MING OFFICIALS AND NORTHWEST CHINA

According to the only recently disputed conventional wisdom about Ming China’s relations with its neighbors to the north, Chinese officials sought to limit and lacked interest in foreign trade and scarcely developed expertise about the so-called barbarians. Scholars over the past few decades have challenged this interpretation, focusing in particular on the benefits of commerce for the Ming and the eagerness with which officials sought trade. Henry Serruys wrote two books on the significance of trade relations and horse fairs in Ming contacts with the Mongols.\footnote{Henry Serruys, “Sino-Mongol relations during the Ming II: the tribute system and diplomatic missions (1400–1600),” Mélanges chinois et bouddhiques 14 (1966–1967); Henry Serruys, “Sino-Mongol relations during the Ming III: trade relations: the horse fairs (1400–1600),” Mélanges chinois et bouddhiques 17 (1973–1975).} I have written about the tea-horse trade, as well as about trade and commerce between the Ming and the Central Asians and Jurchens.\footnote{See, for example, Morris Rossabi, “The Tea and Horse Trade with Inner Asia during the Ming”, Journal of Asian History 4:2 (1970), pp. 136–168; id., The Jurchens in the Yuan and Ming; id., “Ming China and Turfan, 1406–1517”, Central Asiatic Journal 16:3 (1972), pp. 219–220.} Finally, Ralph Kauz has just produced a book that emphasizes Ming economic relations with the Timurids.\footnote{See Ralph Kauz, Politik und Handel zwischen Ming und Timuriden.}

The view of Ming ignorance of the Northwest has been eroded but has not been fundamentally revised. Specialists on Chinese foreign relations, citing Qing officials’ lack of knowledge of the West, proclaim that such ignorance existed earlier and probably throughout Chinese history. They cite Lin Zexu’s observation in his letter to Queen Victoria: “Is there a single article from China which has done any harm to foreign countries? Take tea and rhubarb, for example; the foreign countries cannot get along for a single day without them.”\footnote{Ssu-yu Teng and John Fairbank, China’s Response to the West: A Documentary Survey, 1839–1928, p. 25.} and note that his letter confirms China’s ignorance of the outside world. Such episodes colored perceptions of Chinese foreign relations, with the implication that the beliefs that Lin exhibited characterized Chinese officials and their knowledge of foreigners throughout history.
I. Envoys to Central Asia

This interpretation, however, does not characterize Ming relations with Central Asia. Officials along the frontiers and in the Ming capital of Beijing had a variety of sources on the Central Asian peoples and territories. Despite serious misunderstandings between the early Ming and Temür, which resulted in an attempted invasion of China, relations improved dramatically for the rest of the fifteenth century. Central Asian kings, princes, emperors, and oasis rulers exchanged embassies with the Ming and offered both essential and luxury goods as so-called tribute to the Chinese Court. The Ming responded with gifts and permitted the envoys (who were often merchants pretending to be official emissaries) to trade with Chinese merchants. Such cordial receptions prompted Temür’s son Shahrukh to dispatch an embassy that remained in China for a long time. Its departure from Herat in 1419 and its return to that city in 1421 indicates that the envoys stayed in China for about a year. Entranced by the mission’s ambassadors, the Yongle emperor (r. 1403–1424) invited them to attend court festivities, deliberations, and hunts and allowed them great leeway in their travels throughout China. One of the envoys, based on this extraordinary opportunity to observe life in what he believed to be such a remote and isolated civilization, wrote a revealing and well-informed account of Ming China.

Simultaneously, the missions of Chen Cheng, the Yongle emperor’s emissary to Central Asia, provided the court with reliable information about the nearby oases and the more distant cities. Most revealing was that prior to his trip to Central Asia Chen had already been sent to the Uyghur domains in present-day Northwest China and to Annam. The Court clearly sought to train and employ experts on foreign relations when it sent foreign missions. Dispatched on three embassies to Central Asia

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7 The work has been translated into English by K.M. Maitra in A Persian Embassy to China and by Wheeler Thackston in A Century of Princes, Sources on Timurid History and Art.
8 L. Carrington Goodrich and C.N. Tay, “Ch’en Ch’eng” in L. Carrington Goodrich and C.Y. Fang, A Dictionary of Ming Biography, p. 144. See M. Rossabi, “Two Ming Envoys to...