

Plenary Keynote Speech I

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1524: The End of the Silk Road

Abstract

In 1524, the imperial court of the Ming made a decision: to relocate seven frontier garrisons in the country's northwest border areas (Guanxi Seven Garrisons, 關西七衛) from their original stations outside Jiayu Pass (嘉峪關) at the western end of the Great Wall to their new stations within the pass. Though this decision with its implementation hasn't attracted much attention of historians, it is an event of far-reaching significance in world history: It marked the closing of the Silk Road which stretched across the Eurasia Continent and was seen a "great channel of international trade" regarded by many scholars.

This decision was not an indiscretion of Jiajing Emperor of the Ming dynasty on impulse without counting the cost, but the result of much thought of the top policymakers of the Ming state: Years earlier, memorials were submitted to the throne to suggest to "Close the door [to the barbarians in West China] and Suspend the tribute trade [with them], and never have dealings with them (閉關絕貢, 永不與通)." The suggestion was supported by the Board of War. Though it was not indorsed by the crown then, it heralded the decision. Some deep-seated reasons stood behind the decision.

1. Economic consideration

In terms of trade volume and size, the trade of the Silk Road was not important as thought. One of the main restrains of the expansion of the trade was the unendurably high costs of the trade, which were caused with not just the extremely poor transportation, but very high risks that the merchants suffered from the unsafety caused with political instability in this area. Second, the trade was highly unbalanced: China's export dwarfed its import greatly and made the trade a one-way trade in some sense. Third, the trade was mainly official for political purposes and in charge of the Chinese state. As a result, the size and frequency depended on policies of the Chinese state. Moreover, during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, two great changes happened: climate changes and the rise of the maritime trade. Both of them, in particular the later, had great effect on the trade of the Silk Road and accelerated the fall of it.

The Chinese maritime trade saw a great expansion during the sixteenth century, partly because of the rise of Japan, the tapping of rich resources of Southeast Asia and the arrival of the

Portuguese and Spanish through whom China was linked with a great business world that these Western powers created. Quite different from the trade along the Silk Road on land, the maritime trade was lucrative, though not in the official tribute trade. The prosperity of multinational private trade resulted in troubles for the Ming state. The state had to take precedence over the troubles in the trade along the Silk Road which was trivial in the size.

Second, security considerations.

The traditional threat to China came from the nomads in the steppes of Inner Asia, Central Asia and Manchuria. The sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, however, saw the second great wave of expansion of Islam, which reached Central Asia and reshaped the political and cultural map of this region completely. Though the plan of conquest of China of Tamerlane (“Timur the Lame”, 1336-1405) did not succeed because of his sudden death en route in the march of his massive army to China before he ever reached the Chinese border, the rulers of different Muslim regimes in this region did not abandon their goals to convert China into Islamic, and some of them took actions and waged Jihads against the Ming. Because these nomads enjoyed the superiority in battle fields thanks to their excellent cavalries and took up the cause of Jihad with evangelical fervor, they became very aggressive to Ming China.

Facing the increasing threat from the nomads in the Northwest, the military power of the Ming declined after the disastrous defeat in the battle with Mongols at Tumubao in 1449. Through the Ming military force was recovered later, the threat from Mongols was still serious. Even worse, in sixteenth century, old threats from ‘Japanese Pirates’ (倭寇) intensified, while new threats from the Portuguese and Spaniards and from Luchuan (China’s another border area) and Vietnam in the south appeared in the east in the south. These threats, old and new, put enormous pressures on the Ming state whose financial resources were quite limited. For the Ming policymakers, the threats from the rivals and enemies in the east and south were more severe since they were much closer to China’s political center and most prosperous areas as well as the major sources of the revenue of the state.

Facing a stark choice, the Ming policymakers decided to take an ‘East and North First’ strategy which was most reasonable. As for the northwest, the best way for the Ming state was to take a strategy of ‘passive defense,’ that is, resist the offensives of the enemies from Central Asia with the help of the formidable Great Wall, as it did in the defense against the Mongols in the east. For this consideration, the Ming state decided to withdraw the Guanxi Seven Garrisons back into the Great Wall. The Jiayu Pass was the main entrance to China Proper from Central Asia along the Silk Road, and the Guanxi Seven Garrisons, established in the early Ming, were the major force to defend order and promote stability in the vast areas beyond the Jiayu Pass. It was also the major measure of the Ming state to keep safety of activities along the Silk Road. The removal of the garrisons into the pass means that the Ming state abandoned its role of the safeguard of the road. This action was “Close the door [to the barbarians in West China]” (閉關), and a necessary consequence of it was “Suspend the tribute trade [with them]” (絕貢). Since the



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tribute trade, no matter how small its size was, had been the majority of the trade along the Silk Road, the suspension of the tribute trade was the end of the trade along the road. Moreover, since the road had been the major channel to connect China Proper and Central Asia, no trade means the breaking off of the traditional link. In this sense, it is what the Ming policymakers wanted in their proposal of “Never have dealings with them (永不與通).” The withdrawing of the Guanxi Seven Garrisons in 1524, therefore, marks the end of the Silk Road as a major trans-Eurasian international trade channel. After then, the trade between China Proper and Central Asia along the Silk Road became negligible.

This situation didn't change a lot in the following centuries. The Qing dynasty, the successor of the Ming, was much more powerful in military force and proactive in dealing with the frontier affairs. Though the Qing established its effective rule over the vast region outside the Jiayu Pass after more than a century fighting, the trade along the previous Silk Road never prospered again. The road was gradually forgotten. It didn't come into view of the people until Ferdinand von Richthofen a German traveler, geographer and scientist “re-discovered” it and coined the terms “Seidenstraße” and “Seidenstraßen,” or “Silk Road(s)” and “Silk Route(s)” in English, in 1877. Today when we talk about the Silk Road, we should have better knowledge of its history. The road was never a “great channel of international trade.” The trade along the road was never very large in size, and the business along the road was going on just on and off. Compared with the maritime trade routes, the Silk Road was not as important in history as many people have imagined today. In a perspective of global history, the closing of the road in 1524 is an event of great significance because it reveals the fact: The rise of the maritime world and the fall of the inland world in the early modern times.



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