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THE SILK ROADS AND THE TIMURID EMPIRE: COMMERCIAL, DIPLOMATIC, AND CULTURAL DYNAMICS IN THE POST-MONGOL ERA (1370-1507)

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Abstract. Introduction. This article reassesses the conventional historiographical assumption that the fifteenth century marked the irreversible decline of the Silk Roads after the rise of maritime routes. It argues instead that the Timurid period represented not commercial disintegration, but a profound restructuring of Eurasian exchange through new political, economic, and cultural configurations. Purpose and objectives. The study aims to reinterpret the role of the Timurid Empire in Silk Road history by examining it as an active agent of selective network reconfiguration rather than a passive inheritor of earlier trade systems. Its objectives are to identify the mechanisms through which Timurid rule reorganized trade corridors, integrated commerce into imperial statecraft, and transformed major urban centers such as Samarkand and Herat into strategic hubs of exchange and cultural production. Materials and methods. The research is based on a comparative analysis of multilingual primary and secondary sources, including Persian, Arabic, and Chinese chronicles, diplomatic records, travel accounts, and modern scholarly studies on Timurid administration, trade, and diplomacy. Methodologically, the article applies a cross-regional and interdisciplinary approach combining historical analysis, network interpretation, comparative economic evaluation, and source criticism in order to reconstruct the dynamics of overland and maritime exchange in fifteenth-century Eurasia. Discussion and results. The findings demonstrate that Timurid authorities did not merely preserve existing Silk Road structures, but selectively strengthened certain routes, marginalized others, concentrated skilled labor and commercial wealth in core cities, and used diplomacy, tribute, and institutional control as instruments of economic strategy. The study also shows that overland and maritime trade systems functioned in parallel rather than in simple opposition, while the prosperity of Samarkand and Herat reflected the broader integration of commerce, political power, and cultural synthesis within the Timurid world. Conclusion. The article concludes that the concept of Silk Road “decline” in the fifteenth century is analytically insufficient, since the period is better understood as an era of imperial reorganization and selective connectivity under Timurid rule. This interpretation offers an alternative to Eurocentric narratives and highlights the Timurid Empire as a crucial laboratory of transregional

integration whose legacy shaped later political, diplomatic, and cultural developments across Eurasia.

Keywords: Timurid Empire, Silk Roads, Ming dynasty, Chinese tribute system, Samarkand, post-Mongol Eurasia, Sharaf al-Dīn 'Alī Yazdī, state administration, cultural history, diplomatic networks, global history.

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ЖІБЕК ЖОЛДАРЫ МЕН ТИМУРИДТЕР ИМПЕРИЯСЫ: ПОСТМОНҒОЛ ДӘУІРІНДЕГІ КОММЕРЦИЯЛЫҚ, ДИПЛОМАТИЯЛЫҚ ЖӘНЕ МӘДЕНИ ДИНАМИКА (1370-1507)

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Аңдатпа. Кіріспе. Бұл мақалада XV ғасыр теңіз сауда жолдарының пайда болуынан кейін Жібек жолының қайтымсыз құлдырауы болды деген дәстүрлі тарихнамалық болжам қайта қарастырылады. Керісінше, ол Тимуридтер кезеңі коммерциялық құлдырауды емес, жаңа саяси, экономикалық және мәдени конфигурациялар арқылы еуразиялық алмасудың терең қайта құрылуын білдірді деп тұжырымдайды. Мақсаты мен міндеттері. Бұл зерттеу Тимуридтер империясының Жібек жолы тарихындағы рөлін қайта қарастыруға бағытталған, оны бұрынғы сауда жүйелерінің пассивті мұрагері емес, селективті желіні қайта құрудың белсенді агенті ретінде қарастырады. Оның мақсаттары – Тимуридтер билігінің сауда дәліздерін қайта құру, сауданы империялық мемлекеттік саясатқа біріктіру және Самарқанд пен Герат сияқты ірі қалалық орталықтарды алмасу мен мәдени өндірістің стратегиялық орталықтарына айналдыру механизмдерін анықтау. Материалдар мен әдістер. Бұл зерттеу парсы, араб және қытай шежірелерін, дипломатиялық жазбаларды, саяхат жазбаларын және Тимуридтер әкімшілігі, саудасы және дипломатиясы туралы қазіргі заманғы ғылыми зерттеулерді қоса алғанда, көптілді бастапқы және қосымша дереккөздерді салыстырмалы талдауға негізделген. Әдістемелік тұрғыдан алғанда, мақалада XV ғасырдағы Еуразиядағы құрлық және теңіз алмасу динамикасын қалпына келтіру үшін тарихи талдауды, желілік түсіндірмені, салыстырмалы экономикалық бағалауды және дереккөздерді талдауды біріктіретін аймақаралық және пәнаралық тәсіл қолданылады. Талқылау және нәтижелер. Зерттеу нәтижелері Тимурид билігінің тек қолданыстағы Жібек жолы құрылымдарын сақтап қана қоймай, сонымен қатар белгілі бір бағыттарды таңдамалы түрде нығайтып, басқаларын шеттетіп, білікті жұмыс күші мен сауда байлығын орталық қалаларда шоғырландырып, дипломатияны, алым-салықтарды және институционалдық бақылауды экономикалық стратегия құралдары ретінде пайдаланғанын көрсетеді. Зерттеу сонымен қатар құрлық және теңіз сауда жүйелерінің қарапайым қарама-қайшылықта емес, параллель жұмыс істегенін, ал Самарқанд пен Гераттың гүлденуі Тимуридтер әлеміндегі сауданың, саяси биліктің және мәдени синтездің кеңірек интеграциясын көрсеткенін көрсетеді. Қорытынды. Мақалада XV ғасырдағы Жібек жолының «құлдырауы» тұжырымдамасы аналитикалық тұрғыдан жеткіліксіз деген қорытынды жасалады, себебі бұл кезең Тимуридтер билігі кезінде

империялық қайта құру және таңдамалы өзара байланыс дәуірі ретінде жақсы түсініледі. Бұл түсіндірме еуроцентристік әңгімелерге балама ұсынады және Тимуридтер империясының трансұлттық интеграцияның маңызды зертханасы ретіндегі рөлін атап көрсетеді, оның мұрасы Еуразиядағы кейінгі саяси, дипломатиялық және мәдени процестерді қалыптастырды.

Түйін сөздер: Тимур әулеті империясы, Жібек жолы, Мин әулеті, Қытайдың алық жүйесі, Самарқанд, постмоңғолдық Еуразия, Шараф ад-Дин Әли Язди, мемлекеттік басқару, мәдениет тарихы, дипломатиялық желілер, жаһандық тарих.

Дәйексөз үшін: Чжан Эньмин Жібек жолдары мен Тимуридтер империясы: постмоңғол дәуіріндегі коммерциялық, дипломатиялық және мәдени динамика (1370–1507) // Scientific Journal "Central Asian courier". 2026. Т. 2. № 2. 385-405 бб. (Ағылш.). DOI: 10.64970/3105-241X_2026_2_2_385-405

ШЁЛКОВЫЕ ПУТИ И ИМПЕРИЯ ТИМУРИДОВ: КОММЕРЧЕСКИЕ, ДИПЛОМАТИЧЕСКИЕ И КУЛЬТУРНЫЕ ДИНАМИКИ В ПОСТМОНГОЛЬСКУЮ ЭПОХУ (1370-1507)

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Аннотация. Введение. В данной статье пересматривается общепринятое историографическое предположение о том, что XV век ознаменовал необратимый упадок Шелкового пути после подъема морских торговых путей. Вместо этого утверждается, что период правления Тимуридов представлял собой не коммерческий распад, а глубокую реструктуризацию евразийского обмена посредством новых политических, экономических и культурных конфигураций. Цель и задачи. Исследование направлено на переосмысление роли Тимуридской империи в истории Шелкового пути, рассматривая ее как активного агента избирательной реконфигурации сети, а не как пассивного наследника более ранних торговых систем. Его цели — выявить механизмы, посредством которых правление Тимуридов реорганизовало торговые коридоры, интегрировало торговлю в имперскую государственную политику и превратило крупные городские центры, такие как Самарканд и Герат, в стратегические центры обмена и культурного производства. Материалы и методы. Исследование основано на сравнительном анализе многоязычных первичных и вторичных источников, включая персидские, арабские и китайские хроники, дипломатические записи, путевые заметки и современные научные исследования по тимуридской администрации, торговле и дипломатии. В методологическом плане в статье применяется межрегиональный и междисциплинарный подход, сочетающий исторический анализ, сетевую интерпретацию, сравнительную экономическую оценку и источниковедческий анализ для реконструкции динамики сухопутного и морского обмена в Евразии XV века. Обсуждение и результаты. Полученные данные показывают, что власти Тимуридов не просто сохраняли существующие структуры Шелкового пути, но и избирательно укрепляли определенные маршруты, маргинализировали другие, концентрировали квалифицированную рабочую силу и торговое богатство в центральных городах, а также использовали дипломатию, дань и институциональный контроль в качестве инструментов экономической стратегии. Исследование также показывает, что сухопутные и морские торговые системы

функционировали параллельно, а не в простой оппозиции, в то время как процветание Самарканда и Герата отражало более широкую интеграцию торговли, политической власти и культурного синтеза в мире Тимуридов. Заключение. В статье делается вывод о том, что концепция «упадка» Шелкового пути в XV веке аналитически недостаточна, поскольку этот период лучше понимать как эпоху имперской реорганизации и избирательной взаимосвязи при правлении Тимуридов. Данная интерпретация предлагает альтернативу евроцентрическим нарративам и подчеркивает роль Тимуридской империи как важнейшей лаборатории транснациональной интеграции, чье наследие сформировало последующие политические, дипломатические и культурные процессы в Евразии.

Ключевые слова: Тимуридская империя, Шелковый путь, империя Мин, китайская данническая система, Самарканд, постмонгольская Евразия, Шараф ад-Дин Али Йазди, государственное управление, история культуры, дипломатические сети, глобальная история.

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Introduction: Rethinking the "Decline" of the Silk Roads

In February 1405, Timur lay dying in Otrar. His forces prepared to strike further into Ming China. In fact, the mainstream narrative of the Silk Roads has for some considerable while treated this as an anticlimax: with the apparent swan-song of an overland trade that would shortly be rendered obsolete by the later arrival of Portuguese caravels off the Cape of Good Hope.

Yet, that was precisely the question I was raising when I went through the main sources—the Ming Shilu, Yazdī's *Zafarnāma*, Ibn 'Arabshāh's chronicle—that made me unwittingly look askance at that narrative: these were the sources asserting agitated commercial activities in Samarkand and caravans with silk and spices tramping across Central Asia and envoys shuttling between Herat and Beijing. What I kept asking myself was: What sort of a commercial network could ensure that metabolism if it were decaying so rapidly?

This tension between the then-established historiographical position and the evidence I was consulting would become the starting point of this work. After many months of dialogue between Persian, Arabic, and Chinese sources, this perception was, however, changing: what seemed to be a wrong question was whether the Silk Roads experienced some form of «decline» or «survival» during the fifteenth century. Instead, the framework through which one looked at it was truly, fundamentally defective.

When constructed from most European polemics toward the Asian continent by sea, the «birth» of maritime routes was primarily responsible for pushing the Silk Roads over the precipice. From the viewpoint of seals, the scenario is different: far from playing the role of the last guardian of the dying tradition, I ended up seeing Timur in a very different and far, far more interesting light—as a rather shrewd network constructor who, for his purposes, remodelled the Eurasian exchange system from within pretty drastically.

How could this be described? The argument for this study is that of selective reconfiguration, that is, network reconfiguration: what I propose as a theoretical framework is detached from the traditional standpoint that presents Timur as a mere merciless conqueror who inherited the trade routes established during the days of the Mongol Empire. Instead, he revisited and reworked those routes in a clear-cut, asymmetrical logic, enhancing some while leaving others to wither, concentrating resources and wealth in his core cities, while systematically extracting them from the peripheries, with the relation to trade thought out within a logic of statecraft and not just as a straightforward resource of state revenues. As Manz's seminal study demonstrates, this approach was not merely opportunistic but reflected a coherent strategy of political consolidation: Timur systematically dismantled the existing tribal power structures, replaced them with a new elite loyal to himself, and redirected the political energies of his followers toward a continuous program of

conquest, thereby creating a state that was both highly centralized and entirely dependent on his personal authority (Manz B. F, 1989:148-153).

Why does it matter? Because, on the face of it, the philosophy of rule with, I presume, most premodern empires from Timur to the present, connotes more with the control of movements through the territory rather than the control over the territory per se. Trade routes, artisans, tradesmen, and ideas moving from one point to another location: these would be the true objects of desire. Studying how Timur moulded each of these processes herein will allow us to glean insights into one particular aspect of power sensitivity through networks rather than sovereign demarcations. Such a model also appeals to three issues:

Concerning issues of power, we face questions about the consolidation of rule over newly acquired trade nodes and how the «human resource agglomeration» of artisans would be involved in that process.

On economics, we may ask with which routes Timur sought to consolidate infrastructure versus those routes allowed to be marginalised. Was the tribute system with Ming China diplomacy or a rather sophisticated economic strategy?

On the culture, one could ask what new cultural forms pluralised through the cosmopolitan flows of people, goods, and ideas in the reconstructed Timurid network. Moreover, how does trade prosperity relate to cultural splendor in cities such as Herat?

Together, these three compound dimensions challenge the Eurocentric teleological narrative in which the contemporary discussion about the Silk Roads is too much embedded. Thus, while the fifteenth century can hardly be considered a decline in overland transportation, it was more of a reorganization, for which the Timurid Empire took a central role.

Untangling this will not only allow attitudes to change about the Timurid period but also provides another model of how empires have reshaped the trade networks and how trade networks have reshaped empires in their way.

Purpose and objectives. The primary aim of this study is to provide a critical re-evaluation of the fifteenth-century Silk Roads by questioning the traditional historiographical assumption that this period marked the definitive decline of overland trade. The research is intended to substantiate the argument that the Timurid period should be understood not as an era of commercial collapse, but as a stage of structural transformation and selective reorganization of Eurasian exchange networks. One of the principal objectives of the article is to examine the mechanisms through which Timurid political authority reshaped trade routes by prioritizing strategically valuable directions and marginalizing less significant ones.

The study also aims to determine how commercial activity was integrated into the broader logic of statecraft, imperial consolidation, and political control under Timurid rule. A further objective is to analyze the nature of Timurid-Ming relations in order to reveal the extent to which the tribute system operated not merely as a diplomatic institution, but also as a rationalized framework for economic exchange. Particular attention is devoted to investigating the economic and political functions of Samarkand and Herat as major centers of commercial concentration, administrative coordination, and cultural production within the Timurid realm.

Another objective of the study is to assess the significance of both forced and voluntary mobility of artisans, merchants, diplomats, and scholars in the formation of interconnected economic and cultural spaces. The article further seeks to compare overland and maritime trade systems in order to clarify their respective roles, logistical differences, commodity specializations, and strategic importance in the fifteenth-century Eurasian context. In addition, the research aims to identify the spatial limits of Timurid integration by examining peripheral territories where imperial intervention led more often to disruption than to stable incorporation into a unified network. Ultimately, the study seeks to develop an analytical interpretation of the Timurid Empire as an active agent of selective network reconfiguration, thereby offering an alternative to decline-centered and Eurocentric narratives of Silk Road history.

Materials and methods.

1. Power and Profit: Timurid-Ming Commercial Relations

1.1 The Tribute System as Strategic Mimicry

Now the puzzle: when I first turned to the accounts of Timurid embassies to the Ming court recorded in the Ming Shilu, I was struck by an odd fact. The very first mission is recorded rather tersely: «Timur first sent the Muslim Manla Hafiz and others to court, in presents fifteen horses and two camels. The envoys were granted an imperial banquet and bestowed with eighteen ding of white silver» (明太祖实录, 1962:juan 187). There is no mention of any memorial sent, and the Timurid envoys seem to be voiceless petitioners.

The tone had changed markedly by 1394. In presenting 200 horses, Emperor Timur also sent a memorial couched in the idiom of the classical Chinese political style: «I, Timur, who live in some outlying region ten thousand li away, respectfully heard that the Saintly Virtue was great and that it was again great after the goodness of the ancient ones. All sorts of blessings that the ancient ones never had are held by your Majesty; all sorts of lands that the ancient ones never crossed are brought under your Majesty's commands» (明太祖实录, 1962:juan 234). Since the Hongwu Emperor was obviously very pleased with the literary quality of this memorial, he entrusted Fu An with the mission to return it with sumptuous presents.

What happened between each reset was to make the distance so large? At first, I thought the change happened with ease, assuming that it was only a matter of longer acquaintance with the diplomatic forms of the Chinese. Slowly, however, this struck me as being an over-simplification. The memorial from 1394, which was indeed in proper diplomatic form, was a performance. The use of Confucian courtesy formulas in distant Timur's court indicates not internalized Confucianism but rather the recognition that such a performance of courtesy was rewarding. This sparked the idea that Timurid-Ming relations involved a kind of strategic mimicry in which the misconduct of «states» unilaterally recognized as superior to the Ming Empire, of whom the Timurids were one, was accepted and performed so long as the resulting flow of wealth was maximized.

Where the Timurid court mimicked instead of simply adopting Chinese diplomatic practices was in the rhetorical classical Confucian form that allowed the articulation of commercial interests in terms acceptable to the Ming court. Through this, the tribute system, which had previously been a vehicle of Chinese hegemony, became transformed into one through which the Timurids traveled in pursuit of profit. As Fairbank's foundational study demonstrates, the Chinese tribute system was designed as a complex mechanism for regulating foreign relations while simultaneously facilitating commercial exchange under the guise of tributary gifts (Fairbank J.K, 1953:40).

1.2 The Economics of Tribute: Quantitative Analysis

How rewarding was this strategic mimicry? The numbers tell a striking story. Reviewing Ming Shilu entries year by year, a clear pattern emerges. Between 1387 and 1396, there were at least ten major Timurid missions. Even by my regular but incomplete accounting, imports of horses alone increased over time to 3,050. Besides 1,095 horses, the largest recorded mission in 1396 also brought 191 envoys, camels, and other goods.¹

To put these numbers in perspective, the first mission with recorded data that I found entered with 15 horses and 2 camels in 1387. They recorded a payment of 18 ding of silver for these animals, which translates into 90 taels. By the declared market rate, one horse in Central Asia was sold for 4 taels. In any case, the official valuation by the Ming court represented a premium of about 50 per cent, even allowing for the textile gifts that accompanied the animals.

The margin that the 1396 mission enjoyed was nothing like that paid by earlier missions. Compared with more than 25,000 ding of paper money granted by the court for that mission, the prices for horses paid by the tribute system would have exceeded the average price per horse by about 23 ding, each at a value equivalent to about 9.2 shi of rice – prices that were far from the Central Asian market value (한재원, 2020:18-20).

These findings are also corroborated by Korean scholar Han Jae-won's analyses: According to the tribute system, the exchange ratio for horses was such that silk textiles were worth ten to twenty times their Central Asian market price (Gommans J, 2017:18-20). For the 1394 tribute mission, with 200 horses, the return gifts from the Ming court would have been valued at about 4,000-8,000 ding

of silver, representing a margin of 1,000-2,000 percent, even after freight expenses, per an assessment by Han Jae-won (한재원, 2020:18-20). This was not an exercise in diplomacy to make possible commerce but was in fact commercial activity dressed up in diplomatic garb. The Timurids were willing to perform acts of submission because the performance itself was handsomely rewarded.

Comparative Evidence on the Horse Trade. Other evidence corroborates the general scale of this horse trade with Central Asia. According to the founder of the Mughal Empire, Babur, every year, about 7,000-10,000 horses entered India from Central Asia (Levi S. C, 1999:p.531,n.41). Towards the end of the seventeenth century, according to the French traveler Bernier, 25,000 horses were imported every year into India from Central Asia (Levi S. C, 1999:p.529,n.33). According to the Italian agent and self-styled historian of Indian trade Manucci, Indian traders used to buy 100,000 horses from the cities of Balkh and Bukhara through Kabul alone (Levi S. C, 1999:pp.529-530,nn.34-35). However, the best-priced horses were those imported from present-day Uzbekistan, while those from Baluchistan and Khorasan also enjoyed a good reputation (Levi S. C, 1999:pp.531-533). Such extensive trading was made possible by a commensurate commercial infrastructure, because the Silk Roads were traversed not only by caravans but even by carts and camels on routes connecting Multan (Multan) to Kandahar, Ghazni, and Kabul, from where the road led to the other cities on the Oxus River (Levi S. C, 1999:pp.531-533).

Goods Carried by Caravans and Maritime Trade. These are typical goods carried by Timurid envoys, as well as those sent as tribute by Calicut and Malacca, showing that the maritime network of the Indian Ocean was one with Europe, East Africa, Central Asia, East Asia, and the steppe (한재원, 2020:25). The Indian market supplied Central Asia chiefly with expensive spices such as nutmegs, cloves, and ginger. Central Asia supplied Asian markets with silk cloth, velvet in a bright red color, carpets, bronze and copper domestic utensils, satin, knives, shields, and armor and exported both fresh fruit (apples, melons, grapes) and dried fruit (almonds, pistachios, raisins) (Levi S. C, 1999:pp.531-533). When Inner Asia lost any form of political unity in the later fifteenth century, the merchants appeared at the gates of China according to «autonomous and universal trading practices» instead (한재원, 2020:25). For example, in 1483, when the Ming court is said to have witnessed a «lion tribute,» after permission to return through Malacca, the festivities reflected that the Western Regions and the Western Ocean were not disparate realms but overlapping ones covered by the tribute system conceptually (한재원, 2020:25).

1.3 The Limits of Mimicry: Timur's Aborted Campaign

Moreover, the tribute relationship has never been merely economic in nature. After all, the most dramatic episode to date in Timurid-Ming relations is Timur's planned campaign against China, which was still underway at the time of his demise in 1405. The reaction is recorded in the Ming Shi : «When Emperor Chengzu ascended the throne, he sent envoys... Greatly alarmed, the court heard that Timur took a route through Bieshibali and was leading his troops eastward» (明史, 1974:juan 332). Indeed, Yazdī provides a great deal of detail in the *Ẓafarnāma* concerning the enormous army that Timur assembled at Otrar and the long train of preparations leading him further east (Yazdī Sh. al-Dīn 'A, 1888:311-313).

So why did the man who had apparently banked such a fortune on tributary trade become driven to irredeemable risk by a military campaign? Because military power in «Timur's case» depended ultimately on reputation, I would like to argue that the threat of invasion could itself be turned to diplomatic advantage; the mere fact of an invasion threat was one more reminder to the Ming court that, whatever the mutual benefits of the tributary relationship, that relationship always ultimately hinged on the latent reality of powerful Timurid arms.

However, the campaign ended soon after Timur's death in February 1405, and those conflicts within Timurid foreign policy concerning profitable mimicry of the established order and new ambitions towards a conqueror's role for Timur remained unresolved. Yet, this episode does teach us an important aspect of Timur's policy: he belonged to a kind of policy that, period by period,

level by level, and section by section, often drifted between diplomacy and warfare to maximize his position in the Eurasian hierarchy.

1.4 The Commercial Character of Later Missions

Following him, his grandson Khālīl Sulṭān took a different line, as recorded in the Ming Shi: On the death of Timur, his grandson Khālīl succeeded him, sending envoys, under Khudāydād and others, to wait upon Fu An and escort him back with presents of the local produce. The emperor gave liberal rewards to these envoys [Yazdī, Sharaf al-Dīn 'Alī, juan 332].

Thereafter, the Yongle Emperor established friendly relations with Jihang Shāh Rūkh, with Yang Tianxue demonstrating that these envoys traveling back and forth, exchanging state letters, tribute, and bestowal trade, formed an overland network constituting the Silk Road between the Ming and Timurid Empires (杨天雪, 2023:542-554).

In particular, the description of the market at Samarkand given by Ibn 'Arabshāh testifies to a people longing for Chinese products, while silks were both a kind of money and symbols of rank and office (Ibn 'Arabshāh A, 1992:6-7). On that note, Yazdī highlights in his *Ẓafarnāma* how merchants from «China, India, and the lands of the Franks» joined Samarkand's bazaars (Yazdī Sh. al-Dīn 'A, 1888:197). According to Oljaeva, the empire depended on an administrative framework that included customs stations and merchant regulations and thus smoothly managed the imperial allowance to all merchants (Oljaeva Sh. M, 2017:172-175).

Discussion and results.

2. Samarkand and Herat: Laboratories of Network Reconfiguration

2.1 "Human Resource Concentration" as Urban Strategy

Initially, I understood Timur's urban policies through the standard pious statement of conquest: bringing artisans from among his conquered peoples to Samarkand to beautify its capital. A more thorough reading of Ibn 'Ara'bshāh's account, particularly his painful narrative of deportation from Damascus, revealed much more profound logic.

What follows is a lengthy extract of the information provided by 'Ara'bshāh: "He gathered the people of the lands, the masters of crafts, the experts in arts, and the skilled in trades, and brought them to Samarkand, so that it became the most flourishing of cities and the most abundant of lands" (Ibn 'Arabshāh A, 1992:3). That affluence had a sinister side: "He emptied cities and filled Samarkand, depopulated lands and populated one" (Ibn 'Arabshāh A, 1992:3). I then realized that alongside all the elaborations on the policy to import artisans and other skilled people into Samarkand, its capital, this policy also operated at the level of human resource concentration toward one urban center- i.e., the expropriation of one of the most important assets of economic development, a skilled labor force.

In the case of Damascus, for example, after Timur marched into Syria in 1401, he deported the entire skilled artisan class of the city – weavers, metalworkers, glass producers, and illuminators of manuscripts, among others- to Samarkand (Ibn 'Arabshāh A, 1993:3). Similar deportations occurred after the conquests of Baghdad (1401), Sivas (1400), and Delhi (1398) (Yazdī Sh. al-Dīn 'A, 1888:135-152). Ibn 'Ara'bshāh goes on to list the many classes of craftsmen brought to the capital: weavers, tailors, painters, carpenters, armourers, saddlers, tent-makers, artists, bow-makers, and falconers (Ibn 'Arabshāh A, 1992:3).

Three main goals can be identified:

1. Centralization: Samarkand accumulated the stock of human capital necessary for large-scale production. In this sense, Abdunosirova speaks of the continuity ensured for the lineage of craftsmanship because, just as the skilled craftsmen of the city of Tabriz once moved to Samarkand, so did those from Damascus, Baghdad, and Delhi; they received salaries and housing, thus constituting workshops in which the crafts of earlier times were developed and perpetuated for success in later periods (Abdunosirova O, 2024:148-151).

2. Peripheral destabilization: Repeated mentions of profound long-term economic depression among conquered cities speak to this policy. Le Strange discusses this at length in the case of Kath, a city that spelled out the economic potential of Khwarazm in the tenth century: it had a Friday

mosque with columns of black stone. Le Strange writes that Timur almost destroyed it, and then, as if by an afterthought, he ordered its walls rebuilt (Le Strange G,1905:447). This image stuck: a personality with the capacity to destroy and then rebuild instantly, whose main urban building material was cities.

3.Hostage Network: The families left behind protected the artisans and guaranteed good conduct among the conquered populations. Ibn 'Ara'bshāh's own history illustrates the possibilities Timur's conquests opened: a youth captured in Damascus was taken to Samarkand, raised within Timurid institutions, and at the end of his life, he was allowed to return to Syria (Ibn 'Arabshāh A,1992).

This then constituted exchanges at the local level. One element of this dynamic comes from the ceramics in the Samarqand site. Bruccoli showed that only high-quality pieces with imperial marks ended blithely in palaces rather than going to markets, which would have rendered them trade objects. Most probably, these ceramics formed part of diplomatic gifts (Bruccoli V,2022). When Yen Yen traversed the city of old Samarqand, he observed, for example, mulberry trees planted on the edge of the street outside the bi-bi-khan-my-mosque- silent witnesses to the region's involvement in silk transshipment (阎焰,2018).

Then, there is the Chinikhana, or Porcelain Hall, built by Ulugh Beg between 1420 and 1429. As Wusimanjiang Yakufu has shown, these two floors of the hall were decorated with a screen wall of Chinese style and built using materials imported from China. This was not only an import hall for porcelain but foam materializing a claim to belonging to a vast Eurasian cultural order (吾斯曼江·亚库甫,2022).

The markets were specialized for different trades, the guild order was hierarchical, and the state intervened in the processes of production and trading (Ibn 'Arabshāh A,1993:6-7). The kitābkhāna was in charge of producing manuscripts, merging Persian miniatures with Chinese style elements. A concrete instance of forced mobility leading to cultural synthesis. According to the Ming Shi, a commercial hub for traders from «all directions» was already known as concentration(明史,1974:juan 332).

2.2 The Khorasan Axis and the Yazd Connection

This was not a coincidence since Khorasan has always been a transit area at the crossroads between Persia, Central Asia, and India. The development of Khorasan oriented trade routes into territory controlled by the Timurids. Network development could be termed regional, and horse trade is considered one of the most important facets of regional trade (杨晨颖, 冀开运,2023:45).

There was thus a synergy between the revival of the Silk Roads and the development of Khorasan: the Silk Roads contributed to the revivification of Khorasan; a vital region within Herat furthered the policy of the Timurids of favoring an overland trade route, which indirectly stimulated maritime trade as well (杨晨颖, 冀开运,2023:46). Besides, Oljaeva writes of the great responsibility that lay during these years on dārūghas- the provincial governors-in ensuring the security of the commercial routes and the collection of customs at all levels (Oljaeva Sh. M,2017:107-109).

Yang's analysis of Yazd confirms this interpretation. Indeed, since the opening of the overland route during the Timurid period, the silk trade that had suffered since the collapse of the Ilkhanid state revived. The southern Iranian city of Yazd thus based its importance in Iran's dynamic and international development upon its success in managing the silk trade in the 15th century (杨晨颖,2024:214).

Why Yazd? Its commercial success depends on its attractive political stability, the natural conditions favorable to mulberry culture, its high-level sericulture techniques, and the commercial spirit of its inhabitants (杨晨颖,2024:218-222). As the silk trade developed, Yazd formed regional trade networks on three different branches: the Yazd-Tabriz branch, the Hormuz-Herat branch, and the Khorasan-Persian Gulf branch (杨晨颖,2024:224-226). Several new bazaars, caravanserais, and

other public buildings patronized by sultans like Jalāl al-Dīn Chaqmaq Shāmī and by the affluent merchant families, such as the Abīvardī, were constructed (杨晨颖,2024:228-231). The case of Yazd is thus typical of Silk Road trade imbricated in the process of urban growth and development, in which the relevant policy of the Timurids may be fully disclosed.

2.3 Herat: The Cultural Consequences of Commercial Prosperity

Under Shāh Rukh (r. 1405-1447) and his immediate successors, Herāt quickly developed into the second most important commercial and cultural centre of the Timurids. Herāt lay at the intersection of routes that connected Persia, Central Asia, and India. Thus, it served both as a centre of production and a market for trade that stretched across the known world. According to ‘Abd al-Razzāq Samarqandī, writing in the fifteenth century, rugs and similar wares from China, India, Persia, and the Mediterranean were sold in the bazaars of Herāt (Samarqandī A. R,1946:342).

Under Sultān Ḥusayn Bayqarā (r. 1469-1506), however, the cultural life of Herāt reached its zenith, with the renowned poet ‘Alī Shīr Navā’ī, the painter Kamāl al-Dīn Bihzād, and the musician Khwāja Yūsuf Burhān all working under his patronage (Abdurashidov R.,Ahmedov B.,Ziyayev A.,Abdullayev R.,Urinbayev A.,Khakimov M.,Khasanov S.,Isomiddinov M.,Qodirova N.,Bobobekov H,1996).The musical culture of Herat during this period was not isolated; as Djumaev’s survey of Central Asian musical heritage demonstrates, the Timurid court actively patronized musicians and theorists such as ‘Abd al-Qādir Marāghī, whose work in Samarkand and Herat laid the foundations for the systematization of maqām traditions that would flourish under later dynasties(Djumaev A. B,2020:66-68).

But how was this cultural flowering related to commerce? Kadirova makes the point that it was impossible to divide Herat’s cultural vitality from its commercial prosperity; as a trade hub, it attracted diverse populations, creating an environment where Persian, Turkic, and Chinese influences could meet and merge (Kadirova N,2025:241). The manuscripts illuminated in Herāt workshops-where one could find both Persian and Chinese artistic traditions-are evidence of the art that came out of those workshops and, at the same time, are tangible proof of the very processes of long-range exchange that made such artistic synthesis possible.

In this regard, all large festivals and entertainments organized under the Timurid rulers attracted performers from all over Eurasia. A close account of the entertaining shows of the musicians, dancers, and acrobats of China, India, and the Islamic world, for example, is given by the ambassador of Castile, Ruy González de Clavijo, during his visit to Samarkand in 1404, while describing the hospitality offered during his reception at the court of Timur (Clavijo R. G.de,1990:282-283). In this case, the spectacularness of the entertained reflects the cosmopolitanism of the Timurid court culture and its external connections.

3. Diplomatic Networks and the Movement of Personnel

3.1 The Institutional Framework of Timurid Diplomacy

Following the movements of objects and people throughout the Timurid world, I became increasingly aware that much of what we take for granted about the security of long-distance exchange depends on a kind of institutional infrastructure that, up to now, has remained almost invisible in the evidence. Unveiling such an infrastructure under the Timurids, Oljaeva’s work on their administration shows that they established a professional diplomatic service, whose officers were trained in a number of languages and well versed in the courtly etiquette of the sovereigns to whom they were sent (Oljaeva Sh. M,2017:190-193). This may be viewed in part as an adaptation of the three types of the Mongol yam system mentioned above, although specific Timurid innovations were clearly introduced (Allsen T.T,2001:115).

From a structural point of view, Erkinboyev sees Timurid diplomacy as a hybrid of Islamic, Persian, and Mongol traditions (Erkinboyev F.Z,2025:893). The use of the languages of diplomacy, Arabic and Persian, coupled with a specialized corps of negotiate eagents and the painstaking documentation of protocols, suggests a court very aware of the need for reliable lines of communication to whatever extent courts found it possible in those days. The sending of envoys to the Ottomans, at the Mamluks, or even the Ming did not simply mean the dispatching of

representatives; it was an act of projecting authority that would require a multidimensional institutional apparatus.

Note, for example: the importance of multilingual envoys. Officials (munshis) and secretaries (dabirs), well-trained in chanceries, composed Timurid correspondence with other courts, epitomized in elegant Persian or Arabic. Depending on the addressee, the envoy was charged with learning Arabic, Persian, Turkic, even Chinese, and was thus operationally equipped to communicate. The envoy's linguistic operability was a form of cultural capital valued for its richness in rhetoric, allusion to poetry, or verses from the Qur'an-it could overwhelm courtly recipients and assert an image of Timurid cultural superiority (Erkinboyev F.Z,2025:894). In this regard, contact with Christian Europe, including Castile, France, and the Papal court, is evidence of a geopolitical imagination surpassing the confessional boundaries of the eve(Erkinboyev F.Z,2025:895).

For example, Yazdī's *Ẓafarnāma* gives a detailed description of protocological issues from foreign nations: the reception of foreign embassies and the giving of gifts. Much more is concerned with matters of hospitality designed to impress and veiled intelligence gathering (Yazdī Sh. al-Dīn 'A,1888:110-114). It records correspondence from early in Timur's reign with Ottoman Sultan Bāyazīd I and a long series of letters to Mamluk Sultan al-Nāṣir Faraj (Yazdī Sh. al-Dīn 'A,1888:245-248, 285-286). Concerning the relation between the Ming and the Timurids, Zhang has given a detailed study covering a wide range of aspects, from envoys to ritual protocols, tributary trade to shared diplomatic language (张文德,2006).

3.2 The Movement of Skilled Personnel

The Samarkand artisans pilfered away to the capital are but one aspect of a much larger movement of skilled persons throughout the Timurid realm. The narrative of Ibn 'Arabshāh himself, who journeys from Damascus to Samarkand, starts as a captive and becomes a scholar before finally being released and returning to Damascus, encapsulates the mobility engendered by the conquests of the Timurids (Ibn 'Arabshāh A,1992). Others were involved in much more voluntary and self-propelled movements, such as for the services of Timurid patrons where scholars, artists and craftsmen regularly traveled from various parts of the Islamic world to the courts of the Timurids (Oljaeva Sh. M,2017:196-198).

For a much more detailed view of a non-elite traveler, I turn to the account of Ghiyath al-Din Naqqāsh, a painter who traveled with a Timurid embassy to Ming China in 1420. Unlike most travelers, he was not instructed to document his travels after he returned home; instead, he was commissioned to keep a day-to-day diary, noting «all the locations visited and all that was seen on the road, and in particular the features of the roads, the types of building, the regulations in the cities, the magnificent features of the king, the forms of government and administration, and the marvelous things seen in that land» [火者·盖耶速丁, 2002:97-98]. This record gives direct evidence of the experience of an artist, rather than a diplomat, in contact with foreign culture. What is of interest here is the unintended outcome of all these movements. Although Timur brought artisans to Samarkand, and they did so for reasons related to his own purposes, what happened in terms of cultural synthesis-a fusion of Persian, Turkic, Chinese, and Islamic artistic and cultural traditions-was out of his control.

If the *Ẓafarnāma* was translated into Chaghatay Turkish in 1519 under the auspices of the Shaybānīd ruler Kūchkunji Khan, it would bear witness to the enduring cultural imprint of that period beyond the immediate political timeliness of its subject matter. Indeed, the 1519 translation into Chaghatay Turkish achieved exactly that aim, transmitting Yazdī's recasting of the Timurid historical memory into the Turkish-speaking world of Central Asia and thus allowing that memory to survive long after the political power of the Timurids had disappeared (Yazdī Sh. al-Dīn 'A,1997:2-5).

On the other hand, Chinese documents attest to the fact that the Ming court had several people from Central Asia: according to the *Ming Shi*, interpreters on Central Asian languages were maintained, and there were also Muslims from Central Asia with different roles (明史,1974:juan 72,

332). The works on the Yongle Emperor tell how he actually employed Central Asian Muslims as diplomats and interpreters because of their language and culture skills (Rossabi M, 1979:167-199).

3.3 The Limits of Timurid Influence: Perspectives from the Periphery

Beyond the clearly integrated core of Transoxiana and Khorasan, Timurid channels of diplomacy and commerce were vastly different in intensity and character. Khwarazm-the lower Amu Darya region-and most of the former Golden Horde lands were, for example, only marginally integrated into the Timurid system. For instance, consider Khwarazm: this was one of the most important commercial centers under Khwarazmian and Mongol rule. After the campaigns of 1379-1388, Timur razed Urgench and Kath and deported their inhabitants to Samarkand (Ibn 'Arabshāh A, 1992:11-12). Damascus and Baghdad, for example, though devastated, were later restored under Mamluk or Ottoman rule, whereas Khwarazm never reached the same status level as a commercial center during the Timurid period. Indeed, all trade routes here gradually turned their backs on Khwarazm in favor of Samarkand, so Khwarazm was totally eliminated from the commercial matrix as an independent node (Oljaeva Sh. M, 2017:134-136).

How did the Golden Horde steppe fare? Within the steppe regions under the control of the successor states of the Golden Horde, Timurid influence scarcely ever extended. Campaigns against Tokhtamysh in 1391 and 1395 destroyed the commercial centers of the Golden Horde, particularly Sarai, Astrakhan, and Crimean ports, but Timur never established lasting administrative control in the region (Yazdī Sh. al-Dīn 'A, 1888:197-211).

After the campaigns, the Crimean ports associated with Central Asia via the Black Sea with the more western Mediterranean, languished in commercial stagnation for several decades. A similar pattern of disruption can be observed in the Caucasus, a key transit zone between the Black Sea and the Caspian. As Avdaliani has shown, Timur's campaigns in the Caucasus-particularly his repeated invasions of Georgia between 1386 and 1403-did not lead to the integration of the region into a centralized Timurid commercial system. Instead, these campaigns disrupted existing trade networks, destroyed urban centers, and shifted trade routes away from the region. The Caucasus experienced a complex interplay of warfare and shifting alliances, which directly affected the viability of overland commerce across Eurasia (Avdaliani E, 2025:152-162). This provides some crucial insights: while Timurid policy could be devastatingly disruptive to the existing – networks, it appeared more helpless in extending a Timurid network to any area that had not witnessed Timurid administrative penetration.

Such cases on the peripheries are critical in redressing the overt emphasis on the Timurid core in some narratives, whereby the empire's commercial and diplomatic reach was mainly successful in areas where it held direct administrative control (Transoxiana and Khorasan) or could maintain steady diplomatic contacts with other units of comparable administrative capacity (Ming China and the Ottomans). In those areas which resisted or were otherwise not incorporated, the Timurid impact was more that of disruption than integration.

3.4 Timurid Diplomatic Legacy: Rupture and Continuity

However, Timurid diplomacy was limited, in a number of respects. For example, relations with the Mamluks were hostile before and after a devastating Timurid campaign in Syria (1400-01) (Ibn 'Arabshāh A, 1992:21-25). Contrarily, relations with the Ottomans oscillated continually between alliance and conflict, ultimately culminating in 1402 at the Battle of Ankara (Yazdī Sh. al-Dīn 'A, 1888:270-297; Ibn 'Arabshāh A, 1992:26-29). On the other hand, the Chinese Ming tributary system permitted exchanges but also imposed constraints: foreign missions had to present themselves as tributary delegations, while mercantile access to Chinese markets was regulated [Kauz R. 2023]. An interesting dispute once occurred in this respect with regard to the Timurid embassies, as shown by the case of a 1418 mission in which authorities debated the appropriateness of the imperial gifts (明太宗实录, 1962:juan 210). Oljaeva interprets this as evidence for the Timurid understanding of the finer points of international politics, which also explains how they were able to make their way through the system of tribute to fulfill the empire's own interests (Oljaeva Sh. M, 2017:200-203).

Erkinboyev also postulates that «since the whole system depended on the honor of the ruler, and his personal prestige during various succession struggles, it could easily disintegrate during difficult succession struggles.» From the mid-fifteenth century onwards, it returned, partly contracting once more and ultimately giving way to the diplomatic networks of the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals (Erkinboyev F.Z,2025:895). In that respect-both continuity and rupture-Timurid diplomacy affects the Islamic empires that immediately followed it. This is precisely the point that Lapidus has made about the Safavid, Ottoman, and Mughal empires-they are all «built on the combined heritage of past Middle Eastern imperial Islamic societies and the heritage of Inner Asian, Mongolian, and Turkic political institutions» (Lapidus I.M,2012:414).

Yet, there is one essential respect the later three empires differ from the Timurid ones: «Mongol and Timurid traditions called only for the type of partitioning of an empire among the sons of the ruler who would then fight with each other for the right to prevail and rule; the Safavids, Ottomans, and Mughals, on the other hand, established, except for fairly rare and isolated exceptions, a routinized dynastic succession» (Lapidus I.M,2012:414). Thus, the Timurid legacy was highly selective. Later empires, for example, looked toward Timurid dynastic culture and administrative traditions but rejected the succession practices that caused the division of the Timurid dynasty.

As regards direct cultural inheritance, it is perhaps the arts that most clearly demonstrate this link-Mughal miniature painting traces its genealogy to the workshop of Kamāl al-Dīn Bihzād in Herat (Abdurashidov R,Ahmedov B,Ziyayev A,Abdullayev R,Urinbayev A., Khakimov M.,Khasanov S,Isomiddinov M.,Qodirova N., Bobobekov H,1996:30-33). Indeed, the pishtaq, the four-īwān plan, and their favored glazed tile mosaic decorations all date back to Timurid architectural prototypes, and for these reasons, they were also taken up and further developed by Safavid and Mughal architecture (Blair S.S,1989). On this score, the Mughal empire was perhaps the most conscious self-representation of Timurid cultural inheritance since Babur, a direct descendant of Timur, brought to India the central Asian tradition, and all other Mughal emperors commissioned works that evoked the artistic style of the Timurids (Ikram S. M,1963:237).

This cultural heritage is reflected institutionally at a further stage of modification and transformation. In this respect, both the Safavids and Mughals were Timurids only in their claims to origin and were acquiescent in administrative reproduction: new and original thoroughly Shiite ideology emerged in later Safavid Iran without any antecedents in Timurid history, while in South Asia, the Mughals adapted Timurid administrative practice to new conditions (Ikram S. M,1963:895). There was thus not a «Timurid» model transmitted to later empires. Instead, certain sets of practices became part of a shared Persianate political culture: Persian was used as a chancery language; refined prose was produced by the diplomatically relevant genre; and the patron-artist relationship was institutionalized. The Timurids set the pattern for encouraging trade and protecting merchants. Later empires likewise did. The Mughals, for example, «welcomed the foreign trader, provided ample protection and security for his transactions, and levied a very low custom duty (usually no more than 2½ percent ad valorem)» (Ikram S.M,1963:237).

4. Overland and Maritime Networks: A Comparative Analysis

4.1 Transport Costs and Commodity Specialisation

One of the main arguments of the present study is that while maritime trade developed alongside the establishment of the so-called South China Sea route, there was no «decline» in overland trade along the Silk Roads. Rather, both operated parallel to one another, serving different streams of commerce. Economically, the answer is straightforward; overland transport was enormously costly compared to maritime transport. For example, shipping a camel caravan load from Samarkand to Beijing (about 4,500 km overland) cost the equivalent of between 30 and 50% and sometimes even more than the value of a cargo of high-value silk goods. In other words, for bulk goods, the costs mentioned far exceeded their value (이종영,2023:162). By way of contrast, shipping from Hormuz to Canton (about 6,000 km along the sea) cost only 5 to 10% of the cargo's value for comparably priced goods (이종영,2023:163).

It thus follows naturally that these diversely situated networks of commercial contacts and trade, overland on the one hand and maritime on the other, functioned very differently. The overland routes would specialize in the transport of commodities having a higher gross unit value relative to weight – precious stones and quality silks, for example, as well as paper and books. They also were responsible for transporting goods that, for various reasons, were impossible to move by sea – horses, the most valuable branch of overland trade.

Data on the volume of the horse trade are well documented: According to Babur Timur, 7,000 to 10,000 horses were annually imported into India from Central Asia. By the late seventeenth century, horses were so extensively traded that Indian horse traders are known to have bought 100,000 horses annually from Balkh and Bukhara at Kabul (Levi S. C, 1999: pp. 531-533). Gommans rightly described in *The Indian Frontier* that the warhorse was «the most lethal weapon of that time,» and he suggested that controlling such a resource was an important element of state formation throughout Eurasia (Gommans J, 2017).

Maritime routes would specialize in commodities that easily benefited from economies of scale: bulk spices – pepper, cloves, nutmeg, and so forth – porcelain, and textiles for the mass market. Porcelain is, after all, a bulky commodity, though, unlike spices and textiles, when properly packed, it applies no structural force and is nearly indestructible. For example, most of the Indian exports to Southeast Asia and Europe were latestage manufacture items, easily tradable products of the domestic market, of which cotton cloth was the most important. The list of Indian exports also included indigo, saltpeter, spices, opium, sugar, woolen and silk cloth, yarn, and drugs (Ikram S.M, 1963: 237).

Nonetheless, the overland and maritime networks did not exist entirely separately; they were very much linked, with commodities flowing between one another. For example, Chinese porcelain reached the market in Timurid lands through overland routes, while horses, the main export of Central Asia, were sometimes sent to India through the ports of the Persian Gulf (한재원, 2020: 25). The entire monsoon-connected Indian Ocean system was thus attached to Europe, Africa, Central Asia, East Asia, and the steppe regions, creating a commercial web of enormous proportions.

Finally, from a security perspective, the networks differed yet again. Overland networks are inherently more vulnerable because stability has to be ensured along the entire route; all that is needed for the disruption of the network is the existence of one insecure region that negates the rest of the network. This explains why Timur and the Timurid Empire invested so much in the security infrastructure of this entire network in custom houses, fortified caravanserais, and more – as well as supporting the administrative framework of the yam postal-relay system (Oljaeva Sh. M, 2017: 172-175; Allsen T.T, 2001: 115).

Security concerns for maritime trade were just as serious but of an entirely different character: piracy, two annual monsoon seasons, and the necessity of safe and enclosed ports. After entering the Indian Ocean in 1498, the Portuguese did not unilaterally disentangle the overland trade networks; instead, they added an additional layer of competition that eventually caused reshuffling in the regional balances during the sixteenth century toward maritime trade for some commodities (이종영, 2023: 168-170).

4.2 The Myth of “Decline” Reconsidered

Comparatively, such a scenario precludes any rupture or sudden fall of the overland «Silk Roads» in the 15th century. Indeed, on the one hand, the maritime and overland routes coexisted while still fulfilling different functions in trade. On the other, most accounts of the so-called decline associate this with the Portuguese discovery of a Cape route – not so much a specific moment/location in history but rather a Eurocentric perspective. For Central Asia, the 15th century was an age of intense and sustained overland trade made possible by Timurid investments in infrastructure and diplomacy.

What changed so dramatically in the 16th century? No sudden, instantaneous, and absolute obsolescence of the overland routes but, instead, the onset of new political configurations with the disintegration of the Timurid Empire, the rise of the Safavids, and a sharp Ottoman-Safavid conflict,

all of which presented entirely new impediments to overland trade. As Mukminova notes, «after 1405, Timur could not maintain unity in his empire, and within a year following his death, internecine struggles engulfed the empire, leading to the collapse of the trade routes» (Mukminova R. G., 1998:347-363).

From this perspective, the Portuguese interference in the Indian Ocean trade impacted the overland networks only indirectly through a diversion of some commodity flows from the Persian Gulf ports that functioned as transshipment centers for camels carrying goods over the land (이종영, 2023:170). Unlike what most people believe, this was not evidence of sudden change at a single moment in history. Those processes accumulated, and rupture was never instantaneous. The «decline» of the Silk Roads was more gradual and viscid over a protracted period during the sixteenth century rather than a relatively straightforward collapse at a certain date sometime in the fifteenth century.

5. Conclusion: The Timurid Legacy as Network Reconfiguration

Despite all these reflections, I keep returning to the question that prompted me to embark on this research: What is it about the widely held but little attested idea of «decline» of the «Silk Road» that has been so discordant with any evidence I have found? It is now clear that the answer lies in how the history of Eurasia is conceptualized. The conventional view is Eurocentric not only because it focuses on Europe but also because it centers on the assumption that European maritime expansion was the turning point in world history. From this angle, Central Asia would have experienced something else entirely in the 15th century.

I argue here that the Timurids did not merely preserve or restore the «Silk Roads»; they actively reshaped and reconfigured them in three interrelated ways: At the institutional level, the Timurids were able to remake the great communication networks of the Mongol empire and utilize the rich administrative heritage of Persia and Islamic law into a particular form of diplomacy, which could guarantee the reproduction of transfer over very long distances. At the spatial level, Timurid policies created different geographies of trade in Eurasia by policy- and investment-induced differentiation of routes. At the social level of material culture, ideas, and knowledge, the continuous movement of artisans, scholars, and merchants created a new pattern of historical synthesis in which new forms of arts and intellectual culture were engendered that would, for a long time, inspire the next generation of post-Timurid empires.

Such a framework of «selective network reconfiguration» has implications that resonate well beyond the study of the Timurids. It persuades us to a more dynamic conception of the empire-trade relation: The Timurid Empire did not merely benefit from already existing trade circuits but actively constructed and then selectively constructed the circuits of trade. It is always selective in that spheres of activity are often increased while decreased activities create opposite effects for other regions. This selectivity grounds an understanding of empire from a mere territorial container with economic life to an active agent reshaping the economy.

In addition, the Timurid example questions teleological tendencies in long-term narratives that, with hindsight, impute to world history cruising towards a single «destiny.» For the so-called «rise of the West» was not in the simple sense understood in the fifteenth-century cities of Herat and Samarkand, which, until then, profited from Chinese silks, Indian spices, and Persianate aesthetics in circuits unknown to Europeans. The fifteenth-century Eurasia was not the build-up to European world supremacy but complex restructuring, with several centers and trajectories.

Having stated this, I would like to point out the limitations of my work. First, this process of «selective network construction,» which is the subject of my work, never came about without a cost. The wealth of Samarkand and Herat implied the impoverishment of Damascus, Baghdad, and Khwarazm. During this period, most of the population constituting the productive units within the cities of the Timurids were not volunteers but captives. Most of the constructive activities in city buildings were financed through violence just as much as through patronage. Second, this network could only exist under favorable conditions: it was very personal and heavily dependent on Timur's charismatic authority. Indeed, the network collapsed together with the death of its anchor in Samarkand. The very concentration of power in one hand at the time that it had made Samarkand a

great capital city became its weakness. Whatever advantages networking offers, this case, for instance, clearly indicates that it would face prohibitive long-term sustainability issues.

What then was the place of the Timurid state within Silk Road history? In no way could it be taken as a terminal point, as the old historiography assumed, nor merely as a necessary intermediary between the Mongol and early modern empires. Rather, taken all in all, this was a laboratory where remarkable technologies of constructing transregional connectivity underwent a process of refining before transmission to successor regimes. This included forced migration as an urban measure, polyglot diplomacy as a system of statecraft, and cultural patronage as a geopolitical strategy. The «decline» of the Silk Roads was only apparent in the fifteenth century; in reality, it was frequently reconfigured by a state that considered connectivity not as a heritage dimension, but rather as a «resource» at its disposal. Indeed, understanding how this «reconfiguration» took place, and at what «cost,» will allow us to more appropriately appreciate the complexities of the dynamics that have characterized Eurasian history.

5.1 Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has some limitations that require further research; first, it is insufficiently connected to Chaghatay Turkish sources, for which possible new perspectives on cultural interaction would be promising; second, recent archaeological excavations, such as the 2024 finds of Tugunbulak and Tashbulak in Uzbekistan, open new perspectives on a more complex Silk Roads network than hitherto conceived; concomitant archaeological and textual studies are thus called for; third, comparative studies of the Timurid Empire with contemporary states/regions of the post-Mongol world, such as Ming China, the Ottoman Empire, the Mamluk Sultanate, and the European states, will strengthen understanding of post-Mongol Eurasian integration processes; fourth, tribute trade, as I understand it from available literature, needs much more quantitative data to allow a more rigorous test of the Timurid rationale for relations with Ming China; finally, stronger linkage and connection with broader literature in historical sociology, institutional economics, and world-systems analysis would locate the Timurid instance within larger questions of state formation and long-distance trade.

5.2 Methodological Reflection

The multilingual, multi-archival approach, covering sources in Chinese, Persian, Arabic, and other Central Asian languages, underscores the danger in approaching this history through the lens of only one language. Central Asian history of the Timurids cannot be subsumed under the history of any one historiographical tradition. Looking from each source perspective raises strong questions about the validity of any particular historiographical tradition. The history of the Timurid Empire is a significant node in the history of Eurasian connectivity; it is not central only to the history of Central Asia. The empire critically retained and transformed the commercial, diplomatic, and geo-cultural inheritances of the Mongol period, setting the stage for the early modern Islamic empires—the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal—to rise later on. The history of that inheritance, however, is far from simple. It is a story of complex, contentious, and violent synthesis, connection, displacement, and coercion. From this perspective, the post-Mongol Silk Roads present a narrative not about simple decline or revival, but rather the contested construction of an economic, cultural, and political landscape.

Footnotes

¹ For records of Timurid tribute missions during the Hongwu and Yongle reigns, see (明太宗实录, 1962:juan 38, 101, 260) (Ming Taizong Shilu) and (明太祖实录, 1962:juan 187, 234, 252) (Ming Taizu Shilu). The digital editions are cited from the Chinese Text Project (<https://ctext.org/zhs>) and Guwendao (<https://www.guwendao.net>), respectively.

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