

China as Clime: a Response to Evrim Binbaş

David Brophy | ORCID: 0000-0003-3595-056X

University of Sydney

david.brophy@sydney.edu.au

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Evrin Binbaş's consideration of an "epistolographic geography" of Asia returns us to a classic moment of encounter between East and Central Asia—the diplomatic exchange between the Ming Dynasty and the Timurids. While such acts of state may not figure prominently in the sort of contemporary imaginings of the "Silk Road" that Binbaş opens with, recently Xin Wen has made a case for the centrality of such exchanges to any defensible definition of that term. In this view it was diplomacy, not trade or proselytism, that most linked China to the rest of continental Eurasia in the centuries from the Tang until the Mongol Empire.¹ Concepts of connectivity and mobility, that is to say, cannot be separated from the conscious efforts to delineate boundaries and define self and other that occurred in such ritualized exchanges of emissaries and letters. This is not to mention other, often more violent acts of state that also facilitated long-range Eurasian cultural exchange throughout history—hostage-taking, enslavement, relocation of skilled populations. The archive of early modern Central Asian history is replete with such stories, with a rare few furnishing the historian with valuable first-person narratives. But for scholars interested in the valence, or simply the validity, of large political and geographic categories such as "Asia", the diplomatic archive remains an essential reference point. The Ming-Timurid exchange is a relatively rare and well documented case of two expansionist empires meeting across a divide now subsumed within current conceptions of Asia, but not the only example. Here I take a later case, that of eighteenth-century Qing relations with Afghanistan, to reflect on what I take to be some of Binbaş's concerns.

¹ Xin Wen, *The King's Road: Diplomacy and the Remaking of the Silk Road* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023).

As discussed most recently by Jul Eijk and Timur Khan in this journal, in 1763 Ahmad Shah Durrani sent his emissary Mir Khan to the Qing court in Beijing.² Sadly, much of what transpired in this meeting remains opaque to the historian. Like Amir Temür's first letter to the Hongwu Emperor, Ahmad Shah's letter(s) to the Qing have not survived, and a travelogue by Mir Khan, if it existed, has been lost. As Eijk and Khan describe, Mir Khan's initial reluctance to prostrate himself before the emperor was an obstacle to the smooth conduct of guest ritual in Beijing, though maybe not an insuperable one. Eventually he did comply with the requirement to kowtow, and was entertained in fine imperial style. Still, the emperor was evidently unimpressed with the Afghan representative, and only the bare minimum of support was provided for his return.

In 1764, the Kazakh khan Nur Ali (r. 1748–86) of the Lesser Horde wrote to the Russian governor of Voronezh, offering a version of these events deriving from the testimony of his own emissary to Beijing, whose visit had coincided with that of Mir Khan.³ The accuracy of this account is of course questionable: Nur Ali claims, for example, that it was the Qing that first opened correspondence with the Durrani state, in a letter announcing the Qing empire's incorporation of all Kashgaria, Kokand, and the Kazakh steppe—a letter for which no evidence exists. Roused by this provocative declaration, Nur Ali's representative informs us, Ahmad Shah's missive to Beijing is said to have taken issue with these Qing claims on two chief grounds. The first was straightforwardly religious: these newly conquered peoples were all Muslims; how could they possibly submit to the non-Muslim Qing? The second case rested on what we might call a normative political geography. The world, the letter is purported to have said, was made up of seven climes: the Great Qing comprised one such clime, and the Russian empire another. The Muslim lands that the Qianlong emperor had recently seized made up half of a clime, and thus the Qing empire had expanded beyond its natural limits into an untenable one-and-a-half climes.

Whether or not this line of reasoning was actually part of Ahmad Shah's lost letter to the Qing need not particularly trouble us. It clearly made enough sense to those who circulated this story on the Kazakh steppe, and thus can be said to reflect a view of international relations that held some purchase at this time. It is one of relatively few examples of Central Asian discourse on the rise

2 Jul Eijk and Timur Khan, "Do You Not Bow before Heaven?: The First Qing-Durrānī Encounter, the Tributary Non-relationship, and Disorder on a Shared Frontier." *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 66 (2023).

3 B. P. Gurevich and G. F. Kim, eds. *Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia v Tsentral'noi Azii XVII–XVIII vv. Dokumenty i materialy* (Moscow: Nauka, 1989), vol. 2: 179–82 (document #222).

of the Qing state that drew on such large-scale conceptions of the partition of the globe. Clearly, what we see here originates in a long tradition of Islamic geographical thinking that combined the ancient Persian conception of “seven kingdoms” (*haft keshvār*) with the Ptolemaic theory of seven climes.⁴ The combination was not necessarily a straightforward one: in origin, climes were conceived of as horizontal environmental bands, with large regions like China thus straddling a series of climes. But in practice, climatic representations of the world did often make allowance for cultural and political cohesion, and the trope of seven kings ruling seven climes remained a staple of literary works.⁵

This conception of a clime as a cultural or political unity is something that occurs in other forms in eighteenth-century sources. In introducing his Turkic translation of Ṭabari’s historical chronicle, for example, the Kashgari author Muhammad Sadiq Kashgari explained that most people residing in “this Turki clime” (*bu Türk iqlimi*) were unable to comprehend the work in its original.⁶ Other sources from the period adopt the term for more clearly circumscribed regions, e.g. the “clime of Ferghana.” The word was thus semantically unstable, ranging along a spectrum with primarily geographic and primarily political specifications at either end. Such instability may be helpful to historians seeking ways to make use of long-lived pieces of geographic nomenclature, while avoiding the modern baggage such terms tend to carry. I have in mind here current debates on the validity of a term like “China”, which seem caught between ahistorical, nationalist retrojections of contemporary nation-state boundaries and identities, and in response to this, a desire on the part of some Western scholars to minimize use of the term, if not abolish it entirely. Here, thinking of pre-modern China as a “clime”, with all the ambiguity that the term entails, may offer something of a way forward.

Kazakh rumors concerning Ahmad Shah’s response to Qing expansionism reflect what today we might call a notion of “China proper”. It was a defensive conception that carried the implication that the incorporation of the Tarim Basin into the Qing empire was decidedly “improper”. But of course, that incorporation stuck. It is not surprising, then, that we find the usage of “clime” within the Qing domains as acquiring a more strictly political emphasis, in line

4 A. Shapur Shahbazi, “Haft Kešvar.” In *Encyclopædia Iranica*, XI/5: 519–522; B. A. Miquel, “Iqlīm,” in *Encyclopædia of Islam New Edition Online*. One of the first authors to adapt the term “clime” to Iranian conception was Masudi in the tenth century. See *El-Mas’ūdī’s Historical Encyclopædia, Entitled “Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems*, trans. Aloys Sprenger (London: Oriental Translation Fund, 1841): 197–200.

5 See, for example, Ron Sela, *The Legendary Biographies of Tamerlane: Islam and Heroic Apocrypha in Central Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011): 65–66.

6 Muḥammad Šadiq Kashghari, *Tajnama* (MS Lund, Jarring Prov. 439): fol. 6b.

with an imperial universalism that refused to be limited by cultural boundaries. Open up a dictionary of modern Uyghur, and the first definition one finds for *iqlim* is simply “state” (*mämlikät*).⁷ In texts produced within Qing institutions from the mid-eighteenth century onwards, the word *iqlim* became the standard Turki translation for the Manchu *gurun*, itself corresponding to the Chinese *guó* 國. For example, Turki works that emerged from within this Qing world of letters rendered concepts such as *Zhongguo*, which we usually translate into English as the “Middle Kingdom”, as “the clime in the middle” (*otturadaqi iqlim*).⁸ In the late nineteenth century, this Turki idiom served as the common language of diplomacy between what was now the Qing province of Xinjiang and the Russian province of Turkestan, and such correspondence thus exhibits the same language of “the clime of Russia” (*Rüsiya iqlimi*), and for China, “the clime of the emperor” (*khāqān iqlimi*).⁹

To return to Ahmad Shah’s embassy and its reverberations across the Kazakh steppe, a view of the world divided into seven culturally defined political units, each ruled by their own sovereign more readily calls to mind the pessimistic worldview of Samuel Huntington than any image of Eurasian connectivity. Indeed, the word “civilization” here may not be out of place here as an alternative to “clime”. In the wake of Ahmad Shah’s embassy, talk of religious war was certainly in the air, as rumors filtered north to Russia that the inhabitants of Kashgar and Yarkand were looking to their Durrani co-religionists for protection. Not all observers, it must be noted, were so pessimistic: when asked why Ahmad Shah had sent a mission to the Qing, the Muslim governor of Kashgar expressed the view that the Durrani’s campaigns had made him such serious enemies in Iran and India that he needed a display of good relations with the Qing so as to deter them.¹⁰ But the possibility of a united front against Qing rule certainly did weigh on the minds of Qing officials stationed in the region, particularly when they discovered that Ahmad Shah had dispatched an envoy to the khan of Kokand. It was this Afghan mission to Kokand—or more properly, a mission from the governor of Balkh sent at the command of Ahmad Shah—that eventually led Russian intelligence to believe that Kokand’s Irdana

7 Abliz Yaqub, Ghänizat Ghäyurani, and Äkbär Eli, eds. *Uyghur tilining izahliq lughiti* (Beijing: Millätlär nashriyati, 1991): 302.

8 M. Cl. Huart, “Le texte turc-oriental de la stèle de la mosquée de Péking,” *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 56 (1902): 213.

9 One source for examples of such correspondence is the Tsentral’nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Respubliki Uzbekistan, fond 1, opis’ 29.

10 *Zhongguo diyi lishi dang’anguan*, and *Zhongguo bianjiang shidi yanjiu zhongxin*, eds. *Qingdai Xinjiang Manwen dang’an huibian* 清代新疆满文档案汇编 (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2012), vol. 61: 15.

Beg had committed to a holy war against the Qing—a possibility that has since fascinated historians.¹¹

Working out exactly what had transpired between the Durrani and Kokand was thus one of the objectives of a Qing diplomatic mission that was sent to Kokand in 1763. Do Qing sources shed any light on the reality or otherwise of a looming civilizational conflict here? Yes, in a sense they do, albeit in a negative sense. When the Qing mission, led by the Imperial Guard Tomcitu, arrived in Kokand, Irdana Beg was evidently keen to downplay any talk of an Islamic front against the Qing. According to Tomcitu's report, on the eve of his departure from Kokand a party of the khan's close confidants took him aside and told him what had transpired during the Afghan envoy's visit.¹² According to this version of events—tailored, we may well assume, for Qing consumption—the Afghan envoy had pointedly inquired why Irdana Beg had submitted to the Qing. To this, Irdana had responded angrily, telling Ahmad Shah to mind his own business and justifying his actions with reference to Islamic texts. According to the story, Irdana had cited scripture to the effect that “In the east there is an emperor of a great kingdom, and no-one may commit any evil against the Great Emperor.” The Manchu term here, *nomun*, tends to refer to the Quran, but what precise book or verse Irdana might have had in mind is impossible for us to say. The vision of an emperor in the East commanding obedience is much more reminiscent of the Persianate political geography discussed above, than any reference I am aware of in the Quran or the hadith. Indeed, I think it is not too much of a stretch to see here again a version of the “seven climes” view of the world that informed the putative Afghan rebuke of the Qing. That is to say, in both the Afghan and Kokand case, we see different applications of a recognizably similar theme: a divided world in which the clime of “China”—a political-cultural unity ruled by a sovereign emperor—dominated any vision of the East. If some Central Asian actors might invoke this paradigm to depict Qing expansionism into Islamic lands as a violation of natural boundaries, others might equally rely on it to justify subordination to one of the world's seven great sovereigns.

Qing officials were impressed, if still a little skeptical, at the thought that Irdana was using holy books to defend himself against Afghan criticisms.

11 For discussion, see Shir Muḥammad Mirab Munis, and Muḥammad Riza Mirab Agahi, *Firdaws al-Iqbal*, trans. Yuri Bregel (Leiden: Brill, 1999): 591–3; Jin Noda, *The Kazakh Khanates between the Russian and Qing Empires: Central Eurasian International Relations during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 2016): 171–2.

12 First Historical Archive of China, doc. 04-02-001-000521-0048 *Aiugan ci Hooohan de elcin takūraha baitai turgun* (“An account of the dispatch of an emissary from the Afghans to Kokand”).

"If it is the case that Irdana cited the words of scripture to refuse him, then he has truly demonstrated a lack of fear of Ahmad Shah!" The fact that Kokandi officials took pains to tell Qing officials that they saw their mutual relations as religiously sanctioned—a case of "following the principle of heaven" (*abkai giyan be dahame*), as Irdana is said to have told the Afghan envoy—is a strong indication that talk of religiously-inspired resistance to the Qing *was* circulating in Central Asia at this time.¹³ Likewise Russian observers seem to have been quite willing to assume the presence here of a dangerous civilizational faultline, and were avid consumers of sensationalist reports emerging from the steppe. This was not, though, a perspective that eighteenth-century Qing actors embraced. While Europe's monotheistic tradition readily gave rise to totalizing views of Islamic peoples as representatives of a common Oriental civilization, there is little sense in Qing narratives of the Qianlong-period expansion into Xinjiang of crossing from one major division of the globe into another, or concern that religious injunctions against non-Muslim rule might serve to motivate resistance to the Qing.

Diplomatic intercourse was often a site of misunderstanding, of concepts lost in translation. Qing officials inquired no further into the doctrinal basis of Kokand's apologia for submission to the Qing. If Ahmad Shah's letter did indeed invoke climatic discourse to admonish the Qianlong emperor, it was not something that the emperor felt the need to respond to. There is, that is to say, little evidence of any shared view of the situation. Nevertheless, for the more modest task of exploring Central Asian views of Asia in the early-modern period, and (in Binbaş's words) taking "a photograph of what a concept meant in a specific context", the archival scraps I have drawn on here seem helpful. The evolving concept of the clime, with its applications in not just literary but political discourse, should be part of any consideration of "what is Asia" in the eighteenth century.

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