



How to cite this article:

Arshidourbash, S., Mohammadi, L., & Taghavi Sangdehi, S. L. (2024). The Application of Information from Ghiyath al-Din Naqqash's Travelogue in Shah Rukh Timurid's Foreign Policy. *Journal of Historical Research, Law and Policy*, 2(1), 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.61838/jhrp.401>



Article history:
Original Research

Dates:

Submission Date: 05 September 2023

Revision Date: 07 December 2023

Acceptance Date: 14 December 2023

Publication Date: 01 January 2024

The Application of Information from Ghiyath al-Din Naqqash's Travelogue in Shah Rukh Timurid's Foreign Policy

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ABSTRACT

The reign of Shah Rukh Timurid (1405–1447) constituted a turning point in relations between Iran and China. Whereas Timur pursued a policy of military confrontation, his successor adopted a course of diplomatic engagement. This strategic transformation raises the question of what factor prompted Shah Rukh to shift from confrontation to engagement with the Ming dynasty. The study hypothesizes that the information contained in the travelogue of Ghiyath al-Din Naqqash, Shah Rukh's envoy to China, played a significant role in this strategic change. Employing a descriptive-analytical method and drawing on the theoretical framework of "intelligence diplomacy," the study extracts and classifies six categories of information contained in the travelogue—geographical, military, economic, sociocultural, political-administrative, and religious—and analyzes their application in Shah Rukh's foreign-policy decision-making. The findings indicate that, on the basis of this information, Shah Rukh conducted a cost-benefit assessment of confrontation versus engagement and concluded that war with China would be either unfeasible or prohibitively costly because of the considerable geographical distance, natural barriers, advanced fortifications, early-warning system, large numbers of disciplined troops, economic stability, and China's highly developed civilization. He therefore replaced military confrontation with diplomatic engagement and commercial and cultural relations. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that Ghiyath al-Din Naqqash's travelogue was not merely an ethnographic account but one of the principal informational foundations underlying Shah Rukh's decision to pursue engagement with China.

Keywords: *Shah Rukh Timurid, Ghiyath al-Din Naqqash's travelogue, Timurid foreign policy, Iran–China relations.*

Introduction

In the history of Iran's foreign relations, the Timurid period—particularly the reign of Shah Rukh (1405–1447)—constituted a turning point in interactions with the major powers of the East. Whereas Timur, the founder of the dynasty, pursued a policy based on threats, the detention of diplomatic caravans, and preparations for a military campaign against China, his successor, Shah Rukh, adopted an entirely different course and established regular and amicable relations with the Ming dynasty. This strategic transformation in foreign policy raises fundamental



questions concerning Shah Rukh's sources of information and the foundations of his decision-making. One of the most important surviving documents from this period is the travelogue of Ghiyath al-Din Naqqash, who was dispatched to China in 1419 as a special envoy of Shah Rukh's court. During his mission, Ghiyath al-Din was instructed to record, from the day of his departure from the royal capital of Herat until his return, everything he observed in every city and province through which he passed, including the conditions of the routes, the characteristics of the lands, and the customs and practices of renowned rulers, on a daily basis and in the form of a journal. This emphatic requirement for the systematic and comprehensive recording of information clearly demonstrates that Shah Rukh regarded precise knowledge and understanding of China as fundamental prerequisites for any strategic decision. In other words, he had clearly recognized that any foreign-policy formulation toward an eastern power such as the Ming dynasty required a documented and firsthand informational foundation, of which Ghiyath al-Din's travelogue was intended to constitute the central core. In the present study, the travelogue of Ghiyath al-Din Naqqash is examined as a case study of the collection, processing, and application of information within a strategic decision-making system. The fundamental question is how dispersed and multidimensional data—geographical, military, economic, cultural, political, and religious—could become the basis for a paradigmatic transformation in foreign policy. The principal problem addressed by this research is the relationship between the “information” contained in Ghiyath al-Din Naqqash's travelogue and Shah Rukh's “decision” in the sphere of foreign policy. This issue is significant because it may reveal a model of “intelligence diplomacy” in the medieval period—a model in which the ambassador was not merely a ceremonial messenger but a “systematic collector of information” and the “eyes of the ruler in the territory of an adversary or potential partner.” Such a model transforms our understanding of the nature of international relations in the premodern period and, more specifically, of the place of information in foreign-policy decision-making. Moreover, examination of this issue may facilitate a clearer understanding of “Shah Rukh's rationality” in comparison with that of Timur. Timur initiated a campaign against China on the basis of his military power, although he died en route, whereas Shah Rukh, relying on detailed information concerning the routes, military capabilities, political structure, and economic condition of China, concluded that diplomatic engagement was the most profitable and least costly option. This difference in the “source of decision-making”—force versus information—is one of the most subtle yet overlooked dimensions of the transition from Timur to Shah Rukh. By focusing on the text of Ghiyath al-Din Naqqash's travelogue and extracting its classified information—geographical, military, economic, sociocultural, political-administrative, and religious—the present study seeks to demonstrate how Shah Rukh could have used these data to assess the costs and benefits of confrontation or engagement with China and ultimately to adopt a policy of peace and cultural diplomacy. The study also seeks to introduce the “intelligence-diplomacy model” as a theoretical framework for analyzing Timurid–Ming relations and to demonstrate that, in the fifteenth century, “information” was as decisive as “armies and swords” in the calculations of foreign policy.

Review of the Literature

Numerous works have been published concerning the embassy of Ghiyath al-Din Naqqash to China. In the article “What Did the Timurid Envoys of Herat Observe in Cathay?,” Kuhzad presented an account of the Timurid delegation's embassy to the Chinese court (1). In the article “The Influence of Relations between the Timurids and the Ming Dynasty of China on the Painting of the Herat School,” Bahrani-pour examined Ghiyath al-Din Naqqash's travelogue from the perspective of the reciprocal artistic influences between Iran and China (2). In the article “A

Reflection on the Relations and Correspondence between Shah Rukh Timurid and the Yongle Emperor of China,” Lajmorak Moradi provided a brief account of Ghiyath al-Din Naqqash’s embassy on the basis of Hafiz-i Abru’s *Zubdat al-Tawarikh* and Abd al-Razzaq Samarqandi’s *Matla al-Sadayn* (3). Qarabaghlou, in the article “Reflections of Iran–China Relations during Shah Rukh’s Reign in *Zubdat al-Tawarikh*,” referred to Ghiyath al-Din Naqqash’s travelogue while examining Iran–China relations under Shah Rukh (1). Hosseini et al., in the article “*Aja’ib al-Lata’if* by Ghiyath al-Din Mohammad Naqqash: The Artistic Legacy of the Timurid Embassy from Herat to the Chinese Court,” investigated the role of Ghiyath al-Din Mohammad Naqqash in the influence of Chinese painting on Iranian manuscript illustration (2). In the book *The Marvels and Wonders of Cathay, or the Chinese Travelogue: According to the Account of Ghiyath al-Din Naqqash, 1419–1422*, Fatehi extracted the contents of Ghiyath al-Din Naqqash’s travelogue from Timurid-period works, including Abd al-Razzaq Samarqandi’s *Matla al-Sadayn wa Majma al-Bahrayn* and Hafiz-i Abru’s *Zubdat al-Tawarikh* (3). Emam, in the article “Mapping the Route of Ghiyath al-Din Naqqash’s Travelogue in the Geography of Present-Day China,” employed field investigation, library research, and online satellite imagery to identify the outward and return routes of the journey, as well as the names of the stations and cities mentioned in the travelogue, and to correlate them with their present-day locations and names in China (4).

Fayaz Anush et al., in the article “Shah Rukh’s Eastern Diplomacy: Achievements and Strategies of the Timurids in Their Relations with China,” analyzed the transformation of the hostile relations of Timur’s period into relations based on cooperation and mutual respect during Shah Rukh’s reign. Their findings indicate that, by continuing the policy of dispatching diplomatic missions, or *ilchigari*, Shah Rukh succeeded in creating a balanced atmosphere of mutual understanding between the Timurid and Ming states (5).

A review of the foregoing works indicates that most studies of this travelogue have either concentrated on its artistic and pictorial dimensions or have treated it merely as an ethnographic text and travel account. Few studies have attempted to demonstrate systematically how the objective data contained in the travelogue—geographical, military, economic, cultural, political, and religious—could have been employed in Shah Rukh’s foreign-policy decision-making process, or whether a meaningful relationship existed between the information recorded in the travelogue and Shah Rukh’s transition from military confrontation to diplomatic engagement.

This research gap becomes even more conspicuous when it is recognized that, during the same period, the Ming court dispatched an envoy named Chen Cheng to Herat, who was likewise instructed to record routes, distances, customs, and the Timurid structure of power with precision. The existence of this “bilateral intelligence diplomacy” indicates that both empires had independently recognized that “precise knowledge of the other” was a prerequisite for intelligent decision-making in foreign affairs. Although Ghiyath al-Din Naqqash’s travelogue has long been regarded as one of the most important primary sources for the study of Timurid–Chinese relations, existing research has neglected a systematic analysis of its two informational levels. The first level involves identifying and classifying the types of information contained in the text, including geographical, military, economic, cultural, political, and religious data. The second concerns explaining how these data were applied in Shah Rukh’s foreign-policy decision-making process. The epistemic gap is therefore that previous scholarship has largely confined itself to rereading the travelogue as an ethnographic text or travel report, whereas the fundamental question concerning the relationship between this report and the strategic transformation of Shah Rukh’s foreign policy—from military confrontation to diplomatic engagement—has remained unanswered. More specifically, although it is known what Ghiyath al-Din observed and recorded, it remains unclear how Shah Rukh, as the principal actor in foreign policy,

received, evaluated, and ultimately incorporated this information into his strategic calculations. This is the principal gap that the present study seeks to address.

The Concept of “Intelligence Diplomacy” in the Medieval Period

Recent studies in the history of diplomacy identify information as one of the principal pillars of the diplomatic system, alongside “negotiation” and “communication”; together, these three elements “bridged the gap between ancient practices and modern meanings in diplomatic activity” (6). Intelligence diplomacy refers to the collection, processing, and application of information by ambassadors and diplomatic envoys in foreign-policy decision-making. According to Lazzarini, information gradually became the currency of diplomacy: the collection, dissemination, and manipulation of information not only transformed the instruments available to statesmen and rulers and profoundly influenced decision-making processes, but also sustained a comprehensive network of patron–client exchanges (6). In the premodern world, the boundary between the “ambassador” and the “spy” was frequently blurred, and embassies, in addition to performing ceremonial functions, were charged with gathering strategic information about foreign territories. Such information included the condition of roads and mountain passes, the size and equipment of foreign armies, the organization and customs of courts, and even the characteristics and moral disposition of rulers. Francesco Sforza, Duke of Milan from 1450 to 1466, was among the earliest rulers to recognize the strategic importance of information. He explicitly instructed his ambassador in Naples not to write to anyone other than himself concerning affairs of state and emphasized that he wished to be the master of news, so that anyone seeking information would obtain it from him first and would know only what he chose to reveal (6). This approach demonstrates an awareness that information was not merely a source of knowledge but also a weapon in political competition and an instrument for exercising power over allies and rivals.

The informational function of embassies was also institutionalized within the Turko-Mongol diplomatic tradition. Research has demonstrated that ancient Turkic peoples conducted their relations with other states through established diplomatic practices. Although interstate relations were formally pursued through embassy delegations, spies embedded within those delegations attempted to obtain confidential information and gather intelligence on behalf of their own states (7). Commercial caravans and diplomatic missions therefore frequently served as covers for the collection of information.

In studies of Timurid–Chinese relations, contemporary scholars have analyzed Shah Rukh’s diplomacy toward the Ming dynasty through the indigenous concept of *ilchigari*, which may be understood as a form of “intelligence-cultural diplomacy.” According to this interpretation, by maintaining the continuous movement of diplomatic missions and making strategic use of cultural instruments, Shah Rukh succeeded in establishing a balance between economic-cultural gains and regular diplomatic relations (5). The dispatch of Ghiyath al-Din Naqqash in 1419 constitutes a prominent example of this model: art and painting provided an ideal cover for the systematic collection of geographical, military, and cultural information about an eastern power against which Timur had previously contemplated war.

Diplomatic Relations between the Timurids and the Ming Dynasty

At the beginning of Timur’s reign, political and commercial relations between his court and China, particularly under the Hongwu Emperor of the Ming dynasty, were predominantly amicable and based on convergence. These interactions were manifested not only in diplomatic correspondence but also through marital ties; Ibn Arabshah

reports that two of Timur's wives belonged to Chinese royal families (8). Chinese sources likewise identify Timur as a son-in-law of the Yuan dynasty (9). Under these favorable conditions, trade flourished, and commercial caravans, often accompanied by political delegations, traveled from Samarkand toward China. To reinforce these relations, Timur sent an assemblage of valuable gifts to the Ming court in 1393, including expensive textiles, weapons, and 200 horses. The gifts reached the Chinese capital in 1395, accompanied by a cordial letter from Timur, and elicited a positive response from Chinese officials (10). Pleased with the gifts and Timur's diplomatic conduct, the Ming emperor dispatched an official delegation headed by An Qidao to Samarkand. The mission reportedly comprised approximately 1,500 individuals and was accompanied by soldiers carrying gifts such as wool, Chinese musk, and silk textiles. Despite the warm reception extended by the governor of Samarkand, the members of the Chinese embassy were not permitted to proceed beyond the designated boundaries (11). Shami also reports that, while Timur was preparing his campaign against India, another Chinese envoy named Taizi Oghlan arrived at his court and presented gifts (11). Between approximately 1397 and 1403, diplomatic relations between the Timurids and the Ming were temporarily interrupted, and no delegation was dispatched from Samarkand to China. This period coincided with the death of the Hongwu Emperor in 1398 and the ensuing political crisis in China, which Timur regarded as an opportunity to plan an eastern campaign (10). Following the accession of the Yongle Emperor, the Chinese court achieved relative stability and dispatched an official delegation to Samarkand to assess Timur's position; this was the same mission mentioned by Ruy González de Clavijo in his account (12). Upon the arrival of the Chinese delegation, Timur demonstrated his capacity to manage relations with the eastern powers while maintaining his political authority. By rejecting China's demand for tribute, he adopted a policy combining intimidation with direct control. A large Chinese caravan carrying luxury goods was detained by Timur, and economic and military information concerning China was collected (12). Thus, the initially friendly relations based on exchanges of gifts entered a phase of hostility and military pressure during the final years of Timur's life. His death, however, left his planned invasion of China unfinished (13, 14).

Following Timur's death, Shah Rukh consolidated his authority and succeeded in reconstructing diplomatic relations with China. The first indication of this policy was the arrival of a delegation from the Yongle Emperor at Shah Rukh's court in early 1409. The envoys conveyed condolences and presented valuable gifts, receiving an official welcome in return (15, 16). While observing diplomatic protocol, Shah Rukh also dispatched his own missions to China, which reached the Ming court approximately one year later (10).

In subsequent years, official relations became increasingly regular and institutionalized. In 1412, Shah Rukh received another delegation from the Yongle Emperor, which carried a letter and valuable gifts (15, 17). Valeh Esfahani describes the arrival of the Chinese envoys and the special ceremonies held for them in the Bagh-i Zaghan palace garden (18). Several Chinese delegations reached Herat, including missions in 1417 and 1419, and Shah Rukh's formal responses guaranteed the security and freedom of trade (3, 15). Shah Rukh's diplomatic missions, including the dispatch of Ardashir Tovachi to China and the successful return of the delegations, demonstrate the maturation and institutionalization of Timurid–Chinese diplomacy and the emergence of a stable period of amicable, economic, and cultural relations (3).

The Travelogue of Ghiyath al-Din Naqqash

Little information is available concerning the life of Ghiyath al-Din Naqqash. According to Yaqub Azhand, the individual referred to in historical sources as Ghiyath al-Din Naqqash was Ghiyath al-Din Mohammad, a painter of

Tabrizi origin. Around 1407, and before Ghiyath al-Din Pir Ahmad Zarkub Tabrizi arrived in Herat, he entered the Herat royal library together with three other artists—Khwaja Ali Musavvir, Sayyidi Ahmad Naqqash, and Qavam al-Din Mujallid Tabrizi—and joined the painters of Prince Baysunghur Mirza's artistic workshop (19).

According to the chronicle of events for 1419, Shah Rukh Timurid dispatched a delegation of envoys to China under the leadership of Shadi Khwaja. Prince Baysunghur also appointed Ghiyath al-Din Naqqash, who was described as "a talented young man," to participate in the mission (20). He was emphatically instructed to record, from the day of his departure from the royal capital of Herat until his return, everything he observed in every city and region concerning the characteristics of the roads, the conditions of the territories, and the customs and practices of renowned rulers, on a daily basis and in the form of a journal. In 1422, the envoys returned to Herat on the eleventh day of Ramadan, presented the Chinese ruler's insignia and gifts at court, and related "astonishing reports and extraordinary accounts" concerning the conditions and customs of those lands (3). This mission was Shah Rukh's most important embassy to China. Its significance lies in the fact that Khwaja Ghiyath al-Din documented the route followed by the envoys and presented it in the form of a written report (1). Ghiyath al-Din Naqqash preserved the achievements of this diplomatic mission in two written and illustrated works. His written account was reproduced in several Timurid historical sources, including Hafiz-i Abru's *Zubdat al-Tawarikh* and Abd al-Razzaq Samarqandi's *Matla al-Sadayn*. The travelogue, originally written in Persian, was translated into Ottoman Turkish in approximately 1727–1728 by Ismail Asim Efendi at the order of Ibrahim Pasha, grand vizier of the Ottoman Sultan Ahmed III, and became known under the title *Aja'ib al-Lata'if* (2, 21). It should be noted that the original manuscript of Ghiyath al-Din Naqqash's travelogue is no longer extant; what is known of it derives from Hafiz-i Abru's *Zubdat al-Tawarikh* and Abd al-Razzaq Samarqandi's *Matla al-Sadayn*.

Analysis of Geographical Information

The text of Ghiyath al-Din Naqqash's travelogue contains valuable geographical data recording the precise route followed by the Timurid diplomatic delegation from the "royal capital of Herat" to the capital of the Ming dynasty. The diplomatic caravan departed from Herat and passed through Balkh, Samarkand, Tashkent, Sayram, and Ashpara before entering the "Mongol territory" (15). It then passed through Turfan, Qara Khwaja, Ata Sufi, and Qamul, eventually reaching Suzhou, described as the "first city of Cathay" (22). According to the travelogue, the distance from Suzhou to Khanbaliq, the "seat of the ruler," comprised 99 *yam* stations, all of which were described as "prosperous" and equipped with facilities (4). The travelogue also records regional topographic details, including "valleys and mountains," "desert and wilderness routes," and the "Andigan Pass" (3). With regard to climatic conditions, reports such as the freezing of water during summer in the Yulduz Desert and periods of continuous rainfall indicate the systematic recording of meteorological phenomena. The text also presents quantitative geographical knowledge by explaining the Chinese system of measuring distance, according to which "every 16 *mareh* equals one legal farsakh," and by noting that the caravan customarily traveled four or five farsakhs per day (3).

From the perspective of Shah Rukh's foreign policy, these geographical data had strategic applications. First, the precise recording of routes and distances enabled Shah Rukh to undertake an "assessment of the logistical costs of a military campaign." Timur had previously planned an expedition against China but died en route. By documenting the details of the route and its topographic conditions, Ghiyath al-Din's travelogue demonstrated to Shah Rukh the difficulties involved in crossing waterless deserts, barren regions, and inaccessible mountain ranges.

The report of water freezing during summer and the description of the “desert route,” a dry and difficult wilderness, effectively depicted the substantial human and financial costs that a potential military campaign would entail (3).

Second, the reference to “99 prosperous *yam* stations” between Suzhou and Khanbaliq indicated the existence of an “advanced communications and logistical infrastructure” in China (3). The existence of postal and commercial stations at regular intervals implied that China was capable of rapidly redeploying its forces across its extensive territory. This information demonstrated to Shah Rukh that any military invasion would encounter a swift and organized response from Ming forces.

Third, the description of all the *yam* stations as prosperous and the presence of flourishing cities and towns along the route suggested to Shah Rukh that China was “a powerful state capable of territorial administration and development,” rather than a disordered and vulnerable polity that would justify the risks of military action. It may therefore be argued that the travelogue’s geographical information shifted the “cost-benefit assessment of war with China” within Shah Rukh’s diplomatic apparatus in favor of peace and engagement. Shah Rukh recognized that the considerable distance, numerous natural obstacles, and strong communications and logistical infrastructure of China would render any military conquest either impossible or prohibitively costly. He consequently replaced military confrontation with a policy of “continued diplomatic engagement and commercial-cultural relations,” a decision that was probably informed by his interpretation of the geographical data contained in Ghiyath al-Din Naqqash’s travelogue.

Analysis of Military Information

Ghiyath al-Din Naqqash’s travelogue contains multilayered military data depicting the defensive structure, combat capabilities, and communications system of the Ming Empire. The first component concerns “frontier fortifications.” The place called Qaraul is described as “a strong fortress,” surrounded by mountains and constructed in such a manner that travelers had to enter through one gate and exit through another, demonstrating a defensive design based on the control of mountain passes (15, 22). The second component concerns “urban fortifications.” Suzhou, for example, is described as possessing a city wall, roofed towers constructed at intervals of approximately 20 paces, and four gates located in its four walls, indicating an orderly and standardized defensive system (3). The third and most important component is the rapid communications system known as the *qarghu*, through which information concerning events occurring at a distance of three months’ travel could be communicated within a single day and night. Based on watchtowers and coded fire signals, this system enabled news of threats to be transmitted in the shortest possible time (15, 22). In describing court ceremonies, the travelogue also refers to the number of troops present: “nearly 300,000 persons had assembled at the royal court,” together with “1,000 musicians,” “2,000 armed guards,” and, in other scenes, “200,000 armed men” (3, 15). In terms of military equipment, the recorded weapons included battle-axes, ceremonial staffs, javelins, spears, steel projectiles, poleaxes, lances, swords, and maces, demonstrating considerable diversity in armaments (3).

From the perspective of Shah Rukh’s foreign policy, these military data had deterrent and decision-shaping functions. First, the report concerning the *qarghu* as an empire-wide “early-warning system” effectively demonstrated to Shah Rukh that strategic surprise against China would be impossible. An empire capable of transmitting news of an enemy campaign to the capital “within a single day and night” would have sufficient time to mobilize its forces and organize its defenses. This information eliminated the element of “surprise,” one of the principal foundations of victory in Timurid military campaigns, from the strategic equation.

Second, the reports of “frontier fortifications” and “strong urban walls,” equipped with “roofed towers” and “multiple gates,” presented a model of “standardized, multilayered defense.” Penetrating each defensive layer would require considerable time, manpower, and heavy equipment. This differed significantly from many earlier Timurid campaigns, in which the Timurids had often confronted enemies without coherent defensive systems.

Third, the enormous number of military personnel assembled at the royal court—300,000 individuals—as well as the “200,000 armed men” who stood in orderly ranks, “so silent that it seemed not a single person was breathing,” constituted a demonstration of military discipline, organization, and an extraordinary capacity for mobilization (3). For a ruler such as Shah Rukh, this degree of order and concentration of manpower clearly indicated that China possessed a “disciplined and comparatively advanced army,” rather than the dispersed and uncoordinated forces commonly encountered in Timurid warfare.

Fourth, the diversity of the recorded armaments, ranging from traditional bladed weapons to steel projectiles, shields, and other military equipment, indicated a “capacity for large-scale arms production” and the existence of a “military supply chain.” It may therefore be argued that the totality of the travelogue’s military information provided Shah Rukh with documented and tangible evidence of China’s “strategic deterrent capability.” He recognized that, unlike many Timurid rivals, China possessed “multilayered defenses,” an “empire-wide early-warning system,” a “large and disciplined army,” and “diverse weaponry.” Under these conditions, a military campaign would not guarantee victory and could instead result in disaster for Timurid forces. This intelligence assessment directly contributed to the formation of Shah Rukh’s “policy of peace and engagement,” under which war with China was removed from the available strategic options and replaced by cultural and commercial diplomacy. More precisely, Ghiyath al-Din Naqqash’s travelogue demonstrated to Shah Rukh that China was not necessarily an “invincible enemy,” but that the costs of failure in confronting it would be so great that no rational calculation could justify the attempt.

Analysis of Economic Information

Ghiyath al-Din Naqqash’s travelogue contains multidimensional data concerning the Ming economic system that may be classified under the headings of “gift diplomacy,” “daily allowances,” “royal rewards,” “commodity values,” and “commercial infrastructure.” The first level concerns diplomatic gifts exchanged between the two courts, including valuable items such as satin and gold brocade, porcelain, silver, and pearls (3). The second level concerns the system of daily allowances provided to the envoys, which was regulated with considerable precision: for every 10 persons, one sheep, one goose, two chickens, two legal *manns* of flour per person, a large bowl of rice, two large cakes with halva, a container of honey, garlic, onions, vinegar, salt, various vegetables, two jars of wine, and a tray of sweets were provided each day (3, 15). The third level concerns royal grants and rewards at official ceremonies, which reflected a precise hierarchy: Sultan Ahmad received 10 ingots of silver and 30 pieces of satin, whereas Khwaja Ghiyath al-Din received seven ingots of silver and 16 pieces of satin, while the royal women received no silver (3, 22). The fourth level concerns the *yam* system as a logistical-commercial infrastructure through which caravans moved from one station to the next each day and reached a city each week. At each station house, services such as food, clothing, pack animals, and carts were provided (15).

From the perspective of Shah Rukh’s foreign policy, these economic data had three strategic applications. First, they enabled an “assessment of the profitability of economic engagement in place of military confrontation.” Information concerning the abundance of commodities, the security of the routes, and the existence of well-

equipped station houses demonstrated to Shah Rukh that trade with China represented a “sustainable economic opportunity,” rather than a merely occasional exchange. The “abundance of provisions” indicated that China possessed the capacity to supply commercial caravans and that shortages would not threaten Timurid merchants. This image strengthened the economic incentives for maintaining peace and engagement.

Second, the data revealed “a hierarchical system of gifts and allowances as an indicator of diplomatic relations.” The precise differences between the rewards granted to different envoys—10 ingots of silver for Sultan Ahmad compared with seven for Ghiyath al-Din—demonstrated to Shah Rukh that the Ming court maintained “a reward policy based on a clearly defined hierarchy.” This information enabled Shah Rukh to assess the “ranking of his envoys in Chinese perceptions” and to enhance the diplomatic status of representatives appointed to subsequent missions.

Third, the information facilitated an “assessment of China’s financial and logistical capacity.” The detailed daily allowances demonstrated that the Ming court was capable of meeting the substantial costs of hosting foreign delegations—including food, clothing, accommodation, and transportation—without apparent disruption. This indicated that China possessed “an extensive state budget and an efficient logistical system.” Conversely, Shah Rukh recognized that any diplomatic rupture would not only eliminate commercial benefits but would also result in confrontation with a state possessing considerable “financial and organizational resources” for responding to threats.

It may therefore be argued that the travelogue’s economic information caused the “sustainable benefits of engagement to outweigh the probable costs of confrontation” in Shah Rukh’s calculations. He recognized that China was not merely a costly enemy but also “a wealthy and reliable partner.” Trade in silk, gold-brocaded textiles, porcelain, and other luxury commodities could provide “a sustainable source of revenue” for the Timurid treasury without incurring military casualties or campaign expenditures. This economic information led Shah Rukh to the strategic conclusion that “diplomatic engagement with China was the most profitable and least costly option available to the Timurids.” He consequently adopted a policy of “peace and commerce” toward China, which continued until the end of his reign and provided a model for his successors.

Analysis of Sociocultural Information

Ghiyath al-Din Naqqash’s travelogue contains its richest body of information on the culture and society of the Ming Empire. These data may be classified under the categories of “architecture,” “court etiquette and protocol,” “ceremonies and festivals,” “clothing and visual symbols,” “food and table arrangements,” “music and performance,” and “craft industries.” In the architectural sphere, the description of a “revolving pavilion” as a 15-story structure with Chinese-style muqarnas designs, chambers, and porticoes is so magnificent that “all the carpenters, blacksmiths, and painters of the world ought to learn their crafts there” (22). The city of Suzhou is represented as an example of “orderly urban planning,” with markets approximately 50 legal cubits in width, crossroads covered by domed wooden roofs, and a two-story pavilion constructed in the Chinese style (3). In the sphere of “court etiquette,” the protocol of prostration is defined as a symbol of obedience: the envoys were instructed first to bend double and then place their heads on the ground, repeating the gesture three times, although their foreheads did not touch the ground; on other occasions, they performed the gesture five times (3). In the sphere of “clothing and color symbolism,” white represented mourning, and it was stated that no one should wear white because the Chinese wore it in times of bereavement, whereas the emperor wore a red robe of gold brocade (15). In descriptions of

“ceremonies and festivals,” the New Year is characterized by the lighting of so many lanterns, candles, and lamps that it appeared as though the sun had risen, together with a major lantern festival (3). In the sphere of “entertainment and performance,” the travelogue records a series of theatrical spectacles: beautiful boys made up like girls, with pearls in their ears, performed dances; a boy approximately 10 or 12 years of age climbed to the top of poles approximately seven cubits high and performed various feats; and an enormous artificial stork, constructed with remarkable realism, stamped its feet rhythmically and moved its head in every direction (15). In the sphere of “music,” the text records a diverse range of instruments, including the *yatughan*, bowed lute, *pipa*, flute, goblet drum, panpipes, double-headed drum, cymbals, clappers, large drum, bell, and *gurgeh*. It also reports the performance of 12 principal musical modes in a manner different from conventional Chinese practice (3).

From the perspective of Shah Rukh’s foreign policy, these sociocultural data served the function of “intelligent knowledge of the other and the adjustment of diplomatic expectations.” First, the descriptions of “magnificent architecture” and “orderly urban planning” presented Shah Rukh with “an image of an advanced and powerful civilization.” Structures such as the 15-story revolving pavilion, with gilded ornamentation appearing to be made entirely of gold, clearly demonstrated that China possessed exceptional “engineering, artistic, and financial capabilities.” This understanding challenged any assumption of “Timurid civilizational superiority over China.”

Second, the documentation of “court protocol,” including the prescribed number of prostrations, the required distance of approximately 15 cubits from the throne, and the observance of white as the color of mourning, enabled Shah Rukh to understand precisely the “rules of diplomatic interaction with China.” This knowledge allowed him to prepare subsequent envoys in the proper protocols and to prevent “inappropriate conduct” that could impose considerable “diplomatic costs.” In other words, this information constituted a guide to etiquette in dealings with the major eastern power.

Third, descriptions of “festivals and entertainments,” including the New Year, the lantern festival, and elaborate theatrical performances, demonstrated to Shah Rukh that China possessed a “vibrant, creative, and socially dynamic society,” rather than an exhausted state on the verge of collapse. Spectacles that astonished the audience and acrobats who somersaulted through the air before being caught by other performers indicated “investment in the performing arts and public entertainment,” itself a sign of “economic stability and social prosperity.”

Fourth, the diversity of instruments and musical modes, including performances based on 12 principal modes distinct from conventional Chinese principles, indicated “the development of musical art” and the existence of “an independent theoretical and practical system.” This challenged Timurid “cultural hegemony” in the East and demonstrated that China was a “civilization of equal, if not superior, stature.”

It may therefore be argued that the travelogue’s sociocultural information demonstrated China’s “civilizational deterrence” to Shah Rukh. He recognized that China was not a “barbarous eastern polity” but an “advanced, orderly, creative, and magnificent civilization.” This understanding undermined any “cultural pride” that might have been employed to legitimize a military campaign. Shah Rukh realized that the “cost of losing prestige in the sphere of cultural diplomacy” could be as significant as the cost of military defeat. Consequently, he necessarily sought to regulate his own diplomatic conduct and that of his envoys in accordance with Chinese protocols and preferred “cultural engagement” to “civilizational confrontation.” More explicitly, Ghiyath al-Din Naqqash’s travelogue taught Shah Rukh that war against China would be not only costly but potentially humiliating, whereas respectful engagement would be both profitable and honorable.

Analysis of Political-Administrative Information

Ghiyath al-Din Naqqash's travelogue contains systematic information concerning the Ming Empire's "structure of power," "bureaucratic system," "judicial and penal system," "registration and census mechanisms," and "customs regulations." At the level of the "structure of power," the text describes a hierarchy comprising the "emperor" at the apex, followed by commanders of units of 10,000, 1,000, and 100, *dajian* as executive officials, eunuchs serving as court intermediaries, and a Muslim judge described as one of the emperor's "12 tribunals" (3, 22). At the level of the "bureaucratic system," the text reports that the emperor maintained 12 tribunals and that the judicial mechanism operated in such a way that, if an individual was accused of an offense and found guilty by 11 tribunals but the charge was not established by the twelfth, the accused retained hope of acquittal (15). This description indicates the existence of a "multilayered judicial system" intended to exercise "caution in punishment" and prevent judicial error. At the level of the "judicial and penal system," the travelogue refers to prisoners subjected to various forms of restraint and punishment, including forked collars around the neck and wooden boards securing the hands and neck, as well as the application of retaliation. At the same time, it emphasizes that even when an individual whose testimony was required lived six months' travel away or more, an accused person would not be executed until the offense had been thoroughly investigated and would instead remain in custody (15, 22). The travelogue also records a "general amnesty" during the New Year festival, when the emperor pardoned prisoners, offenders, and debtors, with the exception of those guilty of homicide (3). At the level of "registration and enumeration," the travelogue reports a precise method of frontier control: the envoys were counted and their names recorded upon entering the fortress, and their number and physical descriptions were registered on departure so that the same record could be reviewed carefully upon their return (3). At the level of "customs and commercial regulations," the rule was that everyone's baggage should be opened and inspected to prevent the export of items such as paper currency and other restricted goods (15). This demonstrates the existence of a "system for supervising imports and exports" and preventing the removal of strategic commodities.

From the perspective of Shah Rukh's foreign policy, these political-administrative data had three strategic applications. First, they provided "precise knowledge of the Chinese governing system as a centralized and law-governed state." The accounts of the 12 tribunals, the investigation preceding punishment, and the general amnesty at the New Year presented an image of "a state characterized by stable procedures and established institutions." This image differed fundamentally from the "tribal governments based on the personal will of the ruler" that the Timurids commonly encountered. Shah Rukh inferred from this information that China possessed "predictable governmental behavior," "an institutionalized dispute-resolution system," and "stable ceremonial procedures." These characteristics rendered diplomatic engagement with China "reliable and durable."

Second, the information enabled an "assessment of the consequences of violating Chinese laws for Timurid subjects." The existence of a frontier "registration and enumeration system," including the counting of individuals and the recording of their characteristics upon entry and return, as well as the inspection of baggage at customs posts, demonstrated to Shah Rukh that any "illegal conduct" or "attempt at smuggling" by Timurid merchants or envoys would be rapidly detected and punished. This awareness encouraged Shah Rukh to issue "behavioral instructions" to his envoys and merchants so that they would avoid actions likely to provoke a "diplomatic crisis."

Third, the information facilitated an "understanding of punishment and pardon as instruments of social control and political legitimation." The report of the New Year's general amnesty—in which the emperor pardoned prisoners,

offenders, and debtors except those guilty of homicide—demonstrated to Shah Rukh that the Chinese ruler employed “symbolic and ceremonial instruments” to reproduce his legitimacy. Conducted during the New Year and the lantern festival, the amnesty was a “deliberate and carefully planned act,” rather than an arbitrary gesture of personal generosity.

It may therefore be argued that the travelogue’s political-administrative information introduced Shah Rukh to “a model of institutional and law-based governance” that differed from the tradition of “personal rule based on the sovereign’s will” prevailing in the Timurid world. Shah Rukh recognized that engagement with such a state required “the regulation of formal diplomatic procedures,” “respect for local laws,” and “predictability of conduct.” He also learned that, although the “Chinese judicial system” was strict, it operated in an “investigative and comparatively equitable manner,” and that “general amnesty” could create an opportunity for the “restoration of diplomatic relations in the event of tension.” This understanding further encouraged Shah Rukh to preserve and deepen “formal and stable diplomatic relations” with China, relations in which the “rules of the game” were clear to both sides and the “costs of violating those rules” could be calculated with relative precision. More specifically, Ghiyath al-Din Naqqash’s travelogue taught Shah Rukh the “unwritten constitution of diplomacy with China.”

Analysis of Religious Information

Ghiyath al-Din Naqqash’s travelogue contains distinctive information concerning the “status of Muslims,” “Buddhist practices,” “local beliefs,” and “funerary rituals” within the Ming Empire. The first and most significant category concerns the “presence of Muslims and the provision of religious facilities” for them. The travelogue reports that “the emperor had constructed a mosque for Muslims in the city of Khanbaliq,” and that the Timurid envoys, together with a group of Muslims, performed the Eid prayer in that mosque (3). It also reports that, in the city of Qamul, Amir Fakhr al-Din served as the governor of the Muslims and had constructed a magnificent mosque and exalted place of worship with elaborate ornamentation (15). The second category concerns “idolatry and Buddhist practice.” In the city of Turfan, most inhabitants were described as idol worshippers, and the city contained a large temple in front of which stood a great image said to represent Shakyamuni (3). The most detailed description concerns a vast temple containing an enormous gilded bronze statue approximately 50 cubits in height, known as the “Thousand-Armed Idol,” around which Buddhist monks, ascetics, and yogis engaged in seclusion and austerities. The third category concerns “funerary and burial rites,” including the sacrifice or abandonment of horses and attendants in association with the dead. The travelogue states that noblewomen were interred in tombs on a designated mountain; their personal horses were released on that mountain and were never taken by anyone, while many girls and eunuchs remained inside the tomb, supplied with provisions for five years or more, until the supplies were exhausted and they too perished (3, 22). The fourth category concerns “superstitious beliefs and symbolically interpreted events.” Following a palace fire, the Chinese emperor reportedly entered a temple, lamented and supplicated extensively, and declared that the God of Heaven had become angry with him and had burned his royal residence, although he had committed no evil, had not offended his parents, and had oppressed no one (15).

From the perspective of Shah Rukh’s foreign policy, these religious data had three strategic applications. First, they enabled recognition of the “status and security of Muslims within Ming territory.” Reports of a “mosque in Khanbaliq, the Chinese capital,” “Amir Fakhr al-Din as governor of the Muslims” in Qamul, and the performance of Eid prayers by the envoys and local Muslims demonstrated to Shah Rukh that Muslims in China not only enjoyed “religious freedom” but could also attain “governmental office” and receive “royal patronage.” The construction of a mosque by order of the Ming emperor likewise indicated a “policy of tolerance and engagement toward Muslims.”

This information alleviated Shah Rukh's concerns regarding the "security of the lives and property of Muslim merchants and envoys" traveling to China. He learned that Timurid Muslims would not be persecuted in China and could openly observe their religious practices. This substantially reduced the "psychological and religious costs of engagement with China."

Second, the information provided "knowledge of China's dominant belief system for the regulation of diplomatic conduct." Awareness that the Chinese emperor was associated with Buddhism, visited temples, and engaged in supplication and lamentation demonstrated to Shah Rukh that he was dealing with a "non-Muslim ruler possessing an independent religious system." By reporting that the emperor interpreted the palace fire as the anger of the "God of Heaven," the travelogue indicated that he believed in a "transcendent divine power," even though his conception of God differed from that of Islam. This knowledge enabled Shah Rukh to use "language and concepts" in his diplomatic letters and messages that would be "comprehensible and respectful" to the Chinese emperor, without provoking "theological disputation" or "denigration of the other party's beliefs." It should be noted that, in earlier embassies, Shah Rukh had invited the Ming emperor to embrace Islam (3).

Third, the information enabled an "assessment and management of profound cultural-religious differences." The account of funerary rites involving horses, girls, and eunuchs accompanying the dead, as well as the serving of pork mixed with mutton at the emperor's banquet—which the Muslim envoys refused to eat—demonstrated to Shah Rukh that "profound cultural and religious differences" existed between the Timurids and the Chinese and could generate "diplomatic misunderstandings." At the same time, the report of the Chinese ruler's "acceptance of these differences," including the absence of pressure on Muslims to consume pork, indicated that the Ming court possessed "religious tolerance" and "a capacity for accommodation." Shah Rukh inferred that preserving relations required a higher degree of tolerance toward difference and the preparation of his envoys to encounter unfamiliar beliefs.

It may therefore be argued that the travelogue's religious information transformed the "problem of religious difference" from a "potential obstacle to engagement" into a "manageable field of interaction." Shah Rukh learned that China was a country with a Buddhist majority and non-Islamic practices, but that these differences did not preclude engagement; rather, through the Ming court's "policy of religious tolerance," they could become an "opportunity for civilizational dialogue." He understood that China did not exhibit hostility toward Islam or pursue cultural aggression against Muslims and that Timurid Muslims could engage in economic and diplomatic relations with China while "preserving their religious identity." This understanding undermined the credibility of any "religious justification for a military campaign against China," such as the defense of oppressed Muslims or warfare against unbelievers. Shah Rukh consequently recognized that "religious diversity" did not threaten Timurid identity but could instead become "a field for demonstrating Islamic tolerance" and "an arena for cultural diplomacy." More explicitly, Ghiyath al-Din Naqqash's travelogue dismantled the image of a "hostile infidel China" and replaced it with that of "a tolerant China containing a mosque in its capital."

Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that Ghiyath al-Din Naqqash's travelogue functioned as more than an ethnographic account or a set of travel notes. It operated as a "strategic intelligence dossier" that provided a basis for Shah Rukh's reassessment of his foreign policy toward China. The sixfold analysis of the information contained in the travelogue—geographical, military, economic, sociocultural, political-administrative, and religious—reveals

that Shah Rukh acquired through these data a relatively comprehensive image of the Ming Empire: an organized power possessing multilayered defenses, a stable economy, advanced infrastructure, a coherent administrative system, and a flourishing civilization.

Whereas Timur acted on the basis of military power and direct confrontation, Shah Rukh relied on Ghiyath al-Din's documented firsthand information to assess the costs and benefits of confrontation versus engagement. The geographical data revealed long distances and natural obstacles; the military information indicated advanced fortifications, an early-warning system, and large numbers of disciplined troops; the economic reports demonstrated stability and an abundance of commodities; and the sociocultural and political-administrative findings depicted an advanced civilization with a law-governed and tolerant system. Taken together, this information shifted Shah Rukh's strategic calculation in favor of peace and diplomatic engagement.

This study demonstrates that "intelligence diplomacy" played a decisive role in foreign-policy decision-making during the fifteenth century. The model in which the ambassador was defined not merely as a ceremonial messenger but as a "systematic collector of information" and the "eyes of the ruler in another land" was fully embodied in the mission of Ghiyath al-Din Naqqash. By recognizing that "information" was as decisive as "armies and swords" in international relations, Shah Rukh was able to secure sustainable commercial and diplomatic benefits for the Timurids without incurring the costs of military confrontation. This transition from a "force-oriented Timur" to an "information-oriented Shah Rukh" constitutes one of the most subtle examples of the influence of objective data on a paradigmatic transformation in the foreign policy of the premodern period.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to all those who helped us carrying out this study.

Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

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