While Yongle forged ahead with his political, social, economic, and cultural reconstruction programs, he carefully monitored the activities of the Mongols inside as well as outside his empire. One of the critical reasons for moving his capital from Nanjing to Beijing was that the northern frontier, of all the Ming’s borders, faced the heaviest constant pressure from external threats. Even after the founding of the Ming dynasty, the Mongol khan continued to contest Ming suzerainty, holding north China under his sway and frequently sending marauders into China proper. A succinct passage from Gu Yingtaí, a mid-seventeenth-century historian, best describes the situation:

Even after repeated Ming punitive attacks, more than a million Mongol warriors continued to use their bows and arrows; the groups that pledged allegiance to the Mongols still covered several thousand li; their provisions, means of transportation, and weapons remained intact; and they still had plenty of camels, horses, cattle, and sheep.¹

Both Ayushiridala (1338–78) and Toghus Temur (r. 1378–88), Toyon Temur’s successors, seemed to take to heart what the great Chinggis Khan had taught: “War is the father of all and the king of all.” They managed to tap the rich vein of Mongol nationalism and promised to restore the Mongols’ pride and place in the world. And after suffering a terrible defeat at the hands of the Mongols in 1373, the Ming court took no offensive initiatives against their northern enemies for fifteen years.² This is why Yongle had to reprioritize his defense system when he took power from his nephew and why he was dubbed “the Son of Heaven who became his own general and who constantly patrolled along the northern borders.”³

As long as the Mongols remained a viable power and a formidable threat,
and as long as the Ming emperor could not alter the status quo with impunity, relations with the Mongols were the top national security issue of the Ming court. After Toyon Temur, the last Yuan emperor, fled Beijing in 1368, the Mongol khan was considered to have lost his mandate to rule although he still possessed the imperial seal created by China’s First Emperor in 221 B.C.E. The First Emperor’s chancellor, Li Si, who was an accomplished calligrapher in the clerical (li) style of writing, inscribed on the seal, “Receive the mandate from heaven / Enjoy longevity and eternal prosperity” (Shou ming yu tian / Ji shou yong chang). In the Chinese dynastic tradition, the imperial seal was generally equated with power, and whoever won the mandate of heaven also became the custodian of this sacred seal.

Since Chinese rulers were so enamored of possessing the seal, it had survived numerous dynastic changes, passing from Wei, Jin, Sui, Tang, and Song to the court of Qubilai Khan. After the death of Toyon Temur, its custodian was Oljei Temur, also known as Bunyashiri, who joined the Oirat forces but was later murdered by the Oirat chief Mahmud (d. 1416). In 1409 Mahmud pledged his allegiance to Emperor Yongle and offered to return the seal to the Ming court. However, the Ming had by this time already created seventeen new imperial seals, each with its own unique and specifically stated functions, and had no need for such a seal. For the next two centuries the Yuan dynasty claimants kept it carefully stashed away until the last Mongol khan, after pledging service to the Manchus, turned over the seal to his people’s new master, Hong Taiji (r. 1626–43), in 1635. When Hong Taiji’s ninth son, a six-year-old boy, was enthroned in the Forbidden City on June 6, 1644, the seal was placed beside him. That, of course, was the end of the Ming dynasty, but it was not the end of the story of the seal. Throughout the 1920s it remained a highly coveted prize among contending Chinese warlords. This thousand-year-old, legendary seal is now housed in the National Palace Museum in Taipei.4

Even though the Mongols still possessed the sacred seal, the steady weakening of their forces ultimately led to the balkanization of the once far-flung Mongol world. It now split into three major groups, and the Ming leadership quickly learned how to maneuver within the confines of the divided Mongol population. A militant group consisted of former khans, princes, and nobles who, after safely retreating to the treeless steppe, resolved to gather whatever troops they could muster to fight their Ming nemesis. Since there was no restricted territory on which they could not trample, skirmishes and petty wars of reprisal against the Ming continued. The Ming court often responded in kind to their obscene killings and appalling savagery. Another, vacillating group of Mongols who preferred milder weather and richer food resources, elected
to stay south of the Gobi, living under the watchful eyes of Ming frontier administrators. This group managed to maintain their traditional pastoral lifestyle, either as stock breeders or steppe nomads, while enjoying not only subsidies from the Chinese but also a degree of autonomy. Finally, a swelling number of Mongol defectors, many of them officers who had brought their own troops along with them, sought service with the Ming emperor. Emperors Hongwu and Yongle both responded generously but also tried to utilize these surrendered Mongols to the utmost, integrating the Mongol defectors into the rank and file of the Ming army and selectively assigning them to defend the area along the Great Wall. Ultimately these Mongols mingled with the Chinese, adding a new layer to the mosaic of the Chinese nation.

It is nearly impossible to draw a demographic map of the Mongol population at this trying time, mainly because the deployment of the Mongol troops and the number of their families long remained a state secret. One source states that “among the total 400,000 Mongol troops, only 60,000 escaped and the remaining 340,000 fell to the hands of the enemies.” Such figures may or may not be unreliable, but one issue is certain: most of these Mongols willingly or unwillingly stayed in Henan, Hebei, Beijing, Shanxi, Shaanxi, Sichuan, Gansu, and Yunnan under Ming rule. An estimated 700,000 to 800,000 were captured as prisoners-of-war or forced to abandon their homes and become refugees.

In order to harness these exhausted and hapless Mongols, the invidious Emperor Hongwu tried to reach an accord with them. As a gesture of good will and a measure to break racial barriers, he had his second son, Zhu Shuang, marry a younger sister of the best-known Mongol general, Koko Temur, in October 1371. Hongwu exiled some of the prisoners-of-war, including a Mongol prince, to the Ryukyu Islands but nevertheless invested seventeen Mongols as Ming princes and marquises, and appointed many others to important posts in his new government. Such generous gestures caused Chinese to protest that the boorish Mongols were filling the court and that one-third of the tribute grain in Nanjing was allocated exclusively for feeding the Mongol officials and their families.6

Both Hongwu and Yongle remembered the foreign policy of the Han dynasty known as “using barbarians against barbarians” (yiyi zhiyi or yiyi fayi). In 1374 Hongwu returned to the Mongol khan, then Ayushiridala, his expatriated son Maidiribala, who had been captured by Li Wenzhong at Yingchang in 1370. And when Ayushiridala died four years later, Hongwu sent a eunuch-envoy to express his condolences. Such generous gestures and conciliatory policies were designed not only to restore tranquility on the borders but also to lure more Mongol talents into Ming service. In almost no time the Ming court
would test the loyalty of the surrendered Mongols, who were armed as cavalrymen and put into the Ming battalion-guard organizations so that they could be used to fight their own people. Several of the Mongol defectors distinguished themselves and were rewarded accordingly. For example, Toyon (Chinese: Xue Bin) was made a vice commissioner-in-chief of a chief military commission for his outstanding service. Qoryocin received an appointment as battalion commander in the Yanshan Central Protective Guard, serving under the command of the Prince of Yan. Known for his courage and determination, Qoryocin often broke through the enemy ranks recklessly during battles. Later, after the prince became emperor, on October 3, 1402, he invested Qoryocin as Marquis of Tongan, with an annual stipend of 1,500 piculs of rice. Other prominent Mongols also found it easy to serve under the Prince of Yan. In 1390 both Nayur Buqa and Alu Temur were captured by the Prince of Yan, and after a brief rehabilitation, the two fierce Mongol commanders and their troops also joined the rank and file of the Yan army. Another Mongol officer, Aruygeshiri (d. 1433), surrendered to Yongle in 1409. The emperor first gave him a Chinese name, Jin Shun, and then appointed him assistant commissioner-in-chief at Daning. Aruygeshiri twice helped Yongle defeat the Mongol forces and was first promoted to be a vice-commissioner of a chief military commission, then invested as Earl Shunyi (Obedience and Righteousness).

It should be noted that even though Yongle did not hesitate to turn to the Mongol defectors for effective generals, he managed to contain their aspirations and refused to give them real positions of authority. Overall, the policy of divide-and-rule yielded good dividends for the Ming court during the first two decades of the fifteenth century.

Yongle and his father were also concerned about the interrelationship of the Chinese and the Mongols, who now lived in a bifurcated society, and they looked for ways to build a genuine fusion or synthesis between the energy and ambition of the Mongols and the culture and splendor of China. Their often unspoken subtext was fear that the historical moral and cultural achievements of Chinese civilization were at risk of being diluted, even submerged, by the alien nomads. In spite of their desire to keep the goodwill and loyalty of the Mongols, they also wanted to flush out from the new society what they perceived to be the rotten residue of Mongol rule—elite illiterates, peddlers of vulgarity, and promoters of pomp and excess. The first step toward the restoration of basic Chinese characteristics was to forbid the Chinese to use popular Mongol names, imitate Mongol habits, dress in resplendent costumes like the Mongol elite, or speak the Mongol tongue. Early during his reign, Hongwu launched a program of “enculturation,” specifically ordering his subjects, by codified laws and regulations, to dress as their ancestors did during the Tang
dynasty in loosely hanging robes. Likewise, he outlawed all of the fashionable Mongol styles, including hairstyles, men’s narrow sleeves and trousers, and women’s short sleeves and skirts. These decrees clearly demonstrated that Hongwu sought to reinforce Chinese nationalism and orthodox cultural and social values. As a result, Ming Chinese men began to prize long and elaborately dressed hair as a sign of masculinity and elegance. And women resumed binding their feet as their men professed that small, crippled feet were sexually more attractive.

While Hongwu was willing to embrace all the “barbarians” within the empire in the arms of Chinese civilization, he was not yet ready to treat them just as he did the majority Han Chinese. That his cultural and ethnic policy, if we can use such a phrase, was one of amalgamation rather than assimilation is evident in his 1370 decree that neither Mongols nor people with “colored eyes”—Turks, Tibetans, Arab Muslims, and Europeans—would be allowed to change their names to Chinese ones. He was concerned that once they had changed the names, their offspring would forget their true identity. Assimilation assumes that one group is somehow changed or converted by another group after a military conquest or long peaceful cohabitation. Amalgamation, on the other hand, assumes that the marginal group will adopt the cultural ways of the main group and, while living subserviently in a symbiotic arrangement, will retain its own heritage without disturbing the internal order. By the time Yongle assumed the Ming leadership, he had decided that he wanted to assimilate the Mongols so that they could eventually be treated just as the Chinese. He saw the assimilation not as an end in itself but as an instrument for converting the Mongols into loyal, productive members of the new society.

In 1403 Yongle complained to his minister of war that most of the Tartars in the military service bore the same first names and had no surnames to distinguish them, and he suggested that the guard officers be given Chinese surnames and be required to wear Chinese clothing. While Yongle tried to make it easier for his military commanders to identify the Mongols in battle, he also took measures to assure that those who had surrendered would feel comfortable and welcome in the new society. Following this line of thinking, he interspersed his new Mongol subjects among the Chinese population in various parts of the empire. For instance, hundreds of thousands of Uriyangqad people from Jehol and Liaoning previously under the hegemony of Naghachu, who had surrendered to the Ming forces in 1387, were dispersed to Yunnan, Guangdong, Guangxi, and Fujian. The less ethnically conscious Yongle took one step further to encourage racial comity and civil society when he organized the Mongols into lijia hamlets “in tandem with the Chinese” so that the two peoples
could intermingle. As had happened so many times during previous dynastic changes, a slow and gradual assimilation of the “barbarian” population took place in China proper, and Yongle’s efforts to rid Ming society of Tartarism began to see notable results.11

But Tartarism (Chinese: Dadan), which has derogatory and even ribald connotations in China, meant different meanings to different people. After the Mongols retreated to the north, two powerful groups emerged: the Oirat (lit., “border area”), a collection of different peoples in the northwest; and the Dadan in the northeast. This latter name was to be distorted into “Tartar” by Europeans, who then applied it wrongly to the Manchus, a people of Tungusic, not Mongol, extraction and also to the Tartars of Russia, who are of Turkish origin.12 It is believed that the word “Mongol” (Menggu) was first coined by the Chinese in the Tang dynasty (618–907) and that “Dadan” was first used in the Song dynasty (960–1279) to refer to a Turco-Mongol people called the Qidan, who established a powerful empire called Liao (916–1125) in eastern Mongolia and Manchuria. In the year 1004, the Qidan cavalry defeated the Chinese and compelled the latter to pay Liao an annuity of two hundred thousand bolts of silk and one hundred thousand ounces of silver. Indeed, the term “Tartar” was already in use long before the great Chinggis Khan was born.

In 1324, when the Yuan emperor Taiding (r. 1324–28), also known as Esun Temur, ascended the throne, he issued an amnesty decree, in which he used such phrases as “our grand national land” (Chinese: dada guotu) and “our great people” (Chinese: dada baixing).13 In fact, fourteenth-century playwrights frequently used the term dada in composing colloquial-style drama. Scarcely had the Ming forces driven Toyon Temur out of Beijing than the Ming founder was calling eastern Mongolia—where the Yuan claimant Toyon Temur and his remaining forces stayed—the land of the Tartars. In 1370 the Ming emperor called the Mongols the “Tartar people adjacent to the northern frontiers” (yibeì Dada baixing). An entry in the 1388 Hongwu Veritable Record refers to the Mongol chiefs as the “Tartar princes” (Dadan wangzi). By the time Yongle was compelled to deal with the Mongol problem, the Chinese had already begun using the term yibeì Dazi to refer to their archenemies beyond the Great Wall. Even though they did make distinctions among the Oirat, the Uriyangqad, and the Yugu Mongols, they began referring to the Mongols in general as Dazi or Dadan.14

While Yongle was trying to homogenize the surrendered Tartars in China proper and convert them into his productive and loyal subjects, his policy toward the Mongols beyond the Ming’s northern borders was, first, to keep them dependent on China economically and win their political allegiance if
possible; second, to make known a convincing connection between his political objective and his military assets—including the national will; and finally, to engage the Mongols militarily and launch periodic punitive campaigns into their territory so as to strip the Mongol regime of its offensive capacity. The Ming leadership seems to have decided against attempting to annex Mongolia, probably because most of this area was like a great ocean of sand, in which fighting the Mongols had proven to be too costly in the past. Based upon his many years of dealing with the Mongols, including his few preemptive and debilitating campaigns, Yongle in particular was cognizant that there was no such thing as total victory in a war against the ever mobile and shifting nomads. His strategy, therefore, was containment—that is, keeping the enemy at arm’s length and protecting China proper by means of a strong defense. Early in the summer of 1409, Yongle revealed such a strategy when he discussed his Mongol policy with the heir apparent.15 Following this strategic thinking, Yongle carefully developed a pattern of incentives and deterrents and varied the emphasis on these as he perceived problems or successes. Incentives, such as granting trade privileges and periodic gifts, encouraged Mongol flaccidity, while deterrents discouraged their aggressiveness. In his seminal booklet **Learning from the Sages and the Method of the Mind**, Yongle reiterated this thought when he wrote, “A well-prepared defense, not an initiated offense, is the fundamental way to defend against the nomadic barbarians.”16

With the containment strategy in mind, the Ming’s main forces were stationed in a cordon of garrisons around Beijing as well as around nine fortress command posts built along the most strategically crucial frontier areas. The nine fortresses were Liaodong, in what is now Manchuria; Jizhou, in northeastern Beijing; Xuanfu, in northwestern Beijing; Datong, in northern Shanxi; Taiyuan, covering the central and western portions of Shanxi; Yulin, in northern Shaanxi; Guyuan, covering the western and central portions of Shaanxi; Ningxia, outside the Great Wall north of Shaanxi; and Gansu, in the far west.17 These nine garrison commands, “Nine Frontier Fortresses” (Jiubian), were so well constructed that they earned the reputation of possessing “gold cities and soup ponds.” Take Datong, for example: its defense barriers included a brick inner wall with a stone foundation, forty-four watchtowers, and 580 stands for archers, and a suspension bridge across a moat three meters wide and one and a half meters deep. Located along the great northern loop of the Yellow River, Datong was further protected by three small outer walls, about three kilometers in length, facing north, east, and south.18 All eight of the other frontier fortresses were patterned after Datong, with impregnable bulwarks.

Clearly, Yongle was incapable of as well as uninterested in expanding his
territory farther into the Gobi, where farming is impossible and where the temperature ranges from +38° to -42°C during the winter. On the other hand, he made sure that the 129 passes peppered along the six-thousand-kilometer Great Wall would be adequately defended against the unpredictable Mongol raiders who often used hit-and-run tactics to pillage the Chinese. Ming national security thus focused on two poles: countering Mongol threats and preparing for inevitable conflicts while simultaneously improving upon benign and cordial relations with the vacillating ethnic groups who lived at the doorsteps of China. This strategic thinking led the Ming policy-makers to search for a further flank that could provide support to withstand attacks from hostile nomads. Recent artifacts discovered along China’s northern frontiers suggest that some of these nomads were far more enterprising than was previously thought. In order to find nutritious foods to supplement their pastoral diet, they built a long-distance trade network from Central Asia all the way to Siberia. Given that policy was not made in isolation from actual events, the Ming policy-makers found trade and gifts to be dynamic means to deepen their political and military relations with the various nomadic peoples in the Taklamakan Desert and along the Great Khingan Mountains (Da Xingan Ling). All told, they established three agro-military colonies between the Great Wall and the Liao River east of Beijing, and seven beyond the western terminal of the Great Wall, and they installed numerous friendly local chiefs as nominal Ming officials in various frontier regions. They expected these agro-military colonies to stabilize food supplies in the region and to establish a firm Ming military presence. Ideally, Ming soldiers and their local allies were to act as self-sufficient farmers and also function as agents of social control. The stability of such peripheral colonies was expected to bolster the security of China proper.

The cliché that geography is the stage on which historical drama is played out should be taken seriously when one discusses Ming policy toward the Mongols. In this vast region, rivers, mountains, and deserts presented unique problems and solutions for the Ming strategists. In the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, three natural features—the Yellow River, the Great Khingan Mountains, and the immense Taklamakan deserts—were the keys to understanding the Ming security system. Along the middle section of the Yellow River is one important “stage,” where the river has cut a north-south course deeply into the loess plateau that forms a nearly eight-hundred-kilometer-long loop. This loop begins just north of Lanzhou—a vital link along the Silk Road—where the Yellow River curves in nine bends through Gansu into Ningxia, then makes a tremendous loop through the Mongol grasslands before winding back southward to form the borders of Shaanxi and Shanxi. Within the “great bend” lies
the Ordos region, where the Huns, Toba, and Mongols—all manner of invaders—galloped, and where the Chinese established their first government two thousand years ago. Kevin Sinclair asserts that the word “horde” is a corruption of “Ordos.” It is here that the Ming policy-makers drew their line in the sand. While the Ordos natural landscape was mostly the same as other regions in north China, there were few places in Ming China that offered a sharper contrast between the Chinese and Mongol worlds. Across the dry northern regions of Shaanxi and Shanxi, the Ming Chinese reconstructed part of the Great Wall. South of the Wall was the Chinese domain, and the Ming made sure that it was stable, tranquil, and agricultural. North of it was territory that the Chinese believed hostile, dangerous, and pastoral. The loop ends at the fulcrum town of Tongguan, where the Yellow River meets its tributary the Wei River, cuts through the gorges of the Taihang Mountains, and flows into Henan.

The other “stage” where the Ming policy-makers utilized geographical features to arrange their security system was the Great Khingan Mountains, which penetrate through northeastern China and extend all the way to the Amur River in Siberia. West of the Great Khingan Mountains lies the Gobi, the heartland of Mongolia and the home of those who posed the greatest threat to Ming security. Here the Ming policy-makers relied more on deterrents than incentives, and Yongle directed his five punitive campaigns. East of the mountains is the Manchurian Plain, with the Liao River in the south and the Sungari River in the north, where the more submissive Uriyangqad and other Jurchen people lived. There, both Yongle and his father used more incentives than deterrents to harness such groups. In 1389 Yongle’s father created three guard units—Duoyan, Taining, and Fuyu—among the Uriyangqad Mongols and allowed their chieftains to lead their own people and to support each other. The Duoyan Guard, on the west, administered the area from Daning to Xifengkuo Pass all the way to the boundary of Xuanfu; the Taining Guard, at the center, covered Jin and Yi Counties and Guangning all the way to the Liao River; and the Fuyu, on the east, controlled the huge territory from Huangniwa to Shenyang and Kaiyuan.

Even though the three military guard units were led by their own indigenous chiefs, the Ming kept them under the close supervision of a Beiping Branch Regional Military Commission and the Prince of Ning (Zhu Quan), Hongwu’s seventeenth son, who resided at Daning. During the civil war Yongle had sent troops to this region to secure his rear and make them into his “outer feudatories.” Since then, the three Uriyangqad guard units had been valuable allies. After the civil war Yongle transferred the Princedom of Ning to Nanchang and, as a payment for the three guard units’ services, simultaneously granted them
autonomy by withdrawing the Beiping Branch Regional Military Commission to Baoding (in what is now Hebei), within the Great Wall. During the summer of 1403 a delegation of some 290 Uriyangqad Mongols came to Nanjing and basked in the presence of His Majesty. They presented him with a large number of steeds; in return, Yongle awarded them various honors, official seals, dresses and belts, silver money, and so on. Henceforth, the Uriyangqad pledged their fealty to Yongle, who annually showered their chiefs with substantial and handsome gifts. Because material goods were fungible in the realm of policy, he allowed the Uriyangqad to exchange Mongol horses, furs, and gyrfalcons for Chinese rice, textiles, and manufactured products. These amounted to subsidies, as the Ming officials usually bartered their rice at half price. Even though Yongle’s policy of subsidizing the Uriyangqad bought him peace and security on the east side of Beijing, there would come times—such as in 1406 and 1422—when these people, who had control of a large portion of the Inner Mongolian steppe and southern Manchuria, would grow rambunctious and join the cause of the claimant Mongols.24

In order to expand his lines of defense and communication beyond the three Uriyangqad territories and possibly also to counter the moves of the Yi (or Chosŏn) dynasty (1392–1910) of Korea, Yongle decided to develop the Liao River valley and to incorporate Jurchen into his orbit. In 1404 he created three commanderies—Haixi, Jianzhou, and Yeren—in eastern and northern Manchuria, where the distinction between nomads (hunting and fishing peoples) and farmers had by this time become blurred. It is believed that Yongle, when he was still the Prince of Yan, had married (as a concubine) the daughter of a Jianzhou Jurchen chieftain named Aqachu. The marriage was indeed a deft diplomatic maneuver, and, throughout his reign, Yongle paid very close attention to this area, using various schemes to deepen his relationship with his Jurchen in-laws. According to Henry Serruys, who has made the most thorough study of the subject, Yongle established altogether 178 commanderies in the region, extending from eastern Mongolia to the Amur River valley and maritime Siberia.25

In 1408 Yongle created two communities, Anle (Peace and Joy) and Zizai (Independent and Content), for those Jurchen who wished to settle within or adjacent to the Ming border. During the next eight years twenty-three Jurchen groups moved into these lands. Yongle used a combination of institutional devices and incentives to bring the Jurchen chieftains under loose Ming suzerainty. After receiving ranks, titles, and gifts of silk, clothing, money, and foodstuffs, they would help Yongle carry out his peaceful penetration of the vast region.26

As early as 1403 Yongle had already sent a messenger by the name of Xing
Shu to the lower Amur River valley to invite local leaders to come to the Ming court. Six years later the emperor launched three campaigns to shore up Ming influence in the region. The upshot was the establishment of the Nuerkan Regional Military Commission, with several battalions deployed along the Sungari, Ussuri, Urmi, Muling, and Nen Rivers. Its headquarters was located on the east bank of the Amur River, approximately three hundred li from the river’s entrance to the Sea of Okhotsk and 250 li from what is now the Russian town of Nikolayev. Being a special frontier administrative institution, the commission’s authorities paralleled those of the Liaodong Commission; therefore, Yongle permitted its commanding officers—primarily chiefs of local ethnic groups—to transmit their offices to their sons and grandsons without any diminution in rank. Soon after the commission was established, Yongle chose a eunuch named Yishiha to carry the guidon in spreading his will and to vie for the heart and soul of the Jurchen people in the region.

Yishiha belonged to the Haixi subgroup of the Jurchen, and, when his group was run over by the Chinese in 1395, he was captured and castrated. He began his eunuch career by serving imperial concubines of Jurchen origin. In the spring of 1411 Yishiha led a party of more than one thousand officers and soldiers who sailed on twenty-five ships along the Amur River for several days before reaching the Nuerkan Command Post. Yishiha’s immediate assignment was to confer titles on chiefs of local ethnic groups, giving them official Ming cachets and uniforms, and seeking new recruits to fill out the official ranks for the commission. In order to mollify the groups who had made contact with the claimant Mongols, Yishiha returned to the region in 1413 and showered the local chiefs with food, clothing, utensils, and agricultural tools. During this journey, Yishiha also attempted to convert the Oroqen and other groups in the region to Buddhism, and later, in 1417, he established a prefectural Buddhist registry to expand his missionary efforts. In 1414 he ordered the erection of a stone monument on a cliff overlooking Yongning Temple (near what is now the Russian village of Tyr), on which he inscribed his important activities in Chinese, Mongolian, Jurchen, and Tibetan. According to a seal issued by the Ming Ministry of Rites that was recently discovered in Yilan County, Helongjian, Yishiha also visited Sakhalin Island in 1413 when he established the Nanghaer Guard and conferred a Ming title on a local chieftain. “Commander Seal of the Nanghaer Guard” (Nang Ha Er Wei Zhi Hui Shi Yin) was engraved in eight large Chinese characters on one side, and the date (tenth month, tenth year, Yongle reign) was marked on the other side. All told, Yishiha made a total of nine missions to this desolate but strategically important region, serving as Yongle’s expansionist agent. According to The Great Ming Administrative
Code (Da Ming huidian), the Ming established 384 guard units and twenty-four battalions in what is now Manchuria, but these were probably only nominal offices. After the death of Yongle, the Ming court ceased to have substantial activities there, and almost all of the offices established by Yishiha fell into the hands of Jianzhou Jurchen, whose chiefs Nurhaci (1559–1626) and Hong Taiji fought against Yongle’s descendants and ultimately brought down the Ming dynasty.

Yongle’s gruesome years of battling with Mongols, who were superb horsemen, gave him a good idea of the critical importance of service horses. Consequently, one of his top military priorities was the maintenance of a strong cavalry with sufficient horses for combat readiness, peacetime defense, and logistic transportation. Edward Farmer uses some impressive figures to demonstrate Yongle’s penchant for horses. When Yongle assumed the throne, there were fewer than forty thousand horses in China, but the figure doubled in five years, increased to 623,000 in fifteen years, and, by the time of his death, had surpassed the 1.5 million mark. Yongle obtained his horses from his own stock-breeding farms, from vassals who provided horses as tribute gifts, and from border groups along the western and northern frontiers who traded horses for tea. In 1406 Yongle opened up four pasturage offices known as the Pasturage Office (Yuanmasi) in northern Beijing, Liaodong, Shaanxi, and Gansu, for which he hired expert breeders. As a result, he could count on roughly two thousand horses per year from Liaodong and between thirteen thousand and fourteen thousand more from Shaanxi.

But the supply from his stock farms was not sufficient to meet his military needs, and from time to time Yongle had to ask his vassal states to send him additional horses. Under Yongle, China had found renewed confidence, strength, and authority as the leader of the Asian world; consequently, China’s neighbors yielded one by one to the blandishments of a new Chinese order. Besides, tribute gifts and the horses-for-tea trade were a two-way street that benefited both China and other states. For example, Korea—the Ming’s number one vassal—regularly sent high-quality horses to the Ming court, and during the summer of 1423 alone gave Yongle ten thousand service horses. But Yongle always reciprocated, in this case awarding the king of Korea a substantial amount of silver bullion and fabrics. Since the benefits of exchange with Yongle’s government were so great, even the chief of tiny Tsushima Island, located between Korea and Japan, presented Yongle with tribute horses when visiting the Ming capital in 1405. When Yongle had seized power in 1403, he dispatched a messenger to Hami (Qomul) to order its ruler, Engke Temur, to trade horses for Chinese goods. Engke Temur, who desired to maintain regular trade rela-
tions with China, first presented 194 high quality steeds as tribute and then traded 4,740 more for Chinese tea, fabrics, and other goods. One year later, Yongle invested Engke Temur as Prince Zhongshun (Loyalty and Obedience).\(^{34}\)

Other small states previously dominated by the Mongols also began to gravitate toward the new order, and Turfan, a small but richly exotic oasis on the edge of the vast deserts of Taklamakan, was another example. Beginning in 1409 the chief of Turfan periodically sent his steeds, which were renowned for their spiritedness, to Yongle. Because Turfan was an important stopover on the northern Silk Road and also the crossroads of a number of different cultures, Yongle wanted to make it a military outpost for his empire’s western flank. In 1422 its chief, Yinjiercha, together with Engke Temur of Hami, presented a total of 1,300 horses to Yongle. The emperor subsequently made him an assistant commissioner-in-chief, and his descendants, who later inherited his Ming title, dutifully sent tribute horses to the Ming court every three years.\(^{35}\)

In his determination to build a cavalry juggernaut, Yongle even required the red-blooded Mongol chieftains, who had been defeated and were now Yongle’s vassals, to send him tribute steeds. In 1420, for example, the Tartar chief Aruytai (d. 1434) and the Oirat chief Esen (d. 1455) each sent nine hundred horses to Yongle, their new overlord.

In order to increase his supply of horses, Yongle also developed trade with the western and northern frontiers. At the onset of the dynasty, his father had established a number of so-called Tea-Horse Trade Bureaus (Chamasi) to barter tea, salt, textiles, and silver coins for horses bred by indigenous peoples along China’s borders. The most notable trade bureaus were set up at Yongning, Naxi, and Baidu (all in Sichuan), where tea and salt abounded, and also at Hezhou and Taozhou in Gansu, and Xining in Shaanxi, where the tea-for-horses trade covered such broad areas as Tibet, Ningxia, Mongolia, and Central Asia.\(^{36}\) After Yongle moved the Ming capital to Beijing, the significance of the Sichuan bureaus diminished, even though its tea, called \emph{pacha}, continued to be collected and delivered by porters to the Shaanxi Tea-Horse Trade Bureaus in exchange for Tibetan horses. The trade, a government monopoly, was generally based on the supply and demand of the commodities available and was conducted with goodwill from both parties. Yongle’s officials, most of whom were eunuchs, served both as purchasing agents and police of the market. Yongle wanted to ensure that such trade took place only once every three years and that tea was not smuggled or traded illegally.\(^{37}\) But he also wanted to make sure that no one cheated the border people with bad tea. This was important because in this kind of trade, price and quality had become valuable signs of goodwill. Of course the exchange rate fluctuated from time to time, but sur-
viving records indicate that fine horses were always exchanged for high-quality tea and jaded horses for inferior tea. During Yongle's reign, 120 catties of tea were required in exchange for a stallion of a rare breed, seventy for a common service horse, and fifty for an ordinary horse. According to Mitsutaka Tani, an authority on the Ming horse administration, half a million catties of Sichuan tea could be exchanged for some 13,500 horses from the border people in one year.\footnote{38}

The tea-horse trade suffered from occasional interruptions whenever the Mongols became active and aggressive along the western and northern frontiers and when they plundered the border groups who produced the horses. In order to maintain a steadier supply of horses and also to search for another flank to help the Ming withstand such recurrent attacks, the state turned farther to the west, to what is now Xinjiang, to establish a “Chinese order.” However, winning over the peoples who lived in this vast, barren area proved both difficult and expensive. The oasis communities’ location in immense, arid deserts and their physical isolation made it extremely difficult for the Ming court to maintain long-term, reliable relationships with them. And these peoples moved around seasonally, spoke different languages, and, over the centuries, had drawn their heritage from such diverse ethnic groups as the Uygur, Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Turkmen, and Mongols—whose overlord Tamerlane (1336–1405) claimed to descend from Chinggis Khan. In fact, the aging Tamerlane was leading an army of two hundred thousand men to recover China for his Mongol cousins when, fortunately for Yongle, he died at Otrar, in what is today’s South Kazakhstan, hundreds of kilometers from the nearest Ming outpost, on February 17, 1405. It was a stern warning that a danger continued to exist on the western frontier. Yongle’s envoys, who had been to Samarkand and Herat, in particular, repeatedly advised Yongle about the importance of establishing a good relationship with Tamerlane’s successors.\footnote{39}

On the other hand, since bad weather often caused the pastoral nomads to suffer from periodic food shortages, the Ming court realized that if it could supplement them with reliable food resources, garments, silks, and the like and help them maintain group stability, it should be able to lure them into the Ming orbit and make them function as a buffer between China and the militant Mongols. Such strategic thinking—that peripheral stability always bolsters a center’s security—inevitably entailed the establishment of seven Ming commanderies in the far western region. The Ming official records identify these seven guard units as Anding, Aduan, Quxian, Handong, Shazhou, East Handong, and Chijin. Ming officials referred to the Anding, Aduan, and Quxian people as the “Sari Uygur,” who lived west of the Great Wall’s westernmost
terminal of Jiayu Pass, where the timeless Taklamakan and its occupants had changed little over a millennium. The other four commanderies belonged to the Yugu Mongols, and they generally herded their livestock around the corners of Gansu, Qinghai, and Xinjiang. Since both bravado and fear were part of their lives, their survival instinct told them that the prevailing order of the fifteenth century was that of China and that they had to work with the Chinese for a more secure future. In the past the Yugu Mongols had utilized extended pasture and had traveled constantly to hunt for prey and search of water and food. After receiving Ming investiture and pledging their allegiance to the Chinese cause, they gradually moved eastward and settled in the foothills of the jagged Qilian Mountain range. By Yongle’s time the border people of the Handong commandery reportedly were grazing their livestock near Xining and erecting their yurts around Qinghai Lake (also known as Koko Nor).  

The Anding commandery was established in 1370, and four years later its chief, Buyan Temur, formerly a Mongol prince, attended the Ming court in Nanjing. In 1375, after surrendering all of his Mongol gold and silver tablets to Emperor Hongwu, he was installed as a Ming prince in command of both the Anding Guard and the Aduan Guard. Two years later internal strife rendered the commandery ineffective. However, in 1396 the Ming court sent Chen Cheng (d. 1457), a native of Jiangxi and a doctoral degree holder of the class of 1394, to restore its functioning. Official Ming documents indicate that Anding was located “1,500 li southwest of Ganzhou, neighboring Handong on the east, Shazhou on the north, and connecting with Xifan in the south.” During the last quarter of the fourteenth century, the Anding people resided along the southern rim of the Heavenly Mountains (Tianshan), whose craggy peaks loomed over the Silk Road. When Yongle ascended the throne, he sent messengers to reconnect with this group and its chief, Hasan. Hasan came to the Ming capital and presented rare animals and elegant horse saddles to His Majesty, and received silver ingots and lined garments in colored silk in return. In the ensuing years, Yongle granted the Anding people the right to trade their horses for Chinese tea at the exchange rate of two bolts of fabric for a high-quality stallion and one bolt for a gelding. In 1406 the Anding people asked for and received Yongle’s permission to move to Kuerding, at the western edge of the Tarim Basin. Throughout his reign, Yongle kept in close contact with this far-flung vassal group. Both the Ming envoy Chen Cheng, who led missions to Samarkand in 1414, 1416, and 1420, and the eunuch Qiao Laixi, who journeyed to Tibet in 1424, passed through Anding. The official History of the Ming Dynasty (Ming shi) states that the Ming functionaries at Anding survived until 1512, a total of 137 years.
The Aduan commandery, on the other hand, is believed to have been located at what is now Khotan, along the southern edge of the Tarim Basin. The Aduan people used horse-drawn carts to buy and sell goods at the bazaar, content to trade their famous Khotan jade and precious stones for Chinese spices and cloth. Near the end of the fourteenth century, the commandery was devastated by the invasion of Islamic forces and lost all contact with the Ming court. When Yongle became the emperor in 1403, he managed to reconnect with this group, and during the winter of 1407 its chief, Xiaoxuehuluzha, attended the Ming court, presented tribute to His Majesty, and was reinstated as a Ming assistant commissioner. However, the weaker Aduan group was later absorbed into the more powerful Quxian group, who also traveled regularly and lived in extreme environments. For a long while, the Quxian herdsmen dotted their yurts around the shores of Lop Nor (Ming documents refer to it as Xihai, or West Sea), taking advantage of its water and immense grasslands. In 1406 Yongle ordered this group of more than “forty-two thousand yurts” to settle at Yaowanghuai, a sliver of an oasis along the southern rim of the Heavenly Mountains. They frequently fought the warriors from Turfan, and, possibly because the price of war had become so prohibitive, they decided to move their herds closer to the Ming border in southern Gansu and eventually to Qinghai, where they continued to function as a Ming commandery until 1512, when the Mongol forces led by Aertusi and Yibula broke them up.43

The desire to exchange for benefit brought various vacillating Mongol groups into the Ming orbit, but in addition, their belief that Ming China would protect them, sustain their ethnic identity, and help them cope with demographic change motivated many ethnic groups in the Taklamakan deserts to accept the Chinese order. In 1397 the Handong commandery was established right at the nexus of Gansu, Qinghai, and Xinjiang. As soon as Yongle ascended the throne, the Handong chief, Sonanjilasi, accompanied by his brother, attended the Ming court. Both of them received official Ming ranks, uniforms, and money. During Yongle’s reign, this commandery had about 2,400 yurts and 17,300 people and dutifully fulfilled its obligations as a Ming outpost vassal. In 1418 Yongle dispatched the envoy Deng Cheng to Handong to ascertain if there was any potential danger. Later, during the early sixteenth century, the Handong commandery was laid waste by the militant Mongols, and its people were dispersed over the deserts. Those who escaped to the protection of the Ming authorities were later relocated to an agro-military colony at Ganzhou.44

Another group of marginal Mongols, who once settled in Shazhou (present-day Dunhuang) also expressed their desire to serve under the Ming suzerainty. As early as 1391 their leader, a Mongol prince by the name of Aruygeshiri,
sent horses and other tribute to Emperor Hongwu. In 1404 Yongle invested their chief, Kunjilai (d. 1444), as the commander of the Shazhou Guard, with all the prestige, honor, and cachet of Ming authority. At the time the Shazhou commandery was created, it was located in the northwest desert corridor of Gansu, near the Xinjiang border to the east and the Qilian Mountain range to the west. For centuries, Shazhou was an important caravan stop on the Silk Road linking the rich Orient to the rock-ribbed underbelly of Central Asia. Because of the area's strategic and commercial importance, the Yongle government reconstructed the old Yang Pass and Hongshan Mountain passes and repaired their beacon towers sixty-four kilometers southwest of Shazhou. In 1410 Yongle promoted Kunjilai assistant commissioner and awarded twenty other Shazhou warriors with various military honors and ranks. In 1424 an insouciant Oirat chief sent valuable tribute to the Ming court, but along the way to Beijing, it was stolen. Somehow, Kunjilai was able to recover it for Yongle. Subsequently, Yongle gave him silks and money and advanced him through the next military rank to become one of the vice-commissioners of the Gansu region. But Shazhou constantly faced threats from Hami and the Oirat Mongols as well as from the accumulating sand, which could obliterate its grasslands and cut off its water supply in a matter of days, so that by 1444 only some two hundred households and about 1,230 herdsmen still lived there. Consequently, the Gansu grand defender removed all of them to Ganzhou, taking this small Mongol group under his protection. The vacant Shazhou was, however, repopulated by a rebellious group from the Handong commandery who fled eastward and sought Ming permission to erect their yurts at the deserted outpost. The request was granted, and the so-called East Handong Guard was created in 1479, more than half a century after the death of Emperor Yongle. Like other commanderies, this marginal Mongol group, struggling in a desolate no-man’s land, ultimately lost contact with their Chinese protectors and, after 1516, ceased to send tribute to the Ming court.

In this forlorn region lived another Yugu Mongol group, whose chief, Kuzhuzi, brought some five hundred of his people and surrendered to the Ming authorities in October 1404. But Yongle chose a different warrior, Talini, to be the group’s battalion commander and, as usual, gave him money, uniforms, and a seal. This commandery, Chijin, was first located inside Jade Gate Pass (Yumenguan), a little more than two hundred li west of Jiayu Pass. This was the easternmost of the seven far-flung Ming commanderies. In 1410, six years after its installment, Yongle upgraded its battalion status to guard and promoted Talini to the position of assistant commissioner of the guard. Henceforth, the Chijin commandery regularly sent to Yongle’s court the best horses its herds-
men could breed. The commandery suffered a severe blow in 1483 when both Turfan and Hami marauders plundered their grazing site. For the next three decades, Turfan continued to wage skirmishes against this downtrodden Mongol group. In 1513 the Turfan invaders took the Ming seal away from the Chijin chief and effectively sank the commandery. 48

After the last Mongol emperor was driven out of China, there had been a marked decline in the confidence of the Mongol people in the ability of their leaders to rebuild the empire of Qubilai Khan. Some were weak and vacillating, and others, like the above-mentioned groups, soberly assessed their chances of survival and chose to forge collusive ties with the new Chinese masters. Mongol chiefs, big and small, fought over one of the most divisive and acrimonious questions in their political life: What did it take for a person to be considered Mongol? What kind of relationship should he establish with the Ming? During Yongle’s early reign, the Oirat, or the western Mongols, seemed more willing to acknowledge Yongle as their overlord. But in the remote region of eastern Outer Mongolia, a different kind of cold war was simmering between what ethnologists call Mongol “nationalism” and anything that was new and from Ming China. The eastern Mongols consistently refused to recognize Ming suzerainty and often rallied under the banner of whoever had the best means to recover China proper for them. For the first two decades, their undisputed leaders remained members of the family of Toyon Temur. But during the twelve-year span after the death of Toyon Temur’s grandson, Toghus Temur, in 1388, much of the Mongol world was consumed by a power imbroglio, as five “Yuan emperors” were murdered by their own subordinates.49

Finally, in 1403, Guilichi (d. 1408; also known as Ugechi-Khashakha), who was not related to the Yuan imperial family, nor was he a descendant of Chinggis Khan, proclaimed himself the “Great Khan of the Tartars,” and Ming-Mongol relations were strained.50 Approximately eight months after Yongle ascended the throne, he sought some kind of détente with Guilichi and sent him a message, coupled with silk robes: “After the destiny of the Yuan had declined, my father received the mandate from heaven and tamed the whole world. My father first installed me as the Prince of Yan, and as the successor to my father’s dynastic rule, I respectfully continue to receive blessings from heaven.”51 Five months later, Yongle once again sent a guard commander, Ge Lai, with gifts for Guilichi. The emperor’s message read,

Since ancient times, those who had won the world also received the mandate of heaven. Accordingly, the rise or fall of an empire, the success or failure of a plan, the coming and going of a people's support could not be

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controlled by brain power alone. Somewhere in the cosmos, there was someone who controlled destiny. . . . The Yuan empire had lost its territory and power, and the heavens had requested my father to suppress all of the rebels, command both the Chinese and the barbarians, establish rules, and display disciplines. . . . These could not have been accomplished by humans alone; they had to come from the will of heaven. I followed the augur, obeyed the heavens, and became the legitimate ruler. ⁵²

In spite of Yongle’s goodwill gestures and his invoking the cosmic mandate, relations with Ming China were still an incendiary issue in Mongolian politics, and the khan could ill afford to alienate hard-line Mongol claimants. On his part, Guilichi was more concerned with mundane affairs and political survival. He believed that his Mongol identity was his destiny, and he refused to make amends with Ming China. In order to dissuade Guilichi from turning the cold war into a hot conflict, in the spring of 1406 Yongle once again dispatched a peaceful mission to Outer Mongolia. In his personal message to the Mongol khan, Yongle wrote,

Your Great Khan is both wise and broad-minded. You should respect the will of heaven, sympathize with the poor people. . . . But if you rely upon your petulant nature . . . and resolve to challenge us by force, I cannot help but respond. China has excellent soldiers and strong horses, and if the khan thinks he can penetrate deep into our territory and sweep us under in a hurry, this is indeed wishful thinking. Before you act you will give it very careful consideration. ⁵³

While Yongle was in frequent communication with Guilichi, he learned by early 1408 that Aruytai, one of Guilichi’s commanders, was secretly plotting to overthrow Guilichi and put a puppet named Bunyashiri (also known as Oljei Temur) on the Mongol throne. A descendant of the Yuan imperial family, Bunyashiri was then residing in Bishbalik. In the summer of 1408 Yongle stepped up his divide-and-rule tactics by dispatching a trusted eunuch, Wang An, to help Bunyashiri make the Guilichi regime a casualty. ⁵⁴

In the meantime, Yongle was preparing for the worst and began deploying his troops for a showdown with the Mongols. On the first day of the eighth lunar month in 1408, he told his staff and all government agencies to prepare for his northern tour and hunting trip to Beijing. Ten days later he appointed his heir apparent to serve as regent if and when he was away from Nanjing. And within a month, he ordered his chief military commissioners in Shandong, Shaanxi, Liaodong, Huguang, Henan, and Shanxi to begin readiness exercises. ⁵⁵
Following this series of orders, he requested that Marquis Wang Cong (1356–1409) and Marquis Qoryocin at Xuanfu return to Beijing. In the meantime, Yongle ordered the Grand Canal commander Chen Xuan and others to move grain, clothing, and other provisions to Beijing. While Yongle was moving his troops and provisions northward, Guilichiqi was attacked and killed by a group of Mongols, and Bunyashiri was immediately installed as the new Mongol khan. Yongle learned of the coup d’état as early as January 1409, and perhaps it was a coincidence that he left Nanjing on February 23. He wasted no time in dispatching Guo Ji to congratulate the new Mongol khan, as he believed that his policy to contain the enemies until the regime changed organically was indeed working. But when the news reached Beijing that Guo had been killed by the Tartars, a war fever gripped the Yongle court. An entry in *The Yongle Veritable Record* records the emperor’s reaction: “I treat Bunyashiri with sincerity and return expatriated Mongols to him. But he kills my envoy and plunders my land. How dare he be so wild! He who acts against the destiny of heaven should be eliminated.”

To eliminate the Tartars, in August 1409 Yongle appointed Qiu Fu, the sixty-six-year-old Duke of Qi, to be the commander-in-chief of the punitive campaign. Qiu led an army of one hundred thousand and was assisted by four marquises—Wang Cong (age 52), Qoryocin (60), Wang Zhong (50), and Li Yuan (45). The Tartars had just suffered a terrible defeat at the hands of the Oirat, who were then Yongle’s vassals, and were retreating eastward to the Kerulen River valley. The Ming army seemed like a juggernaut headed for victory. However, the overconfident Qiu Fu took only one thousand cavalry as he recklessly pursued the demoralized Tartars north of the river. On September 23 Bunyashiri and Aruytai ambushed and killed not only Qiu Fu but also all four of the Ming marquises. Yongle blamed the defeat squarely on Qiu Fu as he wrote the heir apparent,

Recently I sent the Duke of Qi, Qiu Fu, to lead a punitive campaign against the Tartars. He had had battle experience, and I coached him on how to maneuver and how to take precautions. I was sure he could get the job done. But he abandoned my instructions and stubbornly refused to listen to the advice of his staff. He could not wait until the main body of the army arrived before attacking the enemy’s camps. Marquis Li Yuan weepingly tried to stop him, Marquis Qoryocin reluctantly went along, both were killed by the Tartars, and the rank and file retreated as fast as they could. The losses and humiliation were such that if we don’t retaliate and defeat them, they will grow even more fierce and there will be no peace on our borders. At present,
I am selecting generals and drilling troops, and have decided to personally lead a new expedition next spring. 60

Yongle then posthumously stripped Qoryocin and Qiu Fu of their noble titles and exiled Qiu’s family to Hainan Island. 61

To prepare for the campaign, Yongle asked the king of Korea to send him
ten thousand horses, ordered the Ministry of Public Works to make thirty thou-
sand armored carts, and commanded his minister of revenue, Xia Yuanji, to
supply two hundred thousand piculs of grain.\(^{62}\) To make sure that his home
bases would not get antsy, he also charged Xia Yuanji to assist his grandson
Zhu Zhanji, the future Emperor Xuande, in the administration of Beijing. On
the eve of his departure he received several elderly dignitaries, prayed to heaven
at Following Heaven Gate, and sacrificed to other appropriate deities, dis-
playing an overall ritualistic mix of nationalism, tradition, and morale boost-
ing. Yongle’s army of half a million men then left Beijing on March 15, exactly
seven weeks before his fiftieth birthday. The grand secretary Jin Youzi, together
with two earls and four marquises, accompanied Yongle and put down the
first day in his journal as an auspicious start. Even though muddy roads and
occasional snows slowed down the march, Yongle took time to appreciate the
terrain. Along the northbound trek, he could not help but recall his maiden
campaign against a different kind of Mongol chief, Nayur Buqa, twenty years
earlier. Once Yongle crossed the Kerulen River in mid-June, he cast a wider
net to catch the Mongols. Finally, at the Onon River, his troops found the
enemies, but the net proved to be a sieve as Bunyashiri escaped with seven of
his bodyguards. Mindful of what had happened to Qiu Fu, Yongle decided
not to pursue the hobbled Mongols too far and too recklessly. He slightly
decreased the intensity of his campaign but marched eastward to search for
Aruytai.\(^{63}\)

On July 10, while the Ming army was encamped in the Green Pine Valley
near the Great Khingan Mountains, several thousands of Aruytai’s cavalrmen
suddenly attacked the Ming camps. Yongle, however, handled the attack with
aplomb as he effectively used his numerical superiority to overwhelm the ene-
mies. The campaign was immediately accelerated as Yongle ordered a hot pur-
suit. After chasing Aruytai for over one hundred kilometers and killing more
than one hundred Tartars, Yongle called off the fight and decided to return
home; his troops had used up all of their provisions and were feeling the strain
of the summer heat. When he turned southwest across the Great Khingan
Mountains, Yongle saw an exceptional hill and named it Fox Hunting Hill. He
then wrote the following victory ode and had it chiseled on a stele:

The immense desert is my sword;
The celestial mountain my dagger.
Using them I sweep away the filth;
Forever I pacify the Gobi.
At a location he named Pure Creek Spring, Yongle erected a monument with another celebratory poem on it:

Herald the six imperial armies;  
Stop the brutality and end insults.  
Within the high mountains and pure waters,  
Forever glorify our military might.  

The emperor returned to Beijing in mid-August and, in spite of the fact that Aruytai remained at large, declared the campaign a success. But before he went on to Nanjing in mid-December, he had to tackle the Yellow River floods that had ravaged Kaifeng in September. Since then, there had been a sine-wave regularity to Aruytai’s moves. The Mongol chief sent tribute horses to the Ming court and recognized Yongle’s overlordship—as he did near the end of 1410—when he felt pinched by his own Mongol rivals. But Aruytai’s promises were made of piecrust, as he unleashed his horde across the Ming border whenever he was offended or felt strong enough to flex his muscles. For his part, Yongle played the incentive-and-deterrent game by returning to Aruytai his brother and sister and even investing Aruytai with a Ming title, Prince Hening (Harmony and Tranquility). In the meantime he kept a close watch on the Oirat.

Though Yongle’s first campaign had blunted the military power of the Tartars, who had some twenty thousand remaining cavalrymen, he could not remove the danger of another Mongol group, the Oirat, whose relations with the Tartars had frayed. The Oirat, who claimed to have forty thousand yurts, generally led rough lives rife with poverty and violence. Of the three Oirat chieftains—Mahmud, Taiping, and Batuboluo—Mahmud had been a vassal of Yongle, with the title of Prince Shunning (Obedience and Tranquility) since 1409. Mahmud first murdered Bunyashiri, then announced his intention to repatriate the Mongols in Gansu and Ningxia. Before he launched the campaign against the Tartars, Yongle tilted in favor of the Oirat, but upon hearing this news, he was outraged. On February 26, 1413, he dispatched his eunuch envoy Hai Tong to not only rebuke Mahmud but also to secure the release of all Ming detainees. As Hai Tong was unable to accomplish his mission, Yongle decided to lead another campaign, this time aiming to teach Mahmud a lesson.

Yongle’s second personal campaign, begun on April 30, 1414, took four months to complete. Once again the emperor followed the routine readiness procedures: he gathered 150,000 piculs of grain and stored them at Xuanfu, mobilized over half a million troops, performed on-the-eve-of-campaign rituals, then marched several hundred kilometers beyond the Great Wall, all the
way to the Kerulen River. This time, however, he brought along his grandson, Zhu Zhanji, who reviewed the troops with him at Xinghe. The young prince was supposed to be under the constant care of Grand Secretaries Hu Guang and Yang Rong, but at the battle of the Nine Dragon Pass, a eunuch named Li Qian took him in a rash pursuit of the Mongols and almost got him killed. Another change of procedure was Yongle's issuance of a set of rules for scouting the enemies. He wanted his officers and soldiers to report to him immediately if they saw (1) wild animals (such as deer) or livestock (such as goats or horses) in the camps or around the troops; (2) dust swirling in the distance; (3) dead animals, hoofprints, or horse dung along the trek; (4) deserted goods, dresses and jewelry, or objects with written words on them; or (5) smoke or fire.68

Finally, Yongle made use of prototype cannons and also blunderbusses against the Mongols. There were two types of blunderbuss: a small type weighing only twelve kilograms that could shoot iron arrows to a distance of six hundred paces, and the larger type weighing about forty-two kilograms that could shoot as far as three kilometers. Marquis Liu Sheng commanded the artillery regiment that engaged the Oirat on June 23 and ultimately broke the Oirat's defensive resistance along the Tula River. Even though the approximately thirty thousand Oirat cavalrymen were scattered, they continued to harass the Ming troops near what is now Ulan Bator, in particular at Shuanquanhai, the homeland of Chinggis Khan. Once again the Ming troops used cannons to fight them off. On August 15 Yongle finally returned to Beijing, where, in spite of having sustained heavy casualties, he celebrated victory at a banquet in Respect Heaven Hall. The bruised Mahmud then reached a new rapprochement with Yongle, agreeing not only to release all of the Ming detainees but also to regularly send tribute horses to the Ming court.69 After this campaign, the Ming's northern borders enjoyed peace and tranquility for more than seven years. Better still, détente with the Oirat Mongols would last for more than thirty-five years. However, the baseness of Mongol politics persisted and the fratricidal feuds between the Oirat and the Tartars continued, resulting in the assassination of Mahmud in 1416.

Although Yongle was now preoccupied with the construction of his new capital in Beijing, he did not give short shrift to the Mongol problem. The maintenance of peace on the northern border was turned over to his eunuch envoy Hai Tong and to his Mongol vassals, who, in order to preserve trade privileges, refused to join the more hostile Mongols beyond the Gobi. All told, Hai Tong made a total of nine missions to execute Ming policy on the steppe. For example, during the spring and summer of 1417, Hai Tong made two trips to
the loessial frontier to win over the Oirat chiefs, who had been beaten by the Tartars and were eager to curry favor with Yongle in hopes of retaliation. One year later Hai Tong accompanied a special Oirat embassy to China, requesting and receiving for Toyon, Mahmud’s son, the title Prince Shunning. But while the truce between the Ming and the Oirat prevailed, that with the unrepentant Tartars remained fragile. By 1421 the Tartar chief Aruytai had expressed his displeasure with the Ming government and had decided to toss the olive branch to the winds and renew raids into Chinese territory. But when Yongle proposed to lead another punitive expedition into the desert, almost all of his ministers, including the most strident Mongolphobics, opposed such a move on the ground that the country could not afford another costly campaign. Among them were Minister of Revenue Xia Yuanji, Minister of Punishment Wu Zhong, and Minister of War Fang Bin. Both Xia and Wu were then imprisoned, and Fang Bin, after learning from a eunuch that Yongle was mad at him, took his own life.

It must have been frustrating for these well-intentioned and ambivalent ministers to second-guess the emperor’s decision and to constantly remind him of his own containment strategy—that is, strong defense instead of initiating offense. But so far as Yongle was concerned, war was not an end in itself but merely a means to keep his faith intact. He was not just a passionate and audacious soul—he was a warrior. He wanted to bring back his lost faith by force and felt an agonizing need for it. Soon after silencing his dissident ministers, Yongle proceeded with mobilization and readiness plans, and by March of 1422 he had assembled a grand army of several hundred thousand troops and had gathered 370,000 piculs of grain. To transport his foodstuffs and provisions, the emperor had to secure more than 340,000 donkeys, 117,000 carts, and 235,000 corvée laborers. The grand army left Beijing on April 17, but amid the spectacle of brilliant colors and gruff noise lurked trepidation. First of all, three days earlier Aruytai had attacked Xinghe and killed the Ming regional military commissioner, Wang Huan. Second, the army was too big and the supply train too long and cumbersome to deal with the nimble enemy. Finally, the Uriyangqad failed to stand up to Aruytai’s provocations and were in fact colluding with the Tartars. Four days into the expedition, Ming scouts learned of Aruytai’s whereabouts. Yongle’s generals, such as Marquis Zheng Heng (who had accompanied the emperor on every one of his campaigns) suggested that it was time to pursue the enemy, but the emperor refused to do so, stating that he wanted to wait until the bulk of the grain had been well stored at Kaiping and the forward troops had reached Yingchang. But the pace of the journey was so slow that by the time they arrived at Yingchang it was
mid-June and Aruytai was nowhere to be found. Yongle nonetheless continued to move toward Dalai Nor, fruitlessly searching for the Tartars. In early July his detachment of twenty thousand troops defeated and captured some Uriyangqad Mongols. After learning that Aruytai had escaped into Outer Mongolia, Yongle, who had by that time lost a forward chief commissioner and a vanguard commander and had used up nearly all of his provisions, decided to return home.\textsuperscript{74}

Yongle arrived in Beijing early in the morning on September 23 and, although the campaign had not produced any favorable military results, once again declared victory. At the celebration banquet, he graded the performances of his officers with his usual incentive-and-punishment ploys. Officers who had earned merits and made no mistakes were seated in the front row and served the best food and drink. Those who had earned merits but also committed mistakes, and had managed the timely return of their troops south of Juyong Pass, were seated at the center and served less palatable dishes. Those who had neither merits nor demerits were seated at the rear and served mediocre food. Finally, those who had not earned any merits but had committed serious mistakes were required to stand and were denied food. Yongle’s two grand secretaries, Yang Rong and Jin Youzi, who apparently had done their parts well in the campaign, sat close to the emperor at the banquet.\textsuperscript{75}

Eight or nine months had elapsed since the victory celebration, and it was early in the summer of 1423 when Yongle received a report that Aruytai was making a draconian sweep along the Ming border. The emperor, who abounded in aggressiveness himself, once again felt provoked and announced yet another personal campaign into the northern desert. He summoned his nobles and commanders and said to them,

\begin{quote}
Aruytai must have thought that I had already accomplished my goals and would not fight him any longer. I should lead my soldiers and deploy them at our fortresses beyond the Great Wall. We will succeed if we wait until the enemies make their first move, then strike them when they become exhausted.\textsuperscript{76}
\end{quote}

The emperor then assembled a grand army of three hundred thousand and, by August 29, was on his way to find his elusive enemies. Yongle seems by this time to have taken the war against Aruytai personally. Behind his colossal ego loomed something chaotic. Yongle was growing old and also becoming unstable, and perhaps used the virility of war to gird against madness and loss of faith in himself.
On September 9, twelve days into the fourth campaign, Yongle arrived at Xuanfu and rested for a few days. A month later he was encamped at Shacheng Fort when a special envoy from Korea came to brief him on a Manchurian border dispute between the Jurchen and the Korean nationals. But when asked if the Koreans happened to have captured Aruytai, the Korean envoy was baffled and could only reply that the Tartars must be hiding deep in the mountains. After a two-month-long wild-goose chase, a eunuch by the name of Mu Jing repeatedly suggested to the emperor that they abandon the futile pursuit and return home. Yongle disagreed and in a fractious mood called Mu a “rebellious barbarian.” Mu looked at His Majesty and replied, “I am not certain who is the real barbarian!” This sharp exchange so offended Yongle’s hubris that he ordered Mu’s decapitation. Throughout the tiff, Mu remained calm and collected and was ready to die, whereupon Yongle was reported to have slowly murmured, “Of all the people brought up by my family, how many are worth more than this slave?” Mu Jing was immediately set free, but the emperor still could not find the Tartars, whose severed heads he wished to display.

While Yongle was pondering how to put the best face on another fruitless campaign, good tidings finally arrived. Aruytai had been defeated by the Oirat in October, and his right-hand man, Esentu Qan (d. 1431), due to differences in style and collisions of ego, had split with him. Esentu Qan brought his family and troops with him and surrendered to Yongle’s forward commander Marquis Chen Mao. Yongle personally received Esentu Qan, gave him the Chinese name Jin Zhong, and invested him as Prince Zhongyong (Loyalty and Valor). To Yongle’s credit, this particular Tartar defector did live up to expectations, as he served the Ming court with integrity and dexterity until the day he died. The emperor now had the results needed to justify his fourth campaign, and, indeed, when he returned to Juyong Pass in December, he put on his glittering dragon robe, rode his legendary “jade-dragon-flowery” steed, and received a rousing welcome from his troops, who lined up for several kilometers under the cold wintry sun. The awestruck Esentu Qan thought he was escorting the emperor in the heavens. But exactly two months after Yongle returned to Beijing, on the seventh day of the first lunar month, when he was still celebrating the 1424 lunar New Year, the resilient Aruytai again unleashed his cavalrymen and invaded Datong and Kaiping. Once again, anger and vindictiveness smoldered in the Ming court and Yongle’s marshal instincts would not allow him to stay confined in his comfortable new palace. Even though, at sixty-five, he felt aged and fatigued, he had by February 9 decided to go after Aruytai one more time.

On April 1, 1424, Yongle reviewed his troops and told them, “I don’t neces-
sarily love travail and the neglect of the easy life. But since my goal is to pro-
tect my people, I really have little choice.” He left Beijing on May 2, and spent
his sixty-fifth birthday on the road without much fanfare. By the time he arrived
at Kaiping, he felt tired. The paucity of victories—along with prolonged heavy
rains—cast the emperor’s camp into a deep gloom. The superb emotional and
physical strength that Yongle had displayed in the first three campaigns had all

MAP 5. Yongle’s Fourth Personal Campaign, 1423

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but disappeared. At Yingchang his eunuchs donned their wigs, make-up, and costumes on stage and did everything imaginable, including singing a song composed by Yongle’s father, to entertain the dispirited emperor. By this time, he had raised Esentu Qan to high command, but for two months even the former Tartar chieftain could not learn the whereabouts of Aruytai. In the meantime his troops were feeling the strain of the weather and the ever-dwindling provisions. At a moment of despair, Yongle told Grand Secretary Yong Rong, who dutifully kept a campaign diary, that the desert was like an ocean, and since there were not many Tartars left, it would be fruitless to pursue them. On July 17, at Fort Green Cloud, the imperial army split into two columns on the return march, with Yongle commanding the eastern column and Marquis Zheng Heng the western column—agreeing to join forces again before returning to Beijing.

Years of bloodshed and travail had taken their toll on the man on the dragon throne. Even though he still had plans to expand his empire, fate was closing in on him. On August 8 Yongle fell sick, raising the specter that he might die. He asked eunuch Hai Shou when they would reach Beijing, to which Hai Shou replied, “Sometime in mid-September.” Afterward the emperor talked very little, except to ask Yang Rong if the heir apparent was experienced enough to take over the affairs of the empire. Four days later, on August 12, Yongle summoned Zhang Fu (1375–1449), the Duke of Ying, to his camp to draft a brief will. A portion of it said, “Pass the throne to the crown prince. Follow the etiquette of the dynastic founder for all funeral dress, ceremonies, and services.” With that, Yongle quietly passed away at Yumuchuan (in what later became Chahar), in the remote desert. Concerns about the security of both Beijing and Nanjing immediately were raised, and a grand eunuch by the name of Ma Yun suggested that the bad news be kept from the public until Yongle’s commanders could move the troops safely from Mongolia to China proper. They secretly had a tin coffin made to slow the decomposition of Yongle’s body and to contain its odor, while continuing to pitch a tent for the commander-in-chief and bring meals every day as if he were still alive. In the meantime Yang Rong and Hai Shou hurried back to Beijing to inform the heir apparent of the emperor’s death. Eleven days later, on August 23, the eastern column rejoined Marquis Zheng Heng’s western column at Wupingzhen. Yongle’s corpse hung between heaven and earth until it reached the capital in September, where the tin coffin was replaced by a permanent hardwood coffin for a formal state funeral. In the midst of grief and memorial services, more than thirty palace women, including sixteen of Yongle’s concubines, followed the emperor in death by
hanging themselves. The Ming state then orchestrated the sort of deification that was deemed most fitting for such an extraordinary man.

With the passing of this feared and powerful ruler, Ming China had lost someone who could command the respect of both its friends and its foes, one who had time and again demonstrated great resolve when there was clear and present danger. But Yongle’s achievements were evanescent and costly. Amid calls for retrenchment, his ambitious reach to encompass territory far into the Taklamakan deserts, Mongolia, and Manchuria caused such advice to be ignored. After his death, the rough-hewn nomads had no fears of the Ming leadership. Aruytai and his Tartars remained haughty and menacing, periodically hurling derision at Yongle’s successors. During Yongle’s reign, Ming China largely deterred and contained the Oirat, who were potentially more dangerous to the Ming than were the Tartars. Two decades after the death of Yongle, Esen, the Oirat leader and Mahmud’s grandson, seized the region of the Uriyangqad and, in 1449, imprisoned Emperor Zhengtong (r. 1436–49)—Yongle’s great-grandson—at Tumu Fort in northwestern Hebei. Even though the dynasty would endure for nearly two more centuries, Ming China had lost its expansionist drive. Yongle’s legacy was only remembered but never followed through.