CHAPTER 1

Sagang Sechen on the Tumu Incident

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The Tumu Incident of 1449,¹ when the Oirat ruler Esen captured the Ming emperor fifty miles north-west of Beijing, was a watershed in Chinese history.² One scholar has even claimed that it changed forever the Ming intellectual world.³ Yet, as with much else about the Ming period, little is known about this particular episode from the Mongol-Oirat point of view. Indeed, since we have no extant sources from this period it is impossible to know what they actually thought about the episode, including why it happened, let alone how they understood its subsequent fallout on both sides of the Great Wall.

Even so, from what we do know, it is certain that in the decades leading up to the Tumu Incident Esen had become one of the most powerful rulers—if not the most powerful—in eastern Eurasia, but was not descended directly from Chinggis Khan, making him ineligible to assume the title of “Khan.” And clearly the capture of the Ming emperor played a role in Esen’s fateful decision to proclaim himself Khan, which in turn the Mongols saw as a gross violation of the Chinggisid principle and which drove them not only to unite, but also, ultimately, to overthrow the century-long reign of the Oirat.

Of course, little is known about how these events actually played out, much less how they were understood at the time by both the Mongols and the Oirats.

¹ I began my academic career with an interest in Tibet. Thus, upon graduating from college, I set off for India and Nepal. Of course, not much there conformed with the Shangri-la myth that had initially inspired me, so in short order my interests shifted from seeking enlightenment to trying to make sense of Buddhism as a world historical reality. A key factor in this intellectual reorientation was my discovery, one afternoon in a Katmandu bookstore, of Morris Rossabi’s China and Inner Asia: From 1368 to the Present Day. The book hit me like the proverbial icepick, and soon it was saturated with yellow highlighter and I was looking for graduate programs where I could learn to do similar work. The rest, as they say, is history. I would therefore like to present my translation of a short piece about a pivotal moment in Chinese-Inner Asian history as a small token of appreciation to Professor Rossabi, who has, quite literally, played a key role in making me who I am today.


Nevertheless, we do know how later Mongol historians of the seventeenth century were to remember them, as evidenced in the Mongol chronicles. And on the basis of these works we need above all to realize that the Tumu Incident was understood very differently in Mongol historiography than in the Chinese tradition. Moreover, as with other episodes of post-Yuan history in Mongol sources—such as the Legend of Muna Mountain, the Yongle Legend, and the Story of Zhu—the account of the Tumu Incident is less about what actually happened in 1449, and more a commentary on contemporary political and social realities. In particular, the need for a powerful state led by a legitimate ruler was felt by Mongols, not only during the Mongol-Oirat civil war, but also in regard to the seventeenth-century civil war that ushered in the Manchu conquest.

With a view to encouraging a greater appreciation of these elements of Mongol historiography I would like to present here a translation of the account of the Tumu Incident and its broader imbrication with the fall of Esen as found in Sagang Sechen’s *Precious Summary* or *Erdeniin Tobchi*, a major history of the Mongols written in 1662. The story begins right after Toghan, Esen’s father, has killed the Mongol ruler Adai Khan, and then, while trying to receive the royal blessing from in front of the Chinggis Khan shrine, is instead killed by the spirit of Chinggis Khan.

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9 On this episode and the broader role of the Chinggis Khan cult in Mongol rulership see Johan Elverskog, *Our Great Qing: The Mongols, Buddhism, and the State in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2006), 52–54.