MING CHINA AND TURFAN, 1406–1517

Turfan was one of the fabled oases on the old silk roads from China to the West. The Chinese sources and the excavations of the German explorers Albert Grünwedel and Albert von Le Coq have familiarized scholars of Central Asia with the early history of the oasis. The post-Mongol era, particularly the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, has, however, been relatively neglected. One explanation for this is that the meager Chinese and Persian sources on Turfan during that period appear to contradict each other. In writing biographies of several Turfanese leaders for the Ming Biographical History Project and in writing a section on “Trade Routes in Inner Asia” for the forthcoming Cambridge History of Inner Asia, I have attempted to explain some of these differences. I will in the course of this essay also mention some of the discrepancies that I have been unable to explain.

I. Background to Ming Relations with Turfan

Turfan is situated in the southern foothills of the T’ien-shan north of the Taklamakan desert. It lies in one of the world’s great depressions, and summer temperatures are extremely high. As Eleanor Lattimore has written, “Turfan is one of the places in Turkestan that foreigners remember about, because it is below sea level and so hot the people have to live underground in summer…” The rainfall in the area is slight, and it was only through conservation of the waters descending from the melting snows of the nearby mountains that Turfan survived and flourished. Carefully constructed irrigation works permitted the inhabitants to cultivate wheat and millet and to grow melons, grapes, and pomegranates. They produced

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1 A good account of the German expeditions in Turfan is found in Albert von Le Coq, Buried Treasures of Chinese Turkestan, tr. by Anna Bartwell (London, 1928). The more recent expeditions in the area are covered in Huang Wen-pi, Tu-lu-fan k’ao-ku chi (Peking, 1954).


3 On the irrigation works of Turfan, see M. Aurel Stein, Ruins of Desert Cathay (London, 1912), II, 354–357. On agriculture in the area, see Wang Tsung-tsai, Ssu-i-kuan k’ao (Peking, 1924 ed.), 2, 13b–14a.
cotton and silk as early as the seventh century. AD. Some families kept horses and sheep, which in times of peace they occasionally brought to China for trade. The Turfanese economy could sustain a relatively small population. Turfan was, in contrast to such a great city as Samarkand, an oasis. Again unlike Samarkand, it did not possess numerous bazaars or markets where peoples and products from all parts of Asia were found.

Yet the Chinese, Mongols, and Central Asians considered Turfan important. They recognized its strategic location on the northern silk road. It was a vital stop for caravans travelling from Persia and Central Asia to China. Weary travellers could find food, water, and shelter for themselves and fodder and rest for their animals in the oasis. As a result, Turfan played a decisive role in the trade of Asia. Numerous Central Asian states sought to control the area in order to obtain commercial advantages. The Chinese also viewed it as crucial in the defense of their northwestern border. The stronger dynasties attempted either to rule Turfan and station a garrison there or at least to insure that a hostile power did not occupy it.

The Former Han (206 BC–AD 9) was the first Chinese dynasty to have relations with Nearer Chü-shih, the old name for Turfan. Emperor Wu (140 BC–87 BC), who coveted Central Asian horses and who sought to dislodge the Hsiung-nu from the region, ordered a certain Chao P'o-nu to pacify the area. Though Chao's initial expedition was a resounding success, the Han could not claim total control of Turfan until the conquests of Pan Ch'ao in the latter part of the first century AD. That renowned general conquered the region, so that Chinese influence was pervasive for over half a century. The decline of the Later Han dynasty in the second century, however, reduced the Chinese presence in the oasis.

Turfan was exposed to many non-Chinese influences until the Uighur invasions of the ninth century. China, weakened by foreign invasions and internal disputes and lacking a unified state, could not impose its own rule on the area from the second to the seventh centuries. Traces of Chinese influence survived, however, for according to the official history of the Northern Chou (557–581) dynasty of China, they possess the Odes of Mao, the Analects, and the Classic of Filiality, and have established Educational

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