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EMBASSY RELATIONS BETWEEN AMIR TEMUR AND THE MING DYNASTY

Elmurodov Nodirbek Nurbek o‘g‘li
Termez State Pedagogical Institute
faculty of Social Sciences and pedagogy,
student of the History educational direction.
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Abstract: This article analyzes the specific features of diplomatic relations established between the state of Amir Temur and the Ming Dynasty in China during the last quarter of the 14th century and the beginning of the 15th century. The study describes the formation of embassy ties between the two states, the exchange of ambassadors, the interconnection of trade and diplomatic missions, as well as the political stance of the Ming Dynasty toward the state of Amir Temur. In particular, information regarding the ambassadors sent to China on behalf of Amir Temur and the role of the major embassy mission led by Fu An in the escalation of tensions between the two states are analyzed.

Keywords: Amir Temur, Ming Dynasty, China, diplomatic relations, embassy, Fu An, Samarkand, trade, ambassadors, Timurids.

Introduction

In the last quarter of the 14th century and the beginning of the 15th century, the state of Amir Temur in Central Asia and the Ming Dynasty in East Asia emerged as major political powers. Active diplomatic and embassy relations were established between the two states during this period. However, there are certain complex and controversial issues in studying the history of relations between Amir Temur and the rulers of China. One of the main reasons for this is the strong presence of court historiography traditions in both Chinese and Muslim sources. In the sources of both sides, instances of glorifying one's own ruler and diminishing the status of a political rival can be observed. Therefore, taking a critical approach to historical sources is of crucial importance when studying these relations.

The starting date of relations between Amir Temur and the Ming Dynasty is also interpreted differently in historical literature [1; p. 225]. Some researchers note that the Ming Dynasty sent ambassadors to Amir Temur as early as the 1370s. In other records, the initial embassy relations are linked to the year 1385. At the same time, there is information indicating that the first embassy sent to China by Amir Temur reached China in the spring of 1387. The main objective of this article is to systematically analyze the formation and characteristics of diplomatic and embassy ties between the state of Amir Temur and the Ming Dynasty, as well as the factors that led to the escalation of tension in these relations [2; pp. 226–278].

Literature reviyew

Chinese chronicles, works of Muslim historians, and studies by modern historians serve as important sources for studying the relations between Amir Temur and the Ming Dynasty. Chinese sources preserve abundant information regarding the ambassadors and trade groups sent from the state of Amir Temur. In particular, the Ming Shilu records that ambassadors from the state of Amir Temur visited China nine times between 1389 and 1398. These sources note that the envoys visiting the Ming Dynasty may have actually been merchant caravans. This is because certain groups, alongside bringing gifts to the imperial court, sought to obtain silk, tea, fabrics, and gold

items, which demonstrates that they also had commercial interests [3; pp. 201–202]. The works of researchers such as R. Grousset, E. V. Rtveladze, A. Khojayev, T. Fayziyev, O. Buriyev, J.-P. Roux, Z. Rajkai, and others hold significant importance on this subject. In particular, Z. Rajkai examined the relations between the state of Amir Temur and the Ming Dynasty from a historiographical perspective. Among Muslim historical sources, Sharaf al-Din Ali Yazdi's work Zafarnama occupies a special place.

Research Methodology

In evaluating historical events, sources were comparatively analyzed to formulate a comprehensive conclusion on the topic. In particular, two differing viewpoints regarding whether Amir Temur recognized vassalage to China or not were examined based on evidence in the sources. Information presented in Chinese chronicles and the works of Muslim historians was cross-compared. The embassies, their dates, and their duties recorded in Chinese sources were benchmarked against data in Muslim historical works. Additionally, the issue of distinguishing between diplomatic embassy missions and trade caravans was given special attention.

Analysis and Results

Initial contacts between Amir Temur and the Ming Dynasty were closely tied to the political interests of both states. The newly established Ming Dynasty sought to find allies against the Mongol and Oirat forces to the north, as well as to gather information about western countries, including Moghulistan (Eastern Chagatai), the state of Amir Temur, and other regions. From this perspective, China's embassy missions sent to Central Asia can be linked not only to diplomatic objectives but also to information-gathering purposes. The first embassy sent by Amir Temur reached China in the spring of 1387. Sources record that the embassy led by Mulla Hafiz presented 15 horses and 2 camels to the emperor, and a banquet was held in their honor [4; p. 55]. This data shows that relations between the two states initially developed on the basis of diplomatic gifts and embassy exchanges. Chinese sources record that between 1389 and 1398, envoys from the state of Amir Temur visited China nine times. Among them were groups led by Mulla Hafiz, Taj ad-Din, Shahalil, Ni'mat ad-Din, Darvesh, and Alamat ad-Din. However, caution is necessary regarding whether to accept all of these embassies as official diplomatic missions. In Chinese historiography, there were instances where merchant caravans arriving at the imperial court were recorded as embassies, and the gifts presented by merchants to the ruler were interpreted as tribute. The fact that certain "ambassadors" gave gifts to the emperor and requested silk, tea, fabrics, and gold items in return increases the probability that they arrived for trade purposes. From this point of view, evaluating all groups that traveled to China on behalf of Amir Temur as official ambassadors of equal status may not be correct. While some of them were trade missions, it is also plausible that some fulfilled the task of studying the political and social situation in China for the state of Amir Temur. Based on the analysis of sources, two distinct viewpoints can be identified. According to the first view, Amir Temur was not politically subordinate to China, and some of the embassies in Chinese sources were actually commercial groups. According to the second view, Amir Temur recognized China's political supremacy to a certain extent during the early stage of his reign, but later rejected such a relationship as his state power grew [5; p. 41]. Coming to a definitive conclusion on this matter based on the content of the sources is complex, as it is evident that sources from both sides interpreted diplomatic relations based on their own political perspectives. One of the most tense stages of diplomatic relations between the state of Amir Temur and the Ming Dynasty is connected with the large embassy mission led by Fu An, sent from China to Samarkand in 1395. This embassy consisted of a group of 1,500 people. Chinese sources mention that they were tasked with requesting 1,000 horses from Amir Temur's court, and in return, paper money was

provided to be presented to the Timurid court. The deployment of an embassy mission in such large numbers shows that relations between the two states went beyond simple diplomatic contact and assumed strategic and political significance. After arriving in Samarkand, Fu An's group was detained by Amir Temur, and the ambassadors' return to China took place only after Amir Temur's death. Various views exist in historical literature regarding the reasons for the detention of Fu An's embassy. One is linked to the Ming ruler describing Amir Temur as a ruler obedient to the Khan of China. The second reason cited is the envoys' desire to visit Herat, and the third reason is the news of a massacre of Muslims in China reaching Amir Temur. However, not all of these reasons are equally reliable. For instance, because the news regarding the massacre of Muslims reached Amir Temur later, it is chronologically difficult to confirm it as the primary reason for the detention of Fu An's embassy. The arrival of Chinese envoys before Amir Temur in the winter of 1397–1398 led to a further escalation of tensions between the two states. Sources record that Amir Temur ordered the Chinese ambassadors to return from Samarkand via a long detour through Isfahan, Tabriz, Shiraz, Herat, and other cities. This "journey" may have been intended to demonstrate the territorial scale and political power of Amir Temur's state to the Chinese envoys. At the same time, in 1398, Amir Temur received ambassadors from various countries in Kabul. Among them was an individual mentioned under the name "Taizi Oglan." However, it is incorrect to assess him as an ambassador of the Ming Dynasty or a Chinese prince. According to source data, he was a prince who came from the Northern Yuan state, had been defeated in political struggles, and came to seek assistance from Amir Temur [6; pp. 421–452]. The end of the 14th century was a period of major shifts in Asian political relations. In 1399, the political situation in China also intensified. Zhu Di, the uncle of Emperor Jianwen (who had succeeded Emperor Hongwu after his death in 1398), launched a rebellion against his nephew's rule. Later, Zhu Di ascended the Chinese throne as the Yongle Emperor. During this period, significant changes also occurred on the eastern borders of Amir Temur's state. Following the death of Khizr Khoja Khan, the ruler of the Eastern Chagatai Ulus, unrest broke out in the region. Consequently, monitoring the political situation related to China and pursuing a cautious policy on the eastern borders became crucial for Amir Temur. Meanwhile, information regarding a massacre of Muslims in China is reflected differently across sources. There is no unified view on this event in the examined sources. On the contrary, some records note that Hongwu, the founder of the Ming dynasty, held a favorable attitude toward Muslims and that Muslims served in high-ranking positions within the country [7; p. 199].

Conclusion

Diplomatic relations between Amir Temur and the Ming Dynasty were closely bound up with the complex political and geopolitical processes of their era. These relations were not limited to simple embassy exchanges; they also encompassed factors such as commercial and economic interests, territorial security, and the consolidation of international prestige. According to the research findings, the active foreign policy pursued by the Timurid state was clearly reflected in its relations with China as well. While Amir Temur conducted diplomacy in his time by combining it with military strength, the Ming dynasty sought to regulate relations primarily through traditional political-diplomatic means. Furthermore, relations between the two states played a vital role in developing trade and cultural exchange carried out via the Great Silk Road. This, in turn, strengthened the interconnectedness between Central Asia and East Asia. Overall, diplomatic relations between Amir Temur and the Ming Dynasty constituted an important component of the international system of that period and continue to hold great scientific significance today as a historical lesson.

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