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INSTITUTE OF  
ASIAN STUDIES

**Wisdom of the East:  
Zheng He and his Maritime Expeditions**

Lee Cheuk Yin

Universiti Brunei Darussalam

Working Paper No. 81

Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam

Gadong 2024

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## **Author**

**LEE Cheuk Yin** was previously head of the Department of Chinese Studies and founding director of the Wan Boo Saw Research Centre for Chinese Culture at the National University of Singapore. He is Guest Professor of the Nanjing University, Hubei University and Wuhan University, and Academic Advisor of the National Institute for Advanced Humanistic Studies at Fudan University, China. He has served as External Examiner of the School of Chinese of the University of Hong Kong, and the History Department of the Chinese University of Hong Kong. He is currently Senior Professor at the Institute of Asian Studies (IAS), Universiti Brunei Darussalam. Prof. Lee's interest is Chinese intellectual history, Muslim activities in China and traditional medicine. He has written 8 books and edited more than 30 books. He is editor of the book series *Overseas Chinese Studies* (Guangxi Normal University Press) and *Emotion and the State of Mind in East Asia* (Leiden: Brill).

Contact: [cheukyinlee@ubd.edu.bn](mailto:cheukyinlee@ubd.edu.bn)

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# *Wisdom of the East: Zheng He and his Maritime Expeditions*

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*Lee Cheuk Yin*

## **Abstract**

About 600 years ago, a huge fleet with more than 27,000 men set sail from the Liujia harbour in Nanjing to begin China's first-ever large-scale oceanic journey, marking a brilliant chapter in the maritime history of mankind. The Zheng He expeditions were the largest naval expedition during that period as it comprised of as many as 300 ships of various sizes (including 62 large treasure ships) and more than 27,000 men.<sup>1</sup> In a span of 28 years, from 1405 to 1433, Admiral Zheng He made seven expeditions to Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea and the east coast of Africa, covering more than 30 countries and regions that include Annam, Champa, Cambodia, Malacca, Siam, Java, Ryukyu, Palembang, Brunei, Sumatra, Bengal, Ceylon, Cochin, Hormuz, Dhufar, Aden along the Red Sea, and Mogadishu on the east coast of Africa. His maritime expeditions demonstrated extraordinary leadership ability and serve as an interesting case study for multi-cultural interaction. Unfortunately, Zheng He was not a scholar and did not leave behind any writing that can reflect his management theories. This paper attempts to reconstruct his traits in managing such a big fleet.

**Keywords:** Zheng He; Maritime Expeditions; Ming Dynasty; Asian Wisdoms

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<sup>1</sup> Louise Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1405-1433*. UK: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 87.

# *Wisdom of the East:*

## *Zheng He and his Maritime Expeditions*

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*Lee Cheuk Yin*

### **Introduction**

#### **Seven Voyages to the Western Oceans**

Zheng He 郑和 (1371-1433) was born in 1371 in Yunnan province, China. He was born to a Muslim family and his original surname at birth was Ma 马, a very common surname among Muslims in China.<sup>2</sup> In 1382 the Ming army defeated the Mongols in Yunnan, and Ma He was captured and brought to the imperial capital where he was made an eunuch and assigned to service in the palace of the Prince of Yan. He served the Prince faithfully and distinguished himself when the Prince usurped the throne in 1403 and became Emperor Yongle. He was gradually promoted to the rank of grand eunuch and honoured with the surname Zheng. In 1405, to publicize the Ming dynasty's wealth and supremacy to countries in Southeast Asia and beyond, Emperor Yongle ordered Zheng He to head the first maritime expedition overseas. From 1405 to 1433, Zheng He led seven maritime expeditions to the "western oceans."<sup>3</sup> He was praised by historians as a navigator, discoverer, and diplomat of the Ming dynasty.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The Chinese surname Ma is sometimes the Chinese translation of Muhammad. Very likely their ancestors are Muslims.

<sup>3</sup> Western Oceans is an expression used to denote places west of Malacca during the Ming dynasty.

<sup>4</sup> Refer to Chiu Ling-yeong, *Zheng He: Navigator, Discoverer and Diplomat*, Wu Teh Yao Memorial Lectures 2000, National University of Singapore, Singapore: UniPress, 2000.



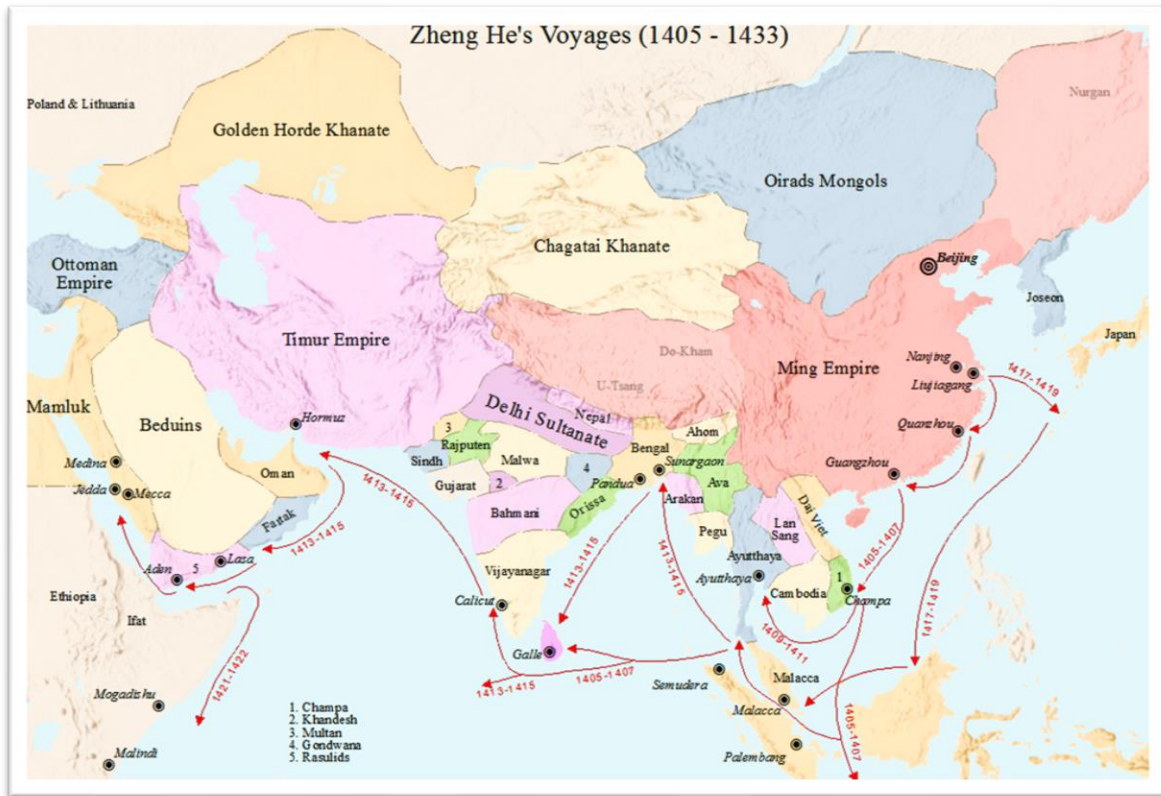
The Zheng He Research Association in Nanjing (Photo by CY Lee)

Dates and Places of Visit of Zheng He's Seven Voyages<sup>5</sup>

Voyage	Year	Places of Visit
①	1405-1407	Visited Champa, Java, Palembang, Malacca and Aden, Captured pirate leader Chen Zuyi in Palembang.
②	1407-1409	Visited Brunei, Siam, Cambodia, and Calicut.
③	1409-1411	Visited Champa, Siam, Java, Malacca, Aru, Sumatra, Lambri, Ceylon, Quilon, Cochin, Calicut and Cambay.
④	1413-1415	Visited most of the countries in Southeast Asia, and as far as eastern coast of Africa.
⑤	1417-1419	Visited more than 19 countries, as far as Hormuz and Mogadishu.
⑥	1421-1422	Visited Siam, Sumatra, Dhofar, Aden, and Mogadishu.
⑦	1431-1433	Visited Champa, Malacca, Java, Palembang, Sumatra, Ceylon, Calicut, Hormuz.

<sup>5</sup> Details of dates and places of visit refer to Dreyer, Edward L. *Zheng He: China and the Oceans in the Early Ming Dynasty, 1405-1433*. New York: Pearson Longman, 2007. Lee Cheuk Yin ed., *Zheng He and Maritime Asia*. Singapore: National Library Board, 2005.

## Map and Timeline of Zheng He's Seven Voyages <sup>6</sup>



The main motivation behind the expeditions has always been a controversial subject. During the Ming Dynasty, the Chinese showed much interest in the neighboring countries and specifically, what they can offer to them economically. Many historians have described the expeditions as diplomatic and commercial, such as Edward Dreyer and Roderich Ptak support the fact that the voyages were in fact to expand China's trade route and to improve "overseas trade" <sup>7</sup> by exploring neighbouring countries to trade for goods such as silk and porcelain. Edward Dreyer argued that the voyages were a rather peaceful one, having no interest in "conquering or looting the countries reached by his fleet, but rather in exploring and expanding commerce and diplomatic relations within the tribute system." <sup>8</sup> Dreyer also stated that "the naval expeditions formed the main channel for the promotion of trade with countries of the south." <sup>9</sup> This was shared by Louise Levathes who claimed that the main purpose of the voyages was to expand their trade route for foreign goods. <sup>10</sup> Hence this further state that Zheng

<sup>6</sup> Map reproduced from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline\\_of\\_the\\_Ming\\_treasure\\_voyages](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_the_Ming_treasure_voyages).

<sup>7</sup> Roderich Ptak, *China and the Asian seas: trade, travel, and visions of the other (1400-1750)*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998, p. 23.

<sup>8</sup> Edward L. Dreyer, *Early Ming China: A Political History 1355 – 1435*. p. 195.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Louise Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1405-1433*. p. 88.

He's expeditions were more of a commercial purpose. Other historians such as Chiu Ling-Yeong of the University of Hong Kong argues that the significance of the voyages was to demonstrate China's military superiority and conciliatory diplomacy.

Various inspiring works on the expeditions have covered their historical and economic implications, as well as diplomatic and cultural contributions. However, expeditions with such a large scale involve detailed planning, organising, and meticulous management and operation. Zheng He's wisdom in managing these unparalleled operations is not fully studied and explored. Treating the expedition team as a gigantic organization and Zheng He as its leader and CEO, we can learn a substantial amount from his knowledge and experience.

### **Chinese Wisdom of Effective Leadership**

According to Han Fei Zi (born around 280-233 BC), who is regarded as the founder of the Legalist School and the advocator of law and punishment that contributed to the unification of China by Emperor Qin Shihuang in 221 BC, a good ruler and leader should have the following qualities:

“The ruler must not reveal his desire; for if he reveals his desires his ministers will put on the mask that pleases him. He must not reveal his will; for if he does so his ministers will show a different face. So, it is said: Discard likes and dislikes and the ministers will show their true form; discard wisdom and wile and the ministers will watch their step. Hence, though the ruler is wise, he hatches no schemes from his wisdom, but causes all men to know their place. Though he is worth, he does not display it in his deeds, but observes the motives of his ministers. Though he is brave, he does not flaunt his bravery in shows of indignation but allows his subordinates to display their valor to the full..... When the ministers stick to their posts, the hundred officials have their regular duties, and the ruler employs each according to his particular ability, this is known as the state of manifold constancy.”<sup>11</sup>

Effective leadership is an important factor in determining the success of an operation or organization. Zheng He was personally selected by the emperor to lead the expeditions. He was chosen because of his track record and previous performance in assisting the emperor to ascend to the throne in a military coup. He demonstrated the ability of an effective leader with his good sense of human resource management, proving that Emperor Yongle had made a right judgement in identifying the accomplished person to achieve his vision.

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<sup>11</sup> See Burton Watson, *Han Fei Tzu*, Section 5, “The Way of the Ruler”, Columbia University Press, 1964, p.16.

As leader of the operations, Zheng He is efficacious in building up his team of senior administrators to support him. According to historical records, he was able to identify many capable talents as assistants, such as senior eunuchs Wang Jinghong 王景弘, Hou Xian 侯显, Li Xing 李兴, Zhu Liang 朱良, Yang Zhen 杨珍, Hong Bao 洪保, Zhou Man 周满, Zhang Da 张达, and Wu Zhong 吴忠. Some of them are experienced diplomats with official experiences to the western seas or other countries in the present central Asia. His team of experts also included talented scholars Ma Huan 马欢, Fei Xin 费信, and Gong Zhen 巩珍. They served as record-keepers and interpreters and compiled very detailed travelogues of the countries they visited after they returned to China. For examples, the *Yengyai Shenglan* 瀛涯胜览 (Wonderful Scenery of the Boundless Oceans) by Ma Huan, the *Xingcha Shenglan* 星槎胜览 (Wonderful Scenery of the Starry Travels) by Fei Xin, and the *Xiyang fanguo zhi* 西洋番国志 (Record of the Foreign States in the Western Oceans) by Gong Zhen. Their first-hand accounts of the scenery and culture of the foreign lands enhanced Chinese understanding of the western countries and re-shaped their worldview.

The expeditions also demonstrated Zheng He's well-planned allocation and placement of human resources. For example, the first expedition in 1405 Zheng He brought along 27,800 men, which include 7 imperial eunuchs serving as envoys, 10 proctors as deputy envoys, 10 junior eunuchs, 53 eunuchs-chamberlains, 2 regional military commissioners, 93 guard commanders, 104 battalion commanders, 403 company commanders, 1 Ministry of Revenue director, 2 officers from Ministry of Rites, 2 drafters, 1 instructor, 1 official astrologer and 4 assistants, 10 interpreters, 108 medical officers and medical assistants, and 26,803 military officers, chosen officers, soldiers, cooks, and clerks.<sup>12</sup> The division of labour and assembling a team of talents in accordance with their aptitude, contributed to the smooth implementation of the unpredictable visits and the success of the operation.

It takes vision to be a leader. Zheng He's determination and hard work should be credited for the success of the large-scale and extensive expeditions. From 1405 to 1433, Zheng He made seven voyages to the western oceans. Within this time span of 28 years, he was travelling consecutively and spent most of his time on the sea. Many of the places he visited had no previous contact with China, which made the trips full of uncertainty and danger. Besides, one trip, back and forth and waiting time for the monsoons, usually took almost two

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<sup>12</sup> *Zheng He Jiapu* 郑和家谱, see Chiu Ling-yeong, *Zheng He: Navigator, Discover and Diplomat*, UniPress National University of Singapore, 2000, p.10.



years. Between the expeditions, Zheng He was back in Nanjing only for few months to repair his ships and replenish his supplies. Some of his entourage and sailors will also be replaced so that they can stay with their families and rest, but not for Zheng He who exemplified the indomitable spirit of a leader.

### **Rigorous Coordination and Communication Strategy**

According to the classical work *The Art of War* by Sun Zi (Sun Wu, a.545-470 BC), “There is no difference between administering many troops and few troops, large army or small army. It is a matter of organization and communication respectively.”<sup>13</sup> Besides acting as a strategist, an effective leader should also be a good organizer. It is important for a leader to have a clear and efficient organizational structure with properly defined authority and responsibility, reporting relationships and structure of communication. A good organization structure will clarify the flow of command. Organization structure resembles the backbone or skeleton of a human being. The skeleton supports the human body, it provides the framework of the body and holds the internal organs in place. Without it, the human body will not be able to stand and move. The bony skeleton also encases vital organs and protects them from damage. The skull protects the brain, while the spinal column protects the spinal cord and nerves. The ribs and sternum comprise the thorax, which protect your lungs and heart. Similarly, in an organization, it is important to have a properly defined structure and chain of command, an unbroken line of authority that flows from the topmost level to the lowest. The structure of Zheng He’s high sea fleet demonstrates his organizational capability.

China’s ship building industry was making rapid progress even before the Ming dynasty. When the founding emperor of the Ming dynasty Emperor Hungwu unified China, he defeated his rivals Chen Youliang and Zhang Xuecheng in river battles with galleon fleets and later incorporated their navy onto his own forces. This lay the foundation for the maritime expeditions about 50 years later. To prepare for the expeditions, Zheng He spent more than two years to build his ships at the Longjiang shipyard in Nanjing. The ships, according to the *Xiyang*

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<sup>13</sup> For a detailed discussion, see Lionel Giles, *Sun Tzu: The Art of War*, “Critical Notes and Commentaries”, Hong Kong: Tuttle Publishing, 2008.

*Ji* 西洋记 (Records of Western Oceans) by Luo Maodeng in 1697, can be classified into five types:

1. Treasure ship with 9 masts, 44.4 *zhang* long and 18 *zhang* broad.
2. Horse ship with 8 masts, 37 *zhang* long and 15 *zhang* broad.
3. Supply ship with 7 masts, 28 *zhang* long and 12 *zhang* broad.
4. Billet ship with 6 masts, 24 *zhang* long and 9.4 *zhang* broad.
5. Battleship with 5 masts, 18 *zhang* long and 6.8 *zhang* broad.

Based on the measurement of the Ming dynasty, one *zhang* 丈 is made up of ten "*chi*" or "Chinese feet." Although the exact length of a *zhang* and *chi* has varied over time, the Ming *chi* was probably about 12.2 inches (31.1 centimeters) according to Edward Dreyer. Incredibly, the largest ships in the fleet (called "treasure ships") were likely between 440 and 538 feet long by 210 feet wide. The 4-decked treasure ship had an estimated displacement of 20-30,000 tons, roughly 1/3 to 1/2 the displacement of modern American aircraft carriers. Each had nine masts on its deck, rigged with square sails that could be adjusted in series to maximize efficiency in different wind conditions. Emperor Yongle ordered the construction of an amazing 62 or 63 such treasure ships for Zheng He's first voyage in 1405. Extant records show that another 48 were ordered in 1408, plus 41 more in 1419, along with 185 smaller ships throughout that time. Along with dozens of treasure ships, each armada included hundreds of smaller ships. The eight-masted ships, called "horse ships," were about 2/3 the size of the treasure ships measuring approximately 340 feet by 138 feet. As indicated by the name, it carried horses along with timber for repairs and tribute goods. Whereas the seven-masted grain ships or supply ships carried rice and other food for the crew and soldiers in the fleet. Supply ship was about 257 feet by 115 feet in size. The next ships in descending order of size were the Billet ships, at 220 by 84 feet with each transport ship having six masts. Finally, the small, five-masted battleships, each about 165 feet long, were designed to be maneuverable in battle.



Model of the Treasure Ship

		戶部郎中 Senior Secretary Ministry of Revenue	1
坐船 Troop Transport	水船 Water Tanker	禮部郎中 Senior Secretary Ministry of Rites	2
		陰陽官 Official Astrologer	5
馬船 Horse Ship	糧船 Supply Ship	翻譯官 Interpreters	10
		醫官與藥生 Medicinal Officers and Pharmacologists	180
戰船 Battle ship			

However, coordinating 27,000 people separated in more than 200 ships, needs an efficient and effective communication system. How did Zheng He command and move his fleet and people? Without the benefit of today's technologies, how did Zheng He communicate with his fleet and crew throughout his voyages?

Zheng He made use of an elaborate system of sight and sound signals to communicate among the various ships of his unprecedented epic fleet when they were out in the open seas.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Louise E. Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1405–1433* (U.S.: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 83.

All his ships carried with them one large flag, some signal bells, five banners, one large drum, gongs and ten lanterns. Sound signals were activated when commands needed to be issued on board a ship, while gongs and drums were used to create audible signals between ships so as, for example, to issue a warning for the fleet to take shelter in a safe harbour when a storm was imminent, or to communicate during war or even bad weather. Each of Zheng He's ships was also identified by its special colour and a black flag with a large white character that indicated which squadron it belonged to. During the day, flag signals were used for communication. In the darkness of night, and in bad weather, lanterns were used to convey signals that were visible over some distances. Carrier pigeons were used for longer-range communication.

Apparently to support this system of sight and sound communication, Zheng He also carefully sailed with a fleet formation called "Flying Swallow Formation" that looked like a flying swallow with its two wings spread out.<sup>15</sup> In the middle will be the large treasure ships that carried the imperial gifts and Zheng He and his senior associates; then surrounding these will be command ships which functioned as the navigational operations centre; then the supplies ships (carrying grains and water supplies) will be positioned to the front, back, left and right; and all these were guarded by the battle ships. With Zheng He's Commander-in-Chief Ship right in the centre of the formation, he could more easily oversee and communicate and hence command the entire fleet. This unique communication system and formation enables Zheng He to command and communicate with his associates and crew effectively and readily.



Flying Swallow Formation of Zheng He's fleet

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<sup>15</sup> Tan Ta Sen, *Cheng Ho and Malacca* (Singapore: International Zheng He Society, 2005), pp. 16–17.

## Winning the Hearts of Your People

In the *Lilou* 离娄 chapter of the *Book of Mencius*, Mencius said: “One who wins the people wins the world.”<sup>16</sup> To win the world, you must win people’s heart; to win people’s heart, it starts with your own heart. Thus, in the *Analects*, Confucius said: “If you want to rule the country, first put your house in order; if you want to cultivate your morality, first put your heart right. To put your heart right, you must be sincere.” By extension of this understanding, Confucius advocates: “A man of benevolence, wishing himself to be established, sees that others are established; wishing himself to be successful, sees that others are successful.”<sup>17</sup> To be able to mobilize 27,000 people to seek after the vision of such an adventurous expedition, Zheng He not only had to win the heart and trust of his team but also that of the people along the way.

The maritime expedition was Ming China’s attempt to restore the existing tributary relations with foreign countries. The Chinese tributary system had been in practice since the Zhou dynasty. However, if we are to use institutional organization as a criterion, a “formal” “system” of tributary relations dated no earlier than the Ming. It is an integral part of the traditional Chinese World Order that China is the “Middle Kingdom”, the emperor is the “Son of Heaven”, and thus “All-under-Heaven” are imperial territories.<sup>18</sup> Under this relationship, the vassal states pay tributes to China, in return they received generous gifts and protection from the suzerain.<sup>19</sup> Ming China interacted with its tributaries in an arrangement combining both ceremonial vassalage and gift exchanges. The arrangement was reciprocal in the sense that non-Chinese tributaries submitted to the Chinese emperor, who in turn rewarded displays of compliance and loyalty with benevolence, usually in the form of generous gifts and trade concessions.

Zheng He’s seven maritime expeditions demonstrated the financial and military strength of Ming China during the Yongle reign, aiming to establish tributary relations between the Chinese court and foreign territories. Thus, it can be inferred that Emperor Yongle, who had a passion for undertaking monumental projects, saw the re-establishment of the tributary system as a driving force for the Ming dynasty in seeking recognition from neighbouring

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<sup>16</sup> For detailed discussion, see James Legge trans. *The Works of Mencius, The Chinese/English Four Books* edition, Changsha: Hunan Publishing House, 1992, Chapter 7 Part 1.

<sup>17</sup> See *Analects*, Book 6, *The Chinese/English Four Books* edition, p.114. Translation of the passage see James Legge with modification.

<sup>18</sup> For a discussion on the Chinese World Order, refer to John King Fairbank ed., *The Chinese World Order: Traditional Foreign Relations*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968. “A Preliminary Framework”, pp. 1-19.

<sup>19</sup> Tan Ta Sen, *Admiral Zheng He and Southeast Asia*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005, p. 53.

countries and legitimization of his ascension to the throne. As the *Official History of the Ming Dynasty* has mentioned, the expeditions were political and diplomatic that Emperor Yongle wanted to ‘display his soldiers in strange lands in order to make manifest the wealth and power of the Middle Kingdom.’<sup>20</sup> Therefore, it can be deduced that the expansion of the trade route or promotion of trade was not entirely a goal that Emperor Yongle had in mind. In retrospect, the tributary system was often plainly a “thin cover for trade”<sup>21</sup> Emperor Yongle ordered the fleet simply to “display his power and for them to comply with Chinese tributary system.”<sup>22</sup> In sum, the expeditions focused less on trade, but more emphasis was placed on re-enforcing the tributary system that was inactive during the time of Emperor Hongwu. In conjunction, it was also aimed at strengthening the diplomatic relations with neighboring states.

However, in his contact with foreign countries, though accompanied by more than 15,000 soldiers, Zheng He tried his best to win the hearts of the people he encountered and adopted a policy of peaceful collaboration rather than military confrontation. Whenever he arrived at a country, Zheng He would communicate the Ming emperor-decreed mission to others and sought to reassure the locals and rulers by having the imperial decree read out in public; this would also include the reading of the imperial appointments which represented the Ming emperor’s endorsement and respect for the authority of the local rulers.<sup>23</sup> An example of the imperial decree issued by the Emperor Yongle in 1409 read: “I, the emperor, send my words to the kings and chieftains of foreign states in the far west, that I follow heaven’s order to rule the world, to execute heaven’s will to grant blessings and virtues. It is my wish that in all lands covered with sunshine and showered with moonlight, and moistened by frost and dew, its people, regardless of age, may be granted a stable livelihood, and a safe shelter. Today, I send Zheng He to spread my message. All must obey heaven’s will and follow my words and know your limits. Do not bully the minority. Do not attack the weak. All should share in the prosperity of peaceful times. If you wish to pay tribute to my court, you will be bestowed with gifts of goodwill. I send my edict to let you know my message.”<sup>24</sup> The imperial decree

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<sup>20</sup> Zhang Tingyu et al., eds., *Ming Shi* (Official History of the Ming Dynasty), Beijing: Zhonghua Book Publishing, 1974, Chapter 304, p.7766.

<sup>21</sup> Edward L. Dreyer, *Zheng He: China and the Oceans in the Early Ming Dynasty, 1405-1433*. p. 34.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>23</sup> Tan Ta Sen and Chia Lin Sien, eds., *The Zheng He Epic*, 1st edition in Chinese edited by Zhou Wenlin et al. (Kunming, Yunnan, China: Yunnan’s Publishing House, Yunnan Fine Arts Publishing House, Aurora Publishing House, 2006), p. 316.

<sup>24</sup> 《郑和家谱》*Zheng He Jiapu* (Genealogy of Zheng He), 〈敕谕海外诸番条〉, in 《郑和下西洋资料汇编》*Zheng He xiaxyang ziliao huibian* (Compilation of Resources on Zheng He’s Voyages to the Western Oceans), Volume 1, Shanghai: Ocean Press, 2005, p.531.

demonstrated the Ming government's intention to share blessings and goodwill, and that all peoples should live in peace and be able to have a stable livelihood. There was also a call for all to follow heaven's will and not to bully or attack others, especially the weak. By announcing the Ming Court's vision of peace and stability and his maritime mission undertaken to achieve that vision, Zheng He was able to give the locals peace of mind that his large fleet's visit was not a threat. The visits reconfirmed Emperor Yongle's vision that if there were peace and friendly ties amongst nations, trade would prosper, and all peoples would benefit.

Hum Sin Hoon in his study of expeditions, categorized Zheng He's strategies as "Art of Collaboration" and regarded it as an alternative model to Sun Zi's "Art of War" for the approach towards achieving a goal. Instead of using aggression, antagonism and colonization to help China prosper and rule the waves and hence the world, Zheng He used a softer approach and collaborated with other countries for mutual benefit. In contrast to the more well-known Sun Zi's *Art of War* which sees and seeks to overcome others as competitors and enemies, the lesser known Zheng He's Art of Collaboration sees and seeks to work with others as friendly neighbours and peaceful partners. This alternative worldview and mindset embodied in the Zheng He's *Art of Collaboration* is a major implication for our consideration and adoption in today's world.<sup>25</sup>

Besides highlighting the importance of peaceful co-existence, the maritime expeditions also manifested China's recognition of cultural and religious diversity. During one of Zheng He's expeditions, a trilingual inscription tablet written in Chinese, Persian, and Tamil was installed in Sri Lanka around 1411–1412. While the Chinese text of the inscription pays homage to the Buddha and Buddhist relics on the island, the Persian text invokes Allah, and the Tamil version offers reverence to the deity Tenavarai-nāyanār, an incarnation of the Brahmanical god Vishnu. The inscription, which is now in the National Museum in Colombo, is a unique and important artefact that it demonstrates Ming China's awareness of the presence of different peoples on the island, as well as their respective faiths and languages; it is also a symbol of connectivity in the Indian Ocean that Sri Lanka being a hub for itinerant merchant groups, shipping networks, and strategic interests.<sup>26</sup> Respecting the faith and culture of the people in the Western Oceans contributed to Zheng He's success in winning the hearts of the

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<sup>25</sup> Hum Sin Hoon, *Zheng He's Art of Collaboration: Understanding the Legendary Chinese Admiral from Management Perspective*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2012, p. 50.

<sup>26</sup> See Tansen Sen, "Serendipitous Connections: The Chinese Engagements with Sri Lanka", in Burkhard Schnepel & Edward Alpers eds., *Connectivity in Motion: Island Hubs in the Indian Ocean World*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp.369-395.

people along the way. Inclusiveness and peaceful collaboration marked the characteristics of his management values that still have a role to play in our modern world.

## **Conclusion**

### **Ancient China's Soft Power**

The *Art of War* said: "When the general is morally weak and lacks authority; when his instructions are not clear; when there are no consistent rules to guide both officers and men, and the ranks are slovenly formed, the result is disorganization."<sup>27</sup> The statement strongly emphasizes the importance of leadership. In fact, leadership has always been recognized as the most important factor contributing towards organizational effectiveness and success. Zheng He's maritime expeditions demonstrated his extraordinary leadership ability and can serve as an interesting case study for multi-cultural interaction.

Wang Daiyu 王岱舆 (a.1580-1658), the first Muslim thinker to write in Chinese to explain the teachings of the Qur'an, wrote in his momentous work *Zhengjiao Zhenquan* 正教真詮 (The Real Commentary on the True Teaching) about leadership: "The Sage said: You all have to show sympathy to your subordinates. We all are the creation of the True Lord. Our body and fate are the same, happiness and anger are naturally no different. Thus, what we do not accept, we should not lay on others. Otherwise, on the judgement day, the True Lord and myself will be the witness."<sup>28</sup> As a Chinese Muslim, Zheng He is well versed in both Islam and Chinese values. He was guided by Islam principles and the Chinese wisdom of human relationships.

Profound ideas and practices can stand the test of time. Ancient Chinese wisdom may sound outdated and irrelevant, however, how people think and behave have little changes all these years and many of the ancient wisdom may still be applicable in our modern times. Management is about human relationships and how we deal with people. Ancient Chinese values are basically enforcing human relationships and seniority. For example, in the core value of "benevolence" (*ren* 仁) in Confucianism, the Chinese character for "*ren*" is a combination of

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<sup>27</sup> Sun Zi, *The Art of War*, 10/18. Translation of the passage refer to Lionel Giles, *Sun Zi: The Art of War*, 44, with modification.

<sup>28</sup> Wang Daiyu, *Zhengjiao Zhenquan*, Yinchuan: Ningxia People's Press, 1988, p.97. For a discussion on Wang Daiyu, see Lee Cheuk Yin, "Islam Values in Confucian Terms: Wang Daiyu and his *Zhengjiao Zhenquan*," in Osman Bakar ed., *Islam and Confucianism: A Civilizational Dialogue*. Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC-IIUM Publications, 2019.



the “person” radical and the “two” ideogram, which denotes the relationships of two persons and the importance of human relations in ancient Chinese thought.

To win the hearts of the people and accomplish his task, Zheng He’s leadership traits and policy of respect and collaboration made the expeditions a great success. However, this was shadowed by the obvious attentions given to the political and economic activities of the voyages. Zheng He was entrusted by the emperor with the fundamental mission of pursuing a diplomacy of peace by spreading Chinese culture and forging friendly ties between China and countries in Asia and Africa. He was to lead the voyages to the west to spread goodwill, help others progress, and in the process, network and build bridges for trade and collaboration, so that everyone would coexist peacefully and harmoniously as they were ruled in accordance with the ways of heaven, and in this way, do justice to the grandeur and splendour of the Ming Imperial Court.<sup>29</sup> It reflects ancient Chinese’s soft power. It was these expeditions lofty visions that stimulated commercial relations between China and countries in Southeast Asia, South Asia and the Middle East. It was also these expeditions which demonstrated China’s maritime superiority in the fifteenth century,<sup>30</sup> and the eventual establishment of the so-called Maritime Silk Road, because of such an immense task. The impact of such expeditions is immense and everlasting. To a certain extent, we may say that the current Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a continuation of Zheng He’s diplomacy of peace and shared prosperity.



Zheng He’s tomb in Nanjing (Photo by CY Lee)

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<sup>29</sup> Hum Sin Hoon, *Zheng He’s Art of Collaboration: Understanding the Legendary Chinese Admiral from Management Perspective*, pp.9-10.

<sup>30</sup> Chiu Ling-yeong, *Zheng He: Navigator, Discoverer and Diplomat*, p.15.

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