

# **THE MAIN POINTS OF THE DOCTORAL DISSERTATION**

Zsombor Tibor Rajkai

## **The Timurid Empire and the Ming China: theories and approaches concerning the relations of the two empires**

### **I. Choice of Subject and Purposes**

The relationship of the Timurid Empire and the Ming China, despite the fact that they were not adjacent empires, aroused academic interest as early as the late eighteenth century. The reason for choosing two empires having culturally so little in common for the subject of academic research can be attributed to at least three factors.

One is that both dynasties were formed almost at the same time, in the second half of the fourteenth century - on the ruins of the former Chinggisid Empire, facing a similar problem: the legitimacy of power both with and against the Chinggisid dynasty - albeit in different ways. The second reason for studying these two empires together is that their historical processes show great similarities in the time of their prosperity and decline, making the two empires decisive factors simultaneously in Asia's two regions: Central and East Asia. The third reason, which is perhaps the most significant one, is that despite the enormous distances between them, the two empires were not isolated but had lively communication with each other throughout their histories – both in the form of tribute missions and trade at market-places designated by the Chinese. Along with the above three points, the Timurid Empire with an active-yet-weak China-policy and Ming China with a fluctuating-but-strong foreign policy gives a highly interesting field for researchers of both Central and East Asia.

The primary sources on the subject consist of materials which mainly written in classical Persian and Chinese language during the fourteenth-fifteenth century - with an overwhelming majority of Chinese sources. Modern researchers such as Joseph Fletcher, Morris Rossabi, Ralph Kauz and Zhang Wende made great use of the available sources to various extent. Among them, Kauz, giving the latest account of the sources, argues that the research on the two empires presents much more work for Sinologists than scholars in Iranian or Turkic studies, simply due to the dominance of Chinese material. Kauz's standpoint can hardly be denied.

The main subject of the present dissertation pertains to not the primary sources themselves (although it presupposes a thorough understanding of those) but the secondary literature. It goes without saying that this choice of subject is stimulated not by the disregard for primary sources but rather by the realization

that the international branches of the research on the Timurid-Ming contacts have been relatively unaware of each other. This assumption becomes clear if one compares the study of the Timurid-Ming Chinese relations in the West with that in China and Japan. I argue that international research in this field has been more or less uncoordinated. Naturally, this does not mean that there have been no references made to each others' work. For example, the latest and most systematic study by Ralph Kauz makes abundant use of international secondary sources. Kauz discusses the historical process of diplomatic relations between the two empires in chronological order, making use of both Western and Chinese studies. At the same time, Kauz also organizes the secondary sources into a convenient format.

It is my contention, however, that secondary literature can also be arranged in different ways. The *uncoordinated* condition of international research mentioned above refers to the lack of a systematic study that would address the subject matter, theories and approaches presented by various scholars. I believe that this condition is a major obstacle for further research. At the same time, such a systematic study, however, has so far remained a challenge because it required the knowledge of not only Western languages but also Chinese and Japanese, since a significant amount of research has been conducted in these two languages. Being a trained Sinologist and Turcologist, and having studied at Kyoto University in Japan for many years, I decided to fill this gap.

Accordingly, the present dissertation has three main objectives:

1. To provide a detailed introduction to the studies concerning the relationship between the two empires in Western, Japanese and Chinese studies, and to outline the development of international research on the subject from the late eighteenth century to present times.
2. To analyse the studies in light of their choice of subject, theories and approaches, and to examine the level of theorisation within each study.
3. To identify the main problems within the international research on the Timurid-Ming Chinese contacts, and to outline potential directions for future research.

## II. Methods

I address and discuss the three major bodies of secondary literature (Western, Chinese and Japanese) in three different chapters. This arrangement, however, does not reflect a pure geographic categorization. As I have mentioned, Western, Japanese and Chinese bodies of research developed separately rather than hand-in-hand – due to internal conditions within each region. The separate development of the Timurid-Ming research could not be presented if one arranged the respective studies primarily according to their subject matter, theories and approaches. Within each of these three bodies of literature, I first provide a thematic arrangement, followed by a chronological discussion of theories and approaches.

The addressed studies are analysed and compared according to the following three points:

1. What degree do the discussed studies reach in theory-building?
2. What aspects are addressed in them?
3. What standpoint do the respective studies take as a conclusion?

By making use of this kind of arrangement, I manage 1) to present and outline the development of the Timurid-Ming research in each region; 2) to discuss the theories and approaches within each study.

### III. Results

#### 1. The development of international research from the late eighteenth century to present times in the Western, Japanese and Chinese secondary literature

The Timurid-Ming Chinese research started with William Chambers' translations from Persian into English in the late eighteenth century; unfortunately, he provided almost no explanation regarding the nature of the Timurid-Chinese contacts. Translations with or without commentaries were typical of Western research up to the late nineteenth century, including the works of Emil Bretschneider, whose translations are of high significance; unfortunately, he presented no discussion of the Chinese contacts with Central Asia either. The first researcher who addressed the Timurid-Ming diplomatic contacts directly was Edgar Blochet (1910) in the early twentieth century, arguing that the Timurids (including Timur himself) were eventually vassals of Ming China. Although Blochet's standpoint was called into question in later times, one can see a long break after him in the Timurid-Ming research in the West.

During this long hiatus in the West, Japanese scholarship took over the "torch" from Western researchers – though apparently neither Western nor Japanese researchers were aware of this take-over. Haneda Toru in 1912 addressed the Timurid-Ming contacts for the first time, and he was followed by other Japanese scholars in pre-war times. However, these efforts eventually came to an end in the 1950s. The active scholarly interest of pre-war Japan in the subject was embedded in Japan's contemporary political interest in Central Asia. In addition, pre-war Japanese scholars were much better at reading classical Chinese texts rather than Central Asian languages. However, from the 1970s, Japanese scholars became increasingly familiar with Central Asian languages, which led to a shift in research interest from the Timurid-Ming contacts towards the Timurid dynasty itself. As a consequence, the first promising initiatives in pre-war Japan were not continued after World War II.

Starting from the late 1960s, Western scholars turned their attention to the Timurid-Ming contacts again, on a surprisingly high theoretical level, suddenly leaping from the making "simple" translations to providing elaborated theories on the subject. However, this sudden appearance of theoretical studies cannot be considered the direct continuation of the initial Japanese studies of pre-war times. Fletcher's study (1968) and Rossabi's dissertation (1970) at the turning point of the 1960-70s are to be considered primarily as reactions to the tribute theory hallmarked by J. K. Fairbank etc. Both studies eventually call the "traditional academic" interpretation of the Sino-foreign relations into question that overemphasized the role of Confucianist ideology - albeit from *different* aspects. Ralph Kauz's study (2005) apparently accepts these new findings and raises the possibility of a political unity between the two empires - a unity which in reality never happened. It seems as if the Timurid-Ming research in the West had taken back the "torch" from the initial Japanese studies, once again, without being aware of this transition.

As for Chinese research, the first initial studies appeared approximately the same time as in Japan, producing promising results. Shao Xunzheng's (1936) reference to the works of Western researchers - e.g. Chambers, Bretschneider and Blochet - by pointing out their weaknesses can be considered a good start. Moreover, Shao - and later Chen Shoushi - identified the Mongol features of early Ming China for the first time. However, these promising initial steps were not followed by other Chinese scholars. The long break from research in social sciences in China during the 1960-70s seems to have severed Chinese scholarship from international research trends. Therefore, it is not surprising to see the Russian V. V. Barthold as practically the only foreign reference point in Chinese secondary sources during the 1980-90s, when Chinese scholars exhibited a growing academic interest in the subject. Consequently, although Chinese scholars produced the largest number of studies on the Timurid-Ming contacts, the theoretical maturity of those remained low. An exception in this respect is Zhang Wende's dissertation (2001), which made an attempt to summarize and analyse the Timurid-Ming contacts from various points of view. Nonetheless, the theorisation-level of Zhang's dissertation appears to fall short of the international standard. In addition, the current interest of Chinese politics in Central Asian countries raises the question whether China is following the example of Japan a century ago, when the political attention towards Central Asia was also paralleled by an academic interest.

In view of the above, the development of the Timurid-Ming research in the three major bodies of literature can be summarized as follows:

1. Making translations - from both Persian and Chinese sources into Western languages - was typical between the late eighteenth and late nineteenth century. Edgar Blochet was the first to address the Timurid-Ming diplomatic contacts directly in the early twentieth century. Thereafter, there was a hiatus of over than half a century in Western research.
2. In the meantime, Blochet's first interpretation was followed by a "boom" of the initial studies in pre-war Japan, while China also started to show some academic interest in the matter at the same time. After the 1950s, however, there was a sharp decline in the Timurid-Ming research in both Japan and China - albeit due to quite different reasons.
3. The initial Japanese research wave was followed by Western theoretical studies from the late 1960s, although this continuation in the West did not rely on a direct take-over of the Timurid-Ming research from the Japanese (as well as Chinese) scholarship - it was rather a reaction to the tribute theory hallmarked by Fairbank et al.
4. From the 1980-90s, one can see an active academic interest in Chinese scholarship, producing numerous studies on the subject, though with a generally low theorisation-level. At the same time, Japanese scholarship appears to remain dormant.

Based on the findings above, I argue that international research in the three major regions has advanced in a rather uncoordinated manner. The initial steps, as well as the sudden halts of Timurid-Ming research within the respective regions suggest separate internal developments rather than coordinated international research efforts.

## **2. Subject matter, theories and approaches**

The subject matter of the related studies can be basically divided into two main parts: those that address the Timurid-Ming Chinese contacts directly, and those that do so indirectly by focusing on either the Chen Cheng accounts (on the Chinese side), or the Naqqash account (on the Persian side). In Western and Japanese literature, one can find studies on each of these three subjects (the Timurid-Ming contacts, the Chen Cheng accounts, and the Naqqash account). In the Chinese literature, however, there are numerous studies on the Chen Cheng accounts, some on the Timurid-Ming contacts, but hardly any on the Naqqash account.

As for the theorisation-level of all publications, I commend two excellent studies, i.e. of Morris Rossabi (1970) and of Ralph Kauz (2005). Both scholars formulate clear questions and attempt to give clear answers to those. Fletcher's study (1968) is just as significant as those by Rossabi and Kauz, although his merit is in drawing attention to a particular problem rather than providing a precise answer to a well-defined question. The (Chinese) dissertation of Zhang Wende (2001) examines the Timurid-Ming contacts from various perspectives, resulting in an itemization of a number of themes without any major conclusion. As I have already mentioned, the theorisation-level of most Chinese studies is rather low. In Japanese research, it is the studies of Mitsui Takayuki (1937) and Murakami Masatsugu (1937) that show a certain degree of theory-building, however, still falling behind the studies of Rossabi and Kauz. As for the hundred-some year period lasting from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries, Blochet's work is the sole exception to the general lack of any theoretical approach.

The studies on Timurid-Ming relationship mainly focus on the diplomatic contacts rather than the daily life along the border region or in the Chinese capital (where a number of Central-Asian people were staying). They usually address one of the three main aspects, namely, cultural, political (military) or economic. These three aspects are related to the basic questions of Ming Chinese foreign policy:

1. the traditional Confucian prestige over non-Confucian "barbarians" with China (more precisely the Chinese capital) as the center of the world, which prestige, at least theoretically, does not allow the Chinese emperor to treat other rulers as equal;

2. the Chinese fear of military attacks by “barbarians”, leading to a general concern regarding the defense of China;
3. finally, the question whether the Chinese gained economic benefits from the tributes and trade with the “barbarians”, which would theoretically contradict the Confucian teaching of disdaining commerce as an inferior activity.

In connection with these three aspects, the studies use two basic approaches in addressing the Timurid-Ming relationship. One is the so-called “traditional” academic standpoint stressing the paramount ideology of the Confucian prestige. In doing so, these studies usually reject the possibility of commercial interests of the Chinese court in its contact with the peoples of Central Asia, and refuse the hypothesis that the Chinese emperor would address a foreign ruler on equal terms. In other words, proponents of this standpoint cannot accept that the Chinese emperor would deviate in his policy from the Confucian doctrines. The studies belonging to the other group either question this “traditional” academic standpoint (e.g. Fletcher and Rossabi) or simply acknowledge, like the majority of Chinese scholars do, the existence of mutual commercial benefits between Central Asia and China, and attempt to show the Yongle emperor - the Ming ruler with the most active foreign policy - as treating the peoples of Central Asia “properly”. In other words, the studies in the former group interpret the Timurid-Ming contacts in terms of the “traditional” academic attitude of the Chinese court toward its neighbours, whereas the studies in the other group make use of the Timurid-Ming research in order to challenge this “traditional” academic interpretation – albeit in the case of the Chinese studies, this is not due to a conscious critique.

It is also worth pointing out that while both of these two approaches are represented in Western scholarship, Japanese studies tend to use the traditional, whereas Chinese the opposite approach. At the same time, neither of these approaches appears to be connected with the trends of scholarship in the West, showing the uncoordinated nature of international research.

Based on these two contradicting approaches, I believe that the study of Timurid-Ming relations is also important for the historiography of Central Asia in general.

#### IV. Future research

As I have mentioned above, the study of Timurid-Ming relationship has a larger potential for the field of Sinology, rather than for Persian or Turkic studies. It goes without saying that this does not say that these contacts had a stronger effect on the Chinese side. Naturally, the contacts between the Timurids and Ming China were mutual, and must have effected significant influence on both sides. Perhaps we are even safe to assume that the contacts had a deeper impact on the lives of the peoples of Central Asia (due to an active flow of Chinese goods along the Silk Road), rather than on the lives of people in Central China. This seems to contradict the profusion of Chinese sources in comparison with Persian ones. My belief is that there are basically two levels of the Chinese-Central Asian contacts: one on the level of diplomacy, and the other on the level of daily contact between common people. I think that on the level of the common people, the effects must have been stronger in Central Asia than in China, whereas the reverse is true for contacts on the official level, since the Timurid Empire, unlike China, could never really present an articulated foreign policy.

As for the daily life of the people, there are reports on spying, smuggling and bribing in the frontier zone, as well as reports on Central Asian merchants buying Chinese women and children and taking them out of the country, or Chinese merchants crossing the border illegally and getting as far as Aksu. But there are also reports about Chinese soldiers guarding the border area and trading with nomads along the border line. In many cases, this had to be done, because there was no well-functioning supply system from the middle of the fifteenth century, or just to “buy peace” from the Mongol tribes who would have attacked otherwise. Reality at the frontier zone was obviously different from what we see in official sources: this different reality should be studied just as carefully as official contacts. However, the research of the world of daily life has remained quite marginal, in contrast with that of official diplomatic contacts. Henry Serruys’ study is an exception in this respect, as he attempts to reveal the everyday contacts between nomads and Ming Chinese people from different perspectives. Felicia Hecker’s study on the Chen Cheng accounts, as well as Hecker’s efforts to understand Chen Cheng’s personality and his personal impressions as a Chinese envoy in Herat outline possible directions for future research: from the perspective of cultural anthropology.

In view of the above, I argue that researchers should turn their attention from official diplomatic sources to the study of daily life and its significance for Chinese and non-Chinese people. This could also be done as a continuation of the works of Fletcher and Rossabi, questioning the dominance of Confucian ideology in modern academic research, albeit on the level of everyday life. As early as 1979, Ildikó Ecsedi studied the contacts between Chinese and nomads in pre-Islamic times, emphasizing this aspect: the stories of the common people, lonely travelers, merchants, refugees etc. She stressed that these stories must be searched for in popular narratives or other kinds of folklore, in contrast with the official narrative. I argue that future research should continue along Ecsedi’s line of thought, but involve all written documents (e.g. the complaints of local officers about the

conditions at the border area) for the reconstruction of daily life from the perspective of *cultural anthropology*. I believe that this could be a fruitful line of future research in the field of Timurid-Ming contacts.

## V. Publication Used in the Dissertation

1. „Történelem és irodalom: képzelet és valóság a kínai elbeszélő irodalomban.”(History and literature: fiction and reality in the Chinese vernacular literature) In: IMRE HAMAR – GERGELY SALÁT (eds.), *Kínai nyelv és irodalom: Tanulmányok Csongor Barnabás 80. születésnapjára*. Sinológiai Műhely 4. Budapest, Balassi Kiadó, 2003, 178-191.
2. „Review: Studies on the Inner Asian Languages (Nairiku Ajia Gengo no Kenkyu). Vol. 18. Osaka, The Society of Central Eurasian Studies, 2005.” *Acta Orient. Hung.* Vol. 58(4), 463-465 (2005).
3. „Xiyu fanguozhi és Xiyu xingchengji: két kora tizenötödik századi kínai forrás Közép-Ázsiáról.” (Xiyu fanguozhi and Xiyu xingchengji: two early fifteenth-century Chinese accounts about Central Asia) *Sinológiai Műhely* (forthcoming).
4. „Japanese and Chinese Research on the Timurid-Ming Chinese Contacts.” In: *Acta Orient. Hung.* (forthcoming).