the emperor, and to delay attacking Beijing, it is necessary to put these events into the broader historical context of fifteenth-century eastern Eurasia. To that end we can start with the fall of the Mongol Yuan 元 dynasty, which was brought about by the leadership

of Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 (1328–1398). He led a collection of rebels on a northward march to expel the Mongols from China and, victorious, on 10 September 1368 was declared emperor of the new Ming dynasty.

For their part, the Mongols, led by the last Yuan emperor Toghhan Temür, fled north. Much to their surprise, however, the old Mongol capital of Qaraqorum was already occupied. Indeed, the entire Mongolian plateau, their ancestral “homeland,” had been taken over by the Oirad. Believing it was not possible for his recently defeated army to wrest control away from the Oirad, Toghhan Temür and the Mongols found themselves in limbo. Eventually they went south and established themselves in the no-man’s land between China’s northern border and the Gobi Desert, which nowadays is the Inner Mongolian province of the People’s Republic of China (Elverskog 2006). Two years after arriving as a refugee in this environmentally and politically marginal buffer zone Toghhan Temür died of dysentery.

While his ignominious death symbolizes well the waning fortunes of the Mongols in the post-Yuan period, such was not the view from China.² Instead the Ming court continued to see the Mongols as a mortal threat to their very existence and they launched several campaigns against them. Much to the anger and consternation of the Ming court, the Mongols continued to elude defeat.³ Nevertheless, one unintended consequence of the continuing Mongol-Ming struggle was that it enabled the Oirad to become stronger. As noted above, the Oirad had taken over the Mongolian plateau during the later Yuan dynasty, though how this happened – as well as who the Oirad were, and where they came from – is somewhat obscure. Nevertheless, by the fourteenth century the term Oirad was an overarching designation for four groups – the Oirad, Naiman, Kereid, and Barghud – that had taken control over the plateau as the Mongols had become more and more embroiled in the affairs of China during the Yuan dynasty (Okada 1987; Miyawaki 1997).

Yet even though the Oirad controlled the “heartland” they were not a major power in the immediate post-Yuan period [Fig. 2]. In the west there was the powerful Moghul ruler Tughluq Temür Khan and in the south were the Mongols, weakened but still a powerful force. The power of both the Mongols and the Moghuls rested not only on their military might, but also in their economic position. In particular, they controlled the east-west trade,

and most importantly, they controlled the trade in Central Asian horses, which were essential for both the Ming military and its larger economy. Without them the Ming would quite literally grind to a halt, since Chinese soil lacks selenium, a vital mineral for the raising of strong horses (Becker 2008, p. 18), and the immensity of this trade is reflected in the fact that annually the Ming bought nearly two million horses from the Mongols (Serruys 1975). Thus, even though the post-Yuan Mongols may have been battered and defeated, they still had the Ming over a barrel.

For the Ming court this situation was clearly intolerable, since in their view China’s national security was in the fickle hands of their barbarian enemies. This vital issue therefore had to be dealt with, and the initial option was invasion and conquest. But every campaign of both Zhu Yuanzhang and the Yongle emperor were largely failures. The Mongols simply retreated into the steppe, and, once the supply lines were overextended, the stranded Ming army was decimated. In response to these failures the Ming court adopted a two-pronged strategy. The first was to find another source of horses, which they did by re-establishing the tea-for-horse trading network with Tibet (Sperling 1988). And although this trade was to expand enormously – one single transaction in 1435, for example, involved 1,097,000 pounds of tea for 13,000 horses (Elverskog 2003, pp. 148–49) – the Ming court still wanted to keep alive their trade with the Mongols and Moghuls. To this end, they therefore decided to normalize trade relations, but on their own terms. Their plan was thus to funnel all trade with the west through the small independent city-state of Hami 哈密, which in 1406 had been brought into the Ming system of frontier garrisons (Rossabi 1997).

The Mongol khan Gülich (1402–1408), however, did not agree with these terms and he poisoned Engke Temür, the prince of Hami, who had initially made



Fig. 2. Post-Mongol Eurasia.

the deal with the Chinese. At this turn of events the Ming court was bewildered, but they still hoped to salvage the trade negotiations. Yet when their envoys were executed at the command of the new Mongol ruler Punyashri, the Ming court finally decided to circumvent the Mongols entirely. They therefore made contact with the Mongols' archrival, the Oirad. The Ming then not only bestowed titles and privileges upon the Oirad ruler, but they also opened up direct trade relations. To repay the favor, the Oirad ruler Mahmud (d. 1416) launched an assault on the Mongols in 1412. After killing Punyashri, Mahmud put his own son Delbeg (r. 1412–1414) on the Mongol throne.

But these events were not solely an internal Oirad-Mongol affair. Rather, the central player in these unfolding events was the Ming court, which had approached the Oirad in order to undermine the recalcitrant Mongols for what were, in Chinese eyes, unfair trading practices. Their hope was that the Oirad would be more willing to do business, as indeed they were. The Ming therefore cut their relations with the Mongols and established direct economic ties with the Oirad. The immediate consequence of this was that any power the Mongols had over the Ming simply evaporated, both their wealth and power rapidly collapsed, and in their place arose the Oirad.

The growing power of the Oirad, however, impacted not only the fortunes of the Mongols. It also came to impinge upon the Moghuls. For example, Uways Khan fought the Oirad twenty-one times and lost every battle but one. He was even taken hostage three times, and to insure his release he had to give the Oirad ruler his sister as a wife (Dughlat 1996, pp. 35–36, 48). And the situation among the Moghuls only grew worse after the death of Uways Khan in 1429. Part of the difficulties that ensued certainly had to do with the succession struggle that erupted between his two sons, Yunus and Esen Buqa, but at the root of the crisis was the collapsing Moghul economy.

In 1424 the Ming emperor had abolished the horse trade with Central Asia (Fletcher 1968, pp. 216–18). Yet even so, such trade continued surreptitiously through the city of Hami (Watanabe 1975). This lifeline of the Moghul economy was cut when the Oirad ruler Toghan (d. 1440) married into the Hami ruling family and took control over this last entrepôt of Moghul trade with China. The final blow to Moghul trade, however, came when Toghan's son and successor Esen moved the horse trade away from Hami completely and established it at Datong near Beijing. It was precisely this new trade arrangement that the Ming, citing cost overruns, had stopped, a move that played a role in Esen's campaign of 1449 and the subsequent Tumu Incident (Farquhar 1957).

Two things should be clear from the above historical synopsis. The first is that the most important event in Inner Asia during the early Ming period was the on-going "civil war" between the Mongols and Oirad. In particular, the essential question was which one of these groups would be the dominant power. Intimately tied into this feud was not only the issue of who was the legitimate heir to the Chinggisid legacy, but also – more mundanely – who would control the trade with China. For both the Mongols and Oirad, this generally meant the normalization of trade relations. In particular, they wanted markets to be opened along the Sino-Mongol border where goods could routinely be bought and sold.

However, such a free market system was not only potentially beyond the ever hyper-vigilant control of the Chinese state, but it was also antithetical to the traditional Chinese tribute system, whereby trade with foreign countries was never simply an economic transaction but instead an elaborate piece of the imperial ideology keeping alive the illusion of China as the center of the universe. All trade was therefore imagined as being tribute presented to the Chinese emperor by subjects from afar, and the Chinese goods sold in return were simply the magnanimous gift of the Chinese sovereign. Since the Chinese market was so valuable, most foreign traders through history had been willing to put up with this charade. When the European imperial powers arrived, however, they were not willing to play the game and problems invariably ensued (Hevia 1995). In many ways it was the same with the Mongols. They wanted open markets, but more often than not the Chinese refused. They wanted to control the trade and thereby limited Mongol "tribute" missions to the imperial capital to one every few years. As a result, at certain times both the Mongols and Oirads launched raids into Ming territory in order to secure what they could not obtain through trade. It was in this context, whereby the Ming had once again refused to trade with Esen, that the 1449 campaign was launched.

The Chinggisid Legacy in Post-Mongol Eurasia

The full reasons why Esen launched this particular campaign, much less why he acted as he did once he won it so decisively, are hard to know based on the available evidence. Indeed, we have no Oirad sources about this event. Moreover, the sources we do have about it were only written down two hundred years after the event from the Mongol perspective. In other words, all we have to make sense of this pivotal moment in Eurasian history – aside from Chinese sources – are the late "legendary" recollections of the Oirads' main enemies, the Mongols. What we have are the texts conventionally known as the "Mongol chron-

icles": works written around the middle of the seventeenth century in the wake of the Manchu conquest and the founding of the Qing 清 dynasty (1644–1912).⁴

To many, the historical value of these sources, especially in reconstructing the "Oirad view" of the Tumu Incident, may therefore seem quite dubious.⁵ Indeed, I readily concede that working with these sources to such an end presents many problems. At the same time, however, I also believe that the material as it has come down to us does still offer us some insights into the realities on the ground. To that end, it is important first to recognize that the "Tumu story" as found in the chronicles is embedded in a much larger narrative frame explaining the history of the Mongol-Oirad wars which were eventually won by the Mongols. In fact, shortly after the Tumu Incident and the death of Esen in 1455, the Mongols gained the upper hand.

How the Mongols were actually able to rally themselves at this particular moment is little understood. One factor in their favor was the environment. Chinese sources record that on account of poor climatic conditions, north China suffered severe famine during the 1450s and '60s (Robinson 1999, p. 95). The same conditions must clearly have affected both the Mongols and the Oirad. Yet since the Oirad were on the Mongolian plateau, which has far greater weather extremes than "Inner Mongolia," it is very likely that they were far worse off during these decades than were the Mongols. Moreover, being closer to China, the Mongols not only could trade with the Chinese, but if need be could also raid over the border.

A further factor that facilitated the rise of the Mongols, or least the weakening of the Oirad, was the changing situation among the Moghuls. During the Oirads' rise to prominence the Moghuls had been in disarray as a result of the succession struggle between the sons of Uways Khan and the weakening economy. However, when his son Yunus eventually became khan in 1468, many of these problems evaporated. One factor that facilitated this turnaround was Yunus Khan's alliance with the charismatic Sufi leader Khoja Ahrar (d. 1490), since it not only put an end to earlier religious squabbles (Paul 1991a), but on account of Khoja Ahrar's status, the expansion of Naqshbandiyya Sufism among the Moghuls helped bridge alliances with other Central Asian Muslim leaders (Alam 2009). In fact, because Khoja Ahrar was so respected, most Central Asian rulers came to have one of his religious representatives at their courts, and through this Sufi network there actually developed a dialogue among all of these fractious groups (Paul 1991b). Even the long alienated Timurid and Moghul rulers came into contact once again on account of Khoja Ahrar's dealings. The two even subsequently developed political and trade relations. Yet while this was good for

the position of the Naqshbandiyya in Central Asia and also improved the economic situation among the Moghuls, it was disastrous for the Oirad, since it left them isolated between the Muslims in the west and the Ming in the east. The final blow was still to come.

In 1500 the Timurid dynasty was conquered and its territories divided into two. The Uzbeks, who traced their origins back to the Mongol Golden Horde, took over Central Asia; and the Safavids, a local Persian dynasty, took over Persia and Iraq. One consequence of this event was the disruption of the political, economic, and religious alliances between the Timurids and Moghuls that had recently developed on account of the Naqshbandiyya. As a result, all of these relations had to be renegotiated with the Safavids and Uzbeks. However, such a possibility was made difficult when the Safavids declared Twelver Shi'ism as their state religion. Their decision to make a radical break with Turko-Mongol Sunni rule and mark their independence by becoming Shi'a did not endear them to either the Uzbeks or the Moghuls, much less the Naqshbandiyya. Nor was the situation ameliorated by the Safavids' invasion of Central Asia. Moreover, as these political tensions mounted, whatever earlier economic networks had tied these regions together started to fray as well. This set in motion a downward spiral, since, as east-west trade diminished in the sixteenth century, the deteriorating financial crisis only added fuel to a worsening religiopolitical situation (Rossabi 1990).

Even more fuel was added to the fire by the Naqshbandiyya. They had cut their teeth and risen to power in Central Asian politics within the rhetoric of shari'aism, namely, "a pre-eminent emphasis on the strict observance of Islamic law" (Fletcher 1995, p. 5). The Safavid conversion to Shi'a Islam thus not only infuriated them, but also caused them to redouble their efforts as agents of both religious and political reform. Yet since the Safavids now acted as a buffer to the west, the Naqshbandiyya were forced to push further into the east. One of Khoja Ahrar's disciples, Khoja Taj ad-Din (d. ca. 1533), for example, carried the Naqshbandiyya message all the way to China's Gansu province (Fletcher 1995, pp. 6-7). The Naqshbandiyya were not the only ones who were forced to move their operations to the east. With their political and economic options stymied in the west on account of the Safavids and Uzbeks, the Moghul khans also began pushing east. Mansur Khan (1485–1545), who was ruling the eastern half of the Moghul Ulus, attacked China's northwestern frontier in the hope of accessing the riches of the Ming dynasty.

Therefore, the final collapse of the Oirad needs to be situated within this context of Sufi revivalism, economic contraction, and the attendant Moghul push

eastward. The rise of the Mongols also must be understood in relation to these events, even though, as noted above, how that happened in the mid-fifteenth century is clouded in mystery (Elverskog 2003, pp. 48–53). It is commonly held that after Molon Khan’s death in 1466, the Mongol throne was empty for a decade until Mandagul became khan and reigned briefly in the late 1470s. Upon his death, Bayan Möngke became khan, and upon his death in 1484 his seven-year old son was married to Mandagul Khan’s widow, which enabled him (of rather suspect Chinggisid lineage) to be recognized as the rightful ruler of the Mongols. Yet once the fortunes of the Mongols began to turn under this young ruler’s direction — soon to be entitled as Dayan Khan — he came to be seen as truly upholding the Chinggisid legacy (Elverskog 2004).

Dayan Khan’s meteoric rise to power began with his consolidation of the Mongols living in the eastern area of “Inner Mongolia” and his re-organization of them into the Three Eastern Tümen (Chakhar, Khalkha, and Uriyangkhan). Next came his greatest military achievement, the conquest of the Mongols of Ordos, who had taken advantage of the Tumu Incident to occupy the area within the great bend of the Yellow River (Hambis 1970). Having thus only recently moved into and taken over this territory, the Ordos Mongols did not initially want to ally themselves with Dayan Khan. Instead they violently resisted Dayan Khan’s project of unification (Okada 1989). Ultimately, however, Dayan was victorious, and the Ordos Mongols were then organized into the Three Western Tümen (Ordos, Tümed, and Yüngshiyebü). On account of this organizational reformulation of the Mongols into the Six Tümen under the authority of the Chinggisid ruler Dayan Khan, they were able to reassert their power against the Oirad. While military prowess, marriage alliances, and shrewd politics certainly held this new sociopolitical structure together, it was also ideologically reinforced through the concept of a return to proper Chinggisid rule and a reaffirmation of the Mongol legacy in opposition to the Oirad “usurpation.”

Indeed, if we are to understand the “Tumu story” as found in the Mongol chronicles — and what it may tell us about Esen’s actions — we need to put the Chinggisid legacy front and center. For the Chinggisid model was the defining feature of political legitimacy in post-Mongol Eurasia from Anatolia to China. While the importance of the Chinggisid legacy in the Muslim world is now well known, as the work of David Robinson (2013) is now making clear, it was also crucial for the legitimacy of the Ming dynasty. Moreover, as Jonathan Brack reveals in his study of the correspondence between the Yongle emperor and the Timurid ruler Shahrukh (r. 1405–1447), it is precisely on account of

this shared Chinggisid legacy that these post-Mongol states understood themselves as being equal:

The Ming Emperor’s letter and Shāhrukh’s response letters represent two distinct, albeit similar trajectories for the engagement with the Chinggisid sacral authority after the dissolution of the Mongol states in Iran and China. Under the Ming, the Chinggisid claim to divine designation was subsumed into the parallel Chinese ideological structure of the Heavenly Mandate, allowing the Ming to claim their inheritance of Chinggisid universal rule in Chinese terms. In the Islamic world, the Mongols’ theology of auspicious kingship was translated into Iranian and Islamic concepts, subsequently giving rise to a new imperial discourse of universal and sacral Muslim kingship. Shāhrukh’s Persian letter, indeed, ends with his rejection of the Ming emperor’s claim to Timur’s earlier submission to the Yuan. Instead, it positions Shāhrukh on an equal footing with the Ming emperor stating that the relationship between Yunglo’s father and Timur was that of “love and friendship,” and that, Shāhrukh and Yunglo should both strive to emulate their example. Shāhrukh, in other words, argues that the Timurids and the Ming, two universal empires at the opposing ends of post-Mongol Eurasia, have each an equal standing in their political succession to the Chinggisids. [Brack forthcoming]

What we need to recognize is that it was the same with Esen and the Zhengtong emperor. They were equals. They were two rulers legitimately ruling over their respective realms in accord with Chinggisid mandates. Thus for Esen, in the wake of the Tumu Incident, the problem or aim was not to conquer the Ming — much less kill a fellow legitimate ruler — but rather to secure his own power against his arch-rival: the Mongols.

Remembering Tumu

The story of Tumu is found in the three main chronicles of the seventeenth century: Sagang Sechen’s *Precious Summary*, Lubsangdanjin’s *Golden Summary*, and the anonymous *Golden Summary*. The longest and most elaborate version of the story is found in the work of Sagang Sechen,⁶ and it differs slightly in the details from the parallel versions found in both the *Golden Summary*.⁷ Regardless, all three follow a basic structure:

1. It is revealed in a dream that Esen will capture the Ming emperor. In Sagang Sechen’s version, it is Esen himself who has the dream, while in the other two, Esen Samai has it.⁸
2. Esen then crushes the Chinese and captures the Ming emperor. In the *Golden Summary* version, the

emperor is identified because he cannot be killed by a sword, or drowning, or in any other way.⁹

3. Esen tells his followers not to tell anyone about the capture of the emperor until he returns home. Yet, upon returning home Esen greets his mother, who already knows that he has captured the emperor. Outraged Esen asks how she knows, and when she reveals the name of the “squealer,” he is executed.¹⁰

4. Esen then sends off the Ming emperor to someone else who is to take care of him.¹¹

5. This individual puts him to work, and gives him a Mongol wife. And during this “captivity” the Mongols see that the emperor is no ordinary man, most notably his body emits light rays.¹²

6. Recognizing his sanctity, the Mongols return the emperor to the Chinese.¹³

7. The descendants of the child the emperor had with his Mongol wife are identified as the nobility of the Asud Mongols.¹⁴

8. On account of this fiasco of mishandling a Chinggisid, Esen’s power is thereby weakened, and while retreating he is then killed by the son of the man who had made public the fact that he had captured the Ming emperor.¹⁵

Whether any of this actually happened is certainly open to question. However, the story as it is told does nevertheless give some insight into why Esen acted as he did.

In particular, it is crucial to recognize that both the Oirad and Mongols saw the Ming emperor as being special. Thus not only could he not be killed, but his body also emitted light, an image that clearly resonates with the famous story of the Borjigins’ progenitor being divinely born through an immaculate beam of light conception. Yet, in fact the Mongols did not need such a literary allusion to connect the Ming ruler with the Chinggisid legacy. For them, the Yongle emperor was a Mongol of royal blood, and thus by extension so too was his grandson the Zhengtong emperor (Serruys 1972; Chan 1992). It is therefore perhaps not surprising that his capture was not something to promote and use as leverage, but rather something that was to be kept secret. Moreover, as the Tumu story makes clear, this capture was not the highpoint of Esen’s career, but ultimately his undoing.

Magical Realism vs. Realpolitik

In the wake of the Tumu disaster the Ming court regrouped in Beijing. Some have called it Beijing’s “finest hour” (Twitchett and Grimm 1988, p. 328). For example, in order to weaken Esen’s possibility of demanding a ransom for the Zhengtong emperor, they

had him deposed and put his brother on the throne, who reigned as the Jingtai emperor (景泰, r. 1449–1457). Moreover, under the leadership of Yu Qian 于謙 the Ming armies were quickly reorganized and the defense of Beijing made priority number one. So much so that when Esen did eventually march towards Beijing a month later he was quickly repelled and thereby returned to the steppe without ever really leveraging the monumental advantage he had gained at Tumu. Indeed, it is precisely this question that has vexed numerous scholars: why did he not take advantage of it?

On a certain level I think the answer can be found in the Tumu story, in particular, in the way it represents the Zhengtong emperor, namely, who he was, and what he represented: a legitimate Chinggisid ruler of a neighboring state. Significantly, when Esen did actually “attack” Beijing in late October 1449, what he demanded was not the submission of the Ming to Oirad power, but that Zhengtong be restored to the throne. The Chinese, of course, rebuffed him (apparently on the recommendation of Zhengtong himself). However, this fact reveals the core narrative truth of the Tumu story: Zhengtong was “magical,” or sacred, on account of his being a Chinggisid by blood.

Of course, in our contemporary demythologized world – and especially in post-nobility America – the power of blood is often under-estimated. Rather, within the framework of modern realpolitik such a notion seems patently absurd. For the Oirad and the Mongols the legacy of Chinggis Khan mattered profoundly, since, as we have seen, for them the most pressing issue was precisely who among them rightfully held the Chinggisid mantle. That was the very point of the civil war: who were the rightful heirs of Chinggis? The Oirad or the Mongols?

In China, on the other hand, the situation was already settled: the rightful rulers in the Chinggisid legacy were the Zhu family. Thus for Esen the only proper course of action was to return Zhu Qizhen, the Zhengtong emperor, to the throne. It was not – as so many modern scholars assume – to leverage his capture in order to reconquer China. Rather, Esen’s task was to reclaim the same authority as the Zhus held in China within his own designated territory – or in Mongol terms, their *ulus* – which was the area north of the “Great Wall.”¹⁶ Indeed, as seen in the correspondence between Shahrukh and the Yongle emperor, these rulers all saw themselves as legitimate heirs of Chinggis Khan ruling their own respective states. Thus the aim was less conquering each other, than maintaining the “Westphalian” status quo between these distinct and legitimately recognized territorial states (Lhamsuren 2010).¹⁷

In the case of the Oirads, however, both their Ching-

gisid legitimacy and their territorial space – the ulus – was questioned by the Mongols. During Esen’s reign this questioning became muted on account of both his undeniable power and Mongol weakness. Nothing confirmed this turn of events more than Esen’s remarkable military victory at Tumu. Moreover, his legitimacy was further bolstered by his unanimous treatment of his fellow Chinggisid ruler, the Zhengtong emperor. Thus, for Esen, his ultimate goal was not to conquer the Ming, for doing so would have been a gross violation of the accepted political order of post-Mongol Eurasia. Rather, his task was to confirm his Chinggisid bona fides and thereby rule the Mongol-Oirad ulus, which he did precisely by trying to return the Zhengtong emperor to his rightful ulus and throne.

Of course, the Ming did not go along with Esen’s plan, which was geared not towards the Chinese but towards the Mongols and Oirads. Having returned the Zhengtong emperor and thereby further secured his power, Esen eventually proclaimed himself Khan in 1453, only to pass away two years later. So too would the fortunes of the Oirad pass, when within the shifting economic and political winds of fifteenth-century Inner Asia, the Mongols ultimately came out on top. In fact, it was with Ming support that Mongols came again to not only uphold the Chinggisid legacy, but also to rule the Mongol-Oirad ulus.

Thus to ask why Esen did not exploit his victory at Tumu is in fact to pose entirely the wrong question. It completely misses the balance of power forged across post-Mongol Eurasia on account of the Chinggisid legacy and the ulus model of rule. Only when we understand that reality do the Tumu story and so too the actions of Esen himself make sense. He was being a good ruler by returning a fellow Chinggisid to his rightful throne.

About the author

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Notes

1. This ritual also entailed commissioning a monumental set of 139 mural paintings at Baoning Monastery in Shanxi to appease the troubled souls lost in the battle (Haufler 2014, p. 248).

2. For the court debates and different Ming views on the Mongols see Serruys 1959, Jagchid and Symons 1989, and Johnston 1995.

3. The Ming hatred of the Mongols would reach its most pathological extreme during the later reign of the Jiajing emperor (嘉靖, r. 1522–1566), who mandated that the Chinese characters for "barbarians" (i.e. Mongols) should be written in the smallest possible characters in all official records (Geiss 1988, p. 441).

4. The earliest Mongol sources, the undated *Golden Summary of Chinggis Khan* (Liu Rogers 2009) and the 1607 *Jewel Translucent Sutra*, both completely ignore the Tumu Incident. In fact, the *Jewel Translucent Sutra* summarizes the two hundred year history from the fall of the Yuan to the rise of Dayan Khan – and thus the entire Oirat-Mongol civil war – in one four-line verse:

From that time on there were several generations of Khans.

There was suffering [because] the state of this world and the Buddha's religion were not stable.

They did not resolutely distinguish between Khans and commoners nor good and evil.

At that the Borjigen Golden Clan deteriorated. [Elverskog 2003, p. 70]

5. See, for example, the comments of Charles R. Bawden in his translation of one of these chronicles, the anonymous *Golden Summary* (*Altan tobči*, or AT): "The actual historical reliability of AT is small... It is in my opinion difficult to treat the accounts of such events as these two as anything more than legends having a certain historical basis, and I do not propose to discuss the historical implications" (1955, p. 172, n. 1).

6. For a full translation see Elverskog 2017.

7. The parallel passages in Lubsangdanjin's version can be found in Vietze and Lubsang 1992, pp. 105–06.

8. While he was making his expedition to the Jürclid, Esen Samai of the Yüngsiyebü dreamed that he had taken prisoner the Qagan of the Great Ming. He reported this to Esen Tayisi. Esen Tayisi said: 'I should like you to take him. If you take him, I will give him to you.' [Bawden 1955, p. 172]

9. While he was returning from taking over the rule of the Jürclid, Jingtai Qagan was campaigning with his troops against the Mongols. On the way they met each other. The Chinese dug an enclosing trench, but did not let themselves be attacked. Esen Tayisi pretended to go back, and sent spies in the rear. The Chinese came out from their ditch. Esen Tayisi came and defeated the army of the Chinese. Three hundred men did not move. He cut them to pieces, but took alive one man, and asked him: 'Why did you not move?' That man said: 'We are the officers of the Qagan of the Great Ming. How should we move, abandoning our Qagan?' He asked: 'Where is your Qagan?' That man pointed out to him that the Qagan was on the ground. They took the Qagan out of the hole, and went to cut him down. His body was not wounded, and sword broke in pieces and fell. When they bound him and threw him into the water, he did not sink, but floated. They could not kill him. [Bawden 1955, p. 172]

10. When Esen Tayisi was on his way back, he gave orders saying: 'Do not say that I have taken this prisoner, Jingtai Qagan of the Great Ming. I will kill whoever tells it.' After Esen Tayisi had come back to his house, his Mother asked, 'What of your booty?' He said: 'I have no great booty. We are in good health.' She said: 'Why do you make a mystery? I have heard that you have seized great booty, and taken Jingtai Qagan of the Great Ming.' He said: 'Who said those words?' His mother said to her son Esen: 'Sorson of the Yüngsiyebü of the Mongols said them.' Saying: 'I said, "Do not tell this;" why did you tell it?' he killed Sorson and separating his chest from his behind, he left him hanging on a crooked tree. [Bawden 1955, p. 173]

11. According to the signs of his dream, he gave Jingtai Qagan to Esen Samai. [Bawden 1955, p. 173]

12. He [Buqun] gave the woman called Mulu Yagatu to that Jingtai Qagan; giving him the name Muqur Sigüse

he gave him to Esen Samai of the Yüngsiyebü, He took him in his service. Although amongst that people there was no cattle-plague, starvation, sickness or pestilence, the man who employed Jingtai Qagan was not content. After he had fallen asleep a light used to come out from his body. [Bawden 1955, p.173-74]

13. He [Jingtai] wrote a note, saying: 'I am here,' and hiding the note in the hairs of a sheepskin which was for sale, he sent it off. The Chinese saw this note and took it. They said: 'It is said that you are employing the Qagan. This is not fitting for you. Give him to us.' The Six Thousand Üciyed of the south side of the mountains, brought back (the Chinese emperor) and gave him back and received Taitu. [Bawden 1955, p. 174]
14. It is said that the Mongols took and kept behind the son of Jingtai Qagan, born of the woman called Mulu Yagatu whom he had married in the land of the Mongols. His descendants are the Talbi Tabunang of the Asud. [Bawden 1955, 174]

15. After that, Esen Tayisi, going alone and exhausted, came to the house of the wife of Sorson. He drank some koumiss, and when he was about to go out, the wife of Sorson saw him and said: 'The gait of this man is like the walking of the evil Esen. He is going clip-clop.' At his Mother's words, her son said: 'What is that man acting like that for?' His Mother said: 'It is said that the peace of Esen Tayisi has been destroyed by himself. This is really he. You should have taken a good look at him.' After that Buqun, the son of Sorson came again, and recognized Esen and took him and killed him. [Bawden 1955, p. 173]

16. On the Mongol theory of *ulus* and how it shaped post-Mongol Eurasian political history see Elverskog 2003, pp. 7-43, and 2006, pp. 40-62.

17. See also Timothy Brook's discussion (2016) on how the *ulus* model can expand scholarly approaches to the study of empire.