

Cheng Ho and Timur: Any Relation?*

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The naval expeditions of the fifteenth-century eunuch admiral Cheng Ho have aroused the interest of numerous scholars in the twentieth century. Cheng's seven voyages to Southeast Asia, India, the east coast of Africa, and other regions were the most spectacular achievements of the early Ming dynasty, and it is only natural that Sinologists have sought to explain the reasons for the dispatch of the expeditions and for their abrupt termination. The more accepted explanations include: the need of the Ming court to stimulate trade and tribute embassies from other lands¹, its aim of securing essential as well as luxury products, the Yung-lo (1403—1424) emperor's wish to announce to foreign rulers his accession to the throne, his effort to impress China's neighbors with the prosperity and power of the Ming empire, and his attempt to expand China's knowledge of the outside world². The official court chronicles add that the emperor wished to find and perhaps dispose of the ex-emperor Chu Yün-wen, whom he had recently deposed but who eluded the pursuing victorious forces³.

Recently, a scholar in Taiwan has proposed still another interpretation. Mr. Hsü Yü-hu⁴, who has written a biography of Cheng Ho⁴, argues in an article published in 1958 that the emperor dispatched the expedition to conclude military alliances with states bordering the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, and the Indian Ocean against Timur, the powerful ruler of Central

* This is a slightly revised version of a paper read at the annual meeting of the American Oriental Society in Washington, D. C. in March of 1973.

¹ The Yung-lo emperor dispatched innumerable envoys to foreign states. *Isiha*, (I-shih-ha)^[1], a Jurchen eunuch who was an envoy to the Wild Jurches, and Ch'en Ch'eng, an emissary to Central Asia, were two of the more interesting ambassadors. For more details on *Isiha*, see EJIMA Hisao^[2], "Ishiha no Nurukan shobu ni tsuite," *Nishi Nihon shigaku*^[3] 13 (1953), 43—61; and EJIMA Hisao, "Taikan Ishiha ni tsuite," *Shien*^[4] 50 (1951), 19—26; and my biography of him for the Ming Biographical History Project. For additional sources, on Ch'en Ch'eng, see L. Carrington GOODRICH, "Ch'en Ch'eng" in *Ch'ing-chu Chiang Wei-t'ang hsien-sheng ch'i-shih jung-ching lun-wen-chi*^[5] (Taipei, 1968), pp. 426—420 and my forthcoming translation of his reports on Central Asia.

² The major Western language sources on the Cheng Ho expeditions include J. J. L. DUYVENDAK, "The true dates of the Chinese maritime expeditions in the early fifteenth century", *T'oung Pao* XXXIV (1938), 341—412; Paul PELLIER's articles in *T'oung Pao* XXX (1933), 237—452; XXX (1935), 274—314, and XXXII (1936), 210—222; and CHANG Kuei-sheng's biography of the eunuch admiral for the Ming Biographical History Project. A recent study of the voyages is J. V. G. MILLS (tr. and ed.), *Ma Huan: Ying-yai Sheng-jan: 'The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores'* (Cambridge, 1970). On a related topic, see Lo Jung-pang, "The Decline of the Early Ming Navy", *Oriens Extremus* V, 2 (1958), 149—168.

³ CHANG T'ing-yü, et. al., *Ming shih* (Yang-ming-shan, 1962—63), p. 3405.

⁴ The biography is entitled *Cheng Ho p'ing-chuan* (Taipei, 1958).

- [1] 亦失哈 [2] 江島壽雄 [3] 亦失哈の奴兒干招撫に就いて、
西日本史学 [4] 太監亦失哈に就いて、史淵
[5] 慶祝蔣慰堂先生七十榮慶論文集 [6] 徐玉虎

Asia⁵. Hsü points out that Chinese dynasties in general and the Ming dynasty in particular were apprehensive about the military danger from the north and the west⁶. He implies that the Ming recognized the gravity of the threat posed by Timur and that Cheng Ho's battles with and pacification of several pirates and principalities in Southeast Asia were minor incidents and irrelevant to the central concerns of his mission. In sum, the true purposes of the mission were to shore up Ming defenses against the "barbarian" from the West and to prevent him from taking advantage of the unrest resulting from the Yung-lo uprising and usurpation of the throne.

According to Hsü, the court did not want to jeopardize Cheng Ho's delicate mission. So it used the search for the deposed emperor as a convenient cover for the actual and more devious intentions of the expedition. The Yung-lo emperor was not, in this instance, interested in finding the nephew whom he had overthrown.

Hsü's argument appears, on the surface, persuasive. The Ming was a xenophobic dynasty and indeed feared attacks from its northern and western neighbors. China had, after all, endured a century of occupation by the Mongols and four centuries of harassment of its borders by the Khitanese, the Jurched, and the Mongols. The Ming court would seize any opportunity to obtain allies against potential or actual invaders from the west. With this background, it is no wonder that the eminent scholar Lo Jung-pang concurs with Hsü, writing that "the objective [of the Cheng Ho missions] must have been, by a combination of diplomacy and naval power, to induce the maritime nations to befriend China during China's impending clash with the Timurid Khanate"⁷. A careful study of Timur's relations with Ming China, however, casts serious doubts on Hsü's hypothesis.

The first Ming emperor, who ruled from 1368 to 1398, did not evolve a satisfactory relationship with the great ruler of Central Asia. Though the Chinese sources record the arrival of several embassies from Timur in the last two decades of the fourteenth century, it seems likely that these consisted not of official emissaries but merely of Central Asian merchants who represented themselves as Timur's envoys in order to gain access to China. These traders knew that they could only enter China as official envoys, not as private citizens⁸.

⁵ Hsü Yü-hu, "Cheng Ho hsia Hsi-yang yüan-yin chih hsin-t'an" [7], *Ta-lu tsa-chih* XVI, No. 1 (January 15, 1958), 21—22.

⁶ Note for example the first emperor's words to his officials: "the nomadic barbarians (Hu and Jung) of the west and the north have for generations been a danger to China; we have no alternative but to be on guard against them". Cited in Lo Jung-pang, "Policy Formulation and Decision-Making on Issues Respecting Peace and War", in Charles O. HUCKER (ed.), *Chinese Government in Ming Times: Seven Studies* (New York, 1969), p. 52.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 54—55. Wolfram EBERHARD also appears to subscribe to this view. See his review of J. V. G. MILLS, *Op. cit.* and Joseph NEEDHAM's "Clerks and Craftsmen in China and the West" in *Journal of Asian History* 6, No. 2 (1972), 165, 168—169.

⁸ See MATSUMURA Jun [8], "Min-sho no higashi Chagatai han koku", *Kenkyū Ihō* [9] 7 (1964), 30. This kind of ruse was not unusual. See my "Ming China and Turfan, 1406—1517", *Central Asiatic Journal* XVI, no. 3. (1972), 224.

〔7〕鄭和下西洋原因之新探 〔8〕松村潤

〔9〕明初の東チヤガタイハン国, 研究彙報

The first few missions were apparently accorded cordial receptions. According to the *Ming shih*, in 1387 an envoy from Samarkand presented fifteen horses and two camels as tribute to the Ming court⁹. The *Ming Shih-lu* fails to record this mission but mentions an embassy of October 15, 1388, which offered three hundred horses and two camels¹⁰. It also reports that another embassy from Samarkand reached China on October 12, 1389 with two hundred and five horses as tribute and still another mission arrived on March 24, 1392 offering sixty-four horses, six camels, velvet, swords, and armor¹¹. Recognizing their need for horses, the Chinese welcomed the envoys and responded by repatriating one thousand two hundred and thirty-six detained Muslim soldiers to Samarkand¹².

This brief period of good relations ended with the arrival of an embassy in October of 1394 with two hundred horses as tribute and a letter purportedly written by Timur. The letter, doubtless a forgery, extolled the emperor for his superior virtue and recognized his preeminent position in the world¹³. It is inconceivable that Timur, who aspired to world conquest, could have written such a fawning, self-deprecatory missive. Professor Joseph Fletcher notes that "the wrong man certainly received the credit, since there is nothing in the Muslim conqueror's character to make one suppose that Temür would have acquiesced knowingly in any infidel's 'mandate of Heaven' to rule the world"¹⁴.

The Ming emperor was, nonetheless, so enchanted with the "submission" of the great Muslim conqueror that he sent his first major embassy to Samarkand¹⁵. In 1395, he sent the two supervising secretaries Fu An^[11] and Kuo Chi^[12], the censor Yao Ch'en^[13], and the eunuch Liu Wei^[14], along with

⁹ CHANG, *Op. cit.*, p. 3824. This mission is also recorded in SHEN Shih-hsing, *et. al.*, *Ta Ming hui-tien* (Taipei, 1963 reprint), p. 1609; Fu Wei-lin, *Ming shu in Kuo-hsüeh chi-pen ts'ung-shu* (Shanghai, 1928 ed.), p. 3303; and WANG Tsung-tsai, *Ssu-i-kuan k'ao*^[10] (Peking, 1924 reprint), 1, 12a.

¹⁰ *T'ai-tsu shih-lu* (Taipei, 1962—1966), 193, 6b—7a.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 197, 5b; 217, 1a; CHANG, *Op. cit.*, p. 3824.

¹² *Ibid.*, 223, 4b.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 234, 3b; the letter was copied into CHANG, *Op. cit.*, pp. 3824—3825. See the translation by E. BRETSCHNEIDER, *Mediaeval Researches from Eastern Asiatic Sources* (New York, 1967 reprint), II, pp. 258—260.

¹⁴ Joseph F. FLETCHER, "China and Central Asia, 1368—1884" in John K. FAIRBANK, (ed.), *The Chinese World Order* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), p. 209.

¹⁵ René GROUSSET, *L'empire des steppes* (Paris, 1939), p. 533 refers to an embassy dispatched in 1385 to Hami, Turfan, and Samarkand, but there is no textual evidence for such a mission. Grousset writes that Fu An and Liu Wei were the leaders of the expedition. This account is inaccurate, for China was still not on good terms with Hami and Turfan. See my "Ming China and Turfan", 209—210 and my *Ming China's Relations with Hami and Central Asia: A Reexamination of Traditional Chinese Foreign Policy*, Columbia University Ph. D. Dissertation (1970), pp. 56—63. The recent English translation of GROUSSET's work *The Empire of the Steppes* tr. by Naomi WALFORD (New Brunswick, 1970), p. 453 does not correct the error.

fifteen hundred men, to express his gratitude for Timur's loyalty¹⁶. The emperor's letter, in which he referred to the latter as a vassal, enraged the Central Asian ruler who immediately seized Fu An and the rest of the embassy. Timur demanded that they kowtow to him, but they refused¹⁷. Taking this rebuff in stride, he attempted to impress them by sending them on a tour of his vast domain from Samarkand to Isfahan and returning through Herat¹⁸. Two years later, in 1397, the Chinese court, anxious about the fate of its envoys, sent a second embassy led by the surveillance commissioner Ch'en Te-wen¹⁹ to make inquiries. He too was detained by Timur. The first Ming emperor died the very next year, and the rebellion following his death temporarily precluded further Chinese action¹⁹.

Meanwhile Timur laid plans for an invasion of China once he had pacified other regions in India and the Middle East. He conducted campaigns against the sultanate of Delhi and the Ottoman empire in the closing years of the fourteenth century and the early years of the fifteenth century, but as early as 1398 he plotted to conquer China²⁰. His principal aim was to avenge himself on the infidel Chinese emperor who dared to treat him as a vassal. It is possible that he planned to convert the Chinese to Islam, particularly on hearing the preposterous story that the emperor had executed one hundred thousand Chinese Muslims and "had utterly eradicated Islam in his possessions"²¹.

Timur manifested his displeasure in his treatment of the envoys sent by the Yung-lo emperor, who had ascended the Ming throne in 1403. The latter, perturbed that the ambassadors dispatched by his father had still not returned from Central Asia, sent another embassy outfitted with eight hundred camels to request the release of the envoys and to demand the resumption

¹⁶ CHANG, *Op. cit.*, 3825, 3829; CHIAO Hung, *et. al.*, *Kuo-ch'ao hsien-cheng lu* (Taipei reprint, 1965), 80, 1a. For sources on Fu An, see T'ien Chi-tsung (ed.), *Combined Indices to Eighty-Nine Collections of Ming Dynasty Biographies* (Peiping, 1935), III, p. 257a. Professor Kazuo ENOKI is preparing to publish an article on Fu. See ENOKI's "Tsung-le's Mission to the Western Regions in 1378—1382", *Oriens Extremus* 19, nos. 1 and 2 (December, 1972), f. 36. For additional biographical data on Kuo Chi, see T'ien, *Op. cit.*, III, 37c. Liu Wei was one among a whole group of Ming eunuchs (including Cheng Ho, of course) sent as envoys to foreign states. For this, see my "Eunuch Power: The Role of Eunuchs in Ming Foreign Relations" in *Monumenta Serica* (forthcoming).

¹⁷ WANG Hung-hsü, *et al.*, *Ming shih kao* (Taipei reprint, 1963) 128, 6b and BRETSCHNEIDER, *Op. cit.*, pp. 144—145.

¹⁸ BRETSCHNEIDER, *Op. cit.*, p. 145.

¹⁹ CHANG, *Op. cit.*, p. 3829; For more information about Ch'en, see T'ien, *Op. Cit.*, III, 215a and CHIAO, *Op. cit.*, 54, 26a—26b. Wolfgang FRANKE has made extensive and useful notes on these emissaries in his "Addenda and Corrigenda to Pokotilov's *History of the Eastern Mongols During the Ming Dynasty*" in *Studia Serica*, ser. A No. 3 (1949), pt. 2, 22—24.

²⁰ For an interesting episode during his campaigns in the Middle East, see Walter J. FISCHER, *Ibn Khaldūn and Tamerlane* (Berkeley, 1952).

²¹ V. V. BARTHOLD, *Four Studies on the History of Central Asia II* (tr. by V. and T. MINORSKY, Leiden, 1963), pp. 49—50.

of annual tribute missions from Samarkand²². Timur again detained and humiliated the envoys. Ruy González de Clavijo, the Spanish ambassador to the Timurid empire, observed that:

Those lords now conducting us began by placing us in a seat below that of one who it appeared was the ambassador of Chays Khan, the emperor of Cathay. Now this ambassador had lately come to Timur to demand of him the tribute, said to be due to his master, and which Timur year by year had formerly paid. His Highness at this moment noticed that we, the Spanish ambassador, were being given a seat below that of this envoy from the Chinese Emperor, whereupon he sent word ordering that we should be put above, and that other envoy below. Then . . . one of those lords came forward . . . to inform this Chinaman that the ambassadors of the King of Spain, the good friend of Timur and his son, must indeed take place above him who was the envoy of a robber and a bad man, the enemy of Timur²³.

This deliberate insult presaged a grandiose plan to conquer China and to add it to the Timurid empire. When Timur started on his invasion of China, he was accompanied by a descendant of the Mongol *khans*, whom he presumably planned to enthrone as the new ruler of China with himself as the true wielder of power²⁴. He undoubtedly looked forward to the opportunity of protecting the Chinese Muslims and was eager to construct mosques in the Middle Kingdom²⁵.

From 1398 on, he prepared for a major assault against the Chinese by sending soldiers eastward to build forts and to farm the land so that his forces would be well supplied²⁶. Finally, in December of 1404, he set forth with two hundred thousand troops for China. The Chinese court failed to make any unusual preparations to counter the threat of the most powerful military figure of that era, and, in fact, was oblivious of the gravity of the danger. Fortunately for the court, Timur died en route on February 18, 1405, and the succession crisis that followed his death aborted the planned invasion²⁷.

Weakened by the struggles over the succession and less prone to military solutions than his father, Shāhrukh Bahādur, Timur's son and eventual successor, sought an accommodation with the Ming court. He wished to trade with the Chinese and apparently believed that wars with them would

²² HANEDA Tōru [16], "Timur to Eiraku-tei", *Geibun* [17] III, no. 10 (1912), 351—352; FLETCHER, *Op. cit.*, p. 210; see also John Buchan TELFER (tr. and ed.), *The Bondage and Travels of Johann Schiltberger, a Native of Bavaria, in Europe, Asia, and Africa, 1396—1427* (London, 1879), p. 28.

²³ Guy LE STRANGE, (tr.), *Clavijo: Embassy to Tamerlane, 1403—1406* (London, 1928), pp. 222—223.

²⁴ BARTHOLD, *Op. cit.*, II, pp. 50—51.

²⁵ Lucien BOUVAT, *L'empire Mongol (2e phase)* (Paris, 1927), p. 65.

²⁶ Charles SCHEFER, "Trois chapitres du 'Khitay Namèh': Texte persan et traduction française", *Mélanges orientaux* (Paris, 1883), p. 44.

²⁷ Percy SIKES, *A History of Afghanistan* (London, 1940), II, p. 265 and BARTHOLD, *Op. cit.*, II, pp. 53—83 for the succession crisis.

be expensive and wasteful. Unlike his father, he did not have the evangelical zeal to convert the Chinese to Islam. Neither was he intent to avenge himself on the Chinese emperor for treating him as a vassal. He also moved his capital westward from Samarkand to Herat, another indication that he had no designs on Chinese territory²⁸. He placed his own son Ulugh-Beg on the throne of Samarkand, and neither he nor his son attempted or even envisioned an invasion of China²⁹. In line with this policy of peace, he released the Ming envoys originally detained by his father, and by 1409 initiated trade and tribute missions with the Chinese³⁰. Peaceful relations prevailed between the two empires from that time until Shāhrukh's death in 1447. Ghiyāth al-Dīn Naqqāsh and Ch'en Ch'eng^[18], two of the most illustrious envoys of the fifteenth century, helped to cement relations between Shāhrukh and the Ming³¹.

This brief survey of early Ming-Timurid relations certainly challenges Hsü Yü-hu's view of the connection between Cheng Ho's voyages and Timur's abortive invasion of China. Hsü fails to explain at least five basic points.

First, if the Yung-lo emperor expended enormous resources and manpower for Cheng Ho's expeditions, including three hundred and seventeen ships and twenty-seven thousand eight hundred and seventy men on the first mission of 1405³², mainly to obtain allies and to open a second front against Timur, why not provide reinforcements and additional supplies for his forces along the northwestern border? There is no evidence that the Ming court mounted a massive effort to meet Timur's forthcoming assaults. A thorough search of the court chronicles yields only one reference to the forces advancing on China. In an entry dated March 24, 1405 (actually about a month after the death of the Central Asian ruler) in the *Shih-lu*, the emperor, learning of an imminent attack on China by a Muslim from Samarkand (i. e. Timur), ordered Sung Sheng^[20], his military commander in Kansu, to make adequate preparations³³. One fails to detect any urgency in these instructions, and there is no hint of an effort to strengthen the defenses in that border region. It appears unlikely that the emperor knew the size and military capability of the force that faced him in Central Asia.

²⁸ Some of the material remains of his reign in Herat are attractively portrayed in Nancy Wolfe, *Herat: A Pictorial Guide* (Kabul, 1966).

²⁹ The most important work on Ulugh-Beg is the study by Barthold in the oft-cited *Four Studies on the History of Central Asia*.

³⁰ *T'ai-tsung shih-lu* 68, 11a; Chang, *Op. cit.*, p. 3825.

³¹ For Ghiyāth al-Dīn Naqqāsh's account of his journey, see Hafiz-i Abru, *A Persian Embassy to China being an extract from Zubdatu't tawarikh of Hafiz Abru* (tr. by K. M. Matra, New York, 1970 reprint). For Ch'en Ch'eng's account, see Ch'en Ch'eng and Li Hsien, *Hsi-vü fan-kuo chih* [19] in *Kuo-li Pei-p'ing t'u-shu-kuan shan-nen ts'unq-shu* (Shanghai, 1937).

³² Mills, *Op. cit.*, p. 10.

³³ *T'ai-tsung shih-lu* 39, 5b—6a. For a biography of Sung Sheng, see Chang, *Op. cit.*, p. 1883, and for additional sources, see T'ien, *Op. cit.*, II, 176b.

Second, the two principal accounts of Cheng Ho's voyages, written by men who accompanied the eunuch admiral, omit mention of Timur. If a major objective of these missions was the conclusion of military alliances against the ruler of Samarkand, one would assume that the two primary sources, Ma Huan's *Ying-yai sheng-lan* and Fei Hsin's *Hsing-ch'a sheng-lan*^[21], would reflect this concern³⁴. But the texts do not substantiate Hsü Yü-hu's hypothesis, and the only proof Hsü now offers is that Timur's campaign and Cheng Ho's first expedition occurred in the same year.

Third, though the date of Cheng's first voyage coincides with that of the planned invasion of Timur, the six other naval expeditions departed from China in periods when the Ming court and Timur's successors had achieved a harmonious commercial and diplomatic relationship. Once the military threat of Timur had dissipated, why did the court persist in dispatching such costly missions to Southeast Asia, the rim of the Indian Ocean, and the east coast of Africa? Why should the motivation of one of the expeditions be so different from the other six³⁵?

Fourth, in his first three expeditions, those of 1405—1407, 1407—1409, and 1409—1411, Cheng reached no further west than southern India. His travels led him nowhere near any state that could have opened a second front against Timur. In any case, the lack of unity in the Indian subcontinent precluded efforts of the southern Indian states to support the Chinese. There is, of course, no evidence that these states intended to assist the Ming and to obstruct Timur's eastern campaign. It is true that Cheng Ho's fourth expedition landed in Hormuz of the Persian Gulf, but that mission left China in 1413, eight years after the death of Timur and several years after the resumption of peaceful and mutually beneficial relations between the Ming and the Timurid empires. In addition, Hormuz was too far away from Samarkand to join China in resisting Timur or his successors.

Fifth, though Cheng Ho's fleets were armed and his troops engaged in battles with enemy forces in Palembang, Ceylon, and other regions, they were certainly no match for the troops of Timur. It appears unlikely that the Ming court expected Cheng, with his relatively small band, to face Timur's army. This military motive did not prompt the dispatch of the Cheng Ho embassy.

In summary, the connection between the Cheng Ho expeditions and Timur's abortive invasion of China is non-existent. Hsü Yü-hu can supply no textual or historical evidence to establish a relation between these two

³⁴ For Ma Huan, see the translation by MILLS, *Op. cit.* For Fei Hsin's work, see W. W. ROCKHILL, "Notes on the relations and trade of China with the Eastern Archipelago and the coasts of the Indian Ocean during the fourteenth century", *T'oung Pao* XVI (1915), 61—159, 236—271, 374—392, 435—467, and 604—626.

³⁵ On this and on several other points in my argument, see CH'EN Sheng-hsi, "Ming-ch'u T'ieh-mu-erh ti-kuo ho Chung-kuo ti kuan-hsi"^[22], *Shih-hsüeh yüeh-k'an* 7 (July, 1957), 34—38.

[21] 費信：星槎勝覽

[22] 陳生釐：明初帖木兒帝國和中國的關係

events. The more credible explanations for the Cheng Ho missions lie in the diplomatic and commercial objectives of the Ming court in Southeast Asia, southern India, and other regions that the eunuch admiral visited.