

HU XIAOBAI

## Competing Visions for the Turquoise Sea: Geopolitical Contestation in the Sixteenth-century Qinghai Lake Region

### ABSTRACT:

This study examines the geopolitical significance of the Qinghai Lake region during the sixteenth-century Ming–Mongol confrontations. Through a transregional lens, it analyzes how contestations over territorial dominance shaped the circulation of material resources, the form of religious networks, and the movement of military populations. Following their civil war defeats in the early 1500s, Mongol groups strategically reconstituted the Qinghai Lake region as both a geopolitical sanctuary and a spiritual corridor connecting to the Tibetan Buddhist ecumene. By leveraging the lake region for refuge, pilgrimage, and resource extraction, various Mongol actors could bring about flows of personnel, commodities, and religious practices. In contrast, the Ming initially adopted a defensive strategy, concentrating military infrastructure along the region’s periphery while tolerating limited cross-border interactions. This equilibrium collapsed in the 1590s when increased Mongol mobility precipitated a full-scale frontier crisis. Despite the Ming’s eventual military suppression of this mobility, the present study demonstrates how such regulation of transregional mobility fundamentally reconfigured the Qinghai Lake region’s geopolitical configuration.

### KEYWORDS:

*Qinghai Lake region, Ming–Mongol relations, transregional movements*

The 1577 summit between the Third Dalai Lama Sonam Gyatso and the Tümed–Mongol leader Altan Khan marked a watershed in Inner Asian geopolitics. In his meticulously crafted reply to the Mongol ruler’s invitation, the Dalai Lama invoked shared karmic destinies: “In every previous birth of ours, the Khan and I, we have met and become Alms-master and Offering-site, and have greatly spread the Buddha’s religion. In order to help beings in the land of the Mongols, I will go. In the Ox Year, Altan Khan should come to the purely built Chabchiyal Monastery at the meeting point of the three nations China, Tibet and Mongolia... There is a sign that we will peacefully meet.”<sup>1</sup>

➤ Hu Xiaobai, Associate Professor of History, Nanjing University

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<sup>1</sup> Johan Elverskog, *The Jewel Translucent Sūtra: Altan Khan and the Mongols in the Sixteenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), p. 145.

This prophetic vision materialized through a monumental gathering that, to quote a later Mongol source, attracted tens of thousands of participants spanning Chinese, Mongol, Tibetan, and Uyghur communities.<sup>2</sup> While historiography has rightly emphasized the event's role in institutionalizing Mongol–Tibetan Buddhist alliances, the impact of the event on the local society remains unclear. Recent scholarship on Tibetan societies, exemplified by Gray Tuttle's groundbreaking work on Amdo, has taken a decentered approach that prioritizes local agency in shaping cross-cultural interactions.<sup>3</sup> Building on this paradigm, the present study examines how sixteenth-century Qinghai Lake became a crucible for redefining regional power dynamics. Through an analysis of polycentric interactions, it reveals how local societies mediated and often subverted transregional ambitions. Unlike Tuttle's focus on Amdo as a connective corridor between Lhasa and Beijing, this investigation uncovers a contested landscape in the local scenario: the lake region emerged not merely as a bridge but as a zone of competition where religious cosmologies collided with political values and mobility challenged sedentary traditions.

Chabchiyal Monastery, the historic meeting site for the Buddhist hierarch and the Mongol leader, is located in present-day Gonghe 共和 county of Hainan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture 海南藏族自治州,<sup>4</sup> approximately 100 kilometers south of Qinghai Lake – China's largest inland body of water. As the geographical focal point of this study, the Qinghai Lake region occupies a unique position at the convergence of three major plateaus: the Loess Plateau to the east, the Mongolian Plateau to the north, and the Himalayan Plateau to the southwest. Its strategic location enabled the region to bridge the Hexi 河西 Corridor in the northern reaches and the Zang–Yi 藏彝 Corridor in the south, serving as a critical transportation node that facilitated cross-regional political interactions, economic transactions, and cultural exchanges.

Between the 1540s and 1590s, the lake region witnessed unprecedented flows of commodities, religious practices, and migratory populations. Three interconnected factors propelled this phenomenon: the displacement caused by Mongol internecine conflicts, the consolidation of Mongol–Tibetan religious alliances, and the Ming 明 (1368–1644) dy-

<sup>2</sup> Sagang Sechen, trans. Johan Elverskog, *The Precious Summary: A History of the Mongols from Chinggis Khan to the Qing Dynasty* (New York: Columbia U.P., 2023), p. 150.

<sup>3</sup> Gray Tuttle, "Local History in Amdo: The Tsong kha Range (ri rgyud)," *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 1.2 (December, 2010), pp. 23–97.

<sup>4</sup> Qiaga danzheng 恰噶旦正 and Sangji jiancuo 桑吉尖措, "Zengfeng Dalai Lama zunhao zhi siyuan: Yanghua si yizhi kaoxi" 贈封達賴喇嘛尊號之寺院, 仰華寺遺址考析, *Zhongguo Zangxue* 中國藏學 4 (2016), pp. 170–73.

nasty's reactive military policy regarding the frontier. As diverse social groups migrated through the area, the Qinghai Lake region rapidly transformed into a contact zone where innovative sociopolitical formations challenged established norms. By analyzing competing patterns of territoriality, strategies of resource exploitation, and associated geopolitical conflicts, this study demonstrates that the regulation of transregional mobility fundamentally reconfigured the Qinghai Lake region's territorial identity. By the century's close, the region had evolved into a contested arena where Ming imperial ambitions, Mongol political aspirations, and Tibetan religious authority intersected – a triangular struggle that prefigured later imperial competitions in Inner Asia.

The evidentiary foundation and methodological approach used here require clarification. The primary sources consist predominantly of Ming-dynasty Chinese materials, whose strength lies in their contemporaneous recording of sixteenth-century events, yet simultaneously suffer from an inherent Sino-centric bias in depicting frontier affairs. Complementary non-Han sources such as Tibetan biographical accounts of the Dalai Lama and Mongolian chronicles like *The Jewel Translucent Sūtra* could provide alternative perspectives, but they present distinct limitations because they were compiled in the sixteenth century and remain steeped in Buddhist doctrinal frameworks that prioritize religious ideology over historical documentation. Given those limits, I employ a type of methodological triangulation that involves cross-examining Ming bureaucratic records against Tibetan hagiographic narratives, while consciously decoupling political rhetoric from administrative realities. For instance, when reconstructing Ming military mobilizations, I prioritize the logistical details given in extant border reports over the frequent moralizing about “barbarians.” Similarly, Tibetan accounts of miraculous events are scrutinized for any incidental notice given to population movements. Through such multi-perspective collection of evidence, the study seeks to extract empirically grounded data from ideologically charged narratives, thereby coming relatively closer to a balanced historical reconstruction.

This critical approach extends to terminological choices concerning spatial and linguistic concepts. The lake region's multivalent identity is epitomized by its divergent toponyms across cultural traditions: Ming bureaucrats officially designated it as Xihai 西海 (Western Sea), a region situated at the jurisdictional intersection of Shaanxi Regional Military Commission (*Shaanxi xingdusi* 陝西行都司), Lintao prefecture (*Lintao fu* 臨洮府), and the mDo-khams Pacification Commission (*Duo-*

*gansi xuanweisi* 朵甘思宣慰司). Tibetan communities referred to the lake as Tsongon Po, and the Mongolian usage of Kokonor (“Qinghai” in modern Mandarin) ultimately came to prevail in present nomenclature. This polyphony of names – strategically foregrounded in the article’s title “Competing Visions” – intentionally guides us toward a multi-civilizational framework and the resultant mix of territorial claims. With this being said, my adoption of “Qinghai Lake” as the primary geographical referent stems from two methodological considerations. First, the current lingua franca status of the toponym ensures a broader audience. Second, the Ming archival corpus that deals with Qinghai – despite its inherent biases – remains indispensable for reconstructing sixteenth-century Sino-Mongol-Tibetan interactions, as non-Han sources from this period lack comparable documentary density.

The terminological complexity also intensifies in the regard of geography because neither *Qinghai* (a late administrative construct) nor *Amdo* (a seventeenth-century Gelukpa-associated Tibetan concept) accurately reflects Ming-era spatial perceptions. However, it is exactly this absence of a shared toponym among Ming, Mongol, and Tibetan actors that reveal the area’s fluid geopolitical status prior to seventeenth-century territorial codifications. By tracing the sixteenth-century transformation of the Qinghai Lake region’s geographical connotations, this study underscores the generative friction of borderland encounters. Namely, transregional movements did not simply connect empires but forged hybrid political ecologies irreducible to any single power’s hegemony. This microhistorical lens thus recalibrates our understanding of early-modern Inner Asia, positioning zones of imperial contact not as peripheries but as laboratories for cultural and institutional innovation.

#### EVOLVING MING-MONGOL POWER CONFIGURATIONS IN THE QINGHAI LAKE REGION

From the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, the Qinghai Lake region’s political landscape reflected broader geopolitical realignments across Inner Asia. Following the Ming dynasty’s displacement of the Yuan 元 regime in the late-fourteenth century, imperial forces projected military authority onto the Tibetan Plateau through strategic alliances with indigenous Fan 番 chieftains.<sup>5</sup> This system of indirect rule under-

<sup>5</sup> The Ming used Fan 番 as a fluid designation for diverse pastoralist groups in the Qinghai-Tibetan ecotone, distinct from both Han settlers and Mongol nomads. While overlapping ethnically with modern Tibetans, in Ming bureaucratic discourse the term carried specific civilizational connotations of “unassimilated border peoples’ in the northwest plateau region.

went significant strain during the fifteenth century, since Ming administrators imposed escalating restrictions on these local powerholders, precipitating sustained tensions between hereditary Tibetan leaders and imperially-appointed military commissioners.<sup>6</sup> However, it was from the mid-sixteenth century following the Mongol civil wars (1547–1551) that the region's strategic equilibrium was fundamentally disrupted. Large-scale migrations of displaced Mongol factions into the Qinghai Lake region catalyzed a geopolitical realignment, transforming the area from a peripheral Ming-Tibetan contact zone into a tripartite arena of competing sovereignties. This demographic and military influx marked the decisive turning point in the region's transition from an object of Ming frontier policy to a contested borderland.

The power dynamics in the Mongol world underwent profound transformation under Dayan Khan 達延汗 (?–1517) and his grandson Altan Khan 阿勒坦汗 (1507–1582), whose leadership spanned the critical transition for the Mongols from fifteenth-century fragmentation to sixteenth-century consolidation. Dayan Khan's campaign for Chinggisid restoration culminated in the subjugation of central-eastern Mongol clans in the late-fifteenth century. This centralizing project, however, faced vehement opposition from dissident factions, particularly Ibarai 亦卜剌,<sup>7</sup> a Muslim Mongol leader whose military capabilities posed a formidable challenge to Dayan Khan's hegemony.

Despite wielding considerable military prowess, Ibarai's forces suffered a decisive defeat, with half his troops capitulating while the routed leader retreated toward his Helan Mountain 賀蘭山 basecamp. However, recognizing the untenability of this position within Dayan Khan's expanding sphere of control, Ibarai executed a strategic pivot southwestward. Bypassing the Ming's heavily fortified Jiayu Pass, linchpin of the Hexi Corridor defense system, Ibarai established a new power base in the Qinghai Lake region by 1510s.<sup>8</sup> This Mongol exodus exposed critical vulnerabilities in the Ming's frontier defenses. As historian John Dardess has demonstrated, while the late-fifteenth century saw concentrated fortification efforts in the Ordos Desert, with

<sup>6</sup> Qu Bin 屈斌, "Mingdai Qinghai Huangbei shanqu de Fanzu zhili yu shehui bianqian" 明代青海遼北山區 的番族治理與社會變遷, *Minzu yanjiu* 民族研究 2 (2023), pp. 110–25.

<sup>7</sup> Ibarai is a variant form of Ibrahim, an Arabic name common among Muslims. But a Muslim identity is just a possibility, because he seems to have been part of a community of Uyghurs who migrated east and settled in the Ordos area; Wu Lan 烏蘭, *Menggu yuanliu yanjiu* 蒙古源流研究 (Shenyang: Liaoning minzu chubanshe, 2000), p. 377.

<sup>8</sup> Yang Jianxin 楊建新 and Wang Dongchun 王東春, "Mingdai Menggu buluo dapi ruju Qinghai kaolun 明代蒙古部落大批入據青海考論, *Zhongguo bianjiang shidi yanjiu* 中國邊疆史地研究 2 (2007), p. 91.

the Yellow River's northern loop becoming the Ming's primary wall-building focus,<sup>9</sup> its northwestern frontier remained comparatively underdeveloped. The military infrastructure gap allowed Ibarai's remnant forces, though diminished, to persistently threaten Ming border garrisons throughout the 1510s. Frontier commanders, lacking sufficient troops to mount effective countermeasures, resorted to unconventional diplomacy – including the documented 1518 case of a Shaanxi regional coordinator offering Ibarai tribute-grade silks and precious metals to induce the Mongols' relocation to beyond his jurisdictional boundaries.<sup>10</sup> Through these negotiated maneuvers, Ibarai's coalition gradually consolidated control over the Qinghai Lake region, completing their settlement network by 1520. This Mongol enclave's establishment marked a significant penetration of post-Yuan Mongol power into the Tibetan cultural sphere and hence fundamentally altered the region's geopolitical calculus.

Ibarai's migration inaugurated a strategic pattern replicated by subsequent Mongol dissidents. Leaders including Burqai 卜兒該 similarly severed ties with Dayan Khan's regime, retracing Ibarai's southwestern trajectory to establish footholds in the Qinghai Lake region. By the 1540s, the steppelands flanking Ming's northwestern frontier had evolved into a political sanctuary for Mongol factions marginalized through civil conflicts. These displaced groups, facing sustained military pressure from the northern heartlands, increasingly coalesced into defensive coalitions. Though Dayan Khan himself had perished, his legacy endured through grandsons Günbileg Jonon 吉囊 and Altan Khan, who recognized the strategic imperative to neutralize Qinghai-based rivals. Throughout the 1520s to 1530s, they launched repeated punitive expeditions from their Ordos power base,<sup>11</sup> employing direct routes through Ming-administered territories rather than circumventing defenses via the Hexi Corridor. This tactical audacity underscored both the weakened state of Ming border controls and the Mongols' growing mastery of Inner Asian migration networks.

The Mongols' unfettered movement across the Ming's frontier region stemmed from both the structural deficiencies in Ming military

<sup>9</sup> John Dardess, *More than the Great Wall: The Northern Frontier and Ming National Security, 1368–1644* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2019), p. 219.

<sup>10</sup> *Ming Wuzong shilu* 明武宗實錄, j. 100, eighth year, month v, *gengwu* (Taipei: Academia Sinica, 1963), p. 2072. Hereafter, references to Ming regnal *shilu* are from same publisher. The citational form follows the order here: *juan* number but without “j.”, followed by “(reign yr./lunar mo./day)”, then page no.

<sup>11</sup> Dalizhabu 達力扎布, *Mingdai monan Menggu lishi yanjiu* 明代漠南蒙古歷史研究 (Haila'er: Neimenggu wenhua chubanshe, 1997), pp. 58–62.

organization and the court's conservative defensive policies. Since the mid-fifteenth century, the hereditary garrison (*weisuo* 衛所) system had entered an irreversible decline, manifested in dilapidated frontier fortifications and demoralized garrison troops. Contemporary military reports describe Mongol cavalry contingents numbering tens of thousands easily breaching crumbling border walls not through coordinated siege operations, but via opportunistic exploitation of neglected defensive sectors.<sup>12</sup> This operational paralysis was exacerbated by the Ming court's risk-averse frontier doctrine. Despite clear intelligence on Mongol movements, regional commanders adhered to a policy of strategic restraint, avoiding direct engagement unless facing imminent attack. An Imperial Edict of 1525 codified this defensive posture, mandating that border troops adopt conservative stances against nomadic incursions.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, Mongol groups traversing the Hexi corridors faced minimal resistance, transforming the frontier into a permeable buffer rather than an impermeable barrier.

The Ming's systematic militarization of its northwestern frontier becomes archeologically legible through spatial representation of its defensive infrastructure. Drawing upon multi-source verification and fieldwork surveys conducted by Gyatso Marnyi and myself,<sup>14</sup> we have geolocated 527 Ming military installations across present-day southern Gansu and eastern Qinghai either by cross-referencing ancient and modern place names or through discovering Ming military infrastructure remnants in fieldwork. Using GIS software such as Google Earth and ArcGis, the spatial distribution of these military infrastructures mapped out here can provide valuable insights into the Ming's nuanced frontier policies during that period.

The spatial configuration of the Ming military infrastructure within the Hezhou 河州, Taozhou 洮州, Minzhou 岷州, and Xining 西寧 Guard jurisdictions is cartographically represented in figure 1, with chronological analysis confirming predominant construction during the early-sixteenth century.<sup>15</sup> This defensive network comprised five functionally differentiated components: fortresses 堡, watchtowers 墩,

<sup>12</sup> *Ming Shizong shilu* 明世宗實錄 117 (9/ix/*wusheng*), p. 2776.

<sup>13</sup> *Ming Shizong shilu* 64 (5/v/*guiwei*), p. 1473.

<sup>14</sup> For Gyatso Marnyi's analysis of the data, see Gyatso Marnyi, "The Ming, Tibetan and Mongol Interactions in Shaping the Ming Fortification, Multicultural Society and Natural Landscape in Mdo smad, 1368–1644," *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* 55 (2020), pp. 351–84.

<sup>15</sup> Most data on military infrastructure are from *Bianzheng kao* 邊政考, by Zhang Yu 張雨 (1547). Therefore, the map reflects the spatial pattern of the military infrastructure in the 1530s and 1540s.

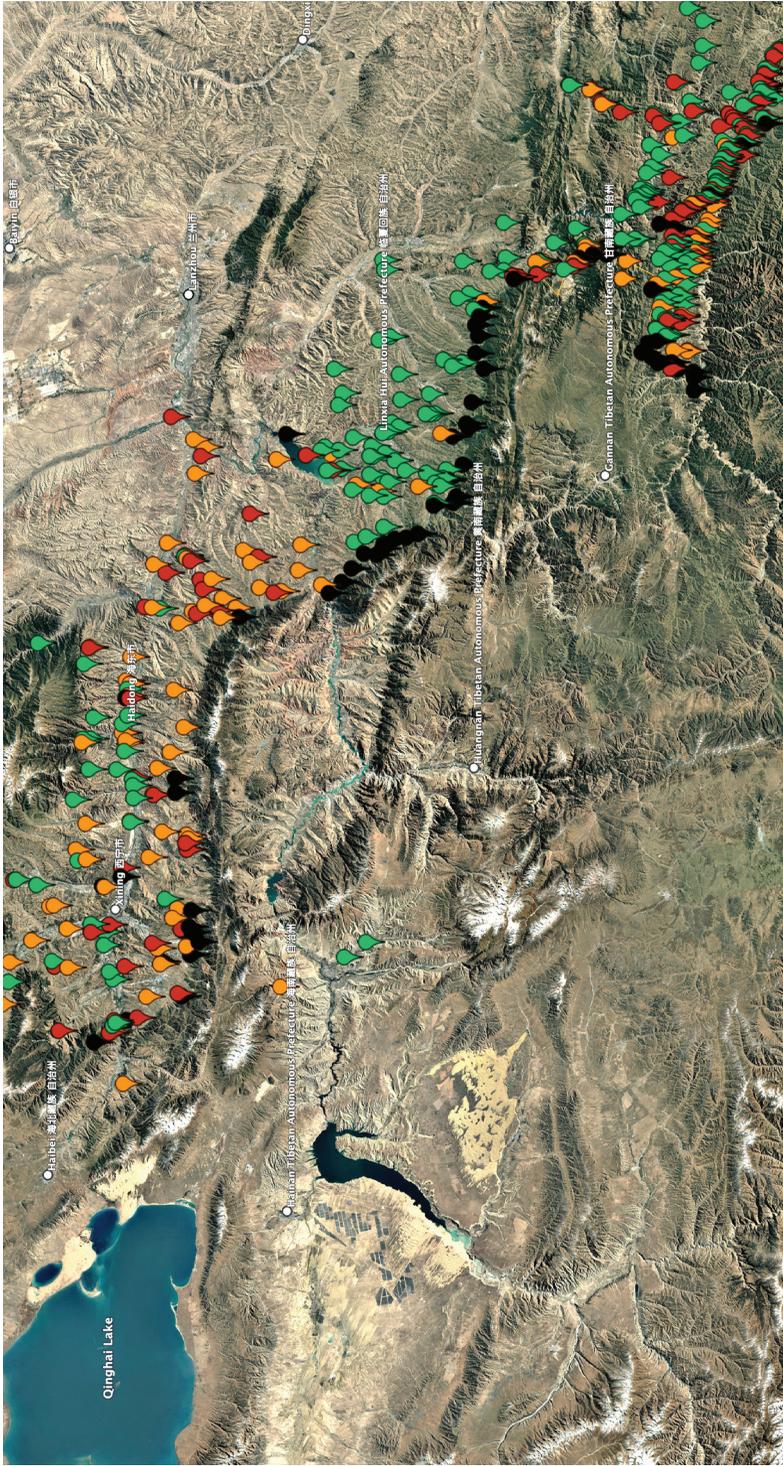
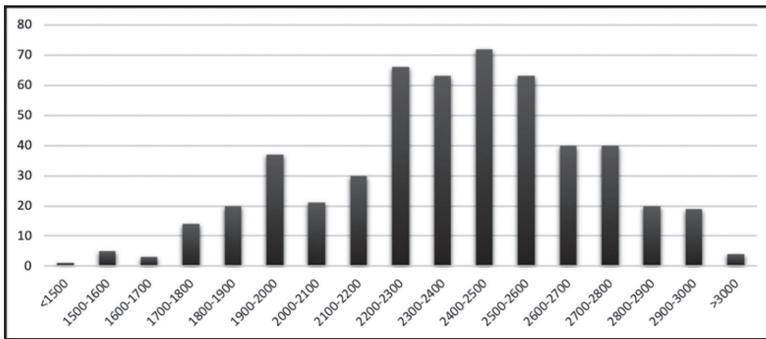


Figure 1. Spatial Distribution of 527 Military Installations in Hezhou, Taozhou, Minzhou and Xining Guard Administration Zones  
 Qinghai Lake is northwest (upper left). Orange pins indicate fortresses, red pins indicate watchtowers, green pins fortified hamlets, black pins mountain passes and relay stations.

fortified hamlets 寨, mountain passes 關, and relay stations 驛站. Collectively forming a semi-permeable defensive matrix, the installations epitomized the Ming court’s material investment in frontier security through infrastructural hardening against nomadic mobility.<sup>16</sup> Notably, these documented structures cluster along the eastern escarpment of the Tibetan Plateau and adjacent piedmont zones. This distribution pattern reflects not administrative exclusion policies but environmental pragmatism, a conclusion substantiated through geospatial analysis. In order to further elucidate the rationale behind the Ming’s military deployment, I first converted the three-dimensional site distribution diagram into georeferenced coordinate clusters and then correlated these clusters with digital elevation model (DEM) data to derive altitudinal profiles (figure 2).



*Figure 2. Amount of Ming Military Infrastructure by Altitude*

The histogram in figure 2 delineates the altitudinal distribution of Ming military installations, revealing pronounced clustering between 2,200 and 2,600 meters above sea level. The amount of military construction exhibits an inverse relationship with elevation, declining precipitously above 2,800 meters and becoming negligible beyond 3,000 meters – a pattern persisting despite the Qinghai Lake region’s strategic locations that exceed these altitudes. The distribution reflects deliberate Ming avoidance of high-altitude deployment rather than technological incapacity, a strategic choice rooted in multifaceted environmental and physiological constraints.

Primary among these factors was altitude-induced physiological stress. Modern biomedical studies confirm that unacclimatized lowland populations at high elevations could face acute mountain sickness

<sup>16</sup> Continuous border walls were not constructed in the early-16th c., rendering the region traversable in the eyes of the Mongols.

symptoms including cephalalgia, emesis, and hypoxemia, conditions consistent with historical accounts from Tang- and Qing-era sources documenting Han Chinese military activities in the Qinghai Lake regions.<sup>17</sup> While Ming records lack explicit medical descriptions, the physical demands of frontier soldiery, including armor-clad combatants engaged in fortification construction and patrol duties, would have made people susceptible to acute mountain sickness. It seems that the physiological barrier shown here would have constrained Ming capacity to maintain effective military presence above 3,000 meters, compelling strategic concessions in highland areas.

The high-altitude environment also imposed constraints on Ming military logistics, especially considering agricultural unsustainability and transport inefficiency. Arid climatic conditions, coupled with nutrient-depleted soils that were characteristic of the Qinghai-Tibetan agro-pastoral ecotone, severely limited cereal cultivation yields. Local grain reserves consistently failed to meet garrison demands, necessitating protracted supply lines from lowland prefectures. In addition, transporting provisions across high-altitude terrain proved particularly debilitating, since such convoys required more caloric intake than that of plains-level portage. This confluence of production deficits and distribution costs created an unsustainable environment that effectively impeded Ming China's imperial expansion.

Paradoxically, the Mongols' nomadic adaptation to this environment proved equally constrained. Ming intelligence reports from escaped captives documented Mongol groups practicing seasonal transhumance, wintering in northwest Sichuan's low grasslands before returning to Qinghai Lake summer pastures.<sup>18</sup> Even Altan Khan's 1559 campaign, despite initial ambitions for permanent settlement, succumbed to environmental pressures as the Mongol leader's recorded illness and subsequent retreat to Ordos underscores biocultural limits to highland habitation.<sup>19</sup> Although Altan Khan viewed the lake region as a contact zone mediating Han agricultural, Mongol pastoral, and Tibetan highland societies,<sup>20</sup> it was still peripheral to the civilization's core territorial imaginary due to its geographical distance.

<sup>17</sup> Feng Hanyong 馮漢鏞, "Mingdai Xizang gongdao yanjiu" 明代西藏貢道研究, *Xizang yanjiu* 西藏研究 1 (1989), p. 42.

<sup>18</sup> Dalizhabu, *Mingdai monan Menggu*, p. 54; Yang Yiqing 楊一清, *Yang Yiqing ji* 楊一清集 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2001), pp. 521, 611.

<sup>19</sup> Chen Zilong 陳子龍, ed., *Huang Ming jingshi wenbian* 皇明經世文編 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), p. 4397.

<sup>20</sup> Elverskog, *Jewel Translucent Sūtra*, p. 145.

During the early-sixteenth century, the Qinghai Lake region held divergent geopolitical values for Ming and Mongol actors. The section preceding has contended that competing sides prioritized strategic mobility over territorial consolidation, with environmental factors mediating both groups' engagement patterns. For displaced Mongol coalitions like Ibarai's, the region functioned as a provisional sanctuary, a space for military regrouping rather than permanent settlement. Conversely, Ming strategists adopted a containment posture, establishing defensive infrastructure along the Tibetan Plateau's eastern margins while avoiding direct highland occupation. Crucially, neither polity developed substantive territorial claims, as evidenced by their limited exploitation of lacustrine resources. This equilibrium of transitory usage would only be disrupted through subsequent religious and demographic transformations

The region's role as a refuge for various Mongol groups proved inherently unstable. Though Ibarai's faction initially exploited the region's remoteness, their presence became increasingly untenable, as Dayan Khan's successors intensified unification campaigns. Six major punitive expeditions were launched as part of a civil war between 1525 and 1559, culminating in Altan Khan's decisive 1558 victory that eliminated remaining Mongol resistance in the lake area. This military resolution, however, merely concluded the war, while inadvertently catalyzing new forms of transregional connectivity through subsequent Buddhist proselytization. We take this up in the next section.

#### THE BUDDHIST RECONFIGURATION OF MONGOL-MING FRONTIERS

The mid-sixteenth century witnessed a transformative shift in Qinghai Lake's geopolitical dynamics, transitioning from civil war-induced migrations to religiously mediated connectivity. Following Altan Khan's 1558 military consolidation, the region became a crucible for emerging Mongol-Tibetan Buddhist alliances with spiritual capital increasingly supplanting martial prowess as the primary currency of transregional influence.

Altan Khan's evolving religio-political strategy proved instrumental in this shift. Initial engagements with Tibetan Buddhism occurred during his 1558 Qinghai campaign, and Altan Khan formally converted to Tibetan Buddhism in 1571,<sup>21</sup> a calculated move to legitimize his rule

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 108; Daoruntibu 道潤梯步, *Xinyi jiaozhu Menggu yuanliu* 新譯校註蒙古源流 (Huhehaote: Neimenggu renmin chubanshe, 2007), p. 376.

beyond traditional Chinggisid lineage claims. This spiritual alignment reached its apogee in 1574 when Altan Khan dispatched emissaries to invite Sonam Gyatso (later recognized as the Third Dalai Lama), leader of the embattled Geluk school, to establish a priest-patron (*mchod yon*) relationship, and the meeting venue was by the shore of Qinghai Lake.

Sonam Gyatso's acceptance, mediated through Ngawang Drakpa of the Phagmodrupa regime,<sup>22</sup> reflected strategic calculus on multiple fronts. First, for the Geluk hierarchy, Mongol military backing could offer crucial leverage against the sect's disadvantaged position amidst Tibet's political and religious rivalry at the time.<sup>23</sup> Second, the Dalai Lama institution sought to take advantage of the existing Ming-Mongol diplomatic channel to further establish their relationship with the Ming, another external force that Sonam Gyatso wished to rely on. Third, both parties recognized the Qinghai Lake region's potential as an inter-civilizational arena transcending existing political fragmentations. From a retrospective standpoint, this confluence of spiritual ambition and realpolitik would redefine the Qinghai Lake region's religious geography.

Upon formalizing the meeting arrangement, Altan Khan initiated comprehensive preparations for Sonam Gyatso's historic visit. Between 1574 and 1578, five sequential Mongol embassies – each comprising hundreds of personnel, with the final delegation exceeding three thousand members – were dispatched to ensure ceremonial protocols and logistical coordination.<sup>24</sup> Concurrently, Altan Khan arranged that his fourth son Bingtū supervise the construction work of a monastic complex near Qinghai Lake as the summit's venue. Initial plans designated Wuwang Cheng 五王城 (City of Five Kings), a southern strategic node, for this purpose. However, through protracted diplomatic negotiations with the Ming, detailed in subsequent analysis, the site was ultimately relocated to Chabchiyal. The construction endeavor spanned approximately two years and mobilized multiethnic labor forces, timber, and artisan expertise provided by the Ming.<sup>25</sup> The completion of the religious complex, ceremoniously named Yanghua Si 仰華寺 (Monastery

<sup>22</sup> Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso 阿旺洛桑嘉措, trans. Chen Qinying 陳慶英, Ma Lianlong 馬連龍 et al., *Yishi sishi Dalai Lama zhuan* 一世四世達賴喇嘛傳 (Beijing: Zhongguo Zangxue chubanshe, 2006), p. 225.

<sup>23</sup> Olaf Czaja, *Medieval Rule in Tibet: The Rlangs Clan and the Political and Religious History of the Ruling House of Phag Mo Gru Pa: With a Study of the Monastic Art of Gdan Sa Mthil* (Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, 2013).

<sup>24</sup> Li Wenjun 李文君, *Mingdai Xihai Menggu shi yanjiu* 明代西海蒙古史研究 (Beijing: Zhongyang minzu daxue chubanshe, 2008), pp. 163–66.

<sup>25</sup> *Ming Shenzong shilu* 明神宗實錄 60 (5/iii/jiachen), pp. 1375–376.

of Celestial Veneration) through Ming bestowal, represented a convergence of Mongol religious aspirations and Ming civilizing rhetoric.

After extensive preparation, Altan Khan and Sonam Gyatso finally convened at Chabchiyal in 1578. During the encounter, Sonam Gyatso asserted his identity as the reincarnation of Phagpa, while Altan Khan was deemed as the reincarnation of Qubilai Khan. In this way, a parallel between their alliance and the revered patron-priest relationship between Phagpa and Qubilai Khan was constructed. Additionally, Sonam Gyatso bestowed upon the monastery the Tibetan name “*nam par rgyal ba'i phan bde legs bshad gling*,” meaning “the continent of victorious and blessed teachings.”<sup>26</sup> In reciprocation, Altan Khan honored Sonam Gyatso with the Mongol epithet “Dalai,” denoting “an ocean of merit.”<sup>27</sup>

The summit fundamentally reoriented Mongol spatial imaginaries of the Qinghai Lake region. Where Mongol elites had previously perceived the region as a provisional military refuge constrained by environmental harshness, post-summit conceptualizations recast it as a sacred corridor linking Mongol domains to Tibetan Buddhist heartlands. This perceptual shift can be seen in Altan Khan's strategic deployment of administrative and religious personnel: upon returning to Ordos, he retained a Mongol clerical-administrative contingent at Yanghua Monastery to institutionalize Geluk influence, concurrently authorizing westward migration of Tümed clans to establish permanent monastic-patron communities.<sup>28</sup>

From the 1570s onward, Mongol engagement with the Qinghai Lake region became increasingly sacralized through strategic religious infrastructure. Between 1574 and 1578, Mongol elites initiated numerous Tibetan Buddhist monastic projects in the lake region.<sup>29</sup> (See figure 3.) Subsequent decades saw additional foundations including

<sup>26</sup> Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso, *Yishi sishi Dalai Lama zhuan*, p. 237. One has to note that the meaning of the Tibetan name of the monastery does not coincide with that of its Chinese name, indicating the fact that the records about the Ming's endeavor to patronize the monastery's construction as well as to bestow a name is highly possibly a narrative that the Ming attempted to broadcast, but was probably not embraced by the Mongols and Tibetans.

<sup>27</sup> Mongolian and Tibetan materials have different accounts of the meeting. See Okada Hidehiro, “The Third Dalai Lama and Altan Khan of the Tümed,” in *Tibetan Studies: Proceedings of the 5th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies* (Narita: Naritashinshoji, 1992), pp. 645–53. For a recent discussion on Sonam Gyatso's title, see Zhu Lixia 朱麗霞, “Shengshi yiqie yu Sanshi Dalai Lama de minghao guanxi” 聖識一切與三世達賴喇嘛的名號關係, *Zhongguo bianjiang shidi yanjiu* 中國邊疆史地研究 4 (2019), pp. 144–49.

<sup>28</sup> Ngawang, *Yishi sishi*, p. 241; Li, *Mingdai Xihai Menggu*, p. 104.

<sup>29</sup> For monasteries constructed near Qinghai Lake during the 1570s, see Ngawang, *Yishi sishi*, pp. 233, 239.

Niegongchuan Si 捏工川寺 and A-wa Si 阿哇寺,<sup>30</sup> though most left little architectural or documentary traces due to their non-sedentary institutional models – an adaptation to Mongol pastoral mobility patterns.<sup>31</sup> Crucially, this sacred landscape transcended Geluk sectarian boundaries. As Elliot Sperling’s study of Chöjé Gön Monastery reveals, Jonang sect institutions like the Dzamtang-based complex located at the Sichuan-Tibet frontier received substantial patronage from those Western Mongol nobles under Altan Khan’s command. The Jonang hierarch Gyelwa Senggé’s acquisition of a Mongol princely seal and official patents from Yüngsiyebü Dayičing demonstrates alternative religio-



*Figure 3. Mongol-Patronized Tibetan Buddhist Monasteries, 1574–1578*

*For the Pengcuo Yanpan ling and Pengcuo Nanjie ling monasteries, see Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso, Yishi sishi Dalai Lama zhuan, pp. 233, 239.*

<sup>30</sup> Historical materials do not specify the Tibetan name of these two monasteries. See Pu Wencheng 蒲文成, *Ganqing Zangchuan Fojiao siyuan* 甘青藏傳佛教寺院 (Xining: Qinghai renmin chubanshe, 1990), p. 469.

<sup>31</sup> Isabelle Charleux, *Temples et monastères de Mongolie intérieure* (Paris: Éditions du comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques, 2006), p. 63.

political network,<sup>32</sup> a narrative veiled by Gelugpa hegemony.<sup>33</sup> While source fragmentation obscures full reconstruction of these interactions, the extant evidence confirms intense multi-sectarian religious negotiation within late-sixteenth-century Mongol Tibetan Buddhism.

The religious reconfiguration in the lake region fundamentally altered transregional dynamics in the 1570s. Unlike their early-sixteenth-century predecessors who circumvented Ming defenses via Jiayu Pass, the Western Mongol groups now traversed the Hexi Corridor under negotiated transit agreements – a strategic shift from coercive penetration to sanctioned movement, due to the peace treaty.<sup>34</sup> (See figure 4.) This transition is most typical, as seen in a 1574 frontier accord wherein Ming authorities reluctantly permitted Mongol passage through Gansu yet strategically channeling their caravans through the sparsely populated Jinchang region to minimize Mongol exposure in eastern Gansu's core agricultural zones.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, Altan Khan's personal travel patterns exposed the fragility of these arrangements. During his 1577–1578 Qinghai expeditions, the Mongol leader deliberately violated agreed routes, opting for direct trajectories through Ming-administered territories.<sup>36</sup> Ming frontier chronicles reveal a paradoxical stance toward these transgressions: while officially framing Altan Khan's mobility privileges as benevolent concessions to a “pacified” Mongol leader, internal correspondence betrayed pragmatic calculations. Officials rationalized the presence of tolerance through Buddhist pacifist rhetoric; they posited that Mongol adherence to Buddhist doctrines would

<sup>32</sup> Elliot Sperling, “Tibetan Buddhism, Perceived and Imagined, along the Ming-Era Sino-Tibetan Frontier,” in Matthew Kapstein ed., *Buddhism between Tibet and China* (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2009), p. 165.

<sup>33</sup> See Gray Tuttle and Leonart W. J. van der Kuijp, “Altan Qayan (1507–1582) of the Tümed Mongols and the Stag Lung Abbot Kun Dga's Bkra Shis Rgyal Mtshan (1575–1635),” in Roberto Vitali, ed., *Trails of the Tibetan Tradition: Papers for Elliot Sperling* (Dharamsala: Amnye Machen Institute, 2014), pp. 461–82; Hasichaolu 哈斯朝魯 and Wuriliga 烏日力嘎, “Anda Han yu Dalonggaju pai gongga zhaxi de huiwu” 俺答汗與達隆噶舉派貢嘎扎西的會晤, *Zhongguo bianjian shidi yanjiu* 4 (2022), pp. 57–66.

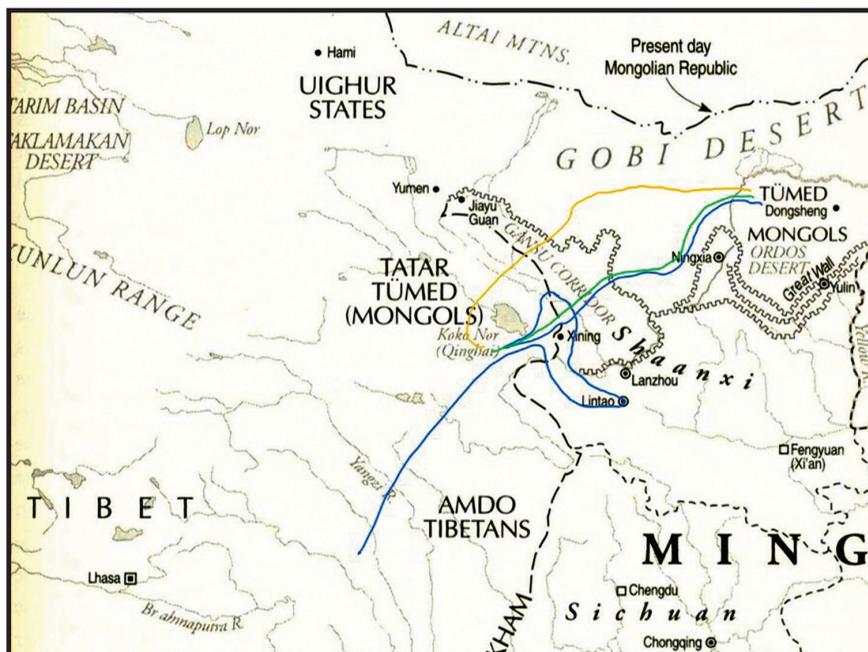
<sup>34</sup> The 1571 Ming–Mongol Peace Treaty, historically known as the “Longqing Peace Agreement” 隆慶和議, or “Altan Khan's Tribute and Investiture” 俺答封貢, marked a pivotal resolution to nearly two centuries of conflict between the Ming state and the Mongol Tümed tribe. It established a framework for peaceful relations centered on trade and diplomacy. By prioritizing mutual benefit (Ming security for Mongol access to goods), The Longqing Agreement redefined relations through economic interdependence rather than warfare, and hence marked a significant watershed in Ming–Mongol relations.

<sup>35</sup> *Ming Shenzong shilu* 3 (6 [longqing]/vii/wuxu), p. 91.

<sup>36</sup> Zhang Tingyu 張廷玉 et al., *Ming shi* 明史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974) 330, p. 8547; Xiaoke 曉克, “Chelike Han xixing Qinghai chuyi” 扯力克汗西行青海謁議, *Xibu Menggu lun-tan* 西部蒙古論壇 2 (2010), pp. 3–8.

ensure self-restraint.<sup>37</sup> This Sino-centric projection merely masked the Ming incapacity to enforce border protocols.

The Ming's accommodation of religious mobility reached its apogee during the Third Dalai Lama's 1582–1584 peregrinations, which indelibly reshaped the Qinghai Lake region's religious landscape. Summoned to Tümed territory to perform healing rites for the ailing Altan Khan in 1582, the Dalai Lama's journey was redirected by the Altan Khan's demise en route. This contingency transformed a ritual mission into a two-year spiritual campaign across the lake region: the Buddhist hierarch presided consecration ceremonies, conducted systematic monastery inspections, and initiated construction projects at major religious sites.<sup>38</sup> Critical nodes in this sacred network included Kumbum Monastery 塔尔寺 and Gonlung Monastery 佑宁寺, namely, institutions that



*Figure 4. Tibetan and Mongol Routes Traversing Ming Territories, 1570s & 80s*

*Yellow: 1574 Mongol itinerary, Tümed to Qinghai Lake.*

*Green: 1578 Altan Khan round-trip itinerary for Qinghai meeting.*

*Blue: Third Dalai Lama 1582–84 itinerary, from eastern Tibet to Tümed.*

<sup>37</sup> Ming Shenzong shilu 60 (5/iii/jiachen), p. 1376.

<sup>38</sup> Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso, *Yishi sishi Dalai Lama zhuan*, pp. 243–45.

emerged as pivotal Geluk strongholds through subsequent centuries. This concentrated institutional presence as cultivated through the Dalai Lama's strategic itinerance, and effectively anchored Mongol–Tibetan Buddhist networks within the region's physical and political landscapes. It is not an exaggeration to assert that by the late-sixteenth century, modern-day northeast Qinghai had transformed into a stronghold of the Geluk school of Tibetan Buddhism.

The post-treaty reconfiguration of the Qinghai Lake region reveals divergent Ming–Mongol territorial strategies. While Mongol elites systematically sacralized the region through Buddhist institutional networks, Ming military planners intensified material investments in frontier fortification systems. Capitalizing on the 1571 peace accord's stability, the Ming initiated a systematic upgrade transforming earlier scattered fortresses and watchtowers into integrated linear defense systems, resulting in what archeologists refer to as a “large-scale construction stage” of border walls in this area.<sup>39</sup> Such militarization focused on securing agricultural settlements through continuous rammed-earth walls along the lake region's eastern periphery, contrasting with the pre-treaty era's selective checkpoint construction. Paradoxically, Ming diplomatic concessions permitting Mongol transit through the Hexi Corridor after 1580 coexisted with entrenched perceptions of Mongol transience. Frontier gazetteers persistently categorized Mongol groups as mobile adherents, denying their settlement legitimacy despite decades of pastoral presence. This cognitive dissonance – simultaneously accommodating Mongol mobility while refusing territorial recognition – epitomized the Ming's supervised autonomy approach: military vigilance paired with administrative non-intervention in frontier demographics.

#### MONGOL AMBITION AND MING INDIFFERENCE

The 1571 Ming–Mongol accord instituted a regulated commercial framework that masked fundamental asymmetries in their relations. While frontier markets witnessed exponential growth in transaction volume and frequency, the Ming court retained monopolistic control over trade parameters by scheduling cyclical market days, designating exchange locations, and licensing merchant participants. This system proved inadequate for Mongol pastoral economies, prompting strategic countermeasures: between 1572 and 1575, Mongol nobles orchestrated

<sup>39</sup> Qinghaisheng wenwu guanli ju 青海省文物管理局, *Qinghai sheng Ming changcheng ziyuan diaocha baogao* 青海省明長城資源調查報告 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2012), p. 456.

numerous petitions demanding the establishment of several Qinghai Lake markets, coupled with tactical military demonstrations along vulnerable border areas.

Ming resistance stemmed from entrenched institutional precedents. The lake region's century-old tea-horse trade, governed through Golden Tablet certification since 1387, had developed into a tightly monitored system of exchange with the Fan communities. Yang Yiqing's 楊一清, 1514 reforms further bureaucratized these networks,<sup>40</sup> creating vested interests opposed to Mongol inclusion. When confronted with Mongol demands, court officials, influenced by the decades of anti-Mongol policymaking rationale, dismissed them as redundant, asserting existing tea-horse trade sufficiently served frontier needs.<sup>41</sup> Facing Mongol persistence that escalated to cavalry mobilizations,<sup>42</sup> Ming negotiators made calculated concessions under the 1571 treaty's pacification framework. The 1574 Ningxia 寧夏 market expansion compromise, justified through the War Ministry's dubious claim that "no tradable commodities exist west of Ningxia,"<sup>43</sup> unraveled within twelve months as Mongol caravans established informal trading hubs near Xining. This pattern exposed Ming regulatory systems' inability to contain pastoralist economic strategies; this foreshadowed later frontier crises.

The Mongols' strategic synthesis of economic demands and religious initiatives culminated in the 1575 establishment of a Qinghai Lake-specific market through deft diplomatic pressure. This breakthrough emerged from the Mongols' calculated linkage of trade access requests to monastery construction projects, a dual agenda that garnered Ming approval through its veneer of cultural accommodation. The process gained momentum in 1574, when Bingtu notified the Ming court of his plan to build a monastery for Altan Khan to meet Sonam Gyatso. While the Ming initially sanctioned this religious enterprise, officials grew alarmed upon learning of Bingtu's proposed site at Wuwang Cheng.<sup>44</sup> The exposed steppe location, situated merely 240 kilometers from the under-militarized Northwest Sichuan frontier

<sup>40</sup> Hu Xiaobai 胡簫白, "Mumin de Zhihui: Mingdai qianzhongqi Ganqing diqu mazheng de yanjin luoji" 牧民的智慧, 明代前中期甘青地區馬政的演進邏輯, *Zhongguo jingjishi yanjiu* 中國經濟史研究 2 (2025), pp. 97-109; He Yi 何毅 and Yao Bo 姚博, *Ming Qing xibei mazheng yanjiu* 明清西北馬政研究 (Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, 2021), pp. 88-109.

<sup>41</sup> *Ming Muzong shilu* 明穆宗實錄 58 (5/vi/jiachen), p. 1421.

<sup>42</sup> *Ming Shenzong shilu* 22 (2/ii/guichou), p. 579.

<sup>43</sup> *Ming Shenzong shilu* 32 (2/xii/renzi), p. 755.

<sup>44</sup> Feng Shike 馮時可, "Anda Houzhi 俺答後志," in Bo Yinhu 薄音湖 and Wang Xiong 王雄, eds., *Mingdai Menggu Hanji shiliao huibian, di er ji* 明代蒙古漢籍史料彙編, 第二輯 (Huhehaote: Neimenggu daxue chubanshe, 2006), p. 137.

garrison at Songpan 松潘 posed unacceptable strategic risks given the region's porous defenses compared to northern border fortifications. Sichuan border authorities urgently petitioned for Bingtu's withdrawal, prompting Altan Khan's diplomatic intervention. The Mongol leader artfully recast the occupation as an unintended consequence of Ming commercial restrictions: he deemed that Bingtu's presence stemmed from inadequate market access in Gansu and the prohibitive distance to Ningxia's trading post.<sup>45</sup> This calibrated rhetoric – implying Mongol withdrawal contingent upon Gansu market becoming authorized – reveals sophisticated negotiation tactics that leveraged Ming security anxieties. The eventual 1575 market concession demonstrates how Mongol elites instrumentalized frontier realpolitik to reshape bilateral economic frameworks.

Ming policymakers adopted a calibrated approach to Mongol trade demands. In a memorial, Grand Coordinator Fang Fengshi's 方逢時 discerned that Bingtu's Sichuan frontier presence constituted tactical posturing rather than invasion preparation, positing that accessible commerce would neutralize Mongols' provocations. Given that the Ningxia trade market was considerably distant, Fang argued that once a functional market within Bingtu's reach was established, his defiant actions would naturally subside.<sup>46</sup> Chief grand secretary Zhang Juzheng 張居正 reinforced this realpolitik through institutional parity arguments that questioned why Mongols should be denied trading opportunities in the lake region when indigenous Fan people were allowed such privileges.<sup>47</sup> This sort of bureaucratic consensus facilitated the 1575 inauguration of Biandu Kou 扁都口 market at the Hexi Corridor's southern threshold, a site balancing Ming security concerns with Mongol accessibility to Qinghai Lake camps.<sup>48</sup> Archival research by Li Wenjun 李文君 reveals this frontier market's commercial significance.<sup>49</sup> From 1576 to 1580, tea-horse trade was carried out annually as a one-month operation with transactional volumes rivaling Ordos border markets.<sup>50</sup> The site's success demonstrates how a regulated trans-frontier exchange could temporarily reconcile Mongol subsistence needs with Ming border management priorities.

<sup>45</sup> Zhang, *Ming shi* 330, p. 8546.

<sup>46</sup> Fang Fengshi 方逢時, *Dayinlou ji* 大隱樓集 (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 2000), pp. 764–65.

<sup>47</sup> Zhang Juzheng 張居正, *Xinke Zhangtaiyue xiansheng shiwen ji* 新刻張太岳先生詩文集 (Jinan: Qilu shushe, 1997), p. 644.

<sup>48</sup> Zhang, *Xinke Zhangtaiyue*, p. 653.

<sup>49</sup> Li, *Mingdai Xihai*, p. 205.

<sup>50</sup> *Da Ming huidian* 大明會典 (Yangzhou: Jiangsu guangling guji keyinshe, 1989), p. 1855.

The late 1570s marked a pivotal transition in the Qinghai Lake region's socioeconomic trajectory: Mongol communities increasingly shifted from transient religious-political engagement to sustained agropastoral production. This transformation emerged under the dual pressures of Ming regulatory constraints and localized economic incentives. The 1575 Biandu Kou market protocol fundamentally reoriented subsistence strategies for the Mongols in the lake region because their economic activities were confined to Biandu Kou exclusively.<sup>51</sup> Ming authorities enforced synchronized market schedules across northwestern frontiers to eliminate cross-regional trade arbitrage and hence bind Mongol groups to specific territorial jurisdictions.<sup>52</sup> Compelled by these institutional barriers, lake-based Mongols intensified exploitation of local resources rather than to rely on transhumant livestock transfers. Biandu Kou's premium horse prices, in this regard, incentivized sophisticated pasture management.<sup>53</sup> This economic reconfiguration gradually supplanted the region's earlier sacred-political identity. Though Buddhist networks continued providing spiritual cohesion, the imperative to produce premium trade commodities transformed the lake region into a managed agro-ecosystem.

After 1578, the Mongol communities entrenched around Qinghai Lake developed sophisticated economic strategies that simultaneously exploited and challenged Ming regulatory frameworks. Disregarding established trade quotas, the Mongols saturated Ming markets with surplus horses.<sup>54</sup> This tactic coincided with qualitative declines in traded livestock. A 1583 memorial from a Gansu regional commander lamented that Mongol-provided horses were either aged or malnourished and frequently succumbed during military exercises.<sup>55</sup> Concurrently, Mongol leaders intensified pressure for expanded commercial access. Bingtu's 1578 petition for a Taozhou market,<sup>56</sup> though rejected, inaugurated a coordinated request from Altan Khan in 1579.<sup>57</sup> While Ming archives contain no record of compliance, these sustained demands reveal emerging Mongol economic ambitions that transcended basic subsistence needs.

<sup>51</sup> Henry Serruys, *Genealogical Tables of the Descendants of Dayan* (The Hague: Mouton, 1958), p. 74.

<sup>52</sup> *Ming Shenzong shilu* 43 (3/x/*renshen*), p. 967.

<sup>53</sup> Zheng Luo 鄭洛, "Fuyi jilue" 撫夷紀略, in Bo and Wang, comp., *Mingdai Menggu Hanji shiliao huibian, di er ji*, p. 157.

<sup>54</sup> *Ming Shenzong shilu* 95 (8/i/*jiyou*), p. 1910.

<sup>55</sup> *Ming Shenzong shilu* 136 (11/iv/*jiazi*), p. 2535.

<sup>56</sup> *Ming Shenzong shilu* 74 (6/iv/*dinghai*), p. 1605.

<sup>57</sup> *Ming Shenzong shilu* 84 (7/ii/*kuisi*), p. 1769.

The scale of Mongol population near Qinghai Lake increased dramatically in the early 1580s, indicating their deepened ecological adaptation. One Ming official report noted: “These Mongols now breed livestock and raise children by the lake, finding northern pastures desert-like by comparison. The sweet waters and rich grasses bind them to this land—there are all sorts of things that exist in the Qinghai Lake area but not in the north steppe.”<sup>58</sup> Demographic stabilization enabled Mongol production surpluses, while also creating dependency on Ming-supplied daily necessities. The region’s transformation from transient refuge to agro-pastoral production zone thus emerged through this paradox: Mongol communities harnessed Ming market systems to entrench territorial claims that ultimately subverted imperial frontier management.

The consolidation of Mongol power in the Qinghai Lake region during the 1580s precipitated escalating tensions that progressively undermined the 1571 peace framework. A pivotal 1581 incident epitomized this erosion: Bingtu’s subordinates breached Ming borders near Xining, murdered civilians, and seized livestock. Rather than direct retaliation, Ming authorities invoked the treaty’s suzerain–vassal protocols, compelling Altan Khan to discipline his underlings. The aging khan forced from Bingtu both a formal apology and restitution, thus temporarily containing the crisis through his personal authority.<sup>59</sup> However, this delicate equilibrium dissolved following Altan Khan’s 1582 death and the subsequent three-year interregnum under his ineffectual successor. The 1586 accession of Altan Khan’s grandson Namudai Jirūke Qong Tayiji (known as Cherik), exposed structural vulnerabilities in the Mongols’ political organization. Cherik lacked the charismatic authority essential for maintaining the fragile coalition of Western Mongol factions.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, in the 1580s, various Mongol groups in the Qinghai Lake region started acting independently. This fragmentation transformed the region into a contested periphery where neither Ming regulations nor Mongol hierarchies could enforce stability.

The 1580s witnessed a profound reconfiguration of Mongol–indigene relations in the Qinghai Lake region, characterized by the Mongols’ escalating predations upon Fan pastoralists. This was due greatly to their having been constrained by the 1571 peace treaty’s prohibitions against plundering the local Han Chinese.<sup>61</sup> But the Mongols were

<sup>58</sup> Chen, ed., *Huang Ming jingshi*, p. 4388.

<sup>59</sup> *Ming Shenzong shilu* 113 (9/vi/jiayin), p. 2158.

<sup>60</sup> Zhang, *Ming shi* 330, p. 8547.

<sup>61</sup> Chen, ed., *Huang Ming jingshi*, p. 4185.

also aware of the ethnic impacts of smallpox epidemics, and so they held back from predations against the Han. (Smallpox was a highly lethal disease for sparsely populated non-resistant communities like the Mongols, but one for which higher-density Chinese populations typically possessed immunity since childhood.) In contrast, raiding the Fan indigenes posed less risk.<sup>62</sup> It is evident that over centuries of interactions with Ming China through trade, tributary system engagements or even outright looting, wealth had accumulated among the Qinghai highland local population, making them lucrative target in Mongols' eyes. When Altan Khan was alive, he still wielded authority to prevent his underlings from pillaging the Fan as it would violate the peace treaty.<sup>63</sup> However, such acts of violence became less restrained after his death in 1582.

The power vacuum following Altan Khan's demise catalyzed systemic violence: the Mongols took pillaging Fan people as a convenient means to acquire daily necessities. In 1583, their raids on Fan communities resulted in more than 1,000 casualties and over 4,000 seized livestock.<sup>64</sup> In 1584, eight Fan communities sought refuge with Ming frontier military units for protection following these attacks.<sup>65</sup> While certain Fan groups displayed bravery by engaging in combat with and even killing several Mongol leaders,<sup>66</sup> many others fled instead, thereby relinquishing their fertile pastures to the Mongols.<sup>67</sup>

By the closing decades of the sixteenth century, the Qinghai Lake region had undergone a profound sociopolitical metamorphosis under Mongol stewardship. Assimilation strategies, including intermarriages and the imposition of the Tianba 添巴 tribute system – a 10% levy on possessions of grain, livestock, and textiles – enabled Mongol elites to gain further control over the indigenous Fan.<sup>68</sup> One result was a change in the Mongols' patterns of consumption. Ming frontier records from a 1586 document Mongol demands for hundreds of luxury items, including silk for hat manufacture, musical instruments like lutes and zithers, grapes, leather valises, and rice and wheat. This signaled a shift

<sup>62</sup> Qu Jiushi 瞿九思, *Wanli wugong lu* 萬曆武功錄 (Taipei: Yiwen yinshuguan, 1980), p. 689.

<sup>63</sup> Chen, ed., *Huang Ming jingshi*, p. 3416.

<sup>64</sup> Li, *Mingdai Xihai*, p. 153.

<sup>65</sup> *Ming Shenzong shilu* 146 (12/ii/jiazi), p. 2725.

<sup>66</sup> Qu, *Wanli*, p. 691.

<sup>67</sup> Li, *Mingdai Xihai*, p. 224.

<sup>68</sup> Chen, ed., *Huang Ming jingshi*, p. 4185. I argue that *tianba* is most likely how the Tibetan word, *gter* (གྲོ་རྩ་, "treasure"), is pronounced in local accent. Mao Ruizheng 茅瑞徵, *Huang Ming Xiangxu lu* 皇明象胥錄 (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 2000), p. 668.

from subsistence needs to aspirational consumption.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, the Mongols' entrenched geopolitical position facilitated far-ranging trade networks – ones that extended beyond Ming borders to reach Muslims in distant western regions.<sup>70</sup> By the late 1580s, the Mongols had successfully established themselves in the lake region.

The Ming court's paradoxical stance toward Mongol encroachment in the Qinghai Lake region reveals the inherent contradictions of late-imperial frontier governance. While Mongol groups consolidated territorial control through systematic resource extraction and coerced assimilation of indigenous Fan communities, Ming policymakers consciously perpetuated the region's status as a buffer zone beyond civilizational boundaries, and they maintained an indifference toward the indigenes. Ming grand secretary Shen Shixing's 申時行 directive to frontier commanders epitomized this instrumental logic: "Deploy troops only when Han subjects suffer depredations. Mongol raids against Fan barbarians warrant vigilant inaction."<sup>71</sup> Gao Gong 高拱, another high-ranking Ming official, further rationalized the non-intervention policy through a type of circular ethics: "Since we desire security from Mongol incursions, denying them Fan plunder would violate heavenly principle."<sup>72</sup> Such rhetoric reflected the Ming's strategy of making divisions, something that tacitly encouraged Mongol–Fan conflicts to deflect steppe pressures from the Han-populated agricultural zones.

The Ming administration's evolving approach to Mongol mobility through the Hexi Corridor involved a gradual erosion of frontier vigilance in the late-sixteenth century. Earlier, as formalized under Altan Khan as *jielu* 借路 (route-borrowing), a specific diplomatic protocol required missions to flow between Mongol leadership and Ming grand secretaries, but these degenerated into routinized privileges devoid of oversight. By the 1580s, Mongol groups traversed Ming territory with minimal scrutiny, establishing multiple unauthorized thoroughfares into the Qinghai Lake region under pretexts ranging from seasonal hunts to tribute missions.<sup>73</sup> This institutional complacency shows itself in both material neglect and ethical decay. Ming military logs document a considerable reduction in border-wall maintenance budgets, while

<sup>69</sup> Qu, *Wanli*, p. 528.

<sup>70</sup> Qu, *Wanli*, p. 536.

<sup>71</sup> Shen Shixing 申時行, *Lunfei jiandu* 論扉簡牘 (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 2000), p. 289.

<sup>72</sup> Gao Gong 高拱, "Furong jishi 伏戎紀事," in Bo and Wang, ed., *Mingdai Menggu Hanji shiliao huibian, di er ji*, p. 71.

<sup>73</sup> Chen, ed., *Huang Ming jingshi*, p. 4372.

frontier commanders frequently accepted bribes from the Mongols in exchange for unimpeded passage and even hosted banquets as long as no trouble arose during traversal.<sup>74</sup> Such practices reflected a reconceptualization of the lake region in Ming geopolitical discourse: it became a space where Mongol predation on Fan communities served to buffer Han heartlands from steppe pressures. This willful blindness to Mongol territorialization, compounded by bureaucratic venality, transformed the Qinghai Lake region from a contested borderland into an extraterritorial corridor where Ming sovereignty existed in name alone.

#### FROM TEMPORARY PEACE TO MILITARY ACTIONS

The late 1580s marked a critical juncture in Qinghai Lake's geopolitical trajectory: Qolachi 火落赤, a Mongol chieftain, exerted ambitions that destabilized the precarious equilibrium with the Ming. Appointed by Altan Khan as a mediator between Mongol and Tibetan forces,<sup>75</sup> Qolachi strategically cultivated cross-cultural alliances while asserting unprecedented autonomy. Ming chroniclers depict him as a figure of insatiable pretension, audaciously demanding royal kingly titles from the Ming and boasting of a capacity to conquer the entire northwest frontier of Ming China.<sup>76</sup> This expansionist agenda crystallized in 1589 when Qolachi convened a strategic summit near Qinghai Lake and invited Cherik, the nominal Western Mongol leader, to coordinate invasions of Ming garrisons.<sup>77</sup>

Cherik's response exposed the Ming frontier administration's eroded vigilance. Upon receiving Qolachi's invitation in Ordos, the Mongol leader petitioned the Ming court for expedited passage through Hexi Corridor. Cloaked in deferential rhetoric, Cherik's 1589 missive artfully wove together three justifications. First, the persistent unrest in the lake region had severely undermined the hard-won peace between the Ming and the Mongols: Cherik found it necessary to address this matter promptly. Second, in order to counter Oirat raids threatening the Western Mongols' interests, traversing through Ming territory became an immediate imperative for the Mongols. Thirdly, due to the recent passing of the third Dalai Lama during his work preaching on the Mongol steppe, Cherik had to escort his funerary procession to Tibet. Despite ministerial reservations about Mongol mobilization through

<sup>74</sup> Chen, ed., *Huang Ming jingshi*, pp. 4375-76.

<sup>75</sup> Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso, *Yishi sishi Dalai Lama zhuan*, p. 241.

<sup>76</sup> Shen, *Lunfei*, p. 362; Yu Hao 俞浩, *Xiyu kaogu lu* 西域考古錄 (Chengdu: Sichuan minzu chubanshe, 2002), p. 275.

<sup>77</sup> Shen, *Lunfei*, p. 361.

Ming heartlands,<sup>78</sup> the Ming court ultimately sanctioned the request for transit, prioritizing diplomatic protocol over strategic problems. By late 1589, Cherik's contingent had traversed Ming territory unopposed and encamped at Chabchiyal Monastery.

The Mongol ascendancy in the Qinghai Lake region reached its zenith in 1590 with Cherik's transit and related military mobilization. Qolachi was enthused to learn of Cherik's arrival in the lake region. Ming military reports indicated that he even paid daily visits to Cherik's tent for discussion on various matters.<sup>79</sup> Subsequently, Cherik initiated the deployment of troops and prepared boats to cross the Yellow River, asserting his intention to conduct a large-scale raid in the region.<sup>80</sup> The assault culminated in the devastating 1590 defeat of Ming commander Li Lianfang's 李聯芳 forces in Taozhou and Songpan, a loss that reverberated through the imperial court and prompted the emperor Wanli to abandon decades of passive containment in favor of aggressive military intervention under the banner of "severing the barbarians' right arm."<sup>81</sup>

In 1591, Zheng Luo 鄭洛, previously the supreme commander of Xuanfu 宣府 and Datong 大同 military districts, was appointed the superintendent of the western frontier region.<sup>82</sup> Upon his arrival in Qinghai, Zheng identified two fatal flaws in Ming frontier policy. First, the unchecked Mongol exploitation of route-borrowing transit rights had allowed steppe forces to penetrate Ming territory with impunity. Second, the Ming's indifference to Mongol predation on indigenous Fan communities had inadvertently supplied the Mongols with provisions and intelligence.<sup>83</sup> Zheng's strategy sought to reverse these problems by severing Mongol mobility while concurrently leveraging Fan resentment against the Mongols.

Zheng Luo's four-part strategy centered first on severing the Mongols' logistical lifelines by regulating their mobility. Recognizing the route-borrowing system as the primary enabler of Mongol territorial penetration, he imposed draconian restrictions on transits across the Gansu frontier.<sup>84</sup> By attributing the Qinghai crisis directly to Ming

<sup>78</sup> *Ming Shenzong shilu* 205 (16/xii/*gengzi*), p. 3857.

<sup>79</sup> Qu, *Wanli*, p. 495.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> *Ming Shenzong shilu* 168 (13/xii/*xinchou*), p. 3039.

<sup>82</sup> Yang Yingju 楊應璠, *Xining fu xinzhì* 西寧府新志 (Xining: Qinghai renmin chubanshe, 2016), pp. 740-41.

<sup>83</sup> Chen, ed., *Huang Ming jingshi*, p. 4381.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4372-73.

complicity in Mongol infiltration through the Hexi Corridor, Zheng reiterated that the Mongols could only access to the lake region first via circuitous detours through Jiayu Pass and second under the Ming's armed escort. Moreover, he warned that any attempts at forcefully entering Qinghai would result in severe consequences.<sup>85</sup> However, not all Mongol leaders were deterred in spite of Zheng Luo's warning. Therefore, when a prominent Mongol figurehead attempted forced crossings, Zheng Luo dispatched a substantial force to repel them.<sup>86</sup>

Zheng Luo's containment strategy operated through asymmetrical mobility controls: while prohibiting Mongol entry into the Qinghai Lake region via Ming territory, he permitted egress through established routes to accelerate their withdrawal.<sup>87</sup> His primary objective centered on expelling Cherik, whose Ordos-based authority legitimized Mongol military operations in the lake region. Initial threats to suspend Cherik's tributary privileges and close frontier markets proved ineffective against the Mongol leader's strategic patience.<sup>88</sup> The breakthrough emerged through Zheng's second plan, namely, the exploitation of Mongol political rivalries. In a calculated 1592 missive, he hinted at imperial plans to elevate multiple Mongol nobles to kingly titles as a challenge to Cherik's exclusive status as Altan Khan's heir.<sup>89</sup> This psychological warfare exploited steppe leaders' acute sensitivity to hierarchical parity: it posed a significant threat to his status and authority. In this regard, Qolachi's desperate countermeasures – including proposals for a coordinated invasion of Shaanxi<sup>90</sup> – failed to offset Cherik's anxiety over status erosion. By winter 1592, Cherik commenced withdrawal to Ordos. Ming officials attributed his departure to their clever threat to change leadership statuses in the Mongol world.<sup>91</sup>

Zheng Luo's third strategic initiative sought to dismantle Mongol power by severing their reliance on indigenous Fan communities. Recognizing that Mongol dominance in the Qinghai Lake region depended on extracting grain, livestock, and labor from subjugated local populations, Zheng implemented a three-pronged approach toward the indigenes: pacification through material incentives, symbolic incorporation into Ming administrative frameworks, and militarization of

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4373.

<sup>86</sup> *Ming Shenzong shilu* 231 (19/i/wuwu), p. 4282.

<sup>87</sup> Chen, ed., *Huang Ming jingshi*, p. 4372.

<sup>88</sup> *Ming Shenzong shilu* 226 (18/viii/guiyou), p. 4199.

<sup>89</sup> Qu, *Wanli wugong*, p. 498.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 499.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

indigenous spaces.<sup>92</sup> This was to be accomplished through calculated reciprocity. Specifically, Fan leaders who disrupted Mongol operations through either horse theft or intelligence gathering could receive Ming-bestowed tea, textiles, and grain rewards.<sup>93</sup> Moreover, Zheng Luo authorized military engineers and laborers to construct stone fortresses at key Fan settlements.<sup>94</sup> This policy of reward and fortification found explicit formulation in a particular imperial edict that the Ming court issued to the Fan community in the lake region. The edict is preserved in the Qinghai Provincial Archive; it reads:

It is observed that the Xifan territories all belong to the realm of the Great Ming Emperor, and the Xifan people are all subjects of the Great Ming Emperor. His Majesty, knowing that your tribes depend on tea for survival and perish without it, decrees that you shall present your annual tribute of horses on schedule. In return, you shall receive tea bundles to sustain your lives, along with additional rewards. Your descendants, generation after generation, have enjoyed the emperor's grace as being boundless as heaven and earth. It is your duty to remain loyal, serve the empire, and forever guard our borders. Recently, the northern barbarians (Beilu) have occupied the seaside regions [the Qinghai Lake] and plundered your tribes. Yet you fail to unite against them. Instead, you submit to their rule, betraying the nurturing benevolence of the Middle Kingdom – a defiance as grave as forgetting heaven and earth! These northern barbarians are no different from wolves and tigers. They extorted your tributes through the *tianba* tax, seized your livestock, and abduct your families. To follow them is calamity. In contrast, the Middle Kingdom not only sustains you with tea but also protects you from barbarian raids. To remain loyal to the Middle Kingdom is to embrace fortune. Your state preceptors (*guoshi* 國師), Chan masters (*chanshi* 禪師), and Buddhist monks all revere the Dharma. How can you ignore the distinction between fortune and calamity, choosing rebellion over allegiance? Yet, as the Middle Kingdom has not previously clarified this, your ignorance and subjugation to the barbarians are pitiable. Hence, this proclamation is issued. This year, other than Jiancuoheshang 堅錯和尚 from the Huilongsi 慧隆寺 tribe that have duly presented eight tribute horses and hence received tea and rewards accordingly, all tribal leaders should be follow the instructions of this

<sup>92</sup> Chen, ed., *Huang Ming jingshi*, pp. 4378–80.

<sup>93</sup> Qu, *Wanli wugong*, p. 541.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 542.

edict. Henceforth, you must repay the emperor's grace with unwavering loyalty. Submit well-bred horses annually, as ordained. Plan wisely – resist barbarian coercion and alliances. Neighboring tribes must unite: fortify strongholds, arm your forces, share intelligence on barbarian movements, and jointly repel their raids. The imperial court now dispatches generals and troops solely to protect you. Report barbarian attacks promptly, and our forces will rush to your aid. If the Middle Kingdom calls upon your warriors to resist invasion, respond swiftly. Meritorious service will be richly rewarded. By joining Han and Xifan forces to expel the barbarians from the western sea [the Qinghai Lake], you shall live free from fear, trading horses for tea in perpetual peace. Should officials at checkpoints extort bribes, withhold tea, or abuse your people under the guise of “tribute inspection”, report them during reward ceremonies. The guilty will be punished, and you shall receive double compensation. Conversely, if tribes persist in colluding with barbarians or stir unrest, heaven and earth will forsake them. The emperor will revoke their tea, sever their survival, and curse their descendants – a regret beyond remedy. By imperial mandate, I oversee your tribute and tea exchange, treating Xifan as our own. I proclaim the sacred grace to guide you from harm to safety, from calamity to fortune, securing prosperity for generations. Let all tribes, whether newly submitted or long-allied, abide by this decree. Wanli 19th Year, 8th Month, 21st Day(Seal)

This long and detailed imperial edict indicates the court's narrative strategy to persuade the Fan communities to side with the Ming. Structured as a tripartite rhetorical performance, the edict first invokes the Fan people's historical obligations: presenting tribute horses and safeguarding the Ming's frontier region. In exchange, the court would fulfill Fan people's needs for tea. This contractual framing transitions abruptly to accusatory denunciation of Fan–Mongol alliances. Finally, it modulates into conciliatory overtures promising the Fan people protection and court reward once they stopped working with the Mongols.

Issued amidst escalating Ming–Mongol hostilities, the edict's calibrated rhetoric proved successful. Ming military logs document nearly 200 Fan communities formally pledging allegiance to the Ming in the early 1590s.<sup>95</sup> Contemporary chronicles celebrate this as ensuring regional stability for at least another half century,<sup>96</sup> though such opti-

<sup>95</sup> Chen, ed., *Huang Ming jingshi*, pp. 404–5.

<sup>96</sup> Zhang Wei 張維, *Longyou jinshi lu* 隴右金石錄 (Lanzhou: Lanzhou guji chubanshe, 1990), p. 84.

mism masked the coercive realities beneath ceremonial submissions. By reconfiguring Fan communities as both beneficiaries and guardians of Ming frontier interests, Zheng Luo aimed to collapse Mongol resource networks. Yet the true legacy of the transactional approach lay not in ideological conversion, but in its tactical weaponization of Fan intermediary status, as it transformed indigenous communities into both buffer and battleground for contending forces.

Zheng Luo's fourth strategic initiative centered on eradicating Mongol geopolitical influence through targeted suppression of Qolachi's religio-political networks. The flashpoint emerged from Qolachi's construction of a Tibetan Buddhist monastery near Guide 貴德, strategically positioned near the Ming's military jurisdiction. Notably, Qolachi himself was an ardent practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism.<sup>97</sup> His monastic ambitions had deep roots in his alliance with the Third Dalai Lama, whom he sheltered during the hierarch's 1584 Ordos pilgrimage.<sup>98</sup> When Ming officials rebuffed Qolachi's 1587 petition for construction materials, viewing it as a guise for frontier fortification,<sup>99</sup> Qolachi mobilized laborers and artisans to erect the Guide complex autonomously. This religious complex represented more than devotional expression: it constituted spatial sacralization of Mongol territorial claims, transforming the complex into both spiritual sanctuary and military redoubt.

Qolachi's monastic ambitions at Guide triggered acute Ming anxieties over frontier security when his agents began harvesting timber from forests within Ming-controlled Sichuan province.<sup>100</sup> Upon learning of this, the Ming authorities feared that such a monastery would attract numerous Mongols and expose the entire region to Qolachi's influence.<sup>101</sup> Zheng Luo recognized the compound's latent threat and decided to neutralize it before it could take root. Exploiting Mongol seasonal transhumance patterns, Zheng orchestrated a precision strike in 1590. While Qolachi was absent overseeing pasture rotations, a Ming sabotage unit infiltrated the construction zone. Under the cover of darkness and aided by strong winds, the Ming soldiers set ablaze all accumulated timber materials and reduced months of labor to ashes.<sup>102</sup>

<sup>97</sup> Cairang 才讓, "Diba Fawang zhuan suozai Mingmo Meng Zang minzu guanxi shishi kao-shu" 第巴法王傳所載明末蒙藏民族關係史事考述, *Zhongguo Zangxue* 3 (2023), pp. 45-50.

<sup>98</sup> Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso, *Yishi sishi Dalai Lama zhuan*, p. 245.

<sup>99</sup> *Ming Shenzong shilu* 187 (15/vi/dingmao), p. 3498.

<sup>100</sup> Qu, *Wanli wugong*, p. 536.

<sup>101</sup> *Wanli Dichao* 萬曆邸鈔 (Taipei: Xuesheng shuju, 1968), pp. 527-28.

<sup>102</sup> Qu, *Wanli wugong*, p. 540.

The impact felt by Zheng Luo's destruction of Qolachi's unfinished monastery revealed to Zheng the symbiotic relationship between Mongol territorial control and Tibetan Buddhist sacred architecture. Therefore, he devised a further plan to incinerate Chabchiyal Monastery, the nexus of this religio-political symbiosis and hence possessing far greater geopolitical and religious significance to the Mongols. Since Chabchiyal Monastery was nominally under the patronage of the Ming court, Zheng Luo petitioned the Wanli court to sanction its eradication. His memorial framed the monastery not as a spiritual sanctuary but as a geopolitical chokepoint, arguing that Mongol manipulation of pilgrimage networks enabled theocratic subjugation of indigenous Fan communities under the cloak of devotion. Therefore, the monastery's demolition was an imperative step towards resolving the Mongol problem.<sup>103</sup> The Ming court granted him permission at last: the imperial authorization transformed Zheng's campaign into a successful overall assertion of Ming sovereignty. In 1591, Zheng Luo dispatched a formidable force to launch an unexpected assault on Chabchiyal Monastery and set ablaze its entire religious complex; this force defeated the Mongols who arrived to rescue it. Triumphant eradication of this Mongol stronghold filled Zheng with confidence and even inspired him to compose several commemorative poems.<sup>104</sup> The monastery's annihilation precipitated the Mongols' strategic collapse in the lake region and resulted in their subsequent series of defeats against Ming forces.<sup>105</sup>

Following the systematic destruction of Mongol-controlled Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, the Ming dynasty strategically repositioned itself as the legitimate patron of Buddhism in the Qinghai Lake region, filling the resultant spiritual void with a curated imperial religious narrative. This hegemonic tactic is epitomized by a stone tablet at Zhenzhu Monastery 珍珠寺 made in Guide in 1597. It was inscribed with an intriguing content that appears to be unrelated to the monastery itself but rather exclusively focuses on the historical significance of a preserved Buddhist statue of Shakyamuni in Beijing.<sup>106</sup> The inscription commences with the early history of Buddhism, tracing the statue's origins, and subsequently chronicles the statue's journey within China over time, culminating in its arrival at Beijing's Jiufeng Monastery 鷲峰寺 approximately 2,580 years after its initial creation. The entire in-

<sup>103</sup> Su Xian 蘇銜, *Xining zhi* 西寧志 (Xining: Qinghai renmin chubanshe, 1993), p. 235.

<sup>104</sup> Yang, *Xining fu*, pp. 1524–525.

<sup>105</sup> Liu Minkuan 劉敏寬, *Xining Wei zhi* 西寧衛志 (Xining: Qinghai renmin chubanshe, 2016), pp. 75–76.

<sup>106</sup> Ma Lin 馬林 and Chen Qingying 陳慶英, “Qinghai Guide Zhenzhusi beiji” 青海貴德珍珠寺碑記, *Qinghai minzu xueyuan xuebao* 青海民族學院學報 4 (1989), p. 1.

scription conspicuously bypasses Tibetan and Mongol Buddhist traditions and has nothing to do with Buddhism in the local society at all. In other words, the inscription erases regional religious memory completely while anchoring Buddhist legitimacy to the imperial center of the Ming. This ideological engineering served dual geopolitical aims: it assimilated Buddhist communities in the lake region into a Beijing-centric tributary framework and invalidated Mongol claims to religio-political authority forged through monastic networks. The inscription's jarring metropolitan focus – utterly silent on Tibet, Mongolia, or even Zhenzhu Monastery itself – operated as the symbolic counterpart to Zheng Luo's military campaigns, complementing the physical annihilation of Chabchiyal Monastery with cultural reconquest. In this regard, the Ming sought to excise the Qinghai region from the Mongol-Tibetan Buddhist ecumene and reorder it within a civilizational hierarchy radiating from Beijing.

While Chen Qinying 陳慶英 and Ma Lin 馬林 rightly interpret the Zhenzhu Monastery inscription as reflecting Ming efforts to cultivate Fan alliances during 1590s anti-Mongol campaigns,<sup>107</sup> I argue that the monument equally signifies the dynasty's ambition to reconfigure the region's religious landscape following Chabchiyal Monastery's destruction. By foregrounding the Beijing-housed Shakyamuni statue's sanctity and erasing local Tibetan-Mongol Buddhist narratives, the Ming sought to recenter spiritual authority within imperial geography. Yet this symbolic imposition of Beijing-centric orthodoxy proved operationally hollow from a retrospective standpoint: Zhenzhu Monastery attracted minimal indigenous devotion compared to Tibetan Buddhist sites in the region; it functioned primarily as a sinicized enclave for Han military settlers rather than a transformative spiritual node. The inscription's disconnection from local society underscores for us the limits of Ming cultural statecraft, wherein performative claims to Buddhist legitimacy failed to resonate beyond garrison communities.

By the decade's close, facing resurgent Mongol-Tibetan resistance, the Ming abandoned such hybrid strategies of frontier control, instead enforcing rigid territorial demarcations. Towards the end of the century, as the Ming progressively imposed more stringent restrictions on cross-regional movement of individuals, commodities, and information, the Mongol era of the Qinghai Lake came to an end, although only temporarily.

<sup>107</sup> Ma and Chen, "Qinghai Guide," p. 2.

## CONCLUSION

This study has interrogated the complex interplay of transregional mobility and frontier territorialization through a study of Ming-Mongol contestations in the Qinghai Lake region during the mid- to late-sixteenth century. The analysis reveals how Mongol groups, leveraging the lake region as a geopolitical sanctuary and Tibetan Buddhist pilgrimage corridor, catalyzed transformative flows of populations, commodities, and religious ideologies. Ming authorities initially tolerated these movements under the 1571 peace accord framework, viewing the region through a lens of civilizational periphery requiring minimal governance investment. This defensive containment posture collapsed in the 1590s as Mongol mobility networks evolved into parallel power structures challenging Ming sovereignty. The Ming response, epitomized by Zheng Luo's campaigns, combined cultural erasure with mobility restrictions that forcibly reconstituted the frontier.

Ultimately, the study demonstrates how frontier societies could emerge not simply through static border demarcations but via negotiated control over transregional circulations. The Ming's military suppression of Mongol networks destroyed the very mobility systems that had sustained cross-cultural exchange for centuries previously. This would congeal the region into a contested territory. These findings might recalibrate our understanding of early-modern borderlands, thus showing them as dynamic ecosystems where control over movement, rather than territorial occupation per se, constituted the essence of sovereignty. By tracing how horse trails became battle lines and pilgrimage routes morphed into ideological fronts, this study has illuminated the coconstituent relationship in frontier spaces – that between transregional mobility patterns and political morphology.