

CONNECTING TIME AND SPACE ALONG  
THE MING—INNER ASIA BORDER

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INTRODUCTION BY LAN WU

**D**rawing and safeguarding imperial borders were perennial challenges for rulers throughout China's late-imperial era. Supported by a generous grant from the Geiss Hsu Foundation, Dr. Ling-Wei Kung of Academia Sinica and I convened two international workshops in 2023 – the first in June at the Institute of History and Philology, followed by an August session at Columbia University. The four articles in this special issue originated at these workshops, forming part of a collective inquiry into how the Ming state (1368–1644) conceptualized and managed its frontiers.

While cartography often reduces borders to static lines, the historical reality was far more fluid. In the Ming period, the Eurasian steppe, the Tibetan plateau, the southwestern highlands, and the southeastern littoral regions dictated the empire's territorial reach and strategic investments. The research presented here follows Ming officials and soldiers into these porous zones, where people and goods circulated – legally or otherwise – for over two centuries. While the workshops covered a broad geographical range, the authors in this issue focus specifically on the Ming's northern border with the Mongols and its western frontiers with Tibet.

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“Border-crossing” is a ubiquitous theme in the historiography of both the Ming and Qing dynastic periods, and it often directs scholarly attention toward divergent geographical peripheries. Traditionally, studies of the Ming’s global engagement have prioritized the southern littoral regions and maritime expeditions.<sup>1</sup> Conversely, Qing historiography – with a few notable exceptions – tends to emphasize the empire’s continental neighbors to the north, west, and southwest.<sup>2</sup> The four essays in this special issue seek to bridge this historiographical divide by engaging with the Ming’s interactions along its northern and western frontiers, specifically concerning Mongol and Tibetan polities.<sup>3</sup> Collectively, these works address two pivotal themes, the vibrancy of borderlands as zones of contact rather than mere lines of defense, and the institutional evolution of the Ming state’s strategic logistics.

The vast territories demarcated by the Ming border walls were not static barriers but dynamic zones of contact and conflict. These regions hosted multifaceted interactions that were significantly more robust than previously understood. This fluid exchange is most evident in the realm of specialized knowledge and military labor. As early as the fifteenth century, during the reign of the Yongle emperor (r. 1402–1424), Mongols possessing sophisticated equine expertise proved indispensable to the dynasty’s ambitious military campaigns. Noa Grass examines the Directorate of Imperial Horses, revealing a complex staffing architecture that relied on flexible and inclusive recruitment. Grass demonstrates how the early-Ming state prioritized technical skill over ethnic or political demarcation, effectively allowing equine knowledge to soften the rigidity of imperial borders. In this context, the frontier

<sup>1</sup> The following works address Ming’s borders in the south and southwest: Kathlene Balanza, *Ming China and Vietnam: Negotiating Borders in Early Modern Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2016); Leo K. Shin, *The Making of the Chinese State: Ethnicity and Expansion on the Ming Borderlands* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge U.P., 2012).

<sup>2</sup> On the Qing’s connection with Southeast Asia, see Yijun Wang, “From Tin to Pewter: Craft and Statecraft in China, 1700–1844,” Ph.D. diss. (Columbia University, 2019). Melissa Macauley, *Distant Shores: Colonial Encounters on China’s Maritime Frontier*, *Histories of Economic Life* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 2021).

<sup>3</sup> On the Ming and the Mongols, see David M. Robinson, *In the Shadow of the Mongol Empire: Ming China and Eurasia* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2019), and *Ming China and Its Allies: Imperial Rule in Eurasia* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2020). On the Ming and Tibetans, see among others Karl Debreczeny and the Rubin Museum of Art, eds., *Faith and Empire: Art and Politics in Tibetan Buddhism* (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2019).

functioned as a reservoir of human capital essential to the state's military viability.

However, the nature of border management shifted as the Ming court moved away from proactive expansionism. Following the catastrophic Tumu Crisis of 1449, Ming emperors ceased leading military expeditions into the steppe. The subsequent strategic retreat toward a policy of containment – typified by the fortification and extension of border walls – aimed to physically exclude Mongol influence. Despite this defensive posture, the logistical demand for war-ready horses remained a persistent challenge. The problem evolved from a matter of acquiring expertise to one of institutional sustainability, particularly in the border horse-ranches, where on-the-ground animal handlers needed to possess equine knowledge to keep a large number of horses alive. To address the shortage, the Ming state attempted to revive depleted border horse-ranches, many of which had been established during the Yongle era. Lan Wu analyzes the complications inherent in this effort, noting that by the mid- to late-Ming, the court was increasingly fractured by factionalism. Wu illustrates that, while the “last-ditch” efforts to salvage the imperial horse enterprise were theoretically sound, they proved impractical due to a lack of political consensus, basic understanding of equine knowledge among decision makers, and bureaucratic inertia.

While Grass and Wu analyze the institutional and logistical dimensions of Ming–Mongol interactions in the fifteenth and early-sixteenth centuries, Xiaobai Hu shifts the analytical focus toward the strategic landscapes beyond the formal Ming administration. Hu examines the Kokonor (Qinghai Lake) region during the sixteenth century – a territory increasingly defined by Mongol hegemony. Initially, the Ming state maintained a reactive, defensive posture, concentrating military infrastructure along the region's periphery to contain potential incursions. However, as Hu demonstrates, this “border” remained permeable. By the final decade of the sixteenth century, internal rift among the Kokonor Mongols inevitably spilled over into the Ming border, forcing a strategic shift. The Ming state was compelled to increase military pressure, illustrating how internal nomadic politics could dictate the timing and nature of imperial border interventions.

By the early-seventeenth century, the Mongol polities of Inner Asia had entered a renewed era of competition for economic resources, religious legitimacy, and political hegemony. This period of nomadic realignment occurred as the Ming state grappled with systemic internal

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and external crises, eventually culminating in the Manchu conquest of 1644. However, the geopolitical realities that facilitated the transition from Ming to Qing were long in the making.

Wei-chieh Tsai explores this transformative period through the life of Tsogtu Khong Tayiji (1581–1637), a Khalkha Mongol prince and renowned poet. Tsai positions Tsogtu Khong Tayiji's career at a critical historical juncture: his staunch opposition to the Gelug sect of Tibetan Buddhism. At the time, the Gelug school was rapidly ascending toward dominance across Inner Asia – a movement that would eventually redefine the religious and political landscape of the Qing empire. Tsogtu Khong Tayiji's eventual downfall was more than a personal or political tragedy; it signaled the end of an era of fragmented nomadic power. His defeat paved the way for the rise of the Western Mongols, who became central players in the Kokonor region—the very landscape analyzed in Xiaobai Hu's contribution. The final two essays demonstrate that the “Ming border” was inextricably linked to the internal religious and dynastic struggles of the Tibetan plateau and the Mongolian steppe.

Collectively, the four essays presented here seek to center the northern and western frontiers and to reveal an empire in a state of perpetual negotiation. Whether through the recruitment of specialized labor, the management of vital equine resources, or the navigation of trans-border nomadic rivalries, the Ming state was defined by the very people, animals, and expertise that traversed its boundaries. These articles suggest that the “border” was not merely a physical limit of sovereignty, but a site of constant adaptation and institutional transformation.