

# **The Relations between Iran and China in the Timurid Era**

## **(Case Study Ala-ud-Daulah bin Bāysonḡor)**

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### **Abstract**

In the Timurid era, the relations between Iran and China got appalled day-to-day as far as only political relations remained and the business relations were not as dynamic as prior periods. Sea route that connected China to Byzantium was as one of the reasons for this problem. Despite all efforts of Shahrukh and his successors, correspondences as well as dispatching ambassadors, this problem remained. Ala-ud-Daulah was one of those sending the ambassador and message to China court. This paper attempts to examine the relationships between Iran and China in the era of the Timurid prince and to investigate the reasons and the grounds of correspondences based on the existing resources.

### **Keywords**

political relations, Iran, China, Timurid, the Ming Dynasty, Timurid Ala-ud-Daulah.

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## **Introduction**

Two ancient countries of Iran and China have had extensive communication throughout the history, the length of this communication is perhaps as old as the two countries. This communication via the Silk Road included abundant cultural and economic nature for both countries. The Silk Road was the first and the most natural path for communication between cultures without which economic and cultural exchange was not possible. On the other hand, the Silk Road was also the underlying of many dealings due to its historical background. The road of trading silk of China with Byzantium and Rome began from Central Asia, passing from Iran, and getting to the possessions of Eastern Roman Empire. Except for the economic resources, what adds importance to this historical pathway, is the role that it has played in human civilization and it has been a means to mix the people's culture from different parts of East Asia to West Europe. In the junction of the roads and commercial cities, diverse ideas and civilizations searched for calm dwelling by crossing the vast plains and different cities sometimes freely and sometimes forcefully. Sharing benefits led to the economic boom of the docks and the cities on the way, but what occurred in these routes in addition to prosperity and economic dealings were the exchanges and dealing with ordinary people of the market.

The Silk Road shows us not only an eight thousand kilometers of roads, mountains, rivers, mountains, etc., but it is also a kind of culture and history. The Silk Road reflects the several thousand year history during which many different civilizations have formed, lived and destroyed. The extent and length of the road had not limited to the material, but it had also created the largest and most expanded processes of the cultural distribution. The commutation and the mutually political, cultural, and commercial exchanges, along the road has led to the formation of specific and amazing cultures and civilizations.

The paper investigates understanding the relationship between Iran and China in the Timurid era, especially political exchanges of prince Ala-ud-Daulah bin Bāysonḡor with China based on the data of the available historical sources and the study of the previous researches in the area of historical and political geography of the Silk Road.

The Silk Road was considered as one of the greatest ways of the trade and commerce of the world which was used by not only businessmen, but also ordinary people, missionaries, and especially Ambassadors to exchange ideas and to communicate. The road has an inhospitable ground and geographically dried path that the distance between its oases and villages was as long as hundreds of kilometers. The only thing that has kept open the rout for thousands

of years is its communicative importance for both the East and the West (Irene Frank, David Brantson, 1376: 14). Not only was the Silk Road a business way, but also it was a sign of cultural ties between Iran and China, sometimes the culture and beliefs of the great scientists of Iran transferred to China, and sometimes human and moral values transferred to Iran beyond its territory, furthermore, the political relations between the governments should not be ignored. The road has been the host of many ambassadors and peace messengers who have passed its stony parts intending to keep the peace, and they have been successful in most instances.

### **The condition of Iran and China after the Mongol invasion**

Mongols could establish an extensive empire throughout Asia in the seventh century and could disturb the power play and relations. Before this, Iran and China as the two ancient powers ruled Asia and involved economic, cultural and, political exchanges through establishing communications via Silk Road.

Mongols, the common enemy of Iran and China, began to ravage, caused slaughter and destruction, and seized power. They gradually dominated economy and culture by extending their power within countries and increasing their sphere of influence and dominated the whole of the Silk Road. Conquering Asia by Mongols and their power, they gradually restore security and tranquility throughout their territory and it can be claimed that the security was held across the eastern route of the Silk Road due to ruling two branches of Mongols over China and Iran and the existence of strong family and political relationships between them, and businessmen and people could transfer through it easily. (Naser Takmil Homayun, 1389: 101; Hans Wilhelm Housing, c 2, 1393: 105-72). Trade routes became more important, Christian missionaries and Muslims from the Middle East and Europe got to China through traveling on the road and they brought back thoughts and Chinese artifacts for their country as gifts while returning (Ali Akbar Mohammadi, 1379: 20).

Despite the rising and strengthening of the Mongols was accompanied by a lot of bloodshed and slaughtering, security across the Silk Road was established under their command in Iran and China and their dominance over the Silk Road, so that traveling from East to West was a common journey. Over the decades, the Silk Road was so crowded that some passengers passed the East and West of the road only to enjoy for a brief period of its existence (Irene Frank, David Brantson, 1376: 15 and 282) because a lot of the Mongol Empire policies had interregional characteristics. Therefore, the necessary ground to promote commercial, social, cultural and political ties between China

and the West Asia territories including Iran was available (Masoud Bayat, 1389: 26). Travel and mutually political, cultural and commercial exchanges along the Silk Road led to the formation of special and amazing cultures and civilizations.

During the ruling of the Mongols, it seemed that Asia was unified and traders and caravans of the Silk Road commuted in their internal land, but this matter was not lasting and permanent as a continuous process of the history. As a result of the destruction of the Mongol Empire and dividing the great empires of Iran and China between the survivors, the last days of the prosperity of the Silk Road were spent. Asian nations became apart from each other once again (Homayun's completion, 1389: 102).

Amir Timur's multiple assaults to Central Asia and Iran damaged the Silk Road badly, however, it caused a break in it. At Timur era, the Kings of the Ming Dynasty (Maine) ruled over China .Timur's Contemporary Qaan was a man named Yongle who sent ambassadors to the court of Iran and demanded tribute. In fact, the Chinese government assumed that Timur who had risen from Transoxiana was a subdued Chagatai Khan and expected like his predecessor Mongol Khans continuously sent the legates with impressive gifts to the court of China and to be mutually approved. The impression remained in Chinese court in the whole Timurid era and this claim was repeated at the era of each Timurid king, but the Timurid of Iran never agreed on this issue and did not look at the relations between Iran and China in such a way (Masud Bayat, 1389: 27). With such an attitude in the court of China, it was not surprising that China Qaan dispatched permanent ambassador to the Iran's court at the beginning of the establishment of the patriarch in Iran to control the circumstances of this part of the empire in his idea. (Torabi, 1376: 20).

The Vain persistence of the emperor of China to be paid tribute led to Timur to threaten China to conquering. The worsening of Timur's relations and the Chinese government grew to the extent that Timur decided to campaign China to conquer and subdue it, but he died before starting the campaign. Timur was extremely angry that he ordered that all Chinese Ambassadors to be executed. But according to resources, Timur released them after protracted negotiations while the thought of conquering China remained though not being fulfilled.

As Timur died, China King sent ambassadors to offer condolences and to observe the condition of Iran. They met Shahrukh in Herat and he treated hospitably. Timur's successors were not adventurous and they preferred lasting relationships based on peace to war relations; while returning ambassadors, Shahrukh sent his own ambassadors with China ones to china to show his goodwill as well.

The issue that should be noted is that the Silk Road has seen many travelers during thousands of years of its fate and life. The passengers in addition to ambassadors, merchants, and traders including cultural, religious, and political issues. One of the most important travelers of the Silk Road was the Persian language. It was the constant companion of the Silk Road which was as the media issuing the message of truth and friendship. The passenger (Persian language) and the favorable performance of its owners led to Iranian's reliability and influence among the Chinese, so that letters and correspondences in Farsi were exchanged in the path. Timurid Shahrukh tried to establish extensive relations with China and believed that the exchange of political and cultural representatives, and trade would boom these relations. The ambassadors who were sent to China all carrying letters in Farsi (Hossein Mir Jafari, 1384: 197). Such dealings at the time of Shahrukh's successors who are Ulug'bek and other members of his family such as Ala-ud-Daulah Bāysonḡor continued. They wrote letters in Farsi for China Qaan and called for good and mutual relations and commutation .As the purpose and attempt of this article is to present the prospect of the relations between Iran and China in the Timurid period by relying on resources and documents based on the Timurid Ala-ud-Daulah Bāysonḡor period, to understand the context and reasons of letter writing and his emphasis on relations with China, and to examine its consequences.

### **Who was Ala-ud-Daulah?**

Ala-ud-Daulah Bāysonḡor with the original name of Mirza Rokn al-dīn was one of the Timurid princes. He was the son of Bāysonḡor Mirza and Timurid Shahrukh's grandson, who was appointed for Emirate Supreme Court after the death of Mirza Bāysonḡor (Habib al-Seir, 1324: 19).

Unlike his father (Timur), Shahrukh did not determine any successor for himself during his life. This matter caused many internal problems in the Timurid government. Meanwhile, Goharshad, the wife of Shahrukh, loved Bāysonḡor's son very much, because of fear from Ulug'bek and his son, Abdulatif, who was responsible for maintaining his Father interests in the court, she did not dare to state and formalize Ala-ud-Daulah as the heir to the throne. When Shahrukh was sick in bed in the year 847 AH, Shahrukh's son, Mohammed joke, was on the way of the capital, but he dismissed his intention due to hearing some news from Herat. He was reported that the chief commander, Jalal'al-din Firuzshah, due to Goharshad urge had pledged allegiance with Ala-ud-Daulah as Shahrukh's legal heir, but against all expectations , Shahrukh escaped death (Bar e Tavalod Bitā: 240-242).

Despite such experiences, Shahrukh the left Crown Prince's problem unsolved again. He could not ignore the absolute right of his only living child named Ulugbek because of his wife's( Goharshad ) desire and welcome, and call Ala-ud-Daulah the future Emperor of the great Timurid government (ibid: 242).

When Shahrukh died on November 25 lunar 850 (1447 AD), Goharshad informed Ala-ud-Daulah immediately, On one hand, Ulugbek who was the only surviving son of Shahrukh considered himself as the legal and unquestionable heir his father, and he considered no right to somebody else in this regard. He knew himself the rightful successor of Shahrukh. On the other hand, Ala-ud-Daulah didn't dare to call himself the king despite the death of Shahrukh and the absence of Ulug'bek. Therefore, he ordered to sermon at the Grand Mosque in the name of Shahrukh as the past. But Abdulatif's misbehaving with Goharshad and her companions, and arresting them angered Ala-ud-Daulah. He officially called himself the king without thinking about the consequences of his action and he divided Shahrukh's treasury among his soldiers (Bar e tavalod, Bita: 243-246, Samarkandi, 1383, vol. 2, the second volume: 606). This action of Ala-ud-Daulah led to a hostile relations and the war between him and Ulug'bek. Two armies faced each other at the nearby of Murghab River, Ulug'bek withdrew from the battle and agreed to negotiate Ala-ud-Daulah. Finally, a peace treaty was signed between them, but the peace did not last so long. In the year 852 AH (1448 AD), Ulug'bek and his son Abdulatif raided Herat, the capital of Ala-ud-Daulah's government, and the war broke out that led to the defeat of Ala-ud-Daulah. He had to flee and to seek refuge in his brother, Babar, the (Bar tavalod, Bita: 247-249), but Babar did not remain loyal to him and ordered to thrust rods in his eyes after a while (Samarkandi, ibid, Vol. 2, the first office: 719), thus Ala-ud-Daulah was stranded and helpless. After some time of wandering, he finally died at Bisotun King's home near the Red Sea, early in the year 865 AH, His corpse was taken to Herat and was buried in the Goharshad tomb (Habib al-Seir, 1324: 19).

### **The Relations of Iran and China**

The relations of Iran and China in the Timurid era, despite all Shahrukh and his successors' efforts decreased at the end of the Shahrukh's reign that much of it has not been mentioned in the resources. The factors leading the relation reduction can be summed up in two categories:

- Political factors
- Business agents

Political causes: Iran and China could gain their independence almost simultaneously. In China, the independence took place in 770 AH by national Ming Dynasty (Ode, vol. 1, 1364: 45). At the same time, the Timurids of Iran assumed that China pursued the matters of the common border with Iran by greater interest, but, in reality, the situation was in other way and they were reluctant to leave their main borders in the West. The reason for this neglect should be sought in the sea. By opening the sea rout rather than the land rout, they had found the other road than the Silk Road to earn money and to communicate. Thus, they had little need to have business and political relations with Iran (Masoud Bayat, 1389: 27). On the other hand, at the same time, the Chinese got in trouble by a disqualified king and Khwajas' interference in the affairs of government after the death of Yong Lu who was the third king of the Ming. One of the Khwajas named Wang Min prompted the king to campaign Mongolian that led to the king defeat and his arresting. The defeat changed the Chinese policies against the Mongols from the offensive to the defensive. Consequently, the Chinese attention to the West that the Timurid were in the same direction became less than the past (Bayat, 1389: 41; Gerald, 1367: 536-537).

Shahrukh and his successors tried hard to establish strong relation with China again through negotiation and good neighborhood, but the more time passed, the less Chinese were direct neighbor of Iran because some large and small Mongolian governments were among them and they waited to misuse the situation after the death of Timur, and they even rose to avenge when they heard the news of the death to Timur as narrated by Ibn Arabshah (Ibn Arabshah, 1339; 260; Bayat, 1389: 42). The Chinese attention to Iranians fell to the lowest because of this troublesome and expansionist government in the way of China and Iran.

Business causes: The condition was different in the business aspect. The more Iran wished to establish business relations with China, the less this need was attended and even ignored by China. Traders were not allowed to enter China anymore and the ambassadors were the only travelers who were allowed to enter the city (Mazaheri, 1372, vol. 1: 29).

The more China developed in the direction of the sea, the more Iran was negligent of the sea way. Iran relied only on the land and searched his economic life in the flourishing of the Silk Road, and the same matter led to Iran's disregarding of China and vice versa. The Silk Road never found its former position, despite the importance of this way to the Timurid government. The security that was dominated by strict regulations of Kublai period on the Silk Road was vanished due to several Mongolian governments in Turkestan rampant at this time, and Timur and his successors were unable to revive it. On

the other hand, the Chinese government had also relied its economy on sea, especially after being defeated by the Mongols and losing the Silk Road, it had no longer the desire to establish security and even expected the Timurids to establish the security.

Despite all difficulties and trade relations as mentioned, the political relations were in current and the caravans were allowed to enter China that only were in embassy grabs. During Timur's successors, several ambassadors traveled from Iran to China to maintain political and even economic interests, and mutually some ambassadors also came from China to Iran.

### **The grounds and reasons for letter writings**

Timur's successors unlike him were reluctant to fight and campaign to China and they tried to establish political and business relations with China. Therefore, whoever gained the throne sent ambassadors to China to not only inform the court China of his ruling but also to examine the situation and to provide the grounds of cooperation.

Perhaps the reasons for such letter writings can be sought in the reasons of the previous topic: The strengthening of the China in the sea and not requiring the land Silk Road, and the other one was the Iranians' urgent need to the existence of the Silk Road to prop up their economy. But as mentioned before, China not only did not feel any need to land rout, but it also knew the care and maintenance of the Silk Road as the duty of the Timurid government, so the Chinese government excluded itself from confrontation with the Mongolian governments.

In the year of 824, the ambassadors of Iran gathered in Samarkand to go to China. The ambassadors were Amir Shadi Khwaja from Shahrukh, Ahmed and Khwaja Ghiyath al-din Naghash from Bāysonḡor Mirza, Mirza Ibrahim Sultan, Amir Hassan and Pahlevan Amir Jamal from Sivri ghetmesh Artedaq and Khwaja Taj al-din from Amir Shah Malek Ardovan and Badakhshan King departed China. Each of these ambassadors were carrying a letter and gifts for Chinese court (the history of cultural relations between Iran, vol. 1, 1356: 77-78).

All the ambassadors demanded good business, political and trade relations (Navai, 1341: 131). The tradition of letter writing continued during the Timurid period, and even Ala-ud-Daulah who had established a tentative and one – year-old government during the chaos after the death of Ulugbek sent a letter to the Emperor of China, Dai Ming Qaan. In the letter, Ala-ud-Daulah had referred to the good relations between Shahrukh and the Emperor of China and called for the continuation of the relations at his period (Navai, 1370: 38). The letter, which is Persian script and language presents:

" To Dai Ming Qaan from Ala-ud-Daulah Bahadur

Greetings abundant

I am enthusiastic to hearing from you. I hope that your government is at the height of authority. As always between you and the great king of Persia, Sultan Said, trade and political relations have been established And there has never been a problem, It would be an honor to continue this relationship that Now I have come to the kingdom and Correspondence continue as in the past.

Commuting routes open such as the past and Ambassadors and Tohaf and hadaya (gifts) commute.”<sup>2</sup>

In the letter, Ala-ud-Daulah After a lot of praising and informing them of his position, at the end, he emphasizes the commutation and the openness of the Silk Road and demanded this matter the same as his grandparent and other previous kings.

## Conclusion

At first, the Mongolians' access and domination on the Silk Road led to much insecurity and bloodshed, but when the Mongolians found the economic value of the road and the connection of two distant points of their empire, Iran and China, they provide Security of the road, and increased it to the extreme so that traveling through the Silk Road was a fun, but the breaking out the Mongol Empire led to disappearing the security and unity. China that had failed to overcome the established governments on this road, tried to find another way to trade and commute with the West and found it in the sea. Therefore, it broke the

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<sup>۲</sup> «به جناب دای مینگ قاآن از جانب علاالدوله بهادر

تحف تحیات عنبرنسیم و طرف دعوات عبهر شمیم که در روضات جنان و جنان عدن استقامت جان و جنان نداء سلام علیکم طبتم فادخلوها خالدین بگوش هوش راند اتحاف و اهد می‌رود.

کثرت اعداد جنود اشواق و غلبه سنان جیوش اشتیاق، نه چندان است که به هندسه عقل و هروله خیال، پیرامون ججمل و تفاصیل آن توان نشست. همیشه همگی همت بدان مصروف کل نهمت برآن مقصور که ثوابت دولت پیوسته از اوج ابهت طالع و سیارات سپهر رفعت بر دوام از مطالع حشمت لامع باشد و ما ذلک علی الله بعزیز. چون همواره میان [آن] قاآن بزرگ عالی مقدار و جانب سلطان سعید نامدار، طیب‌الله مضجعه و ثراه، قواعد فرط موالات علی الدوام ثابت و مستحکم بوده و هیچوقت در سلک لآلی کمال ایشان، تقید تفرق و تبدیری راه نیافته و اکنون تارک مفاخرت آن جناب مقامت مباهات [و] این جانب به تاج قائم مقامی و خلعت مرتبه سامی ایشان مفتوح و مزین شده الحمدالله علی احسانه بر مقتضی قصه الحسب یتوارث، واجب نمود انا وجدنا اباانا علیامه و انا علی آثارهم مهتدون مسلوک داشتن و ابواب رسل و رسائل مفتوح گردانیدن، تا نهال حسن عقیدت بر جویبار ابلاغ مراسلات و ارسال مکاتبات به اهتزاز درآمده، ریاض صدق و مخالفت از هبوب نسایم تلطفات ناضروریان گشته، سیمای امانی و آمال، به صفات [محبت] ذات‌البین آراسته باشد و لآلی اکلیل مجرد معالی بصفوت خاطر جانبین در سلک انتظام پیوسته.

پیوسته از جوانب راه آمد و شد گشاده ماند و نفایس تبرکات و تنسوقات نقل و تحویل و مشایعت و تبدیل پذیرد، هذا ما عهدنا الیه والعهد فی الدارین علیه.»

land link with the West of its empire. In contrast, the Timurid government in Iran still was dependent on land road and was negligent of the sea. This association had led to doing its best to communicate with China. The Timurid needed the presence of Chinese businessmen in their country to improve their economy. Timur's successors tried to keep their relations with China by constant letter writings, but, these efforts were not efficient due to the recession of the Silk Road in later periods. The existence of these letters and responses was the sign of the weakness of the Iranian government. In the case of Ala-ud-Daulah, it can be also mentioned that He did not gain much success and even did not received any response to his letter due to his short period ruling the fast overthrowing of his fleeting governments.

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