

The Ming-Mongol Wars and Borderland Society in the Mid-Sixteenth Century

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The brutal wars fought between Ming China and the Mongols in the sixteenth century have enabled historians to observe and analyze the multi-dimensional interplay of imperial politics and local societies along the Ming-Mongol border. Traditionally, the history of the Mongol Empire in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries has attracted more attention from historians than did Mongols and Ming-Mongol relations in the sixteenth century. Previous generations of scholars, such as Henry Serruys and Wada Sei, have provided the basic frameworks for our current historical understanding of the events and social conditions along the Ming's northern borderland.¹

Recent scholarship has begun to interpret the Ming-Mongol borderlands through a more diverse lens that features social and local histories and goes beyond the traditional paradigm of political history. Zhao Shiyu discusses Ming frontier policies in a broader, comparative context and points out the possibility of understanding Ming frontiers as a whole by focusing on the relationship between the empire's internal dynamics and its frontier wars.² Deng Qingping pays attention to the living conditions of lower social classes and Ming soldiers residing in the Ming's northern frontier.³ Qiu Zhonglin studies the frontier environment, especially the forests along the Great Wall.⁴ Sun Yucen focuses on local people who crossed the border back and forth and their transregional networks that influenced military conflicts.⁵ These new studies touch on the social aspects of Ming-Mongol relations and move the focus from imperial politics to local communities.

As new academic works have opened up horizons, it is important to reexamine interrelated incidents on the Ming-Mongol frontier in a detailed fashion that takes account of developments on both sides of the border. I argue that the local everyday politics involving cross-border interactions sharply contrasted with the imperial conceptualization of Ming-Mongol relations and the military strategies of the Ming. This tension became more vexing and urgent when high politics provoked military conflicts. Local people responded to the Ming's attempts to pacify the borderland by fleeing to Mongolia and aiding the Mongols with their cross-border personal networks to undermine the Ming military buildup. At the same time, the

¹ Henry Serruys, *Trade Relations: The Horse Fairs (1400-1600)* (Bruxelles: Institut belge des hautes études chinoises, 1975); Henry Serruys, *The Mongols in China During the Hung-Wu Period, 1368-1398* (Bruges: Impr. Sainte-Catherine, 1959); Henry Serruys and Aubin Françoise, *The Mongols and Ming China: Customs and History* (London: Varioram, 1987); Sei Wada, *Ming Dai Meng Gu Shi Lun Ji*, trans. Pan Shixian (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1984).

² Shiyu Zhao, "A Reinterpretation on the Mongolian Problem in the Ming Dynasty from the Perspective of Age Turning," *Journal of Tsinghua University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)* 27, no. 1 (2012): 69-70.

³ Qingping Deng, "The Border Army and the Social Order of the Northern Border Towns in the Mid-Ming Period — Centering on the Confession of Zhao Quan," *Journal of Capital Normal University (Social Sciences Edition)*, no. 1 (2019): 24-33.

⁴ Zhonglin Qiu, "On the National defense line: Deforestation and Plantation along the Great Wall during the Ming Dynasty," *Ming Dai Yan Jiu*, no. 8 (Dec 2005): 1-66; Zhonglin Qiu, "Gathering, Hunting and Cultivation: Economic Activities of Soldiers and Civilians Outside the Ming Northern Border," *Ming Dai Yan Jiu*, no. 19 (Dec. 2012): 2177.

⁵ Yucen Sun, "People Who crossed the border between the Ming and Mongolia: Han Immigrants living in Southern Mongolia in the 16th century" (Master's thesis, Nanjing University, 2016).

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porous Ming-Mongol frontier during the wars facilitated cross-border contacts. When local communities were attacked and ruined, fleeing to Mongolia became an appealing choice for poor peasants and opportunity-seekers, and this choice looked even more attractive when Altan Khan, leader of Tümed Mongols who later became the *de facto* ruler of all western tribes, proactively called for agriculturalists and deserters to cross over into Mongol territories.

Ming Refusal to Trade and Literati Ethnic Concepts

The Mongols' threat and the Ming's reaction to it transformed the Ming's northern frontier into a militarized world. Many Ming soldiers and their households settled there, but as commoners, they suffered from endless wars and consequential economic collapse. The situation in northern Shanxi province was a perfect example of the whole northern borderland of the Ming. Because of its geographical proximity to Tümed, which was Altan Khan's base, northern Shanxi was the region most vulnerable to Mongol attack and it was invaded most frequently during the Ming era (1368-1644).⁶⁷ It is not surprising that Ming imperial finances were heavily burdened by the efforts to defend this borderland. In 1546, the imperial court had to spend nearly 380 thousand taels of silver on military buildup in Shanxi's northern borderland,⁷ while the hinterland of Shanxi (i.e., central and southern Shanxi) experienced three upsurges related to city wall construction during the mid-fifteenth to mid-sixteenth century.⁸ Nevertheless, the local government in Datong, the most crucial prefecture in northern Shanxi, managed to collect only an annual sum of about forty-three thousand taels. This tax burden, without a doubt, would eventually be passed on to local peasants.

The Ming's response was not restricted to city wall construction. The Ming army also sometimes undertook a proactive military strategy called *daochao*, meaning "to destroy the dens." According to Temur Temule, these Ming military campaigns were an important but neglected factor precipitating the Mongols' "retaliatory raids."⁹ In contrast to the conventional view that solely blames nomads for the outbreak of conflict, he suggests that the Ming often provoked wars.¹⁰ The main reason behind Mongol military campaigns against the Ming during the mid-sixteenth century was economic. They invaded Ming territory to force the Ming to reopen border trade. The Ming, on the other hand, firmly refused to comply with Mongol demands and even killed the Mongol envoys from time to time.

In 1541, Shi Tianjue from Mongolia was sent to Datong. He was a Ming soldier's son who was kidnapped by the Mongols from northern Shaanxi in 1525 when he was still a child.¹¹ After living in southern Mongolia for sixteen years, he and a Mongol named Kenqie were selected as envoys of Altan Khan. Their mission was to request permission from the Ming emperor to reopen the border markets. Shi told Ming officials that Altan recalled that his father, Bars Bolud Jinong, had received silk from the Ming emperor and had thereby gained "good

⁶ Jingchun Liu, *Ming Dai Jiu Bian Shi Di Yan Jiu* (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2014), 44-45.

⁷ One tael in late imperial China is about 37 grams of silver.

⁸ Ga Li, "Northern Frontier in Alarm: Mongol Invasion and City Wall Construction in Ming Shanxi," *Ming Dai Yan Jiu*, no. 21 (Dec. 2013): 33-50.

⁹ Temur Temule, "The Great Wall as Perilous Frontier for the Mongols in 16th Century: Reconsidering Nomadic-Sedentary Relations in Premodern Inner Asia," *International Journal of Korean History* 21, no. 1 (2016): 155.

¹⁰ Temur Temule, "The Great Wall as Perilous Frontier for the Mongols in 16th Century," 155.

¹¹ National Institute of Korean History, ed., *The Annals of the Choson Dynasty* (Seoul: Tongguk Munhwasa, 1958), 97: 32.

fame” among the Mongols. He asked the Ming to permit his “request of paying tribute” in exchange for gifts. Otherwise, he threatened, he would attack and sack Ming’s border towns.¹² The Jiajing emperor and his court were deeply suspicious that a conspiracy lurked beneath this request and obviously resented Altan’s threatening tone. Hence, the Mongol proposal was rejected. A local official named Shi Dao released Shi Tianjue and allowed him to return to Mongolia while Kenqie was detained at Datong. Nevertheless, the Jiajing emperor and his ministers were irritated by Shi Dao’s “groveling” actions, so he was soon punished by a salary reduction.¹³

Altan Khan did not seem to understand that his diplomatic efforts to establish bilateral trade with the Ming were doomed to fail, so he again sent Shi Tianjue along with Kenqie’s son to make the same demand. A newly appointed local official, Long Dayou, knew the emperor’s attitude toward the Mongols and thought this would be a good opportunity to demonstrate his loyalty to the court. He then arrested Shi and Kenqie and swiftly executed them according to the emperor’s edict, and the imperial court commended Long, as he had expected.¹⁴ The furious Mongols resumed their attacks on the Ming borders. Peter Perdue calls this the “repeated cycle” of “request, refusal, raid.”¹⁵ The Geng-Xu Incident was just one of the most conspicuous results of this cycle which would result in more wars.

With the death of Shi Tianjue, both the Ming and the Mongols lost an opportunity to negotiate peace. However, this case reflects the fact that trade was the primary motivation behind the Mongols’ aggression. As some scholars have noted, the Mongols hoped to trade with the Ming, and they (including the Oirats) had not had commercial exchanges with the Ming in the past.¹⁶ According to Shi Tianjue’s testimony, the Mongols knew that raiding was not an effective way to attain their goal. Shi told Ming officials that the Mongols admired and desired Chinese textiles, especially silk products, but they were not able to obtain them by looting Chinese towns while risking attacks from the Ming army. The Mongol leaders therefore requested the Ming court to open border markets.¹⁷ The Ming nevertheless thought the Mongols’ attitude was neither peaceful nor respectful enough to re-initiate tributary relations.

Inner Asian trade at the time was active but the Ming perceived it differently from its northern neighbors. The bilateral trade run by the Chinese official agency between Inner Asia and the Ming was not an unusual activity for either party. All commercial interactions nonetheless had to be described as paying tribute, otherwise they would be rejected by the Ming. The Oirats maintained tributary relations with the Ming even before Dayan Khan, grandfather of Altan, reunified Mongolia, and they sent a large delegation to obtain meal items and medicine from the Ming. Some Muslim businessmen in the delegation even managed to sell a significant amount of jade (about 9900 *jin*) in China.¹⁸ It is reasonable to assume that Altan might have

¹² *Annals of the Choson Dynasty*, 97: 33.

¹³ Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica, ed., *The Veritable Records of Ming* (Taipei: Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica, 1966), 253: 5073.

¹⁴ *Veritable Records of Ming*, 262: 5209.

¹⁵ Peter Perdue, “Coercion and Commerce on Two Chinese Frontiers,” in *Military Culture in Imperial China*, ed. Nicola Di Cosmo (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 324.

¹⁶ Fan Hu, “On the Policy to Refuse the Tributary Trade with Mongolia in the Shizong Period of Ming Dynasty and the Conflict of Agriculture and Nomad in Jiajing Period of Ming Dynasty,” *China’s Borderland History and Geography*, no. 2, (2015): 8-10; Zhao, “A Reinterpretation on the Mongolian Problem,” 69-70.

¹⁷ *Veritable Records of Ming*, 262: 5209.

¹⁸ Zhao, “A Reinterpretation on the Mongolian Problem,” 67.

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been an active participant in the Inner Asian business prior to his ascendancy as Khan. For example, Altan sent his key aide, Weizheng Sangzai, to Turpan, an important trade center in Central Asia ruled by Shah Khan who was Chaghatai Mongol, to “recall legends and relatives since the Chaghatai Khan.” Shah Khan was pleased and “gifted a lot of gems and thoroughbred horses” to Altan.¹⁹ Given the position of Turpan in the entire commercial network of the Inner Asian gem trade, particularly that in valuable jade, the visit of Altan’s envoy likely had a commercial purpose as well as geopolitical considerations.

The background of this mission to Turpan is also noteworthy. The mission happened in or just after the “year of yellow horses” (1558 C.E.) when Altan marched westward.²⁰ This was eight years after the siege of Beijing occurred, when Altan crossed the Great Wall and forced the Ming to open a horse market on the border of northern Shanxi. However, the market failed soon afterward because of Ming hostility toward it. As Cao Yongnian points out, the Jiajing emperor’s diehard refusal merely aimed to maintain his “dignity.” He quickly terminated the market after refusing the Mongols’ request for permitting poor Mongols to exchange horses for grain.²¹ The Mongols’ request was not unreasonable because, unlike luxury products like silk, grain provided subsistence, especially for Mongols living in poverty. The Ming, however, had to reproach the Mongols because they had penetrated Ming borders and sacked villages. Altan answered with a taunting attitude: “[T]he poor Mongols cannot find food, so I cannot prohibit them (from looting Chinese villages); China’s laws are so strict, but there are still thieves and robbers.”²²

However, the Mongols did not give up their effort to request the reopening of a border market. In 1552, Altan Khan sent another envoy named Yatouzhi to the Ming, but his fate was worse than that of Shi Tianjue: He was lured into Ming territory by a Chinese official translator and then captured. Before his execution, Yatouzhi said: “Killing me is easy, but I am afraid the Chinese will not have a peaceful life anymore.”²³ He was proved right as this was the last time that Altan sent an envoy to the Ming before 1570. This is why the arrival of Altan’s envoy in Turpan in 1558 should be noted — it is because at this time Altan likely lost his hope of establishing formal relations with the Ming by peaceful means and thereafter chose to cultivate his Inner Asian network.

Altan’s request for grain in exchange for horses might reflect the fact that the Mongols urgently needed agricultural products. In the 1550s, Altan began to receive refugees from the Ming so that he could build *bansheng* (houses or towns) to develop agriculture in Tümed territories.²⁴ The description of *bansheng* in Mongolian texts shows the significance of Altan’s effort to develop agriculture and how the Mongols described it in a positive light. This was a part of a broader trend of turning to a sedentary lifestyle in Inner Asia in this period.²⁵

¹⁹ Zhurongga, *The Biography of the Altan* (Hohhot: People’s Press of Inner Mongolia, 1990), 57-58.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 57-58.

²¹ Yongnian Cao, *Meng Gu Min Zu Tong Shi* (Hohhot: People’s Press of Inner Mongolia), 3: 316.

²² *Veritable Records of Ming*, 381: 6741.

²³ *Ibid.*, 382: 6767.

²⁴ Zhurongga, *The Biography of the Altan*, 55. *Bansheng* means houses and later had meaning of towns. See: Wenjuan Hu, “Research Overview on Chinese in *bansheng*,” *Studies the Mongol-yuan and China’s Bordering Area* 22 (Sep. 2010): 178-9.

²⁵ Zhao, “A Reinterpretation on the Mongolian Problem,” 66.

The Ming's stubborn attitude in rejecting the Mongol request is due to deep-seated intellectual and cultural biases against the Mongols, which further provoked a reaction hostile to Mongol demands. The Tumu Crisis in 1449 in which the Oirat ruler captured the Ming emperor substantially shocked Chinese literati and became an intellectual turning point for their perception of the distinctions between *hua* and *yi*, or cultured and barbarians. Some questioned the Yuan's legitimacy as a dynasty as literati opinions regarding the Mongols rapidly shifted to the conservative end.²⁶

Grand Secretary Qiu Jun (1421-1495) was an example of one such Chinese scholar-official. He argued that the peripheries of *tianxia* (all under heaven) should be seen as worthless wastes and the geographical segregation of different peoples had to be maintained to prevent "barbarians" from influencing China with their "barbarian cultures."²⁷ Qiu especially pointed out that the Ming should prevent its subjects from fleeing to "barbarian" regions because the enemies of the Ming would not be victorious without the assistance of those who fled. If fleeing Ming subjects provided the barbarians with intelligence about China, they would be much more threatening to China, just as the Tangut and Liao (Khitan) had endangered the Song.²⁸ Qiu's thoughts represented both the xenophobic ideas of the Song literati as well as the reinventions of earlier Confucian concepts. Later in the sixteenth century, as the threats of Mongols became increasingly menacing, the mainstream opinion of Chinese literati was saturated with the ideological discourse known as the "Sino-barbarian dichotomy" (*Hua Yi zhi bian*) and a hostile stance toward the Mongols. Maintaining contact with Mongols was improper enough in their eyes, let alone establishing a trade relationship. Thus, it is not strange that many officials condemned the Mongols and supported rejecting Mongol demands for a border market. Yang Jisheng, an official in the Ming's defense ministry, for example, strongly suggested that the emperor refute the idea of a border market with Mongols in order to "defend the majesty" because "China is the Celestial Empire and cannot trade with dogs and goats (i.e., Mongols)."²⁹

Ethnic Flexibility in Local Society

The debate within Beijing's imperial court undoubtedly influenced the border regions in a profound way. However, we can get a much different picture if we focus on the everyday politics of local officials, soldiers, and commoners, who acted much more flexibly and even in a way opposite to that of the Ming court.

Evidence suggests that local officials might have supported the opening of a border market. Weng Wanda, governor of the Xuanfu-Datong military region, memorialized the emperor to accept the Mongols' demand after Altan's envoys were killed by officer Dong Bao and his soldiers in 1546. Weng cited the event involving Shi Tianjue four years prior and indicated that he thought that Mongols showed sincerity, but officials had rejected them due to biases; he also condemned Dong and the soldiers' actions as deceptive and aimed at provoking conflicts with the Mongols.³⁰ In his view, this caused the Ming to lose its moral superiority because although Mongols were "dogs and goats in nature," Weng commented, they could

²⁶ Liu, "Yuan-Ming Revolution in national imagination," 143-71.

²⁷ Xianhai Zhao, "Qiu Jun's Ethnic Group and Frontier Concept," *The Journal of South China Sea Studies* 8, no. 1, (Jan. 2022): 116-9.

²⁸ Zhao, "Qiu Jun's Ethnic Group and Frontier Concept," 108-11.

²⁹ *Veritable Records of Ming*, 371: 6629-30.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 311: 5835-38.

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distinguish right and wrong. The Ministry of War, however, replied that Mongols were inherently not trustworthy, and pardoned Dong Bao and those soldiers of their crimes. The Jiajing emperor approved the minister's decision.³¹

Weng was not alone in this regard. Other local officials also suggested that the Ming should establish more dialogues with the Mongols or even develop closer relationships with them. Weng emphasized one incident from the Shi Tianjue case. When Shi Tianjue visited Datong to request trade relations, Shi Dao, governor of Datong, reported at once that it would be "too beneficial to describe for China" if the Mongols' demand was sincere and he hoped that the court would approve the request immediately. The imperial court dragged its feet on this issue, and Mongols had to visit Ming border forts frequently to inquire about it. One day, the Mongols invited a low-ranking Ming officer named Li Bao to a banquet. Li then visited Altan's camps and had a sociable gathering with the Mongols. When Altan heard that some Mongols had robbed the Chinese soldiers of their clothes and grain and taken them outside of Ming territory, he punished those Mongols severely and escorted those Chinese soldiers and their belongings back to China. The supervisor of local affairs in Datong, Tan Xue, reported this incident to the court and suggested that despite the unpredictable nature of Mongol affairs, Altan apparently had a respectful and sincere attitude towards the Ming. Tan thought the Ming should take precautionary measures if the request to trade was to be permitted, but a complete rejection would likely lead to immediate conflicts. He concluded that the court should send more soldiers and supplies to the frontier and appoint savvy officials to oversee Mongol affairs.³¹

As these border officials were more likely to bear the military consequences of Mongol attacks once their demands were rejected, they perceived and tried to address Ming-Mongol conflicts in a more pragmatic way, which was drastically different from the imperial court in Beijing. This divergence, Peter Perdue argues, can classify Chinese policy thinkers into groups following "the logic of theory," such as Yang Jisheng who served at the Ministry of War, versus groups following "the logic of practice," such as these local officials.³² The latter's approach had notable flexibility and pragmatism in contrast to that of officials in Beijing.

Everyday politics in the borderland was even more volatile for rank-and-file soldiers in the Ming army. They maintained daily contact with Mongols, smuggled products across the border, and even participated in illegal secret cults. This indicated that the everyday politics of the Ming-Mongol borderlands were at odds with the literati's moral configuration. Li Bao's experience, as discussed above, suggested that front-line soldiers and officers did not shun the society of the Mongols. These interactions were quite common on the front lines, as Qiu Luan, chief military officer in Datong during the siege of Beijing in 1550, reported in his memorials to the emperor: "Our sentries and nocturnal patrols often visit Mongol camps and do business with them, and eventually they develop a close relationship.... Mongols kept lookouts for Chinese sentries, and Chinese sentries herded horses for Mongols."³⁴ The sentries along the border and nocturnal patrols provided many more opportunities for soldiers to get into contact with Mongols than their colleagues had inside the Great Wall. Ming's military failure contributed to this "intimacy" between soldiers on both sides of the border. When Mongols invaded, they destroyed many Ming forts and defense facilities and moved their camps closer

³¹ *Veritable Records of Ming*, 251: 5030-32.

³² Perdue, "Coercion and Commerce on Two Chinese Frontiers," 326.

³⁴ *Veritable Records of Ming*, 364: 6483.

to approach the Ming border wall. Therefore, the outermost forts with sentries were farther from the Chinese border than from Mongol camps, and the Ming had to withdraw soldiers from these forts in 1552 to prevent them from maintaining close relationships with the Mongols and disclosing intelligence regarding the Ming.³³

The interaction between Ming sentries and the Mongols reveals the personal and practical features of everyday politics. While Confucian elites prescribed the relationship between the Chinese and Mongols as untenable based on the distinction between *hua* and *yi*, such preconceived notions contrasted sharply with the everyday reality in the frontier. Most of the time, political ideology did not factor in Ming soldiers' decisions to defect to the Mongol side. For example, in 1558, an officer named Wei Ang, in a branch fort of Datong, raped his subordinate's daughter and escaped to Mongolia after his crime was uncovered. Soon afterward he returned with Mongol cavalries for his wife and children, but border soldiers ambushed and captured him and eventually had him executed by orders from Beijing.³⁴ Wei's flight to Mongolia to evade punishment and his sudden return with Mongol horsemen showed he had maintained personal contact with Mongols. As Qiu Luan described in his memorial, personal contacts such as these were widespread in the borderland.

In addition, many Chinese peasants fled to Mongolia either to seek relief from famine and poverty, to evade onerous taxes or governmental persecution, or simply to pursue a better life. Zhao Shiyu cited a case of a Chinese man joining several Mongol cavalries in spying on a Ming fort. The former Ming subject refused the soldiers' command that he return to China but, instead, told the soldiers that he was originally from Wei Prefecture of Gansu, but livelihood there was difficult while living in Mongolia was "easy and free."³⁵ The presence of large amounts of Ming refugees and captives alike in Mongolia also triggered Altan to build *bansheng* settlements and encourage the migration of sedentary Chinese.

When Mongols invaded Ming forts and villages with the help of Chinese guides, local villagers were often aware of the raids ahead of time, and even the names of the attackers.³⁶ The cross-border relationship was ubiquitous. The abovementioned cases of Shi Tianjue, Yatouzhi, and Wei Ang testified to the diverse interplay between the Chinese and Mongols in the frontier.

The presence of Ming deserters or captives in Mongolia did not escape the notice of the Ming authorities. Some of them served as spies for the Mongols. During the 1550s, local officials in northern Shanxi province frequently reported capturing spies from Mongolia. In 1550, a total of forty spies were arrested, all of whom had Chinese names.³⁷ Henry Serruys also notes the capture of Chinese spies working for the Mongols, but he does not differentiate them from the Mongols' Chinese aides or returned Chinese captives from Mongolia.³⁸

On the border between northern Shanxi and Tümed area ruled by Altan, cross-border population movement was closely related to espionage. Border-crossing activities, including fleeing, deserting, espionage, and seeking protection in Mongolia, can be viewed as responses to specific circumstances. These individuals proactively weighed their options and made

³³ *Veritable Records of Ming*, 382: 6762.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 456: 7711.

³⁵ Zhao, "A Reinterpretation on the Mongolian Problem," 71.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 73.

³⁷ *Veritable Records of Ming*, 419: 7267; 425: 7362; 452: 7672.

³⁸ Henry Serruys, "Chinese in Southern Mongolia During the Sixteenth Century," *Monumenta Serica* 18, no. 1 (1959): 44-49.

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decisions. The choices they made, in turn, influenced both the Ming imperial court and Mongol nobles. For example, the Ming government enacted a policy to attract Chinese captives in Mongolia to return with rewards. It succeeded in enticing many former Ming subjects to resettle in the Ming territory. However, some of them fled again when the promises did not pay out and extortion by local officials became unbearable.³⁹

Both Ming and Mongol officials were aware of the value of these Chinese border-crossers and their intelligence. Their collaboration gave the Mongols considerable advantages over the Ming and thus reduced military losses, while also allowing the Ming's local political-military system to gather intelligence. Nonetheless, the situation worsened after a key figure named Zhao Quan fled to Mongolia.

Zhao Quan was the son of a low-ranking officer who escaped to Mongolia in 1555 because his neighbor threatened to report him as a follower of the White Lotus Sect. As one of the largest secret societies in China, the White Lotus was banned by the Ming government as a heterodox religious sect. Zhao was the disciple of a White Lotus master named Lü Mingzhen, who predicted that Zhao “has the fortune to command thousands of soldiers.” After Lü was arrested and executed in 1549, his other disciple, Qiu Fu, escaped to Mongolia and later recommended Zhao to Altan Khan.⁴⁰

The Ming crackdown on “cults” and local society in the borderland was long-standing. Shi Dao, governor of Datong, launched a campaign against the followers of the White Lotus in 1551.⁴¹ There was no doubt that the mounting pressure would have forced Zhao Quan to escape with his family and several friends. Zhao was known to be intelligent and equipped with military skills. He taught the Mongols to use tools to demolish the brick walls of Ming forts and towns, ambush the Ming army, and manage migrant populations.⁴² Zhao became Altan's most influential consultant and the leader of the *bansheng* community of Tümed.

Zhao developed an extensive personal network spanning northern Shanxi and the Tümed area, comprised primarily of followers of the White Lotus sect. The cross-border network of Chinese fugitives and their contacts on the Ming side of the border became a knotty problem for the Ming, as manifested by Sun Yucen's case study of the event at Laoyin Fort. These fugitives and their inside contacts in Laoyin Fort planned an attack along the Ming border but were foiled by Ming's informants in the *bansheng*, where the Ming also developed their own intelligence network. As Sun points out, this anti-Ming network consisted of followers of the White Lotus and was extended through kinship and native-place ties.⁴³

This case testifies to how people and information flowed across the Ming-Mongol border. Following Qiu Fu's advice, Altan offered to extend preferential treatment to any educated Chinese with civil service examination degrees. This proved effective in attracting literate

³⁹ Qian Wu, “The Face of Empire—Taoren and the Northern Frontier of the Ming Dynasty,” *China's Borderland History and Geography Studies* 29, no. 1 (Mar 2019): 67-69.

⁴⁰ “The Confession of Zhao Quan,” in *Ming Dai Menggu Han Ji Shi Liao Hui Bian*, ed. Yinhu Bo and Xiong Wang (Hohhot: People's Press of Inner Mongolia, 2006), 2: 108.

⁴¹ *Veritable Records of Ming*, 374: 6667.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 486: 8100.

⁴³ Sun, “People Who crossed the border between the Ming and Mongolia,” 27-33.

Chinese individuals across the border — though their claims of holding degrees were often false. Altan's camp was soon filled with opportunity-seekers.⁴⁴

Aided by the network of Chinese consultants, the Ming-Mongol wars entered a bloody phase from 1557 to 1570. Altan Khan mobilized more than ten thousand cavalries for every battle and, after 1562, invaded the hinterlands and auxiliary counties around Beijing. The conflicts were exacerbated because of Zhao, his clique, and their cross-border networks. The Ming government took measures to prevent Zhao's conspiracies and arrested some critical members of Zhao's network. However, Zhao's influence could not be eradicated until the Ming and the Mongols reached a peace agreement in 1571.

Altan's grandson, Daičing Ejei Taiji, fled to Datong and surrendered himself to the Ming authorities in 1570 because Altan arranged for his fiancée to marry an Ordos nobleman. This defection shocked both the Ming and the Mongols. Whereas Altan was angry and anxious, the Ming court suspected a new conspiracy hatched by the Mongols. However, the situation was actually quite different: the Jiajing emperor had died several years before, and the young Longqing emperor relied more on his ministers to make decisions. Meanwhile, Wang Chonggu, a native of Shanxi, was appointed governor of the Xuanfu-Datong military region. Wang received help in the court from his nephew, Grand Secretary Zhang Siwei.⁴⁵ Wang persuaded the emperor to end this event with a win-win outcome: Daičing went back to Mongolia; Altan accepted the Ming title and promised to pay tribute to Beijing; in return, the Ming agreed to reopen border trade. Zhao Quan and his followers were sent back to China and executed.

The set of events described above brings us many concluding thoughts. It allows us to interpret Ming-Mongol frontiers as shaped by the interplay between imperial policies, cultural biases, and local interactions. These multi-layered factors were entangled. The local community in the frontier was impacted by imperial policies that gave rise to endless wars and turbulence. The policies were in turn supported by deep-seated cultural biases based on the distinction between *hau* and *yi*, which further worsened the Ming-Mongol relations and led to more intensive conflicts. Such conflicts were further complicated by local people's responses in fleeing and aiding the Mongols. This dynamic can be seen as a potential model to re-examine different frontier regions in late imperial China, and its versatility, by virtue of its focus on local interplay of imperial policy and literati ideology, may serve to close regional and temporal gaps and lead to a more nuanced interpretation of the complexity of multiethnic frontiers.

Moreover, the deep commercial links across the Great Wall and the economies behind them compose a meaningful question that needs further investigation. For example, Zhao Shiyu notes that Wang Chonggu and Zhang Siwei were natives of Shanxi, home to the Shanxi merchants who became the most powerful commercial forces in the Ming and Qing eras. This commercial background might be a factor in explaining Wang and Zhang's pro-trade attitudes.⁴⁶ The economic interconnection between the Chinese heartland and frontier in the late sixteenth century is a promising avenue of research.

⁴⁴ Shike Feng, "An Da Qian Zhi," in *Ming Dai Menggu Han Ji Shi Liao Hui Bian*, ed. Yinhu Bo and Xiong Wang (Hohhot: People's Press of Inner Mongolia, 2006), 2: 125.

⁴⁵ Meijue Wang, "Further Analysis of Altan Tributary in Ming Dynasty: From the Discussion about Mutual Trade with Chonggu Wang by Siwei Zhang," *Journal of Inner Mongolia Normal University (Philosophy & Social Science)* 45, no. 3 (May 2016): 8-13.

⁴⁶ Shiyu Zhao, "Ethnic Relationship and Frontier Strategy of the Ming Court During Longqing's and Early Wanli's Reign," *Journal of Tsinghua University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)* 32, no. 1 (2017): 131.