

MONETARY RELATIONS BETWEEN THE TIMURID DYNASTY AND THE MING DYNASTY

Nodira B. Izatova

Research Department of Medieval Studies

Institute of History, Academy of Sciences Uzbekistan

E-mail address: inodi1806@gmail.com

ABOUT ARTICLE

Key words: Timurid Empire, Ming Dynasty, Chen Cheng, monetary relations, trade, jade exchange, taxation, diplomacy, silver coins, economic cooperation.

Abstract: The article explores the monetary and trade relations between the Timurid Empire and the Ming Dynasty, drawing on Chinese and Central Asian sources. It highlights Chen Cheng's observations on market structure, coin circulation, and taxation systems, as well as the role of jade exchange in diplomatic missions. The study reveals how monetary policy, tribute exchanges, and diplomatic interactions reflected broader economic cooperation between the two states.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article examines the monetary and trade relations between the Timurid Empire and the Ming Dynasty in the 15th century. The topic is relevant because it reflects not only the diplomatic interactions between the two great powers but also the mechanisms of early interregional economic exchange. Previous studies have primarily focused on political and cultural aspects of these relations, while the economic dimension remains less explored. This research aims to analyze how monetary exchanges, tribute payments, and trade missions shaped the economic cooperation between the two states, based on Chinese sources.

2. METHODS

The research is based on a comparative historical analysis of Chinese and Central Asian sources. Primary materials include the Ming Shilu, Chen Cheng's travel notes, and Timurid chronicles. The study also uses secondary literature by modern historians specializing in Ming diplomacy and Silk Road trade. The method combines source analysis with historical interpretation, allowing for the identification of patterns of monetary circulation, tribute payments, and diplomatic gift exchange between the two empires.

3. RESULTS

The analysis shows that monetary relations between the Timurids and the Ming Dynasty were an integral part of diplomatic exchanges. Chinese records indicate that ambassadors from Turfan and other Timurid territories received silk, paper money, and silver as official gifts. For instance, in 1419, envoys from Turfan were granted 10,000 paper coins (ding) and 70 bolts of silk, while in 1408 they received 500 silver liang and 1,000 paper coins (guan). These payments reveal not only the material aspect of diplomacy but also the Ming strategy of economic influence through controlled currency circulation.



4. DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that the Ming court used monetary gifts and tribute systems as tools of political control. By providing paper money valid only within Chinese territory, the Ming strengthened their internal economy and ensured the dependence of foreign envoys on the imperial system. The Timurids, in turn, benefited from participating in such exchanges, using diplomatic missions as a cover for trade activities. This mutual interest contributed to the stability of diplomatic relations and the development of long-distance trade routes across Central Asia.

5. CONCLUSION

The study confirms that monetary relations played a key role in Ming–Timurid diplomacy. Through the exchange of silver, paper money, and luxury goods, both empires pursued economic and political goals. These interactions reveal that diplomacy during the 15th century served not only as a channel for political negotiation but also as an effective mechanism of economic integration along the Silk Road.

The founder of the Timurid Empire, Timur, was not only a great military commander but also a farsighted statesman who paid great attention to economic and financial matters. His monetary policy played an important role in stabilizing and managing trade across the vast territory stretching from India to Asia Minor. In Chinese sources, the trade and monetary relations of the Timurid period are described in Chen Cheng's work «Xi Yu Fan Guo Zhi» (西域番国志) — «Records of Foreign Countries in the Western Regions».¹

Chen discusses the economic and commercial life of the local population. In his work, he mentions city markets and pays attention to their architectural features: the markets were covered with domes made of stone and brick, with carefully designed openings left for natural light. This is a vivid example of the tradition of constructing covered trading areas in the Middle East.²

According to Chen's observations, the commodity–monetary relations in the region were mainly based on the circulation of silver and copper coins. He notes that three types of silver currency units — tanga and dinar — were in use, supplemented by small copper coins known as pul. The use of these minor coins, however, was restricted within local legal boundaries. The traveler also provides approximate exchange rates between these units and emphasizes that a 20 percent trade duty was imposed on all commercial transactions. This, apparently, represented a fixed form of taxation on commercial activity.³

According to Chen's observations, the circulation of money in the region was strictly controlled by the central authorities, and the use of coins without the state seal in trade was officially prohibited. The main means of calculation consisted of silver coins divided into three denominations. The largest of them weighed 1 liang 6 fen (approximately 5.97 grams) and was called tanga (dengge). The medium-value coin, known as dinar (dina), weighed 8 fen (about 2.98

¹ Chen Cheng (陈诚, Chén Chéng) was a Chinese diplomat and traveler of the Ming dynasty who was sent to Central Asia in 1414 by Emperor Yongle (Zhu Di) as an envoy.

² 陈诚. 西域番国志. 页 9.

³ 陈诚. 西域番国志. 页 10.



grams). The smallest denomination, the chahoromi (se), weighed 4 fen, equivalent to approximately 1.49 grams. All three types were privately minted. After minting, the coins were taken to the ruler's residence to pay the required duty and receive the official seal. In trade circulation, there was a general rule: if a coin lacked an official seal, the transaction record was considered invalid.

Below these in value were copper coins used as monetary units, commonly known as pul. According to local standards, six or nine pul were equivalent to one chahoromi. The circulation of these coins was strictly limited to the region in which they were issued; beyond that territory, they were not accepted.⁴

Chinese sources also mention jade as a medium of exchange in trade relations between the Timurids and the Ming dynasty. The first documented record of jade exchange between the Timurid state and the Ming dynasty dates back to 1432 (the 7th year of Emperor Xuande's reign). At that time, Shah Rukh sent an envoy together with the Chinese ambassador Li Gui, bringing gifts that included camels and jade artifacts. Later, in 1437 (the 2nd year of the Zhengtong era), additional gifts — horses and jade items — were sent from Samarkand and Herat. In 1445 (the 10th year of Zhengtong), the Ming emperor Yingzong sent an official letter to Ulugh Beg, presenting various colored fabrics as gifts to him and his wife, as well as items made of gold and jade, a ceremonial staff carved with a dragon's head, a fine saddle, and gold-embroidered textiles. Subsequently, in 1456 (the 7th year of the Jingtai era), Samarkand again sent gifts consisting of horses, camels, and jade artifacts.⁵

Coins played a very important role in monetary relations. Analyzing the symbolic meaning of coins, the Chinese scholar Lin Junyong (林钧永) provides us with valuable information. According to him, all the coins minted during that period contained Arabic inscriptions, but some had a mark on the reverse side consisting of three circles. In 1403, the King of Castile sent an embassy to the Timurid state led by Ruy González de Clavijo. In his memoirs, published under the title «Clavijo's Mission to the East», he states that Timur's emblem consisted of three circles enclosed in a rectangular frame. According to his interpretation, this symbol signified Timur's dominion over three-quarters of the world. This emblem was used not only on coins but also widely in architecture — it could be seen on many buildings. Timur's seal also contained an image of three circles within a rectangle. The judicial seal, in particular, was inscribed with the word “justice” and decorated with the same three circles along its edge. All of this suggests that the three-circle emblem was indeed Timur's official symbol. Nevertheless, it remains unclear whether Clavijo's interpretation accurately conveys its original meaning.⁶

There is also information that Amir Timur's coins retained the Persian style and continued the minting traditions inherited from the late Ilkhanid period. On the obverse side of the coin, the inscriptions usually included: «al-sultān al-a'zam sultan» («The Great Sultan, the Sultan»), the ruler's name, as well as the phrase «khalīdā Allāh mulkahu wa sultānahu» («May God preserve his reign and sovereignty»), along with the place and year of minting. The reverse side bore the inscription “lā ilāha illā Allāh, Muḥammadur rasūl Allāh» («There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah»). Around it was written the names of the four great

⁴ 陳誠. 西域番国志. 页 10.

⁵ 许晓东. 帖木儿王朝玉器帖木儿王朝玉器. 香港中文大学文物馆. 页 12.

⁶ 林钧永. 帖木儿的“三环”钱币. 中国商报·收藏拍卖导报. 2008.



caliphs — Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and Ali — and sometimes the place and year of minting were also indicated on this side.⁷

If we analyze the taxation system and its relation to the Ming dynasty, several conclusions can be drawn. In Samarkand, Shahrukh and his son Ulughbeg (1394–1449) introduced the Mongol trade tax system known as «tamgha», which caused dissatisfaction among the religious scholars since it was contrary to Islamic law. To give this tax religious legitimacy, Shahrukh redefined it as zakat, the obligatory alms tax for Muslims. This difference in the interpretation of taxation was particularly important for Chinese embassies and trade representatives visiting Herat and other centers of the Timurid Empire. Chinese travelers unfamiliar with local regulations could easily misunderstand the tax practice in the markets as arbitrariness or fraud. To support trade, including long-distance commerce, it was necessary to develop infrastructure. Although caravanserais were rarely mentioned in early 15th-century sources, a list of constructions commissioned by Mir Alisher Navoi shows that the old caravanserais had become outdated, making it more practical to build new ones. These facilities not only provided comfort and security for merchants and envoys — including Chinese representatives — but also generated income through rent and services offered to traders.⁸

«Ming Shilu» (明实录)⁹ The Chinese historical source Ming Shilu (“Veritable Records of the Ming Dynasty”) contains valuable information about the monetary and economic relations between China and Turfan in the 15th century, especially during the reign of Emperor Yongle (1402–1424) and his successors. Between 1407 and 1462, dozens of embassies were sent from Turfan with tribute, indicating that these relations had a regular and official character. The main forms of tribute from Turfan included horses, as well as camels, falcons, leopards, jade, local products, and rare animals.

In return, China provided «reciprocal gifts» such as:

silver (measured in liang, hang, and ting),

paper money (guan, ting),

precious silk fabrics,

Buddhist robes,

colored brocades,

as well as daily clothing and decorative textiles.

The amounts of payments were recorded in detail. For example, in 1419, envoys from Turfan received 10,000 paper notes (ting) and 70 bolts of silk, while in 1408 they were given 500 silver coins (liang) and 1,000 paper notes (guan). In some cases, the gifts included Buddhist symbols, indicating that before the spread of Islam in Turfan in the mid-15th century, the Ming dynasty of

⁷ 程彤 吴冰冰. 伊朗古代钱币的宗教内涵. China Academic Journal Electronic Publishing House. 2009. 页 120.

⁸ Bernard O'Kane. Timurid Architecture In Khurasan. Mazda Publishers In Association With Undena Publications. 1987. P 4-5.

⁹ Каримова Н.Э. Сочинение «Мин Шилу Лэйцзюань. Шэвай Шилу Цзюань» – Источник По Истории Внешних Связей Династии Мин. Uzbekistan-China: development of historical, cultural, scientific and economic relations. Vol. III. 2023.



China exerted religious influence in the region. Beyond economic benefits, China used the tribute system to strengthen its influence over frontier regions, managing the status of vassals through gifts and expenditures, and controlling trade by issuing paper money valid only within Chinese territory. This promoted domestic consumption of Chinese goods and reinforced the dependence of “tribute-paying states” on the Ming court.¹⁰

Envoys sent to China on behalf of the Timurids were subject to strict supervision: Chinese officials required an exact record of the number of attendants and prohibited any false information. This was particularly important because many merchants accompanying the missions were officially registered as servants or slaves in order to gain entry into Chinese territory. Such measures allowed Timurid merchants to participate in interregional trade under the guise of diplomacy, showing a close connection between official diplomacy and commercial interests.

Once officially registered, envoys were treated as honored guests and provided with state support - including food, accommodation, and travel expenses. All these costs were covered by the Chinese government, indicating the existence of a well-organized system of intergovernmental financial cooperation. Moreover, detailed records of gifts, provisions, border inspections, and escort arrangements make it possible to trace the funds allocated for accompanying the envoys and the regulated financial flows related to their visits. Thus, sources documenting the participation of Timurid envoys in the Chinese diplomatic system provide valuable insights not only into international relations but also into the financial practices and strategies through which the Timurids used diplomacy as a tool of economic influence.¹¹

REFERENCES:

1. Chen, C. (Chén Chéng). (1414). *Xiyu Fanguo Zhi* [Records of the Western Regions]. pp. 9–10. (In Chinese)
2. Xu, Xiaodong. (n.d.). *Jade Artifacts of the Timurid Dynasty*. Hong Kong: Chinese University Art Museum. p. 12. (In Chinese)
3. Lin, Junyong. (2008). The “Three Rings” Coins of Timur. *China Business Daily: Collection and Auction Guide*. (In Chinese)
4. Cheng, Tong & Wu, Bingbing. (2009). Religious Connotations of Ancient Iranian Coins. *China Academic Journal Electronic Publishing House*, p. 120. (In Chinese)
5. O’Kane, B. (1987). *Timurid Architecture in Khurasan*. Mazda Publishers in Association with Undena Publications, pp. 4–5.
6. Karimova, N. E. (2023). The Work “Ming Shilu Leizuan. Shewai Shiliao Juan” as a Source on the History of Foreign Relations of the Ming Dynasty. *Uzbekistan-China: Development of Historical, Cultural, Scientific and Economic Relations* (Vol. III). (In Russian)
7. Rossabi, M. (n.d.). *Ming China and Turfan, 1406–1517*. Cleveland, Ohio, pp. 210–213.
8. Zhang, Wende. (2023). Cultural Exchanges between the Timurid King Shahrukh’s Mission to China and the Silk Road. *Journal of Huaiyin Teachers College*, p. 267. (In Chinese)

¹⁰ M. Rossabi. *Ming China And Turfan, 1406-1517*. Cleveland, Ohio. P 210-213.

¹¹ 张文德. 帖木儿王朝沙哈鲁国王遣使中国与丝路文化交流. *Journal of Huaiyin Teachers College*. 2023. 页 267.

