
In using primary sources to teach about the Mongol conquest, I face a recurring problem: while the Persian sources (even those considered “pro-Mongol”) revel in graphic descriptions of massacres and bloodshed, the Chinese sources (even those considered “anti-Mongol”) consistently pass over massacres and bloodshed in a sentence or two. The first-glance impression left on students is inevitably that the Mongol conquest was qualitatively worse in Islamic Central Asia than it was in North China, despite the fact that a strong case can be made on circumstantial evidence that if anything the opposite was the case. The reason for this divergence in the primary sources is of course the impersonal ideal common in Chinese prose sources, particularly those dealing with public events such as war. As Mark Elvin pointed out in his The Retreat of the Elephants (“Introductory Remarks,” p. xxvi) much of the reflection that in European (or Middle Eastern) writing would take place in prose took place in imperial China in poetry, which brings with it problems of genre and interpretation.

In this context, the discovery of the manuscript “My Service in the Army” (Beye-i cooha bade yabuha babe ejhe bithe) written by the colonel (jalan-i janggi) Dzengšeo of the Manchus’ Plain Red Banner, was an important event in both Chinese and Inner Asian military history. Professor Ji Yonghai of the Central Nationalities University in Beijing found the fourth fascicle of this Manchu-language work in the library of his university, and published it in 1987 in facsimile, transcription, and full translation. The slim volume under review contains the transcription, along with a complete and readable English translation, meticulously researched notes, and an introduction, all prepared by Nicola Di Cosmo of the Institute for Advanced Study.

This incomplete diary describes the campaigns participated in by Dzengšeo (Chinese Zengshou) in Guangxi and Yunnan as part of the Manchu Qing armies and his final return home to Beijing in 1680-82. Tragically the previous three fascicles of what was originally a four-fascicle diary appear to have been lost. Most of the entries are a line or two, but a few reach about one page of print in the English translation. The account appears to be the first memoir surviving from either a Chinese or an Inner Asian military man. As such, it is a precious record of the everyday experiences of a mid-ranking cavalry officer fighting in China.
The diary itself is very laconic and casual readers will miss many of the nuances. Nicola Di Cosmo’s excellent introduction places the diary in political and military context and draws out many of the enlightening details it gives us about the Qing dynasty’s armies and their campaigns to pacify southern China. Even those already familiar with the Three Feudatories’ rebellion and the Qing response or who prefer to encounter primary sources for themselves first will find this part of the introduction a valuable prolegomenon to reading the text. As Di Cosmo notices, for example, nature is seen purely as an impediment or obstacle on the campaign; only on the way home do Dzengšeo’s eyes reopen to its beauty (p. 41). In another passage flagged by Di Cosmo (p. 45), the ironic juxtaposition of public and private sentiments is particularly telling:

The Field Marshal gathered the officers and asked that those willing to struggle on step forward. All answered in one loud voice: “Each and every one of us will leap forward whenever we meet city walls and bartlements.” I only had four horses left. With 400 ounces of silver I bought four [more] horses and six head of cattle. Because [my] horses and servants were so few, I was worried and distressed (p. 57).

As a final example, the almost complete absence of any sense of difference or contrast between Manchu and Han soldiers (noted on p. 43) is a negative fact of great significance for any discussion of ethnicity in the early Qing empire. Differences between the various units in the army, while based on ethnic, or ethnic-like distinctions, are treated in this diary as purely functional divisions.

I have only two reservations about this volume. The first is its cost: $140.00 for only 140 pages comes out to exactly a dollar a page, which seems excessive, even by today’s publishing standards! Secondly there are a number of typographic errors in the text. This does not make much difference in the English text, where readers will discount them immediately. But it does raise a question about the significant number of variants in the transcription of the Manchu. On p. 88, in the entry for Kangxi 19 III/13, we find both jiyanggiyūn and jianggiyūn in the transcribed Manchu text. Elsewhere we find s for expected š (e.g. p. 95 in the Manchu entries Kangxi 20 II/9 and 11, where we have Manchu hūwang ho san for Chinese Huangheshan, and giyoo sui for Chinese Jiaoshui). None of these variants are listed in Di Cosmo’s register of non-standard spellings. Reference to Ji Yonghai’s original transcription (on pp. 26, 57) and perfectly readable facsimile shows that the first error is a typographical error in Di Cosmo’s transcription, while the s for š is