

# 1 March to Power in a Chinggisid World

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## Introduction

Arguing that relations with the Chinggisids formed a defining element of Zhu Di's rulership at home and abroad, the next two chapters explore three central questions.<sup>1</sup> First, how did Zhu Di develop such a deep engagement with the Chinggisid world? Zhu Di invested great political and financial capital in his relations with Mongolian polities and personnel – in the form of warfare, alliances, and patronage. Second, what do such relations tell us about Zhu Di's identity as ruler at home and abroad and how did he and his advisers represent his rule to different audiences? Third, what do Zhu Di's ties to Mongol aristocrats tell us about the Ming court's place in east Eurasia?

This chapter examines three periods in Zhu Di's career. The first is his reign as Prince of Yan c.1380 to 1400. This was his first and transformational exposure to Mongols.<sup>2</sup> By order of Zhu Yuanzhang, Zhu Di oversaw a strategic northern border region, Yan, the area surrounding today's Beijing, which had been the Great Yuan's main dynastic capital, Daidu. His primary residence and administrative offices were located in the former palace complex of Daidu, which the Mongols (and even earlier the Liao and Jin dynasties) had used to bridge the worlds of the steppe and the sown, a point from which to rule both realms.<sup>3</sup> Zhu Di had every reason to learn as much as possible about the Mongols – both as threat and as allies.

Zhu Di's early years as emperor form the second period explored in this chapter. I analyze Zhu Di's written communications with two Great Khans, Gülichī (r. 1403?–08) and Bunyashiri (r. 1408–12). Zhu Di's letters analyze the causes and consequences of the contrasting fortunes of the Great Yuan and Great Ming ruling houses. He develops the case for why the Great Khan should accept his diminished standing and recognize the Ming dynasty's superior

<sup>1</sup> For adumbrated discussion, see Robinson, "Justifying Ming Rulership."

<sup>2</sup> Rossabi ("Ming and Inner Asia," p. 229) notes the formative experience of leading military campaigns as a prince.

<sup>3</sup> Robinson, *Empire's Twilight*, pp. 63–64.

status. This section also briefly examines Zhu Di's early contact with the Moghul Khanate and the Three Guards, both part of the Chinggisid world.

The third and final moment is narrower, the year 1410, when Zhu Di launched his first major steppe campaign as emperor. Preparation for the campaign, including justifying the costs of war and rallying allies, reveals much about Zhu Di's vision of his rule and contemporary perception of the Chinggisids among east Eurasian leaders. The war was a dramatic departure from the military and political precedents of his father, who as emperor had never led troops into the field, much less into the steppe. For this and other reasons, the 1410 campaign drew attention not only from observers within the Ming polity but also more broadly among Korean, Mongolian, Jurchen, and Timurid ruling elites. The resulting documentary record allows a multifaceted look at diplomacy, patronage, war commemoration, and the emperor's relations with both Mongol and Chinese subjects.

### “Lord, Prince of Yan”

In 1389, the reigning Ming emperor, Zhu Yuanzhang, received a letter written in Mongolian from a prominent Mongolian military commander named Nekelai. It mentioned the emperor's son, the twenty-nine-year-old Zhu Di, who was addressed as *yen ong ejen* or “the lord, Prince of Yan.”<sup>4</sup> *Ejen* is a Mongolian term that contemporary Mongol elites used elsewhere to describe Chinggis Khan and his son Chaghadaï.<sup>5</sup> In 1370, Zhu Yuanzhang had named Zhu Di Prince of Yan on his tenth birthday. Yan was a classical name for today's Beijing and environs. During the Yuan period, Beijing had been known variously as the Great Capital (Daidu) and the Yan Capital (Yanjing). The Yan Capital had fallen to Ming armies in September 1368, just nineteen months before Zhu Di was named its new lord, Prince of Yan. After turning twenty in 1380, Zhu Di, accompanied by his household, administrative staff, and tutors, traveled northward from Nanjing to take up residence in Yanjing, now renamed Beiping, meaning Northern Peace or North Pacified. This would be his home and training ground for the next two decades and more.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> HYYY (HFLB, 4.292); Mostaert, *Le matériel mongol*, vol. 1, pp. 16 and 29 (transcription and translation, respectively).

<sup>5</sup> See letters from Torqocha'ar and Imperial Son-in-Law Namun, HYYY (HFLB, 4.273 and 4.270); Mostaert, *Le matériel mongol*, vol. 1, pp. 9, 25.

<sup>6</sup> For Zhu Di's time as Prince of Yan, see Danjō, *Eirakutei*, pp. 93–95; Tsai, *Perpetual Happiness*, pp. 37–56; Shang Chuan, *Yongle*, pp. 13–30; Mao Peiqi, *Yongle*, pp. 36–65; Chao Zhongchen, *Ming Chengzu*, p. 25–38; Zhu Hong, *Ming Chengzu*, pp. 19–80. These accounts say little about Zhu Di's interaction with Mongolian personnel during his years as Prince of Yan. Danjō Hiroshi (*Eirakutei*, p. 239) notes that Daidu/Beiping's cosmopolitan nature “deeply influenced” Zhu Di's understanding of foreign relations without elaborating on such influence's nature or means of transmission. He suggests that Zhu Di adopted Qubilai as his model for rulership (p. 240).

Zhu Yuanzhang dispatched his sons to the most important military frontiers in the fledgling Ming dynasty, along the northern and western borders. He hoped that as family members committed to the dynasty's survival, his sons would prove loyal, effective bulwarks against Mongol incursions.<sup>7</sup> Zhu Yuanzhang entrusted his sons with substantial military, administrative, and fiscal powers. When Zhu Di arrived in Beijing, the former Yuan capital had been under Ming rule for slightly more than a decade. Many Great Yuan palace eunuchs, imperial consorts, and serving women had been transported to the new Ming capital in Nanjing. Some, however, remained in Beijing. They were soon joined by other former Yuan personnel, including Mongol and Jurchen military officers and soldiers, who decided that the Ming dynasty offered better chances for security and advancement than did the Great Khan. These men were frequently incorporated into the many military garrisons stationed in and around Beijing. Some served directly under the Prince of Yan's command. All in all, Zhu Di's seat bore the deep impress of the Great Yuan, whose historical and contemporary significance was clear to all residents.

Former Yuan military personnel were settled in a broad swathe from Beijing proper to the Ming dynasty's northern border. Located near today's Harqin Banner, Inner Mongolia, the Daning Garrisons had been established in the 1380s, and former Yuan generals comprised much of their senior command. For instance, in 1388, the throne appointed Asud and Shabuding, both former Yuan generals, as assistant commanders of Daning Anterior Garrison and Daning Posterior Garrison respectively. Prior to their assignment to Daning, they had both been stationed in Beijing.<sup>8</sup> The Daning garrisons represented a military and administrative extension of Beijing. The Beijing Regional Military Commission was located at Daning.<sup>9</sup> The Beijing Regional Military Commission and the Daning garrisons linked the sedentary world's northern edge and the steppe's southern extent.

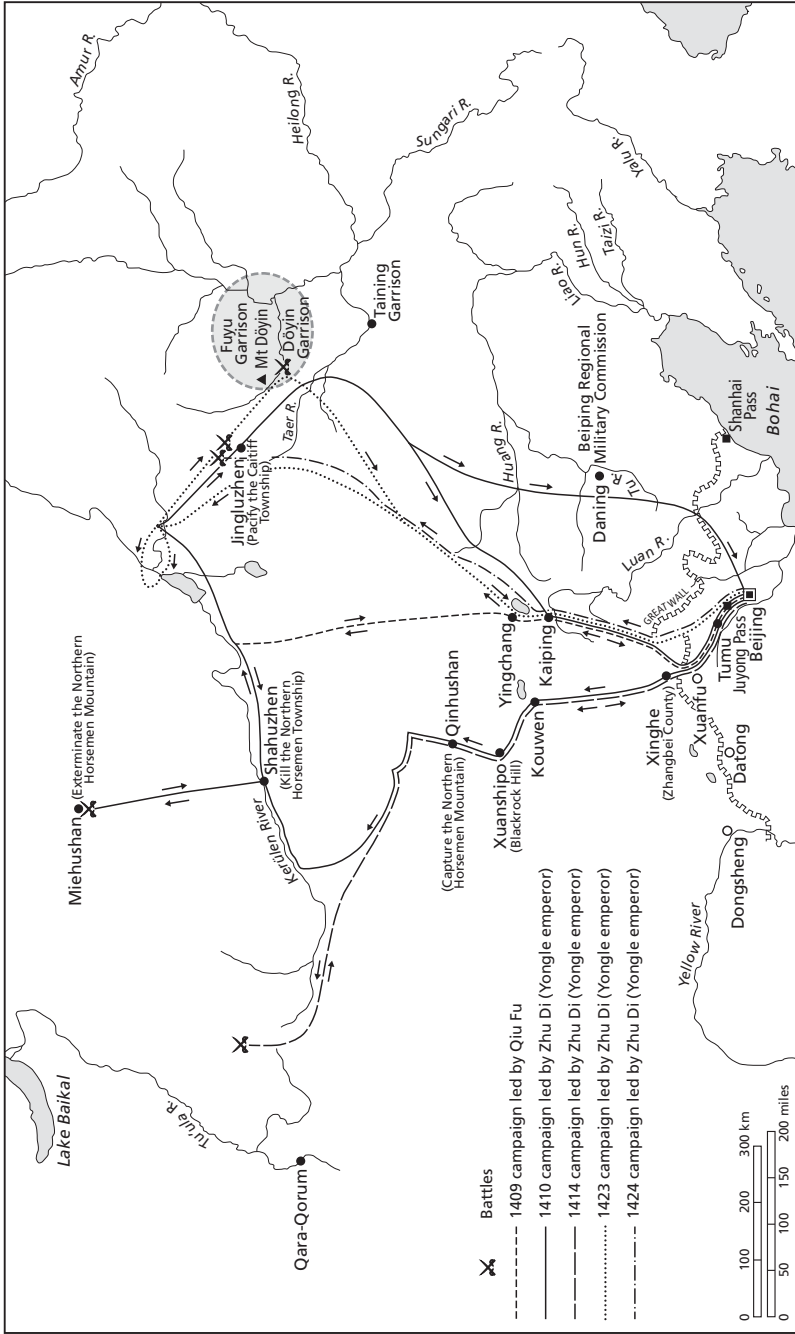
The Ming court cultivated its connections to the Chinggisid world through Beijing and Daning. Zhu Yuanzhang named Irinchin Dzangbu (Tib. Rin-č'en bTsang-po) as the abbot to Wanshou Monastery in Daning. He had previously held the same position under the Mongols.<sup>10</sup> Late in 1390, the court established Confucian academies for the Daning Garrisons to instruct the sons of military officers, and it specifically ordered that men familiar with the “Tatar script” (*Dadazi*) were to be selected to instruct students in “Tatar documents/writings” (*Dadashu*), and in both bureaucratic and private writing, Mongols are often

<sup>7</sup> Zhang Dexin, “Mingdai zhuwang fenfeng”; “Mingdai zhuwang yu.”

<sup>8</sup> *MTZSL*, 192.3a. Nanggia, a former Yuan commander, served as commander of Daning. See *HYYY (HFLB)*, 4.278–83; Mostaert, *Le matériel mongol*, vol. 1, pp. 26–27.

<sup>9</sup> *MTZSL*, 192.2b, p. 2888.

<sup>10</sup> *HYYY (HFLB)*, 4.223–31; Mostaert, *Le matériel mongol*, vol. 1, pp. 17–18.



Map 2 Early Ming emperors in the steppe. Source: adapted from Mote and Twitchett, *Cambridge History of China*, vol. 7

called Tatars or Dada.<sup>11</sup> Tatar script here refers to the Mongolian script. The order suggests that some officers were literate in Mongolian and that the court considered such knowledge useful. Confucian academies are often seen as state instruments to advance the Chinese civilizing mission, but here it taught the Mongolian script, rather seeking the Mongols’ assimilation.

Let us return to Nekelai’s 1389 letter. It was sent amidst the delicate process of negotiating Nekelai’s transfer of allegiance from the Yuan court to Zhu Yuanzhang. In 1388, a Ming army surprised the Yuan court near Lake Buir in today’s Inner Mongolia, capturing thousands and sending the Great Khan into pell-mell flight. Shortly later, an obscure Mongol commander murdered the Great Khan. The Lake Buir defeat and the Great Khan’s death prompted many Great Yuan elites to reassess their alliances. Nekelai was one such noble. His letter refers to “the lord, Prince of Yan,” because Zhu Di had become an important feature of the political landscape in the northern frontier zone. Zhu Di’s status as a lord had been translated into Mongols’ political idiom. He served as his father’s local spokesman. The letter reveals that Zhu Di had previously informed Nekelai that the Ming court would supply his people with seed, grain, and farming tools, which the Mongols would pick up at Daning to transport home. Further, Zhu Di instructed Nekelai to provide information about his followers’ number and composition.<sup>12</sup> Zhu Di also received reports from Nekelai about recent military clashes among Mongol elites. Zhu Di was point man in a high-stakes political negotiation.

Another letter further illustrates Zhu Di’s role as the Ming dynasty’s face to Yuan personnel. A Mongol military commander, Torqocha’ar, who had accepted the title of vice commander in the recently formed Döyin Garrison (Duoyanwei), asked Zhu Di to intercede on his behalf with the emperor. Torqocha’ar wanted to deliver tribute goods such as falcons and cheetahs to Beijing as had been done under Mongol rule rather than to distant Nanjing.<sup>13</sup> Torqocha’ar viewed Zhu Di as a powerful patron who could negotiate advantageous tribute terms with the emperor on his behalf.

Zhu Yuanzhang exploited his son’s close ties to Mongol personnel. Early in 1390, he ordered Zhu Di and his brother, Prince of Jin, to supervise a major steppe campaign.<sup>14</sup> Their target was a Yuan military commander, Nair-Buqa.<sup>15</sup> In April 1390, the Prince of Yan’s troops overran Nair-Buqa’s unprepared camp, which had not anticipated a Ming attack in the midst of a blizzard. When Nair-Buqa and his men hastily mounted their horses to escape, a former Yuan officer now under Zhu Di’s command – and an old

<sup>11</sup> *MTZSL*, 204.2b, p. 3054.

<sup>12</sup> *HYYY (HFLB)*, 4.293; Mostaert, *Le matériel mongol*, vol. 1, pp. 16, 29.

<sup>13</sup> *HYYY (HFLB)*, 4.274; Mostaert, *Le matériel mongol*, vol. 1, pp. 9–10, 25–26.

<sup>14</sup> *MTZSL*, 199.1a, pp. 2981; *GQ*, 9.1.701.

<sup>15</sup> For Nair-Buqa’s career, see Robinson, *In the Shadow of the Mongol Empire*, Chapter Three.

friend of Nair-Buqa – counseled against flight, promising that the Prince of Yan would treat Nair-Buqa and his people well. Nair-Buqa met the prince and decided that, given the circumstances, the smart choice was allegiance to the Great Ming.<sup>16</sup> Nair-Buqa brought with him a large following, including several hundred military commanders and more than ten thousand men and women.<sup>17</sup> By the emperor's order, Nair-Buqa received a high-ranking position in the Ming military and most of his people were settled in the region from today's Beijing to the Ming's northern border.<sup>18</sup>

In 1392, the Ming founder again turned to Zhu Di and his Mongols. The emperor informed his son of his next assignment, writing that the “remnant northern horsemen” – that is, the Great Yuan court and its supporters – lived scattered beyond the pass. “They will certainly become a disaster in the future,” he prophesized. The emperor instructed his son to select as many as ten thousand elite cavalry troops from the Beiping Regional Military Commission and his own escort guard. They were to push deep into the steppe to “find and capture the remnant northern horsemen in order to eradicate [them].” The emperor explicitly wrote that “the followers of Nair-Buqa and other such men” should serve as Zhu Di's guides.<sup>19</sup> Zhu Yuanzhang observed that Nair-Buqa's men were intimately familiar with the region's topography, and with them as guides, the emperor felt confident that “captives are certain to be numerous.”<sup>20</sup> Again, we see the Prince of Yan's close relations with Mongol military men as both allies and enemies, with no absolute line separating the two. We also see that the Ming emperor knew by name senior Great Yuan commanders who served his dynasty.

In the following years, Zhu Yuanzhang repeatedly called on the Prince of Yan's expertise in the management of Mongolian personnel. In 1393, he instructed Zhu Di to apprehend Nair-Buqa and another former Yuan military commander, Alugh-Temür, who were allegedly plotting treason against the throne.<sup>21</sup> The incident reveals Zhu Di's firsthand experience with the nexus of Mongolian personnel in the service of the Ming dynasty, military expertise, and high-level political intrigue. In 1396 and 1397, Zhu Di again led troops into the steppe.<sup>22</sup> Within a few years, Zhu Di would draw on his Mongolian experience to seize the imperial throne.

In 1398, Zhu Yuanzhang died. He had named the eldest son of his eldest son – the future Jianwen emperor – as Heir Apparent. Soon after his father's death, Zhu

<sup>16</sup> *MTZSL*, 200.6b–7a, pp. 3004–05; *GQ*, 9.1.705.    <sup>17</sup> *GXCZ*, 7.35a.

<sup>18</sup> *MTZSL*, 206.3a, p. 3181.

<sup>19</sup> Serruys (“Location,” p. 53) transcribes it as Nayir-Buqa; Tsai (*Perpetual Happiness*, p. 48) renders it Nayur-Buqa.

<sup>20</sup> *MTZSL*, 217.1b–2a, pp. 3188–89; *GQ*, 9.1.728.

<sup>21</sup> Robinson, *In the Shadow of the Mongol Empire*, Chapter Three.

<sup>22</sup> *GQ*, 10.1.765; 10.1.775–76.

Di rebelled, mobilizing his military and political resources in a destructive, four-year civil war with his nephew, the Jianwen emperor. Given its proximity and strategic importance, it is not surprising that three months prior to his insurrection, Zhu Di attacked Daning. Its military units – including the Prince of Ning’s three escort guards and the Mongols – surrendered almost immediately and were integrated into Zhu Di’s army.<sup>23</sup>

As was true of many Chinese men, Mongols in Zhu Di’s escort guards and other Beiping garrisons sided with their commander and patron in the civil war.<sup>24</sup> Their service won promotions and rewards.<sup>25</sup> Former Yuan personnel who joined Zhu Di likely saw backing him as a way to improve their position within the Ming polity.<sup>26</sup> Such a calculation was based on their extensive experience with the “Lord, Prince of Yan.” They would continue to serve in Zhu Di’s armies after he became emperor. As this and the next chapter show, they fought repeatedly on the steppe under Zhu Di’s banner and were integral to Ming military successes.<sup>27</sup> Men of Mongol descent continued to serve in the Daning and Yanshan garrisons until the late sixteenth century and beyond.<sup>28</sup>

To follow a lord meant to offer guidance and analysis, so these Mongols likely influenced the goals of particular campaigns and Zhu Di’s thinking about the relation of the steppe and its peoples to the Ming throne more generally. Aside from a few scattered episodes, however, few specific instances of Mongols’ advice to Zhu Di survive in the documentary record. After seizing the throne, Zhu Di employed Mongols in his repeated campaigns on the steppe. As the following section shows, they not only served as guides and military muscle but also headed armies.<sup>29</sup> His Mongol advisers and allies also provided analysis of steppe geography, politics, and strategy.<sup>30</sup> The number of high-ranking Mongols at Zhu Di’s court owed something to the emperor’s interest in the steppe and a militarily expansive dynasty. At the same time, Zhu Di’s costly commitment to an aggressive posture vis-à-vis several surrounding polities

<sup>23</sup> Hagiwara Junpei, *Mindai Mōkoshi kenkyū*, pp. 34–35.

<sup>24</sup> Hagiwara Junpei, “Minsho no hokuhen,” p. 43; Serruys, “Mongols Ennobled,” pp. 213–15, 226–28. See also Hok-lam Chan’s biographical notes on Qorghochin and Wu Cheng (Mailü) in *DMB*, vol. 2, pp. 1127, 1478; *MTSL*, 94.1a.

<sup>25</sup> Kawagoe (“Keinan no eki ni okeru En-ō kika,” pp. 97–98) identifies fifteen Mongol officers who served in Zhu Di’s army during the civil war against Jianwen. The same study suggests they constituted 6.4 percent of the total officer corps under Zhu Di.

<sup>26</sup> Hagiwara Junpei, “Mingsho no hokuhen,” p. 39. <sup>27</sup> *MGCX*, p. 558.

<sup>28</sup> Robinson, “Images of Subject Mongols under the Ming Dynasty,” p. 89.

<sup>29</sup> Qorghochin often supervised border defenses against the Mongols and in 1409 played a key part in the massive (and ultimately failed) campaign against Bunyashiri. Wu Cheng undertook similar duties along the border and in fighting against Bunyashiri (*DMB*, vol. 2, pp. 1127–28).

<sup>30</sup> In 1409, one high-ranking Mongol in Ming service, Wu Yuncheng, presented twenty-two Mongol captives to the throne. He also provided detailed information about the personal relations among the captured Mongols and their political affiliations, including ties to Bunyashiri (*MTSL*, 89.3b–4a, p. 1190). Zhu Di richly rewarded Wu for his service with a promotion, silver, cash, textiles, and several dozen head of livestock (*MTSL*, 90.1a, p. 1185).



owed something to Mongols' cumulative influence on their sovereign. Such patterns had been established during Zhu Di's time as Prince of Yan on the northern border. Mongols joined Zhu Di to pursue their own ends, which were as often centered in the steppe as they were in the Central Plains. As later chapters detail, several Mongol leaders allied with the Ming proposed joint military strikes against their steppe rivals.

Zhu Di's time as Prince of Yan positioned him at the confluence of the Great Yuan's legacy and the Great Ming's ambitions, between the steppe and the sown. He fought repeatedly on the steppe against military forces of the Yuan court, often deploying Mongol personnel whose allegiance he had either inherited or won in his own name. Familiarity with Mongol personnel; the former palaces of the Great Yuan; and the landscape, history, and memories of the steppe all shaped Zhu Di's perspectives and later actions as emperor. Zhu Di's military victories in the steppe as Prince of Yan raised his status in both the north and the south.<sup>31</sup> One distant reflection of the importance of his tenure in Daidu/Beiping for his status in Eurasia is seen in the Tibetan chronicle *Blue Annals* (*Deb-ther snon-pr*), which continues to refer to Zhu Di as Ye dbang, "Prince of Yan," even after he seized the throne.<sup>32</sup>

### Writing to the Great Khan

The following two sections examine Zhu Di's efforts to come to terms with the Great Yuan polity and the wider network of relations that had emerged from the Mongol empire. After ascending the throne in 1402, Zhu Di's appreciation of the Chinggisid world's breadth expanded as he justified his succession to other Eurasian leaders and navigated the vast web of personal and political connections that stretched from East to Central Asia. He came to see how events in Samarkand and the Moghul Khanate resonated in eastern Mongolia and Liaodong. The first section explores Zhu Di's early interactions with the Great Khan. The second part widens our lens to consider Zhu Di's initial communications with leaders in eastern Eurasia, especially those tied to the Chinggisid world. This section sets the stage for Zhu Di's striking decision in 1410 to break with dynastic tradition and lead imperial troops into the Mongolian steppe, a campaign that is examined in the third and final section.

Like his father, Zhu Di wrote directly to the Great Khan, members of his court, and other influential Mongols tied to the Great Yuan.<sup>33</sup> In these communications, Zhu Di argued that the Great Khan should "open cordial relations" with the Ming court. The terms of such relations were left undefined, but he

<sup>31</sup> Zhu Hong, *Ming Chengzu*, p. 34.

<sup>32</sup> Sperling, "Early Ming Policy," pp. 74–76; Roerich, *Blue Annals*, 1.60.

<sup>33</sup> Robinson, *In the Shadow of the Mongol Empire*, Chapter Seven.



urged an end to border raids and offered a vision of peace and prosperity. On several occasions, he articulated broader explanations that addressed the Great Yuan's rise and fall, analyzed the Great Khan's current plight, and highlighted the Ming dynasty's legitimacy and power. This section examines Zhu Di's communications with two Great Khans, Gülichī (r. 1403?–08) and Bunyashiri (also Romanized as Punyashiri, r. 1408–12), in the years prior to the emperor's first steppe campaign in 1410. It pays particular attention to Zhu Di's claims about his rulership, that of the Great Khans, and the connection between the two.

Shortly after taking the throne in 1403, Zhu Di wrote to Great Khan Gülichī. Gülichī too had just come to power, largely through the efforts of powerful military commanders such as Arugtai. The version of the document preserved in the *Ming Veritable Records* calls Gülichī the "Tatar Great Khan," avoiding explicit reference to Gülichī's status as either emperor or head of the Great Yuan ruling house. Zhu Di opens by reiterating the Ming court's long-standing position that since the "Yuan's fortune had already waned," Heaven bestowed its Mandate on the Ming founder, who then took possession of the realm. Zhu Di notes that as a son of the founder's primary wife, he had been invested as a prince in Yan, and with Heaven's aid, he succeeded his father as ruler, winning myriad countries' acclaim. This explanation of his path to power omits mention of usurping the throne. Zhu Di describes Gülichī's enthronement: "The northern regions have put forward the Great Khan to his rightful position." Zhu Di now sends an envoy (a Mongol serving as a commander in the Ming imperial military) bearing gifts for the Great Khan and a message of hope for the future. Zhu summarizes his vision of good relations with Gülichī:

Now the realm has been settled. All within and beyond the seas have come to court to present tribute. Were the Great Khan to dispatch an envoy to open relations, [we] would become as if a single family so that there are no alarms along the ten thousand *li* of border garrisons. We would be cordial and share in the good fortune of peace. Would that not be wonderful?<sup>34</sup>

Here Zhu Di recognizes Gülichī as a steppe sovereign but not a Chinggisid or successor to the Great Yuan emperors. An implicit contrast separates the two new rulers: whereas Zhu Di succeeds his father in a legitimate line of dynastic rulership, Gülichī comes to the throne by acclamation of "the northern lands." The Great Khan's lineage is left opaque.

Five months later, Zhu Di again writes to Gülichī. The emperor stresses that Heaven's Mandate, not human intelligence or strength, determines dynasties' rise and fall. He rehearses how, when the Song dynasty fell, Qubilai replaced it with a dynasty that lasted for nearly a century through the power of Heaven's

<sup>34</sup> *Ming Shilu*, 17.3b–4a, pp. 306–07.

Mandate. Qubilai's last successor lost the realm through self-indulgence and poor governance, which caused widespread warfare and dynastic collapse. Heaven selected Zhu Yuanzhang to restore order and Zhu Di to succeed to the throne. As a ruler who considers "all under Heaven as family," Zhu Di explains, he writes to Gülichī, who is isolated in the distant steppe. The emperor reminds him of the proverb that "those who obey Heaven prosper; those who defy Heaven perish."<sup>35</sup> These were all rhetorical positions developed by Zhu Yuanzhang and his advisers, who in turn drew on both contemporary and classical precedents.

Zhu Di's next attested letter to Gülichī in the *Ming Veritable Records* does not appear until three years later. During that time, however, Zhu Di's court closely followed Gülichī's activities. The majority of the Ming court's intelligence about Gülichī in particular and the steppe in general was drawn from reports supplied by Mongols who had joined the Ming court. The Ming throne also sent envoys, often Mongol personnel, to steppe leaders to gather information and to gauge individual Mongol commanders' receptiveness to alliance with the Ming court.<sup>36</sup>

Zhu Di and his advisers fully grasped Gülichī's importance in the broader Chinggisid world. They tracked the open military conflict between the Great Yuan polity headed by Gülichī and run by Arugtai, on the one hand, and the Oirat (or Western) Mongols, whose leader was Maḥmūd, on the other.<sup>37</sup> Early in 1405, Zhu Di learned that Gülichī was concerned about increasingly close ties between the King of Hami (in today's Hami, Xinjiang) and leaders of the Three Guards (based in the region around today's Qar Mörön river valley in Inner Mongolia), on the one hand, and the Ming throne, on the other.<sup>38</sup> Just three months later, reports reached the Ming court that Gülichī had the King of Hami killed by poisoning. In response, the Moghul Khan notified Zhu Di of his intention to launch a punitive strike against Gülichī. Zhu Di offered his blessing and urged the Moghul Khan to pursue good relations with the new King of Hami, a Chinggisid noble that the Ming emperor had just installed on the throne.<sup>39</sup> Leaders of one of the three Guards, the Döyin Garrison, located along the Khinggan mountains' eastern slopes (some 1,100 miles or 1,800 kilometers as the crow flies to the east of the Moghul Khanate), were similarly tracking Gülichī's activities, which they reported to the Ming throne.<sup>40</sup>

Zhu Di understood that Gülichī's wars mattered for the Ming dynasty, even if the ramifications were not always immediately clear. In July 1405, reports about fires along the northwestern border reached Zhu Di. Perhaps the fires had been lit to mislead Ming border authorities about the strength of Gülichī's and Oirat forces, speculated the emperor. He reasoned that it might be a strategem

<sup>35</sup> *MTSL*, 21.11a–b, pp. 397–98. <sup>36</sup> *MTSL*, 43.1a–b, pp. 681–82. <sup>37</sup> *MTSL*, 24.5b, p. 440.  
<sup>38</sup> *MTSL*, 38.1b, p. 640. <sup>39</sup> *MTSL*, 41.1b, p. 670. <sup>40</sup> *MTSL*, 59.5a, p. 863.

to discourage Ming efforts to exploit fighting between Gülichī and the Oirats by launching a strike into the steppe. Or perhaps, Zhu Di suggested, the fires were a signal from Mongol commanders interested in submission to the Ming dynasty. Zhu Di ordered the Prince of Zhao to remain alert for any contingency and to accept anyone who offered his surrender. He also ordered the prince to organize a contingent of sixty men comprising both Chinese and Mongolian soldiers to conduct reconnaissance, which likely meant gathering information on the steppe.<sup>41</sup>

In April 1406, Zhu Di again sent several Mongols in his service to deliver another message to Gülichī. In the months preceding this mission, Zhu Di had approved a Gansu border commander's request to open lines of communication with Gülichī to show that the Ming dynasty remained interested in cultivating ties with Mongolian leaders.<sup>42</sup> An additional motive behind the letter to the Great Khan may have been reports that Gülichī and Arugtai were heading southward, perhaps in preparation for attacks on the Ming's northern border.<sup>43</sup> In his letter, Zhu Di restates the Ming court's position that he enjoys universal recognition abroad and peace at home. Zhu Di takes Gülichī to task for not pursuing good relations with the Ming court. Gülichī had detained Zhu Di's previous envoys and raided the Ming dynasty's borders. Zhu Di rehearses the reasons for the rise and fall of dynasties, with particular focus on the Yuan:

Who can challenge that which Heaven causes to prosper and who can raise up that which Heaven causes to perish? In the past, Heaven ordered the Song to rule the realm. After ten or more generations, Heaven tired of its virtue and ordered the Emperor Shizu [i.e. Qubilai] of the Yuan to replace it. After several generations, Heaven again tired of it and ordered the emperor Our Grand Progenitor [i.e. Zhu Yuanzhang] to rule the realm. This is all [determined by] Heaven's Mandate; how could it be brought about by man's power? Unexpectedly, after the Yuan, since Ayushiridara relocated to the north until now, there have been seven men to rule as Great Khan. Has there been even the slightest increase in lands or people? In antiquity, it was said that those who obey Heaven prosper; those who defy Heaven perish. Among your followers, helmet and armor never leave their bodies, and bows and blades never leave their hands. They move back and forth, east and west. The elderly do not live out their lives, the young cannot live in peace, and this has been the case now for dozens of years. What is their crime? The Great Khan is intelligent and perceptive. [You] should revere Heaven's Mandate, succor the people's hardship, and return the envoys sent previously to you and the people seized along the border. [If you] cultivated good relations and committed to peace, your people would share in the blessings of peace. Would that not be magnificent? If you in the end depended on [your] obstinate nature, Heaven orders that when people are sufficiently desperate, they will decide matters decisively through war. We too will have no choice. The armies of the Central State are strong and tough. We fear that the Great Khan will be unable to resist a deep attack and swift strike. Think carefully, Great Khan, before you act.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>41</sup> *MTSL*, 44.1a, p. 689.    <sup>42</sup> *MTSL*, 49.2b, p. 740.    <sup>43</sup> *MTSL*, 51.2b, p. 764.

<sup>44</sup> *MTSL*, 52.4b–5a, pp. 778–79.

Zhu Di acknowledges the Yuan as one in a series of dynasties that held power by Heaven's Mandate. Such regimes rise and fall in succession. Like the preceding Song dynasty, the Yuan had been a legitimate polity, but once its allotted span of rule had ended, it was replaced by the Ming dynasty. By emphasizing that such a process was not dictated by human intelligence or strength, Zhu Di likely wishes to communicate the idea that Gülichī and others should accept the Yuan dynasty's collapse as a *fait accompli*. They should stop their misguided efforts to perpetuate a fallen regime or attempt a restoration. Zhu Di identifies the rule of Ayushiridara and his successors as "after the Yuan," a post-Yuan phenomenon that does not represent the Great Yuan's continuation. In the decades since 1368, observes Zhu Di, Ayushiridara and his successors had consistently lost territory and subjects, while their people lived in a constant state of war and uncertainty. The Great Khans had lost Heaven's support; they needed to face the age's new realities. This line of reasoning harmonized well with Mongolian political culture. Military triumphs, growing populations, expanding lands, and increasing wealth were evidence of Tengri's favor. Developing good relations with the Ming court, Zhu Di promised, would bring stability and prosperity to Gülichī and his people. Failure to do so would lead to war on the steppe, the emperor warned, a war that the Great Khan would not win.

Zhu Di's last attested letter to Gülichī is noted in a *Ming Veritable Records* entry dated to late 1407. The text likely represents only an abstract of the original communication. In it, Zhu Di notes that he had originally hoped for good relations with the Great Khan that would lead to peace. Why, the emperor asks, did Gülichī detain his envoys? By way of conclusion, Zhu Di urges the Great Khan to consider whether he will choose disaster or good fortune.<sup>45</sup>

Gülichī fell at the hands of fellow Mongol nobles, who replaced him with Bunyashiri. Zhu Di's first known letter to Bunyashiri appears in an entry of the *Ming Veritable Records* from early April 1408. By then Zhu Di had been monitoring Bunyashiri's activities for nearly a year. The Ming emperor had heard rumors about plans to depose Gülichī and enthrone Bunyashiri.<sup>46</sup> Early in February in 1408, he had dispatched an envoy (Liu Temür-Buqa) to Besh-Baliq to gather more details.<sup>47</sup> In his letter, Zhu Di used that information to make the case that an alliance with the Ming dynasty was essential to Bunyashiri's interests, even his survival. The extant version of the text reads as follows:

Vice Minister of the Court of State Ceremonial Liu Temür-Buqa and others have returned [from Besh-Baliq] and [We] understand that you escaped from Samarkand and reside in Besh-Baliq. Now Gülichī and others welcome you to travel northward. In

<sup>45</sup> *MTSL*, 72.2b, p. 1004. Half a year earlier, Zhu Di had received a "Tatar monk" at court. The emperor identified the monk as Gülichī's "teacher." See *MTSL*, 65.4a, p. 921.

<sup>46</sup> *MTSL*, 67.2a–b, pp. 937–38. <sup>47</sup> *MTSL*, 75.1b–2a, pp. 1030–31.

Our assessment, Güličhi and Esendai<sup>48</sup> have long been allied as closely as lung and entrails; each relies on the other for support. They now may be unable to abandon someone close to embrace someone unfamiliar. Further, they control major military forces. Some among their subordinates may support you, but how would they dare hold contrary aspirations? At the moment, you and Güličhi cannot both stand [hold power].

The Yuan's allotted span of rule has already ended. After the Obedient Emperor [Toghan-Temür], [rulership] passed to Ayushiridara [and has now] come to Gün-Temür. In total six people have replaced each other in succession within the span of a blink of the eye or the drawing of a breath. Moreover, [We] have yet to hear of a single person who met a good end. This also illustrates Heaven's Path [that is, the Yuan's fortunes have ended]. Given that, it truly will be difficult to preserve your life. The path of correct action is precisely what should be closely investigated and deftly managed.

All those in antiquity who held the realm invested the descendants of rulers from the preceding era with titles and lands so as to continue sacrifices to their forefathers ... The Han, Tang, and Song dynasties all invested the descendants of the preceding era. Our Father, the Grand Progenitor and August Emperor, commiserated and sought to protect the descendants of the Yuan ruling house. He was especially generous. All those who came in submission were ordered to return northward. For instance, he sent Toghus-Temür back. Later, he became Great Khan, governing his people and continuing his forefathers' sacrifices. This is known to all people of the north and south. My heart is the heart of Our Father and the rulers of antiquity.

You are the lineal descendant of the Yuan ruling house and should offer sacrifices in this generation. You should carefully consider between the two paths of good fortune and disaster. If you make a clean break and come in submission, [We] will be generous in the investiture of titles and handsome in the bestowal [of gifts]. It shall be that good lands will be selected near the border where you will reside. It depends on your wishes. If you are led astray by subordinates in pursuit of the empty title of being enthroned, then, though the moment of calamity be before you, there will be no time to respond. This too depends on your wishes. The sincerity of Our love for the people is the same as the bright sun. [We] now again dispatch Liu Temür-Buqa and others to inform you of [Our] thoughts. We further bestow two sets of embroidered gowns of gold-wrapped thread and patterned silks and four lengths of gift silks. Consider this!<sup>49</sup>

Zhu Di highlights Bunyashiri's precarious position to make an alliance with the Ming dynasty appear more appealing. The emperor focuses first on Bunyashiri's personal situation. Zhu Di recounts Bunyashiri's escape from the Timurid court at Samarkand and his flight to Besh-Baliq, where he now enjoys the patronage of the Moghul Khanate. Most recently, Bunyashiri is encouraged to become ruler in Mongolia by men he cannot trust. Zhu Di warns Bunyashiri that he may find sympathizers there, but none will dare defy the will

<sup>48</sup> Here the *MSL* entry has Yeyesuntai, which is likely a scribal error for Esendai, who was a senior commander among the Eastern Mongols in the early fifteenth century. He is several times noted as an ally of Arughtai. See *MTSL* 17.4a, p. 307; 21.11b, p. 398; 33.3a, p. 579; 51.2b–3a, pp. 764–66. However, a report in December 1406 notes that Esendai had been killed by his subordinates. Zhu Di expressed skepticism about the rumor's accuracy. See *MTSL* 60.8a–b, pp. 879–80.

<sup>49</sup> *MTSL*, 77.2a–b, pp. 1043–44.

of the men who plan to make him Great Khan. In other words, Bunyashiri lacks an independent political and military base. Zhu Di then widens his frame to consider the fate of Bunyashiri's family. "The Yuan's fortunes have already expired," he reminds Bunyashiri. This fundamental truth explains why, since the reign of the last Yuan emperor to rule from Daidu, Shundi (that is, Toghan-Temür), at least six men rose to power in rapid succession. Each met a bad end; as the next successor, Bunyashiri faces grave dangers.

Having described the dire prospects of Bunyashiri in particular and his house in general, Zhu Di offers a more appealing alternative. An alliance with the Ming dynasty will bring titles, land, and, it is implied, protection. Zhu Di tries to make the offer more convincing by reminding Bunyashiri that previous dynasties made provisions for the descendants of previous fallen houses. His silence on the Yuan's treatment of the Jin and Song ruling houses is striking. His father had frequently taken the Yuan ruling house to task for its forefathers' brutal purges of Jin and Song nobles. Zhu Di points out that his father had made particularly generous arrangements for the Yuan ruling house. His claim that Zhu Yuanzhang had returned Toghus-Temür to Mongolia likely refers to Maidaribala. A son of the Great Khan Ayushiridara who had been captured and held at the Ming court for several years, Maidaribala is thought by some scholars later to have become the Great Khan known as Toghus-Temür.

Much of the letter revolves around family – past and present, living and deceased. Zhu Di openly acknowledges that Bunyashiri, as a lineal descendant, should enjoy a special role. However, for Zhu Di, the correct path is not to accept an "empty title" as Great Khan. Instead, to guarantee Bunyashiri's own safety and to ensure sacrifices to his ancestors, the right choice is to recognize the Ming throne's dominance. Having made the case, Zhu Di notes that, of course, the decision belongs entirely to Bunyashiri.

Zhu Di's next known letter appears one year later, again preserved in the *Ming Veritable Records*. In the interim, the Ming court had actively sought information about political developments, sending teams into the steppe and places like Qara-Qoto to gather the most recent news.<sup>50</sup> It also relied on information supplied by Mongols who had joined the Ming dynasty, either voluntarily or under coercion.<sup>51</sup> In his brief missive from April 1409, Zhu Di notes that he has heard that Bunyashiri had been put forward as Great Khan and expresses gladness that Bunyashiri wishes to open relations with the Ming dynasty. This decision, Zhu Di observes, shows that Bunyashiri has "obeyed Heaven's intentions" and "examined human affairs." This description of events is disingenuous. Ming border commanders had in fact seized twenty-two of

<sup>50</sup> *MTSL*, 79.2b, p. 1064; 87.2b–3a, pp. 1154–55.

<sup>51</sup> *MTSL*, 89.5b, pp. 1182–83. Bunyashiri too sent men to Hami, where news of Central Asia, the steppe, and China was available. The King of Hami detained Bunyashiri's men pending directions from the Ming throne. See *MTSL*, 80.5a, p. 1073.

Bunyashiri's men, who then divulged news about Bunyashiri's enthronement. The Ming emperor nonetheless fully acknowledges Bunyashiri as a sovereign. "We rule the Central State," Zhu Di writes, "and the Great Khan rules the steppe." Having demarcated separate realms, Zhu Di expresses hope for the future. "Would it not be wonderful if we were to interact with each other without incident forever?" Zhu Di characterizes his decision to return Bunyashiri's men (with gifts in hand) as a gesture of good intentions. He also sent presents to Arugtai and Mar Hasia, the Mongol commanders who had enthroned Bunyashiri.<sup>52</sup>

It is unclear whether the letter found in the *Ming Veritable Records* preserves the full original text or represents an abridged version. Absent is much of the rhetoric found in previous communications by Zhu Yuanzhang and Zhu Di to Great Khans such as the Yuan's rise and fall, the operation of fortune, Heaven's Mandate, universal acknowledgment of the Ming dynasty's legitimacy, and certain destruction if the Great Khan fails to recognize the Ming throne's rule. Nowhere does Zhu Di refer to Bunyashiri's precarious position. In this version of the letter, Zhu Di does not make much of a case for why Bunyashiri should forge an alliance with the Ming dynasty – nothing beyond the vague prospect of a future "without incident."

Zhu Di's final and shortest letter (at least in its surviving form) to Bunyashiri appears just four months later. In it, Zhu Di upbraids Bunyashiri for murdering his envoy and planning to attack the Ming border. The emperor lambasts the Great Khan's insufferable arrogance and informs Bunyashiri that he has ordered his commanders "to lead an army to investigate the reason for the murder of the envoys." This is not empty bluster. Zhu Di had already appointed senior officers to command the campaign and briefed them on the operation.<sup>53</sup> Zhu Di further warns Bunyashiri, "Next year, We are certain to lead in person a great army to punish your transgressions." Immediately following that decisive announcement, however, the emperor opens the door to negotiation. He writes, "[Either] the two armies will cross swords [or] envoys will be exchanged without end. Thus, We have sent a letter to inform you. Consider this."<sup>54</sup> Zhu Di again puts the decision in Bunyashiri's hands.

Like the previous missive, this letter too lacks the broader explanations of the Yuan's fall, the Ming's rise, and the political standing of Zhu Di and Bunyashiri. Had Zhu Di and his advisers abandoned efforts to persuade Bunyashiri through well-rounded arguments? Or, as seems more likely, is the surviving version an abridgment shorn of the rhetorical heft found in Zhu

<sup>52</sup> *MTSL*, 90.1b–2a, pp. 1186–87. <sup>53</sup> *MTSL*, 94.1a–b, pp. 1243–44; *GQ*, 14.1.1024.

<sup>54</sup> *MTSL*, 94.1b, p. 1244.



Yuanzhang's letters to the Great Khan and some of Zhu Di's earlier communications with Gülichī and Bunyashiri?<sup>55</sup>

What do Zhu Di's letters to the Great Khan reveal about Ming rulership in the early fifteenth century? First, several of Zhu Di's communications include carefully constructed arguments that sought to persuade audiences at home and abroad that Mongol sovereigns after 1368 were not emperors, that their reigns did not constitute a continuation of the Great Yuan, and that the Ming dynasty held exclusive possession of Heaven's Mandate. Such efforts likely reflect the Ming court's ongoing anxiety that many in eastern Eurasia saw no fundamental rupture in Toghān-Temür's withdrawal to the north in 1368 but instead believed that they still lived in a Chinggisid world. Second, Zhu Di and his advisers depicted Gülichī and Bunyashiri as regional, and therefore lesser, rulers. The Great Khans enjoyed various levels of local support and governed "one single territory." At least once, Zhu Di offers a formulation that suggests roughly analogous status – "We rule the Central State, and the Great Khan rules the steppe." Both were descriptions first developed by Zhu Yuanzhang and his advisers in communications with the Great Khan. In the same vein, Zhu Di, like his father, struck the pose of one ruler counseling another. He analyzed the Great Khan's political standing and chances of survival. He also drew attention to their performance as rulers. Did they win wars and bring security to their people? Did they possess the intelligence and judgment to evaluate circumstances and choose the best course of action? Through such strategies, Zhu Yuanzhang and Zhu Di wished to highlight their own superiority as sovereigns. They also wanted to lead the Great Khan to recognize the wisdom of an alliance with the Ming throne. Again all this reflects the Ming throne's sense that the Great Khan was a ruler who mattered for the emperor's status and the dynasty's interests.

Third, in his early communications with the Great Khan and senior Great Yuan figures, Zhu Di drew freely from the rhetorical repertoire developed at his father's court. Fortune's end, Heaven's Mandate, and each man's need to discern the age's imperatives and his own interests – these all appeared regularly in Zhu Yuanzhang's writings. Like his father, Zhu Di also offered the Great Khan a clear choice for the future. If he accepted the Ming dynasty's legitimacy and patronage, wealth and security for the Great Khan and his descendants were possible. If he continued his errant ways, destruction was ensured – whether at the hands of steppe rivals and disloyal supporters or by the Ming dynasty's overwhelming military might.

Fourth, Zhu Di understood that the Great Khan's status was more precarious than it had been during his father's reign. He grasped that succession was more keenly contested than in the past. He saw that senior Mongol commanders

<sup>55</sup> *GQ*, 14.1.1024, merely notes that Zhu Di issued a communication to Bunyashiri.

without Chinggisid pedigree now selected the Great Khan. More than his father, Zhu Di explicitly addressed the rapid turnover of power and the strong probability that the Great Khan would meet a poor end. Zhu Di may have been dealing with Great Khans of diminished power and prestige, but he was clear that leaders in east Eurasia believed that the Great Khan mattered and that political jockeying on the Mongolian steppe had important consequences for neighbors. Zhu Di also appreciated that the Great Khan's relative weakness did not increase his own ability to impose his will on the steppe.

The following section broadens our perspective to consider Zhu Di's interaction with other political leaders of his day.

### Zhu Di's Court in a Chinggisid World

Like his father, Zhu Di monitored political and military developments among Chinggisids in Eurasia. In 1405, Zhu Di dispatched envoys bearing an edict of praise and gifts of textiles for the current Moghul Khan, Sham'-i Jahān (r. 1399?–1408), one of Khiḫr Khwāja's sons. Sham'-i Jahān had launched a military strike against Gülichī, the reigning Great Khan, who, as noted above, had poisoned the King of Hami, a Chinggisid noble of Chaghadaid descent.<sup>56</sup> The same year, Zhu Di received news about the death of Tamerlane, who at the time had been leading a massive military force against the Ming. Two years later, in 1407, Sham'-i Jahān had sent an envoy to the Ming court, stating that in past generations Samarkand had been the territory of Besh-Baliq, presumably referring to the time before Tamerlane's conquest of the region when Samarkand had been Chaghadaid territory.<sup>57</sup> Sham'-i Jahān requested Zhu Di to send military forces to assist in the region's recovery. Zhu Di urged the khan to consider the situation carefully and avoid precipitous action.<sup>58</sup>

The communications above suggest at least two things about the Ming throne's standing in eastern Eurasia. First, Zhu Di understood that relations among successors to the Mongol empire had ramifications for the Ming dynasty. Thus, he remained abreast of developments in places like Hami, Besh-Baliq, and Samarkand. Second, the overtures of the Moghul Khan Sham'-i Jahān suggest that he believed that the Ming throne should be directly involved in Central Asian geopolitics. Zhu Di showed no interest in committing military resources to the simmering conflict between the Timurid and Moghul polities, but he remained an engaged observer. As we shall see below, he did

<sup>56</sup> *MTSL*, 41.1b, p. 670. See also Bretschneider, *Medieval researches*, vol. 2, p. 238.

<sup>57</sup> In March 1361 (1360?), Sham'-i Jahān's forefather, Tughluq-Temür, had seized Samarkand by military force, but in 1363–64, Tamerlane took control of the city. See Dūghlāt, *Tarikh-i-rashidi* (Thackston), pp. 13–14, 17.

<sup>58</sup> *MTSL*, 66.3a, p. 929.

prove willing to invest political capital in powerholding in Hami, a key node of trade and intelligence linking China, the Mongolian steppe, and Central Asia.

Six months after Sham'-i Jahān's request for military aid, worried envoys from the Three Guards arrived in Nanjing in October 1407. They informed Zhu Di that they had heard from "a subordinate of Chaghan Tatar" that King Öljeitü planned to ally with the people of Besh-Baliq and then attack "the south," presumably the Ming. "The groups of the northeast" would be struck first. This is the first of five related entries in the *Ming Veritable Records* that appear on this day. Zhu Di explained to the anxious men of the Three Guards that Öljeitü was a Chinggisid descendant, whose original name was Bunyashiri, whom we have encountered above. In 1407, he was still just a guest of the Moghul Khan but rumors had begun to circulate that powerful actors in Mongolia wished to enthrone him as Great Khan. Zhu Di sought to calm the Three Guards' envoys. He told them that his envoy (a Commander Choulü, likely a Mongol if the name is any indication) had been to Samarkand and reported that Bunyashiri/King Öljeitü had only a few hundred men at his command. These men were likely his personal guard and entourage, the nucleus of any steppe leader's court.

Zhu Di pointed out to the Three Guards that Besh-Baliq was far to the northwest. How, he asked, could Öljeitü and Besh-Baliq unite? The Ming emperor's reasoning here is unclear. He presumably knew that Timurid and Moghul territories were adjacent and that they were politically and militarily entangled. An alliance was far from unimaginable. At the same time, just six months prior, Zhu Di had declined the military assistance that Sham'-i Jahān had requested to retake territory that Tamerlane had seized. Now the Moghul Khan was rumored to have formed an alliance with a potential new Great Khan and stood poised to raid Ming borders. The truth of the matter, suggested Zhu Di, was that Chaghan Tatar had been sent by Gülichi to mislead Ming border defenses. The emperor dispatched an envoy with instructions to the Three Guards to remain calm. Do not be fooled by empty rumors, he ordered.<sup>59</sup>

At the same time, however, Zhu Di alerted his military commanders on the northeastern border. It is unclear whether he was warning them about a possible Mongol strike or that such rumors were false.<sup>60</sup> In either case, Zhu Di ordered Gansu's regional commissioner to organize a military unit to escort his imperial envoys to Gülichi's court and to gather intelligence about steppe developments.<sup>61</sup> In a separate edict, he upbraided the commissioner for failing to enforce a prohibition against the sale of outlawed weapons, which had been sold to "outer foreigners."<sup>62</sup> It is unclear whether the emperor meant Mongols or Central Asians. Finally, recorded on this same day in the *Ming Veritable*

<sup>59</sup> *MTSL*, 72.2a, p. 1003.

<sup>60</sup> *MTSL*, 72.2a, p. 1003.

<sup>61</sup> *MTSL*, 72.2a–b, pp. 1003–04.

<sup>62</sup> *MTSL*, 72.2b, p. 1004.

*Records* is an entry that notes the delivery of an imperial edict to Gülichī about opening relations (discussed in the previous section).<sup>63</sup>

In a word, Zhu Di understood the ties that connected the sprawling Chinggisid world and appreciated the different ways such connections could influence the Ming court. As we have seen, Zhu Di knew that Bunyashiri had taken refuge at Tamerlane's court in Samarkand and later sojourned at the Moghul Khan's court. As the previous section has shown, Bunyashiri, against Zhu Di's counsel, was enthroned at the Yuan court among the Eastern Mongols. Leaders of the Three Guards also understood that Chinggisid alliances (e.g. between the Moghul Khanate and the Eastern Mongols) spanned much of east Eurasia with direct consequences even for those based in northeast Asia (e.g. the Three Guards). Thus, for contemporaries, the geopolitical ramifications of "greater Mongolia" and its potential for alliances and rivalries were clear.

### Explaining Choices

In 1410, 1414, 1422, 1423, and 1424, Zhu Di took to the field, personally overseeing five military campaigns on the steppe against various Mongol rivals.<sup>64</sup> Historians most commonly consider the campaigns in the context of foreign relations, trade, war, or occasionally ethnic relations.<sup>65</sup> They debate the motivations and consequences of Zhu Di's steppe campaigns. Were they an effort to bolster a usurper's political legitimacy through the illusion of bold military mastery?<sup>66</sup> Should they be seen as a way to compensate for increasing physical infirmity, even impotence?<sup>67</sup> Were they an effort to resurrect an Inner Asian style of military rulership, perhaps even re-create the Great Yuan's control of both steppe and sown? Was there a coherent strategic vision rooted in a desire to divide and conquer the Mongols?<sup>68</sup> Should we interpret the campaigns as an expensive and strategically misguided folly that permanently

<sup>63</sup> *MTSL*, 72.2b, p. 1004. <sup>64</sup> Franke, "Yunglo's Mongolei-Feldzüge."

<sup>65</sup> Rossabi ("The Ming and Inner Asia," p. 231) argues that Zhu Di's inconsistency prevented the creation of stable, peaceful relations with the Mongols. Waldron (*The Great Wall*, p. 76) writes, "active campaigning was the most important ingredient in early Ming security policy." Zhu Hong (*Ming Chengzu*, p. 250) also notes, "Beijing's security relied on the ruler repeatedly campaigning in person."

<sup>66</sup> Zhu Hong (*Ming Chengzu*, p. 244) suggests that like other usurpers in Chinese history, Zhu Di used ambitious state projects, including war, to compensate for the way he came to power.

<sup>67</sup> Zhu Hong, *Ming Chengzu*, pp. 251–52.

<sup>68</sup> Much scholarship sees an overarching goal of preventing steppe unification through supporting weaker steppe polities and undermining stronger leaders. Chan ("The Chien-wen, Yung-lo, Hung-hsi, Hsüan-te reigns," p. 264) writes of wishing "to achieve peace on the northern borders by dividing, rewarding, and pacifying" Mongol groups. Waldron (*The Great Wall*, p. 76) describes it as "a game of divide and rule." Mao Peiqi (*Yongle*, pp. 386–405) argues Zhu Di lacked an overarching strategic vision but instead reacted ad hoc to steppe leaders' initiatives.

weakened the Ming dynasty's northern borders?<sup>69</sup> Or, in contrast, did they extend the Ming throne's influence deep into steppe, preventing reunification among the Mongols and a resultant aggressive southern push? Historians have developed a rich array of interpretations. Below, I ask two slightly different questions. What do the campaigns reveal about Zhu Di's rulership and what do they tell us about the contemporary perception and representation of the Great Yuan's legacy?

The first campaign took Zhu Di out of the capital for five months, from mid-March to mid-August 1410. It evinced the Ming court's ties to a variety of polities linked to the Mongols, both Chinggisid and otherwise. The immediate cause was a disastrous defeat the previous year. Qiu Fu (1343–1409) had led a Ming army of some 100,000 men into upper Mongolia north of the Kerülen river to punish Bunyashiri and Arugtai for the murder of Zhu Di's envoys.<sup>70</sup> It ended in a complete rout and grievous losses, including most of the Ming commanding generals. Although the 1409 campaign often receives only passing mention, it was the first major steppe campaign of Zhu Di's reign.<sup>71</sup> It was led by senior military commanders who had fought with Zhu Di during the civil war and who had been rewarded with aristocratic titles. Several of these same men, including the Mongol Qorghochin, had developed considerable experience on the northern border, supervising defenses in the important frontier garrison of Xuanfu and leading units of several thousand men into the southern steppe on a nearly annual basis since 1402.<sup>72</sup> In other words, Zhu Di had chosen some of his most experienced and trusted senior military commanders to oversee the campaign. The loss was as unexpected as it was humiliating.

In the weeks preceding the 1410 campaign, Zhu Di explained his decision to lead an imperial army into the steppe against Bunyashiri and Arugtai to several

<sup>69</sup> Chan ("The Chien-wen, Yung-lo, Hung-hsi, Hsüan-te reigns," p. 228) notes that Zhu Di's policies "inadvertently weakened security along the northern borders." Zhu Hong (*Ming Chengzu*, p. 251) notes the campaigns' heavy losses and steep expense. Dreyer (*Early Ming China*, p. 182) writes that the ineffective campaigns reveal the "sclerosis" that afflicted the Ming military even in the early fifteenth century. He concludes, "After this the Ming could still influence Mongol chieftains by granting them rewards and titles, but a credible threat of force was lacking."

<sup>70</sup> For description, see Serruys, *The Mongols in China*, pp. 258–61.

<sup>71</sup> For brief narratives of the 1409 campaign, see Mao Peiqi, *Yongle*, 378–79; Rossabi, "The Ming and Inner Asia," pp. 228–29; Shang Chuan, *Yongle*, 193–94; Chao Zhongchen, *Ming Chengzu*, 359–61.

<sup>72</sup> The five commanders were Qiu Fu, Wang Cong, Qorghochin, Wan Zhong, and Li Yuan. For their service during the civil war, in 1402 Qiu Fu had been invested as a duke, and the remaining four had been invested as marquises. Between 1402 and 1409, Qorghochin and Wang Cong had frequently served together on the northern border. See *MTSL*, 27.1a, p. 491; 33.1a, p. 575; 33.3a, p. 579; 33.8a, p. 589; 33.9b, p. 592; 39.5a, p. 657; 42.1b, p. 676; 51.3a, p. 765; 62.1a, p. 889; 76.1a, p. 1035; 84.4b, p. 1124; 92.2a, p. 1201. Wang Cong and Qorghochin may have first formed a relationship during the late fourteenth century, when both men were officers in the Middle Escort Guard of Yanshan. See *MGCX*, 6/44.

different audiences.<sup>73</sup> On March 2, 1410, Zhu Di briefly addressed his son and Heir Apparent. Although the empire enjoyed peace, the emperor noted, “the remnant caitiffs are recalcitrant and raid the borders; they detain and murder envoys; and they have long remained unrepentant.” “Heaven,” he wrote, “knows of their evils and is putting them to death.” In this formulation, Zhu Di acts as the instrument of Heaven’s will. This mirrors his father’s rhetoric during war against rival warlords of the 1350s and 1360s. Zhu Di then recounted Qiu Fu’s abortive campaign. The emperor explained to his son and Heir Apparent that Qiu Fu’s devastating loss “has so damaged dynastic awe that if We were not to raise another army to exterminate them, the caitiffs will be without restraint. In the future, they will be an endless source of suffering to the border.”<sup>74</sup>

Zhu Di put things similarly for his commanding generals: “The northern horsemen bandits have violated Heaven’s Mandate, murdered dynastic envoys, and preyed upon border subjects. This has not been [something of] a single day and night. Now We personally chastise [them] on Heaven’s behalf.”<sup>75</sup> Here the emperor again describes himself as Heaven’s instrument of punishment against the Mongols. Zhu Di devoted the remainder of the edict to boosting morale and appealing to his men’s desire for lasting fame and rewards.<sup>76</sup>

On March 9, Zhu Di offered the fullest rationale for the campaign, explaining why he would succeed and why the realm would benefit. The following passage addresses issues of rulership, the Mongols’ transgressions, and the Mongol polity:

We have received Heaven’s Mandate and succeeded to the vast foundation of the Grand Progenitor the Lofty Emperor to rule the myriad regions and succor the multitudinous kinds. Among barbarians of the four quarters and distant lands, there is none that has not come in submission. Only the remnants of the northern caitiffs located in the desolate wastelands brazenly perpetrate brutality. [We] have repeatedly dispatched envoys with messages, [but] they have detained and murdered them. Recently their people raided the border. Border generals apprehended them. [We] again dispatched envoys to return them. Again they were detained and murdered. [Our] kindness has already been betrayed several times. Can they possibly harbor virtue? Furthermore, the jackals and wolves are avaricious and grasping. The duplicitous villains gnaw on their people, who crane their necks in search of respite. Investigating [such circumstances] in terms of the Heavenly Path, [we see that] their fortunes have already expired. Examining [them] in terms of human affairs, [we see that] their people are all divided. We now personally

<sup>73</sup> Scholars have shown curiously little interest in Zhu Di’s decision to lead an army into the field. Chao Zhongchen (*Ming Chengzu*, p. 361) suggests in passing that in light of Qiu Fu’s defeat, Zhu Di decided that he alone was capable of victory on the steppe.

<sup>74</sup> *MTSL*, 96.3a, p. 1271. See also *MTSL*, 100.2b, p. 1306. <sup>75</sup> *MTSL*, 100.3a, p. 1307.

<sup>76</sup> *MTSL*, 100.3a, p. 1307. Zhu Di recounted the military exploits of the Tang-period general Xue Rengui (614–83).

lead the Six Armies to go and chastise them. [We] inspire fear [through] martial awe and make manifest Heavenly punishment.<sup>77</sup>

The passage's first section articulates Zhu Di's qualifications as ruler. Passing in silence over the bloody civil war through which Zhu Di seized the throne from his nephew, the text stresses that the emperor holds Heaven's Mandate, is heir to the dynastic founder, and has won universal recognition from surrounding peoples and polities. The Mongols were the sole exception. The contrast between the Ming dynasty, with its impeccable pedigree, and rapacious, predatory, and deceitful Bunyashiri on the steppe is clear. Desperate for help, the Mongolian people suffer under cruel and grasping leaders. Its fortunes expired and its people resentful, the Mongol polity is divided – clear evidence of poor rulership and the absence of support by Heaven/Tengri. In fact, Bunyashiri's people “crane their necks in search of respite”; that is, they desperately look around in all directions for someone to save them. Zhu Di's edict does not openly acknowledge Bunyashiri as holding an analogous status to Zhu Di as ruler. Indeed, it never names Bunyashiri. However, the Son of Heaven's claims to rulership implicitly use the Mongolian Great Khan as a foil. The remainder of the edict describes Zhu Di's advantages over the Mongols in the coming war. He also gestures toward what the campaign will achieve, perhaps most important being lasting peace and ease of mind. It closes with the statement that the edict has been promulgated so that those at home and abroad will understand the reasons for war.

Zhu Di's edict was an effort to convince his son (and heir), civil ministers, and officer corps (which included Mongols) of his legitimacy as sovereign and his likelihood of success, which was another way to amplify his qualifications as ruler. When Beijing's “the elders” – that is, local men of some social standing – visited the court to say farewell before Zhu Di departed the capital, the emperor provided yet another justification for the campaign. “This,” he said, “is to bring peace to the people.”<sup>78</sup> The Ming imperial family and its high advisers found it difficult to tell the story of the dynasty's rise, successes, legitimacy, and fears without extensive reference to the Mongols. Zhu Di understood that neighbors perceived the campaign as a conflict between the Ming and Chinggisid ruling houses that raised issues about allegiance, duty, and the burdens of war. Zhu Di hoped to convince ambitious men among the Eastern Mongols, including Chinggisid nobles, that he was the superior sovereign who deserved their loyalty and obedience. The emperor knew he had to justify his actions to, and win support from, not only domestic audiences, including his son, his officials, and

<sup>77</sup> *MTSL*, 101.2a–b, pp. 1313–14; *HMZZ*, 2.40a–b (*XXSK*, vol. 458, p. 20). This translation has previously appeared in Robinson, “Justifying Ming Rulership,” p. 11.

<sup>78</sup> *MTSL*, 101.3a, p. 1315.



his subjects, but also concerned third parties such as the Chosŏn king, Jurchen leaders, the Oirat *tayishi*, the Moghul Khan, and Timurid rulers.

### Persuading the Chosŏn Throne

King T'aejong (r. 1400–18) of the Chosŏn court closely tracked regional developments. He was well positioned to evaluate a Ming–Chinggisid conflict. His forefathers had served for generations in Ssangŏng Commandery, a key outpost of Mongol military and administrative control in northeast Korea during the preceding Koryŏ period.<sup>79</sup> His father, Yi Sŏnggye (1335–1408), had risen to prominence fighting with and against Yuan generals in the chaotic 1350s and 1360s before establishing the Chosŏn dynasty in 1392. Having seized power in a bloody coup, King T'aejong was also familiar with rhetorical strategies for bolstering rulership and justifying military action.

The Ming founder had coerced the Chosŏn's predecessor, the Koryŏ dynasty (918–1392), into selling him some 50,000 horses for his wars with the Chinggisids. Zhu Di had similarly pressed the Chosŏn throne into selling him tens of thousands of horses during his civil war.<sup>80</sup> King T'aejong likely viewed the coming conflict with apprehension. In the run-up to the Ming dynasty's 1409 steppe campaign, King T'aejong had shared worries with senior officials that in the face of a major Ming expedition, refugees from the steppe would seek refuge in Chosŏn territory. If the Mongols proved victorious, the king believed, Ming refugees would likewise spill into Chosŏn territory. The king also commanded military intelligence, knowing, for instance, that Qiu Fu's army numbered 200,000 troops.<sup>81</sup> In the wake of Qiu Fu's defeat, Chosŏn envoys informed King T'aejong that Beijing was in crisis as Mongol troops approached the capital. Rumors from Liaodong claimed that the imperial Ming army was terrified of the Mongols. Afraid to confront the Mongols on the field, Ming troops hid behind the safety of city walls.<sup>82</sup> The Koreans were also deeply concerned about rumors that the Ming court wanted the Chosŏn king to contribute 100,000 troops and two generals to attack the Mongols from the northeast.<sup>83</sup>

The following secret report preserved in *Veritable Records of Chosŏn*, a royal chronicle, reveals perceptions of the relative standing of Zhu Di and Bunyashiri among regional political elites.

<sup>79</sup> For the Yi family's ties to the Mongol empire, see Yun Ŭnsuk, "14 segimal Manju."

<sup>80</sup> Robinson, "Rethinking the Late Koryŏ"; Pak, "Jingnan zhi yi," pp. 231, 236–38, 243; *Myŏngch'o Chosŏn*, 141–45; Kitajima, "Eirakutei ki," pp. 200–02.

<sup>81</sup> *T'aejong sillok*, 18.14b, vol. 1, p. 503. <sup>82</sup> *T'aejong sillok*, 18.40a, vol. 1, p. 516.

<sup>83</sup> *T'aejong sillok*, 18.35b.

The Tatar Emperor has stationed a powerful army outside the passes of Guanzhong. Regional Commander and Duke of Yiguo (i.e. Qiu Fu) and Marquis of Wucheng (i.e. Wang Cong) clashed with them and suffered defeat. Their entire army was taken captive. The Emperor is mobilizing troops from all routes, and he will campaign against the north in the second month of next year.<sup>84</sup>

Within a few short lines, the report explicitly mentions two emperors, both of whom command considerable military forces. The document as preserved in the *Veritable Records of Chosŏn* qualifies the reference to Bunyashiri as the Tatar Emperor, whereas Zhu Di requires no such qualification. Otherwise the Chinggisid and Ming rulers are treated as roughly analogous. Reading such reports, the Chosŏn king and his advisers could not have been sanguine about the Ming's military prospects. After all, the Ming army had been routed, and now Zhu Di was forced to mobilize troops from throughout the empire.

By late November, the king had a clearer idea of what the campaign would mean for Chosŏn. Zhu Di's Korean-born palace eunuch brought word to King T'aejong that the emperor did not want troops but instead demanded Korean horses at prices determined by the Ming government. Over the next five months, King T'aejong would deliver 10,000 horses to Liaodong in nineteen installments.<sup>85</sup> Perhaps this explains why Zhu Di sent a note to the Chosŏn king to justify his steppe campaign. "Among the descendants of the Yuan emperors, some have submitted and some have not submitted," observed Zhu Di. He continued, "We plan to pacify those who have not submitted."<sup>86</sup> This brief statement articulates Zhu Di's understanding of Bunyashiri as the Great Yuan emperors' successor far more explicitly than does surviving Chinese evidence, which often uses descriptions like "remnant bastards" and "remnant northern horsemen" but almost never "remnant of the Yuan." It also tallies well with the Chosŏn court's description of Bunyashiri as Tatar Emperor, emperor being a status qualitatively different from that of chieftains and other lesser leaders. During his sojourn at the Chosŏn court, Zhu Di's eunuch used similar language. He observed, "the descendants of the Yuan emperors have taken refuge at the Kerülen river for eight generations. Now they do not come in submission. The emperor plans to pacify them in the coming spring; he will mobilize the great army on the sixth day of the second month." In the coming months, the Chosŏn court continued to follow the military situation, gathering information from the Ming capital and Liaodong.<sup>87</sup>

Zhu Di and his court did not take Chosŏn allegiance for granted. As was true with Zhu Yuanzhang's demands for large numbers of Korean horses, Zhu Di's requisition of 10,000 horses served several purposes. It increased the Ming

<sup>84</sup> *T'aejong sillok*, 18.35b. The official who filed the secret report was O Chin. Qiu Fu's title was Duke of Qiguo, not Duke of Yiguo.

<sup>85</sup> *T'aejong sillok*, 19.19a. <sup>86</sup> *T'aejong sillok*, 18.37a.

<sup>87</sup> *T'aejong sillok*, 18.40b; 19.2b; 19.3a; 19.10b; 19.13a.

army's supply of mounts for the steppe campaign and reduced the number of horses available to the Mongols. It drew King T'aejong closer to the Ming dynasty by forcing him into a high-profile gesture of loyalty and obedience. Finally, it greatly handicapped the Chosŏn military's ability to wage war, which might seem to work against Ming interests but in fact simplified Zhu Di's strategic calculations, as he did not have to worry that Chosŏn might support Bunyashiri.

Viewed from the perspective of sixteenth- or seventeenth-century Ming–Chosŏn relations, such a fear might seem far-fetched, but it was entirely plausible to observers during the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. Late in December 1409, a Korean translator alerted the king that a man from Liaodong had secretly informed him that the Ming “court had heard rumors that Chosŏn is raising troops to aid the Tatars.” To test the veracity of such tales, the Ming court sent the palace eunuch Hai Shou (Korean Hae Su) to travel to Korea. Once there, he feigned a towering fury to verify Chosŏn loyalty – presumably such an outburst would provoke them into showing their true colors.<sup>88</sup> It is nearly impossible to determine whether the rumor arose at the Ming court, in Beijing's streets, in the offices of the Liaodong Regional Military Commission, among the inhabitants of Liaoyang, or somewhere else, but, as Chapter Five below shows, decades later in the 1440s and 1450s, Ming political elites continued to worry that the Chosŏn court was susceptible to the Great Khan's allure.

King T'aejong had grave doubts about Zhu Di's steppe campaign. On the eve of the emperor's departure, the king received a briefing from an official recently returned from Beijing. The official informed him that when Zhu Di learned that the Chosŏn dynasty had delivered the last of the 10,000 horses, the emperor immediately wanted more. The Ming army's intense conscription efforts had largely emptied cities of fighting-age males, the official continued. Heightened security measures meant the remaining residents – “old men and females” – were not allowed beyond city walls. Imperial guards were on constant alert, forced to eat meals while standing. King T'aejong asked his official whether the Tatars would attack first or did Zhu Di plan to take the fight to them? “I have not heard of the Tatars coming to attack,” responded the official, “but I have heard that Qiu Sheng (Qiu Fu) led the imperial bodyguard and was defeated by the scoundrels. Thus the emperor wishes to cleanse this humiliation and campaign against them.” Not persuaded by Zhu Di's rationale, the king acknowledged that, if attacked, one had no choice but to respond. However, he mused, “Is it right to impose burdens on the people to campaign in some remote, desolate

<sup>88</sup> *T'aejong sillok*, 18.43b.

place?” Were one to do so, King T’aejong concluded, “one will be mocked by all the realm.”<sup>89</sup>

To sum up, Zhu Di worked hard to persuade fellow rulers of his actions’ legitimacy and likely success, because he needed their support. Co-operation from even close allies was not automatic, because such assistance imposed political, economic, and military costs that had to be assessed in light of wider considerations. Failure to secure allied but doubting rulers’ aid and recognition not only posed military complications but also undermined Zhu Di’s status as lord of lords.

### Central Asia

At the same time as Zhu Di was trying to win the support of a close but skeptical neighbor to his east, an envoy of a distant sovereign from the west arrived in the capital. On March 14, one day before departing Beijing for the steppe, Zhu Di received envoys from the Timurid ruler Shāhrukh (1377–1447, r. 1405–47). Few details of the meeting survive but Zhu Di dispatched a regional military commissioner to the Timurid court with an imperial edict affirming his ruler’s universal nature. “We rule the realm,” he wrote, “treating all with equal benevolence and not discriminating between near and far.” Zhu Di then counseled Shāhrukh to improve relations with his nephew Khalil Sultan. Whether the advice was intended as a claim to wider sovereignty or simply as ruler-to-ruler insight gained through personal experience, it shows that Zhu Di had been briefed about Timurid politics.<sup>90</sup> The editors of the *Ming Veritable Records* describe Shāhrukh as the fourth son of “Yuan son-in-law Tamerlane.” Having married a Chinggisid noblewoman, Tamerlane secured status as a Chinggisid imperial son-in-law (Mongolian *güregen*; Persian *kürkân/gürgān*), a status he used as an official title and inscribed on his coins. In Ming-period Chinese sources, Yuan usually refers to the Yuan ruling house, which had been based in China, but neither Tamerlane nor his liege lord was located in China but rather in Central Asia. Thus, Ming writers used the term Yuan to mean the Chinggisid ruling house in the aggregate, or they believed that the Yuan ruling house had ruled the entire Mongol empire. The former possibility seems more likely, but the latter cannot be dismissed out of hand.<sup>91</sup>

The Persian translation of Zhu Di’s letter even more clearly links the Timurids to the Chinggisid age. It notes, “previously when the Yuan dynasty fell, your forefather imperial son-in-law Timūr recognized [the new holder of] Heaven’s Mandate and submitted to the Grand Progenitor the August

<sup>89</sup> *T’aejong sillok*, 19.13a. <sup>90</sup> *MTSL*, 101.3b, p. 1316.

<sup>91</sup> Kim Hodong (“Mong’gol che’guk”; “The Unity of the Mongol Empire”; “Was ‘Da Yuan’ A Chinese Dynasty”) argues that Great Yuan (Da Yuan) referred to the wider Mongol polity, which the Yuan emperor ruled.

Emperor.”<sup>92</sup> Zhu Di and his advisers understood that the Chinggisid mantle was claimed in many quarters and that the Timurid court had an active interest in developments among both the Oirats and the Eastern Mongols. As noted above, Bunyashiri, the reigning Great Khan, had sojourned in Samarkand as Tamerlane’s guest.

The next day, just as Zhu Di was leaving the capital, he dispatched commander Öljei-Temür to bring gifts to another member of the Chinggisid aristocracy, the “King of Besh-Baliq,” Muhammad, the Moghul Khan.<sup>93</sup> Zhu Di wished to express his gratitude for the protection Muhammad had extended to Ming envoys on their way to Samarkand.<sup>94</sup> We have no information about how Shāhrukh, Muhammad, or their envoys viewed the looming war with Bunyashiri, but they were likely interested. Tamerlane had offered Bunyashiri protection and may have contributed to his rise to power in Mongolia. These missions to Herat and Besh-Baliq remind us that Zhu Di’s campaign against Bunyashiri and Arugtai should be viewed from the wider perspective of continued Chinggisid power and its various manifestations in the post-1368 period. For contemporary rulers like Zhu Di, Shāhrukh, and the Moghul Khan, war with Chinggisid nobles was of common concern to all sovereigns.

### The Oirats

In mid-April 1410, Zhu Di, now on the steppe with his army, received envoys from Maḥmūd, the most powerful leader among the Oirats or Western Mongols, who had taken advantage of the Mongol empire’s collapse to expand their strength in western Mongolia and today’s eastern Xinjiang.<sup>95</sup> The Ming court had sent at least three embassies to Maḥmūd in the recent past, and the Oirat leader in 1408 had reciprocated. Thrilled with Mongolian recognition – even if was not Chinggisid – and hopeful that Maḥmūd might prove a useful counter to the Eastern Mongols, Zhu Di responded with lavish gifts, seals of office, and impressive titles. The Ming court had invested Maḥmūd as the Obedient and Peaceful Prince (*Shunning wang*).<sup>96</sup> Maḥmūd’s envoys now presented Zhu Di with horses as a token of gratitude. Fine horses were common

<sup>92</sup> The Persian translation (along with a French translation from the Persian) of Zhu Di’s letter is reproduced in Blochet, *Introduction à l’histoire des mongols*, pp. 247–48. I follow the Chinese translation by Shao Xunzheng, who used both the Persian text and Chinese materials to emend errors by Blochet, who did not have access to Chinese-language texts. See Shao Xunzheng, “You Mingchuye yu Tiemuer diguo zhi guanxi,” p. 90. In the Persian version, Timūr’s title imperial son-in-law is rendered *fūma*, a transliteration of the Chinese term *fūma*. I thank my colleague Jyoti Balachandran for her generous help in parsing the Persian.

<sup>93</sup> For a brief biographical sketch of Muhammad, see Dūghlāt, *Tarikh-i-rashidi* (Ross, pp. 57–59; Thackston, pp. 20–21).

<sup>94</sup> *MTSL*, 101.4a, p. 1317. <sup>95</sup> *MTSL*, 102.2a, p. 1325.

<sup>96</sup> Rossabi, “The Ming and Inner Asia,” *CHC* 8, pp. 227–28.

gifts among fellow Eurasian rulers, most of whom shared a keen appreciation of equestrian culture. Horses figured prominently in the royal hunt, polo, exhibitions of mounted archery, and of course war. Maḥmūd was no doubt interested in Zhu Di's objectives and the possible ramifications of a large Ming army in the steppe, especially one personally led by the emperor.

The day after their arrival, Maḥmūd's envoys were invited to watch as Zhu Di conducted a massive military review. Divided into eastern and western wings, the army took up formations that extended for dozens of miles.<sup>97</sup> Ming court annals described the sight in stirring terms. The soldiers' "halberds and armor, pennants and flags were so radiant as to block the sun. The iron riders leapt. The gongs and drums thundered." This same source indicates that Maḥmūd's men "saw this and were afraid." Whether or not the military display really intimidated the Oirats, they responded with courtier-like diplomacy. They confided to Zhu Di, "With the Heavenly Army like this, who would dare cross swords [with the emperor]?" – or so Ming imperial editors wrote.<sup>98</sup>

Maḥmūd's envoys departed the next day. They had learned something of the Ming army and perhaps Zhu Di's intentions, while the emperor had done his best to impress them with his power and confidence. Zhu Di sent the envoys off with gifts for Maḥmūd and two other Oirat leaders whom the Ming court had invested with titles.<sup>99</sup> Zhu Di entrusted Commander Baobao, likely a Mongol in the service of the Ming, to relay his sentiments to the Oirat nobles.<sup>100</sup>

Cordial exchanges between rulers continued, and little more than a month later, in mid-May, the Oirat nobles sent another mission, which was given a banquet.<sup>101</sup> By this time the Oirats were likely wondering how Zhu Di and his army were faring in harsh steppe conditions. The emperor and his men had already gained a profound sense of gratitude for sources of clean fresh water, celebrating their discovery as close to miraculous (see below). Ensuring supplies of food and other provisions to the troops was also a constant worry for Zhu Di and his inner circle. A week before the arrival of the second group of Oirat envoys, Zhu Di went out of his way to personally thank representatives from a local border region community who had supervised the transportation of supplies.<sup>102</sup> The gratitude was well founded. Before the campaign was over, many transport workers and soldiers would die from disease, frostbite, exposure, and starvation. Thus, a banquet not only expressed respect and goodwill toward Maḥmūd but also demonstrated that Zhu Di possessed plentiful supplies of food and other provisions. The emperor continued to receive reports from his envoys (often military officers) about the Oirats. On occasion, he permitted

<sup>97</sup> *GQ*, 15.1.1038.      <sup>98</sup> *MTSL*, 102.2b, p. 1326.

<sup>99</sup> The Wise and Righteous Prince, Taiping, and Contented and Happy Prince, Batu-Bolad.

<sup>100</sup> *MTSL*, 102.3a–b, pp. 1327–28.      <sup>101</sup> *MTSL*, 103.3b, p. 1340.

<sup>102</sup> *MTSL*, 103.1a, p. 1335.

senior civil officials to listen to the most recent updates while riding beside him.<sup>103</sup>

### Patronage and Rulership on Campaign

Exploiting his presence on the steppe, Zhu Di negotiated directly with Eastern Mongols considering an alliance with the Ming. Eager to break or at least diminish the power of Bunyashiri and his *tayishi* Arugtai, Zhu Di struck the pose of rival patron. In mid-June, a group of several hundred Eastern Mongolian prisoners were brought to see Zhu Di, who assured them that his only enemies were Bunyashiri and Arugtai. He held no animus toward their followers, who “are my children who have long been mistreated by the bandits.” “Bandits” here means Bunyashiri and Arugtai. Zhu Di ordered that the prisoners be released and provided with grain, sheep, and horses. He forbade his commanders from abusing captured Mongols, remarking that they were all good people and not culpable for hostilities with the Ming dynasty.<sup>104</sup> According to the *Ming Veritable Records*, his generosity won their vocal support. “They all bowed their heads and bellowed ‘Long Live the Emperor.’ From this point onward, those who surrendered in submission were even greater.” Zhu Di, however, sent them back home, reasoning that they all had mothers and fathers, wives and children whom they would eventually come to miss.<sup>105</sup>

Zhu Di and his court took active steps to win Eastern Mongols’ allegiance during the 1410 campaign. Late in June, Arugtai and Bunyashiri turned against each other. At the same time, Ming armies scored initial victories. Zhu Di issued a series of “edicts of instruction” to Mongol leaders. These short missives were addressed to individual men who are identified by their title (such as duke of state, prince, chieftain) and personal name. In each communication, Zhu Di briefly reviews current circumstances and then invites the addressee to come in submission. He relates Bunyashiri’s transgressions (including the murder of Ming envoys and border raids), Zhu Di’s personal command of an imperial army that had reached as far as the Onon river, and finally Bunyashiri’s defeat and flight. Praising the addressee for returning one of his Mongol officers, Zhu Di observes that he understands that circumstances had long prevented them from fulfilling their wish to submit:

Now We have heard that you have all been scattered. This has all come about because of Heaven’s Path. If you can follow Heaven’s Path and come in submission, father and mothers, wives and children will all be reunited and forever enjoy the good fortune of

<sup>103</sup> Jin Shan, *BZL*, in *GCDG*, 16.1.305. <sup>104</sup> *YSTBJ*, 88.4.1682.

<sup>105</sup> *MTSL*, 104.3a, p. 1349; *GQ*, 15.1.1043.



peace. If you do not heed Our words and miss this opportunity, it will be too late for regret.<sup>106</sup>

Perhaps most striking is that these missives were both standardized – the content of each was identical – and personalized – the name of the addressee, the Ming Mongol officer returned to Zhu Di, and the Ming Mongol officer now dispatched to deliver Zhu Di’s edict and his gifts of textiles were all tailored to the specific case. The delivering officer presumably also provided an oral translation of the emperor’s written edicts. Zhu Di mobilized the Ming state’s bureaucratic resources for the highly personalized task of negotiating Mongol leaders’ transfer of allegiance.

### The Emperor’s Mongols

Surviving records from the 1410 campaign suggest the pervasive presence of Mongols in Zhu Di’s armies and staff in the field. In a series of orders issued during the 1410 campaign, Zhu Di directed Mongols such as regional military commanders Suqurqui and Wang Qara-Ba’atur to be careful in choosing the next site for the imperial army to encamp, a highly sensitive mission that bore directly on the security of Ming military forces.<sup>107</sup> On another occasion, Zhu Di specially dispatched one of his palace eunuchs to order four Mongol men (all mentioned by name) to wait for the emperor because he wished to consult with them.<sup>108</sup> Zhu Di gave detailed instructions about the composition of reconnaissance units that the commanders Zhu Rong and Suqurqui were to organize and where they were to go. He explicitly ordered that they were to contain a mix of between eight and twenty Chinese troops and “Tatar troops.” Each man was to take two horses. Mongols commanded these units.<sup>109</sup> One unit, led by the Mongol Kōrtei and a palace eunuch, captured several of Arugtai’s men.<sup>110</sup> Also among these orders, Zhu Di refers by name to at least half a dozen Mongol officers sent to pursue Arugtai.<sup>111</sup> These same men were charged with ensuring that valuable military technology, such as cannon

<sup>106</sup> *YSTBJ*, 88.4.1684.

<sup>107</sup> *YSTBJ*, 88.4.1678. A Chinese officer and a palace eunuch accompanied the Mongols commanders.

<sup>108</sup> *YSTBJ*, 88.4.1679. <sup>109</sup> *YSTBJ*, 88.4.1679.

<sup>110</sup> *YSTBJ*, 88.4.1680. They revealed that Bunyashiri and Arugtai had turned against each other and that their forces had scattered. During the 1414 campaigns against the Oirats, Zhu Di refers explicitly to dispatching both a “Han officer” and a “Tatar officer” to reconnoiter enemy movement. Both were to submit reports, possibly to discourage either one from supplying poor or false information. See *YSTBJ*, 88.1.1698. Zhu Di also ordered two Mongol officers in the Ming army to serve as guides. See *MTSL*, 150.5a, p. 1753; *GQ*, 16.2.1101. Later in the same campaign, he dispatched yet another Mongol officer to reconnoiter the Oirats’ movements. See *MTSL*, 151.2a, p. 1757.

<sup>111</sup> *YSTBJ*, 88.4.1681.

and handheld firearms, were not abandoned along the army's route. Zhu Di was likely concerned that they might fall into the hands of the forces of Bunyashiri or Arugtai.<sup>112</sup>

Mongols appear regularly among the scores of men who received promotions in the immediate wake of the campaign, as noted in the *Ming Veritable Records*.<sup>113</sup> A few received special recognition. Mandu, an officer from the Branch Regional Military Commission of Shaanxi, was given a promotion, 300 *ding* in cash, one hundred taels of silver, and six bolts of gift silk. Zhu Di valued Mandu for his expertise in the northwestern border, particularly Liangzhou, where Mandu had spent considerable time. Immediately upon the campaign's conclusion, Mandu was ordered back there to establish order in the wake of a recent revolt in Liangzhou by Mongols in the Ming military.<sup>114</sup> The son of Batu-Temür (to whom the Ming court granted the Chinese name Wu Yuncheng), a vice commissioner in chief, also accompanied Zhu Di into the steppe, where he captured several Mongols. The Wus were one of the most prominent Mongol families in the service of the Ming state.<sup>115</sup> After returning to Beijing, the son was appointed assistant commander in Liangzhou Garrison.<sup>116</sup> Also from a notable Mongol family in the service of the Ming state, the brothers Xue Gui and Xue Bin were appointed assistant commissioner in chief of the Middle Chief Military Commission and assistant commissioner in chief of the Left Chief Military Commission respectively.<sup>117</sup> Furthermore, Zhu Di made sure that Mongolian translations of important military directives were delivered to their encampments for the edification of their men, presumably also Mongols.<sup>118</sup>

We catch only occasional glimpses of Zhu Di's interactions with rank-and-file Mongols in the Ming armies. At one point in the summer of 1410, Zhu Di conferred with a Mongol centurion about the best way to pursue Bunyashiri's forces. He questioned the Mongol about the likelihood of the Great Khan withdrawing further into the steppe once he learned that Zhu Di was still intent

<sup>112</sup> *YSTBJ*, 88.4.1681. Such a concern is predicated on a belief that the Mongols could use such military technology. Later in 1414, Zhu Di gave fifteen signal cannons to co-ordinate communications between Ming imperial troops and Oirat forces. See *YSTBJ*, 88.4.1694.

<sup>113</sup> *MTSL*, 107.1a–b, pp. 1379–80; 3a, p. 1383; 4b–6a, pp. 1386–89. Several Jurchen officers were recognized by name, winning promotions and receiving Chinese names (*MTSL*, 107.4a, p. 1386; *GQ*, 15.1.1050). See also *GQ*, 15.1.1050.

<sup>114</sup> *MTSL*, 106.4a, p. 1374. Mandu would die in fighting with the Oriats during the 1414 campaign. See *MTSL*, 152.1b, p. 1764; *GQ*, 16.2.1103. Zhu Di ordered that sacrifices be offered on his behalf (*MTSL*, 152.2a, p. 1765).

<sup>115</sup> Serruys, "Mongols Ennobled," pp. 215–23; Zhou Song, "Ru Ming Mengguren."

<sup>116</sup> *MTSL*, 107.4a, p. 1385; *GQ*, 15.1.1050.

<sup>117</sup> *GQ*, 15.1.1050, 1051. Xue Bin, whose Mongol name was Toghontai, had succeeded to his father's post in the Yanshan Garrison. Xue Gui's Mongol name appears to have been Toghochi. See Serruys, "Mongols Ennobled," pp. 223–24.

<sup>118</sup> *YSTBJ*, 88.4.1693. Few extant sources refer explicitly to the place of Mongolian as an operational language within the Ming imperial military. This almost certainly reflects the vagaries of document survival rather than the Mongolian language's unimportance.

on Bunyashiri's destruction. The emperor sought to assure the centurion that his insights were valued. "We now employ you as a guide; how is it [We] would not listen to your words?"<sup>119</sup>

### Reinscribing the Landscape

The episode above portrays Zhu Di as an open-minded liege offering support to even his humblest Mongol subjects. The emperor also operated in a more imperial – even imperious – mode. He repeatedly named and renamed important natural landmarks on the steppe, including springs, rivers, and mountains. Sometimes Zhu Di assigned a new name as a way to recognize a miraculous event. Early in May 1410, a tower of water suddenly erupted from a spring, providing parched soldiers and horses with desperately needed water. Zhu Di named it Spring of Daemonic Response (*shen ying quan*).<sup>120</sup> Other times, renaming was to commemorate poignant moments. Early in June the emperor watched from a nearby hill as imperial mounts stood drinking eagerly for what seemed an unusual length of time from the waters of Kerülen river. The river, which had figured prominently in the Chinggisids' early history, Zhu Di now renamed "Drinking Horse River" (*yinma he*).<sup>121</sup> In addition to displaying imperial power, repeated renaming of springs and rivers likely reflects the growing appreciation of Zhu Di and his advisers for sources of potable water on the steppe.

Zhu Di's toponymic reworking of the steppe sometimes carried a sharper edge. In June 1410, he changed the name of the Onon river to the Xuanming river. In pre- and early imperial Chinese texts, Xuanming had been used variously as a name of a deity of water, of winter, and of the north.<sup>122</sup> As the central habitat of the Mongol tribe during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the Onon (and Kerülen) rivers were closely linked with Chinggis Khan and appear regularly in the *Secret History of the Mongols*. For Zhu Di to rename the river was to proclaim the Ming court's sovereignty over both its physical space and its spiritual power. After renaming the river, Zhu Di dispatched an officer to invest

<sup>119</sup> *MTSL*, 104.2b, p. 1348; *GQ*, 15.1.1043.

<sup>120</sup> *MTSL*, 102.6, p. 1355; *GQ*, 15.1.1039. Several senior court ministers composed commemorative poems on the occasion. See Yang Rong, *YWGJ*, vol. 1, pp. 21–23. Zhu Di renamed a spring at Qinhu Mountain (Qinhushan, literally "Mountain of the Captured Northern Horseman" or "Mountain where the Northern Horseman was Captured"), "Miraculous Aid" (*ling ji*); Hu Guang, *HWWJ*, 9.34a–36b (*SKCM*, *ji* 28, pp. 619–20). See also Jin Shan, *BZL* (*GCDG*, 16.1.304); *MTSL*, 103.3b, p. 1340. Zhu Di named a spring near Xuanshipo "Heavenly Bestowed Spring." See Hu Guang, *HWWJ*, 20.29b–30a (*SKCM*, *ji* 29, p. 180).

<sup>121</sup> Jin Shan, *BZL*, in *GCDG*, 16.1.305; *MTSL*, 104.1a, p. 1345. Zhu Di's renaming did not efface earlier names. In a poem entitled "Kerülen River," Hu Guang adds an explanatory note, "Now named Drinking Horse river." See Hu Guang, *HWWJ*, 20.23b (*SKCM*, *ji* 29, p. 182). Hu Guang similarly explains in one of his poems that the Onon river had been renamed "Xuanming river." See Hu Guang, *HWWJ*, 20.25b (*SKCM*, *ji* 29, p. 183).

<sup>122</sup> Legge, *The Ch'un Ts'ew*, pp. 669 and 671.

the deity of the Onon river with the title “Deity of the Xuanming River.” In effect, Zhu Di was asserting his authority as sovereign to confer titles and status on the river just as he did with Mongol men. The commander then offered sacrifices to the newest member of the Ming imperial pantheon.<sup>123</sup> Zhu Di was claiming control over an iconic place closely tied to Chinggisid identity and charisma.<sup>124</sup> In other instances of renaming, such as Kill the Northern Horsemen Township (Shahuzhen), Intimidate the Caitiff Postal Relay Station (Weiluyi), or Pacify the Caitiff Township (Jingluzhen), the assertion of domination was blunter.<sup>125</sup>

Another show of power was Chinese-language inscriptions carved into rock. Some were tributes to the Ming dynasty’s longevity, and others celebrate military victory over the Mongols.<sup>126</sup> At today’s Naran District (Sükhbaatar

<sup>123</sup> *YSTBJ*, 88.4.1682. The officer was Xue Lu.

<sup>124</sup> It is unclear how much Zhu Di and his inner circle understood of the broader Orkhon river valley’s continuing charisma. In 1585–86, the Buddhist monastery Erdene Zuu was built adjacent to Qara-Qorum’s ruins. See Rogers et al., “Urban Centres and the emergence of empires,” p. 813.

<sup>125</sup> In June 1414, Zhu Di’s forces defeated a contingent of Oirats under Maḥmūd, Taiping, and Batu-Bolad north of the eastern Tu’ula river. The emperor promptly renamed the site “Kill the Barbarian Township.” See *MTSL*, 152.2a, p. 1765; *GQ*, 16.2.1104. For a celebratory account of the victory, see Hu Guang, *HWWJ*, 20.53a–54a (*SKCM*, *ji* 29, p. 192). Soon after this victory, Zhu Di ordered the army’s return to the capital. Hu Guang highlights the military campaign’s lasting significance, claiming,

[His Highness] has swept away the venomous wasp,  
For the next millennium.  
[He] has washed away the mutton stench,  
[We] return ten thousand *li*.

See Hu Guang, *HWWJ*, 20.54a (*SKCM*, *ji* 29, p. 192). Hu Guang uses similar language in several poems composed during the return journey to the capital. An imperial victory proclamation was issued when the Ming army arrived at Capture the Northern Horsemen Mountain (Qinhushan). See Hu Guang, *HWWJ*, 20.58a (*SKCM*, *ji* 29, p. 194). Intimidate the Caitiff Station was the new name given to Li Ling Pavilion.

<sup>126</sup> Blackrock Hill (Xuanshipo) is located in today’s Sinod Banner, Xilingol League (Inner Mongolia), twenty-one kilometers east of Mandulatu Township. The inscriptions are found on several large grey granite stones in a stone outcropping. One the western side of the outcropping, Zhu Di had the following thirty-one characters inscribed.

An inscription composed by the emperor for Blackrock Hill:

Only sun and moon are brilliant,  
Only Heaven and Earth live long.  
The inscription on Xuanshi,  
Will match their longevity.  
The seventh day of the fourth month of the eighth year  
Of the Yongle reign.

*MTSL*, 103.3a, p. 1339; Zheng Xiao, *Jin yan*, *juan* 4, p. 165; *GQ*, 15.1.1040. Also at Blackrock Hill, Zhu Di ordered Hu Guang to write the characters “Standing Horse Summit of Blackrock Hill,” which were to be carved into stone. See Hu Guang, *HWWJ*, 20.29b (*SKCM*, *ji* 29, p. 180).

On a large stone of the eastern face of Blackrock Hill is one more inscription. It reads:

Province, Mongolia), Zhu Di composed a brief epigraph, which was inscribed on a stone monument. It reads:

An inscription composed by the emperor:  
 Hanghai is the hilt,  
 Heaven and Earth is the edge.  
 A single sweep of the northern horsemen's dust,  
 Forever clears the steppe.<sup>127</sup>

Zhu Di's imagery likely derives from a passage in the Daoist classic *Zhuang zi*, which describes "the sword of the Son of Heaven." The sword of Heaven uses various kingdoms of the Warring States period for its hilt, edge, back, point, and so on. The sword is all-encompassing and all-conquering. "When this sword is once put to use," the passage reads, "the feudal lords return to their former obedience, and the whole world submits. This is the sword of the Son of Heaven."<sup>128</sup> Zhu Di pointedly used Hanghai, an expression for the Mongolian steppe, thus transcending control of the Central Plain, suggested in the original by reference to various Chinese states. However, true to the original, Zhu Di claims universal rule over all. Here, as at Blackrock Hill, Zhu Di inscribed the statement "On the sixteenth day of the fourth month of the eighth year of the Yongle reign, the emperor of the Great Ming led the Six Armies past here on campaign to chastise the northern horsemen bandits."<sup>129</sup>

A few days later at Guangwu Township, Zhu Di commissioned an even more bellicose epigraph for inscription. It reads:

Oh! Powerful are the Six Armies  
 [We] employ troops to extirpate the foul caitiffs.  
 The mountains are tall, the waters clear,  
 Forever displaying Our martiality.<sup>130</sup>

"On the seventh day of the fourth month of the eighth year of the Yongle reign, the emperor of the Great Ming led the Six Armies past here on campaign to chastise the northern horsemen bandits."

For details of the inscriptions' location and content, see Wang Dafang and Zhang Wenfang, *Caoyuan jinshi lu*, p. 193.

At another mountain with rich mica deposits, Zhu Di ordered Hu Guang to write six large characters, "Victory Hill of Mica Mountain" to commemorate "Heavenly halberds cleansing the distant wastelands in a single sweep." See Hu Guang, *HWJ*, 20.32a (*SKCM*, ji 29, p. 181).

<sup>127</sup> *MTSL*, 103.3b, p. 1340; Zheng Xiao, *Jin yan, juan 4*, p. 165; *GQ*, 15.1.1041. For photograph and transcription of the inscriptions, see Wang Dafang and Zhang Wenfang, *Caoyuan jinshi lu*, p. 194. Tsai (*Perpetual Happiness*, p. 169) offers a different translation.

<sup>128</sup> Watson, *Complete Works of Zhuangzi*, pp. 268–69.

<sup>129</sup> Wang Dafang and Zhang Wenfang, *Caoyuan jinshi lu*, p. 193.

<sup>130</sup> *MTSL*, 103.3b–4a, pp. 1340–41; Zheng Xiao, *Jin yan, juan 4*, p. 165; *GQ*, 15.1.1041. See also Su Zhigao, *Yi yu*, in *MMHJ*, vol. 1, pp. 218–23. Tsai (*Perpetual Happiness*, p. 170) offers a different translation.

A month earlier in mid-April, Zhu Di had confronted evidence of Yuan rule on the steppe. Zhu Di and several civil and military advisers climbed to the top of a hill, where they surveyed the surrounding lands. Looking north, Zhu Di observed to one of his ministers, “When the Yuan thrived, these were all people’s homes. Now there is desolation for ten thousand miles. One can see only wind-blown dust and steppe grass. The power of the caiffiffs has diminished to this degree, yet they remain obstinate. What keeps them going?”<sup>131</sup> Zhu Di’s remarks reflect his understanding of his enemy as a continuation of the Great Yuan. They also reveal that despite his emphatic statements in stone about decisive victory on the steppe, the emperor entertained no small wonder about Bunyashiri and his supporters’ refusal to concede the Yuan’s fall.

### Conclusion

This chapter has argued that interactions with Great Yuan personnel, especially Mongols, were a formative experience for Zhu Di during his reign as Prince of Yan. During his twenties and thirties, he learned to govern, win men’s allegiance, conduct military campaigns, and eventually seize supreme power. Throughout, Mongols figured prominently as loyal commanders, dangerous enemies, and potential allies. He had also witnessed his father’s active and extended engagement with the Chinggisid world, most especially the Great Yuan and its legacy. He had seen his father’s efforts to undermine the ruling Great Khan’s standing in Eurasia and to secure Great Yuan personnel’s loyalty through persuasion, military pressure, and material incentives. On occasion, Zhu Di played a direct role in such efforts, negotiating with prominent Great Yuan leaders, warring against dynastic enemies, and commanding recently surrendered officers and troops in the field. In retrospect, we may consider 1388, the year the Great Khan Toghus-Temür was murdered, as a turning point, the end of the Great Yuan or, at the very least, the moment when it lost much political relevance. Little evidence suggests that contemporaries held such a view. For them, the Great Yuan and its legacy continued to loom large.

After becoming emperor, Zhu Di’s engagement with the Chinggisid world only deepened. He communicated directly with two Great Khans, Gülich and Bunyashiri. In letters to them, Zhu Di offered an encompassing narrative that explained both broad political changes, such as the Yuan dynasty’s fall and the Ming dynasty’s rise, and specific personal conditions, including particular challenges confronting the Great Khans. Zhu Di’s letters demonstrate a firm understanding of steppe dynamics and their relevance for the Ming dynasty. Zhu Di and his advisers likewise appreciated that the Ming court was part of the broader Eurasian constellation of polities that emerged from the Mongol

<sup>131</sup> *MTSL*, 102.3a–b, pp. 1327–28; *GQ*, 15.1.1038.

empire's collapse. Events in Samarkand and Besh-Baliq mattered for the Ming court and its allies in places as widely separated as Hami, the Khinggan mountains' eastern slopes, and Seoul. Zhu Di's decision to lead an imperial army into the steppe against Bunyashiri and Arugtai in 1410 threw into high relief the interconnected nature of eastern Eurasia.

With the 1410 campaign's end, Zhu Di again explained to senior ministers why he had taken personal command of an imperial army. "On behalf of [Our] forefathers' ancestral shrine and the common people, We had no choice but to lead a distant campaign of punishment against the treasonous caitiffs in the hope that a single great labor will bring everlasting ease." In the official proclamation ending the war, Zhu Di described both long- and short-term reasons for the campaign. He began with the end of the Yuan dynasty's fortunes, which threw the realm into chaos. Heaven commanded that Zhu Di's father unify China. All under Heaven recognized Ming rule. The sole exception was "the remnant bastards of the northern horsemen raiders, who scattered into the steppe, where they precariously clung to life." This contextualization establishes Zhu Di and his military efforts as a direct continuation of his father's epic feats. It depicts the Mongols as the common enemy of both Zhu Yuanzhang and Zhu Di. It also implicitly acknowledges Bunyashiri as successor to the Great Yuan. To destroy the benighted Mongols would have been easy, Zhu Di explained. Instead, his aim was to bring peace and stability to the people. Thus, he repeatedly sent envoys to bring the recalcitrant Mongols to their senses. In towering arrogance, the Mongols murdered the imperial envoys, which infuriated both men and deities. In other words, Bunyashiri betrayed Zhu Di's attempts at peace. Describing the decision to mount a campaign against Bunyashiri, Zhu Di observed, "In reality it was Heaven that put them to death." Like his father, Zhu Di was Heaven's instrument. Zhu Di insisted his victory was decisive and epochal. "A century of weeds were eliminated in a single day," he noted, "and ten million *li* of mutton stench was thus washed clean." Here Zhu Di implied that he completed his father's unfinished work. He concluded by highlighting his universal rulership, which viewed all with equal benevolence and would prosper for ten thousand years.<sup>132</sup>

Yet, Zhu Di knew that nothing had been fundamentally resolved.<sup>133</sup> Bunyashiri and Arugtai remained in power. Little more than a month after declaring a successful conclusion to the 1410 campaign, Zhu Di indirectly acknowledged that military action had not achieved lasting change on the

<sup>132</sup> *MTSL*, 104.3b–4b, pp. 1350–52; *HMZL*, 5.26b–27B (*XXSK*, 457.130); *HMZZ*, 2.41a–42b (*XXSK*, 458.21); *T'aejong sillok*, 20.2b, vol. 1, p. 557.

<sup>133</sup> Mao Peiqi (*Ming Chengzu*, pp. 386–405) shows how each of Zhu Di's steppe campaigns bled into the next. Individual leaders rose and fell, but steppe politics in the aggregate remained an enduring threat to the Ming dynasty.



steppe. In July, Zhu Di tried to persuade Bunyashiri and Arugtai that the Great Yuan's time had passed. They should abandon their futile resistance, the emperor counseled:

Heaven Above has long forsaken the Yuan. Even if you have ambition, Heaven has cast [you] aside. How could Heaven be blamed? Even if human strength is powerful, how could it surpass Heaven? At this moment, [if] one can truly follow that which Heaven has caused to flourish, Heaven will be bound to bring good fortune to one. Wealth and high status can be preserved; merit and fame will not perish.<sup>134</sup>

Zhu Di acknowledges the political genealogy of Bunyashiri and Arugtai as prominent leaders of a polity that considered itself a continuation of the Great Yuan. Rather than deny their status as the Great Yuan's successors, Zhu Di insists that Heaven had transferred its support from the Great Yuan to the Ming. Zhu Di paints an alliance with the Ming as a way to prosper that did not betray an allegiance to the Great Yuan. He offers historical examples of prominent men from the steppe who had linked their fortunes to the Central Plains ruling houses.<sup>135</sup> If Arugtai surrenders peacefully and presents himself at the emperor's camp, promises Zhu Di, "not only will the prestige of fame and titles be granted to you, but it will also be arranged for your sons and grandsons to inherit generation after generation. The multitudes of [your] command will remain under your leadership."<sup>136</sup>

After the 1410 campaign, the Great Yuan legacy retained its singular appeal. Inner Asian politics continued to draw Zhu Di into the Chinggisid world. When Arugtai wished to ingratiate himself with Zhu Di, he wrote, "The descendants of the Chinggisids have all died out." Faced with a new reality, Arugtai wished to come with his followers in submission, or so Ming imperial chronicles say in January 1411. Praising Arugtai's decision, Zhu Di reiterated his claim to universal rulership. "We have received Heaven's Mandate to act as ruler to the realm. We wish only that the people of the myriad regions all enjoy good fortune. [We] extend generosity to all those who come [in submission]. There is after all no difference between near and far, us and them."<sup>137</sup>

The following episode suggests something of the contrasting ways Arugtai, Zhu Di, and other Inner Asian leaders addressed the Great Yuan's legacy. In January 1411, Arugtai's envoys accused the Oirats of dealing in bad faith with Zhu Di. They had failed to turn over the Seal of Dynastic Transmission to the

<sup>134</sup> *MZSL*, 105.1b, p. 1358.

<sup>135</sup> The first is Jin Midi, a steppe leader who, after considerable adversity, won great favor with Han emperor. See Ban Gu, *Han shu*, 68.9.2960. The second is Qibi-heli, a Turkic noble (based in what would today be eastern Kyrgyzstan) who held important military positions in the Tang in the mid-seventh century and was legendary for his unwavering loyalty to the dynasty. Through his distinguished military service as a commanding general, Qibi-heli won praise and aristocratic titles from the throne. See Liu Xu, *Tangshu*, 109.10.3291–92.

<sup>136</sup> *MZSL*, 105.1b, p. 1358. <sup>137</sup> *MZSL*, 111.3a, p. 1419.

Ming court. The seal was reputed to have passed through the hands of dynastic rulers, including Qubilai, back to the time of the First Emperor of the Qin dynasty in the third century BCE. Zhu Yuanzhang had sought but failed to secure this prominent emblem of the Yuan dynasty's authority and legitimacy. Arugtai's message was likely intended to remind Zhu Di that potent symbols of the Mongol empire remained in play on the steppe beyond the emperor's control. This highlighted Arugtai's importance as an ally. Zhu Di tried to deny that he had ever valued the seal.<sup>138</sup> Later in 1413, Arugtai sent a large embassy (187 men) to the Ming court to present horses and a seal that he had received from the Central Secretariat of the Great Yuan.<sup>139</sup> These repeated and explicit gestures of severing ties with the Great Yuan suggest that Arugtai understood both the Ming court's stated position about the termination of the Chinggisids' allotted span of rule and the ongoing anxiety that informed such a stance.

Arugtai's strategy worked. In July 1413, Zhu Di invested Arugtai as King of Qara-Qorum and presented him with a golden seal bearing his new title.<sup>140</sup> In the investiture edict, Zhu Di wrote that Arugtai was a "surviving minister of the Yuan" who understood Heaven's Path, came in submission, and turned over his seal. At the same time as Zhu Di invested Arugtai as King of Qara-Qorum, he also confirmed Arugtai's previous title as *tayishi* granted by the Great Khan. In edicts from May 1414 in the context of a joint military campaign against the Oirats, Zhu Di addressed Arugtai by his full panoply of titles, the majority of which had been granted by the Great Yuan.<sup>141</sup>

Perhaps Zhu Di's 1410 campaign never aimed for fundamental, structural change to Inner Asian politics. Instead Zhu Di sought a bold intervention. Through prominent display of military might and largesse, he inserted himself into the Chinggisid world as the preferred patron in eastern Eurasia. He actively sought allies among the ruling elites of the Chosŏn dynasty, the Oirats, the Eastern Mongols, the Timurids, and the Moghul Khanate.<sup>142</sup> To

<sup>138</sup> *MTSL*, 111.3a–b, pp. 1419–20. <sup>139</sup> *MTSL*, 140.6a, p. 1689; *GQ*, 15.1.1092.

<sup>140</sup> *MTSL*, 141.4a, p. 1691; *GQ*, 15.1.1092. The title was Prince of Hening "Hening wang," Hening being the new administrative name of Qara-Qorum adopted by the Yuan government early in the fourteenth century. Prince of Qara-Qorum would be a more accurate translation.

<sup>141</sup> These included "*tayishi*, Grand Councilor of the Right of the Central Secretariat, and Head Bureau Manager of the Manager of Military Affairs," which had been granted by his Chinggisid Great Khan and represent a continuation of Yuan-period administrative nomenclature. See *YSTBJ*, 88.4.1694–95. These edicts are not included in the *Ming Veritable Records*. In 1403, the Ming court had addressed Arugtai as Grand Guardian and Bureau Manager of the Bureau of Military Affairs. See *MTSL*, 17.4a, p. 307.

<sup>142</sup> Zhu Di reportedly had a clear sense of major political actors in West Asia. During a 1420 audience with Timurid envoys, Zhu Di "enquired if Qara Yusuf would send an emissary and tribute." Shortly later, the emperor announced, "I have in mind to send an emissary to Qara Yusuf and request from his some good-tempered horses, for I have heard that in his realm there are excellent horses." Ghiyathuddin Naqqash, "Report to Mirza Baysunghur," in Thackston, *A Century of Princes*, p. 289. Qara Yusuf ruled the Qaraqoyunlu dynasty of Eastern Anatolia, Azerbaijan, and Iraq from 1389–1420.

that end, he adopted an Inner Asian identity that would be readily understood and appreciated.

In the 1410 campaign, like the rest of his steppe campaigns, Zhu Di and his court sought control rather than extirpation. They tried to dominate – not destroy – the landscape and its people. In some ways the campaign and its rhetoric were analogous to Zhu Yuanzhang's compilation of the *Official History of the Yuan Dynasty* – an opportunity to pass judgment on the meaning of Yuan rule, proclaim the end of Yuan fortunes, and appropriate the Yuan legacy to the purposes of the Ming court, particularly those of the emperor.

As the next chapter shows, Zhu Di cultivated other facets of his rulership. He used the steppe and the wider Chinggisid world to define his relations with his civil officials. They were essential to the broader project of “fabricating” his image as ruler.<sup>143</sup> Despite such power, civil ministers themselves confronted great challenges. How, for instance, were they to depict the Inner Asian aspects of Zhu Di's rulership with its obvious links to the Chinggisid realm? How were they to understand and describe the proper relations between the Son of Heaven and his foreign subjects? Similarly, what was the relationship between themselves, as the emperor's natural advisers – even teachers – and the Mongols, with their privileged access to the emperor?

<sup>143</sup> The term is borrowed from Burke, *Fabrication*.