Chinese Diaspora

Since Admiral Zheng He

With Special Reference to Maritime Asia

Edited by Leo Suryadinata

HuayiNet

CHINESE HERITAGE CENTRE

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Preface

Six hundred years after Zheng He's first expedition to the Indian Ocean in 1405, a group of Singapore institutions headed by the National Library hosted a conference to rethink some of the received views about Chinese maritime activities and overseas migration during the Ming and Qing dynasties and the 20th century. This volume of essays provides examples of new research as well as reexaminations of some well-known themes. As it turned out, more papers were offered dealing with recent history and current migratory patterns than with the earlier centuries. In any case, no attempt was made to draw conclusions about whether the Zheng He expeditions marked a turning point or an aberration, or estimate their immediate or long-term impact in history.

Recently, reading the new books and articles that have been produced to celebrate the anniversary, I looked afresh at the basic documents I had known before about the seven historic voyages. The reading confirmed that the larger picture of China's maritime concerns for the past 600 years has not been changed by the recent spate of reassessments. There is certainly greater appreciation today of what an extraordinary feat the Chinese fleets performed. Indeed, no Chinese navy has ever done anything as spectacular as this before or after. But when the Ming emperors ended the series 30 years later after the seventh voyage, attitudes towards China's ocean frontiers remained the same, and the court reverted to the policies that combined trade and tribute even when benefits did not always match the costs. The Confucian mandarins favoured the stable prosperity of China's agrarian society and, until the 20th century, most of them remained fearful and watchful of sea-going exploits.

We now know that external factors were very important in determining the trajectories of growth in China's maritime trade after Zheng He's last expedition and that the Chinese court did not, or could not, control those factors. But developments within China were perhaps no less important. Two in particular deserve special mention: the first drove many Chinese to trade overseas and the other seriously limited their ability to do so. During the first millennium till the early Song dynasty (10th-12th centuries), migrations

from the Central Plains had led to a rapid rise in population in southern China. This made more Chinese dependent on coastal resources for their livelihood, and many learnt to trade overseas. By the 13th century, during the Southern Song dynasty, that development had reached unprecedented heights and it was further stimulated by Mongol Yuan imperial ambitions during the 14th century. But, soon after that, a contrary second development followed. In 1368, the Chinese threw the Mongols out and the founder of the Ming dynasty introduced tough policies to control all offshore trading enterprise, and these controls lasted, with brief interludes of relaxation, for 500 years till the 19th century. So powerful were the centripetal urges in the Chinese state that the changing external realities in Asia that followed the rise of Western dominance during those centuries were largely ignored or neglected. The two contrary developments largely taking place within China, therefore, created a continuous tension in state-society relations along the China coasts, one that determined the nature of Chinese overseas trade as well as the patterns of Chinese migration.

Most of the papers in this volume deal with developments long after the 15th century. There is little to suggest that the Zheng He expeditions influenced the patterns of Chinese trade and migration in any meaningful way. Indeed, few people in China knew about Zheng He. If they did, they were just as likely to place him and his exploits in the realm of fantasy and superstition. Modern scholars have found it difficult to show that the expeditions, dramatic though they unquestionably were, had changed the course of Asian history. In fact, they find it easier to show that the withdrawal of imperial fleets had played a greater part in the fate of maritime China for the next five centuries. The adventurous Chinese of South China continued to be bold and opportunistic, as they had been long before 1405. These Chinese then went on to learn how to survive both at home and abroad in the face of the numerous imperial bans and controls that were imposed. They persisted to do their utmost to maintain their connections with the trading ports and kingdoms of East and Southeast Asia through every change in China's overseas trading policy. These were the Chinese whom local native rulers and merchants dealt with, and most of these same Chinese were quick to find partners with the Europeans who needed their help to build networks for new kinds of long-distance trading companies.

Although the Singapore conference highlighted the Zheng He anniversary, the bulk of the papers presented dealt with developments during the past two centuries. One way or another, they illustrate how the Chinese ventured forth to build bridgeheads to every potential market for their goods and services, even without state support or encouragement, and

even when facing dire threats of punishment and other dangers. Particularly striking are the continuities of enterprise and organization that we find in their activities after the end of mandarin controls and the era of Western dominance, when we see them coping with the power structures of new nation-states. The challenges of modernity, including new factors of ethnicity and redefined gender roles, have sorely tested these Chinese, who have shown how adaptable and resourceful they remained during the century when China ceased to wield any influence in the region.

For me, the most memorable feature of these presentations is what comes across as the real story of the Chinese diaspora, the story of initiative and innovation, showing their capacity to act without any help from state institutions. That framework of inner strength and resilience has an ancient heritage, rooted within Chinese history in response to an officialdom that was fearful of entrepreneurship in overseas trade. As I see it, the imperative to send the Zheng He expeditions out to distant oceans was but another expression of that official tradition. Ultimately, this tradition did not reflect any concern for the livelihood needs of the Chinese coastal peoples, and it never led to any understanding of how these people had the potential to benefit the larger economy of a China that had done so little to help them.

Wang Gungwu
20 April 2007

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Introduction

Leo Suryadinata

The year 2005 was the 600th anniversary of Zheng He's maiden voyage to Southeast Asia and beyond. It is thus not surprising that the conference on "Maritime Asia and Chinese Overseas 1405-2005" held in August 2005 also included a section on Zheng He's voyages and their impact. It is also not a coincidence that the conference covered the period from 1405 to 2005. The 23 conference papers in English, which have been revised and selected for publication in this volume, are diverse, but one can still find a major theme: they are related to the Chinese Diaspora, mainly in maritime Asia, since Admiral Zheng He.

Zheng He's Voyages and Their Impact

Zheng He is both a historical and legendary figure, but he was not much known in the West, until the publication of Gavin Menzies' controversial book entitled, *1421: The Year China Discovered the World* (2003). Menzies, a retired submarine captain and an amateur historian, claims that Zheng He's fleets were the first to circumnavigate the world and discover North America long before Columbus, and that Columbus used Zheng He's maps and information for his journey. The book, which shocked the West, became an instant bestseller. Some support Menzies' views but many more are critical, calling the book more fiction than history. The book will remain controversial for sometime to come. Meanwhile, Zheng He became a well known historical figure all over the world and Menzies made a fortune from the sales of the book.

Richard Leirissa, an Indonesian historian, argues that maps are the historical source materials that provide the main evidence for Gavin Menzies'

analysis of the "Treasure Fleets" sent by Emperor Zhu Di or Yongle (1402-1424) of the Ming Dynasty in 1421-1423. While acknowledging the importance of the many varieties of evidence provided by Menzies to support his theory, like anthropological, linguistic, biological and archeological remains, Leirissa is only concerned with the maps that Menzies uses to construct the circumnavigation of the world by the Chinese fleets. He focuses on two maps which are essential to the Gavin Menzies theory and argues that Menzies has failed to provide sufficient evidence that "the first European cartographers of the 16th century must have used the maps made by the Chinese on those fleets", or the information about their travels.

Unlike Menzies who claims that China discovered the world, a German Sinologist, Roderick Ptak, sees Ming China as basically "a leading maritime nation in parts of Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean." "The Gulf, Red Sea and East Africa marked the limits of early Ming navigation in the West; whether some ships went beyond that limit, remains uncertain." Nevertheless, the focus of Ptak's essay is his comprehensive survey on the perceptions of the Zheng He voyages through the ages as reflected in the literary field, from the Ming dynasty to the Qing dynasty. He has also included other forms of perception that are reflected in history writing, films, school books, comics, performances of all kinds, quasi-religious activities or business activities, but these are not his major concern. Ptak has intertwined the traditional literary versions of the "Zheng He theme" and other more contemporary dimensions of Zheng He, showing that "the imagery used in the past epochs stands in the centre of the discussion." In fact, Ptak has presented Zheng He more as a legendary than an historical figure.

Although the assertion that Zheng He was the first navigator who discovered the world has still to be proven, there is no doubt that Zheng He's fleet went to Southeast Asia and beyond. It is also a historical fact that Zheng He commanded large fleets manned by more than 20,000 seamen which sailed to the Indian Ocean. A Belgium historian, Mathieu Torck, is interested in the question of food supply for these crew members. Torck maintains that taking into account that Western expeditions often encountered serious dietary problems with crews not exceeding a few hundreds, a tantalizing question remains: how could a crew of that size sail so far beyond China's maritime boundaries and at the same time be kept in good physical conditions? Torck argues that Zheng He's sources remain extremely scanty on this topic but he notices that there are data from pre- and post-Zheng He periods which may throw light on the provisioning of Zheng He's expeditions. Indeed, Torck's paper attempts to draw up a virtual diet of the average seaman in the fleets from these data.

Zheng He's fleets sailed to Southeast Asia seven times. They were sent to the region against the backdrop of the so-called tributary system of the Ming dynasty. Johannes Widodo, an historian and architect from Indonesia, finds the legacy of Zheng He's cosmopolitan and tolerant spirits in the urban patterns, architecture, and cultural artifacts throughout Southeast Asian coastal cities and settlements. Unlike the conventional historian whose findings are based on written records, Widodo bases his research on the empirical study of morphology and typology of several old urban nuclei across the Southeast Asian region which "clearly demonstrates the harmonious relationships between the Chinese diaspora settlers, indigenous Muslim communities, and different racial and cultural groups—the original condition which is currently under serious threats of disintegration because of rapid economic development, cultural reprogramming policy, political conflicts and historical amnesia."

The legacy of Zheng He in Southeast Asia is abundant. Nevertheless, much of it is legendary rather than historical. In the historical records of Zheng He's voyages, Siam was one of the places that his fleet visited, but the three Buddhist temples in Thailand which are attributed to Zheng He or Sam Po Kong might not have been established by the grand admiral. Charnvit Kasetsiri, a Thai historian, states that the first temple is reported to have been built in 1324, or 81 years before the first 1405 expedition of Zheng He. The other two were built in the first half of the 19th century and "they are like spiritual extension, continuation and reproduction of the original one in Ayutthaya." Charnvit points out that the devotees of these temples may have kept the memory of Zheng He alive for hundreds of years, but he doubts whether Zheng He had personally visited Xianluo or Siam during his expeditions. In his paper Charnvit attempts to explore the "myth and reality of Sam Po Kong/Zheng He in Thailand." He tries "to show how historians have come to believe in 'what actually happened'", and at the same time "presents views of common people: those of Sino-Thai who are true believers and those [of] local Thai who never know or even have heard of Zheng He."

In fact, there is a temple in Semarang, Indonesia, which is also believed to have been built by Zheng He, but there are no historical records which show that Zheng He's fleet ever landed in Semarang or its vicinity. Nevertheless, the locals, both Chinese Indonesians and Indonesians, believe that Zheng He landed there and built a mosque which was later transformed into a Chinese temple with many local features. Zheng He was a Muslim from Yunnan, but he was known to be tolerant. During his expeditions, he not only built mosques but also Buddhist temples which reflect the multi-religious

and multi-cultural characteristics of Zheng He's legacy. Nevertheless, it is believed that Zheng He made significant contributions to the spread of Islam in the archipelago which led to the rise of Islam and the decline of the Indianized kingdoms.

China, Chinese Trading Activities and Migration

Zheng He's voyages may be appropriately discussed in the context of the Tributary System. Some historians interpret the tributary system as a form of trade which the state conducted with other countries. Andrew Wilson, an historian from the United States, presents an essay on the Ming mission to Manila in 1603—about a hundred years after Zheng He's first voyage—to investigate claims of stockpiling of gold and silver, followed by a policy of intervention in the bullion economy. Wilson argues that had the mission been successful, the revenues could have been used to strengthen the Ming armed forces to secure the northern boundaries. Unfortunately for the Chinese, the mission failed, which resulted in the weakening of the northern boundaries. That is why Wilson calls his paper "Southern trade and northern defence".

It should be pointed out that Zheng He's voyages, or adventures, which lasted for 28 years, were abandoned as they drained the Ming treasury. Nevertheless, Dutch historian Leonard Blusse believes that the 18th century "witnessed an enormous expansion of Chinese overseas trade, sending Fujianese and Cantonese junks to overseas destination(s) along the South China Sea." Unlike the state-sponsored trade or official trade in the past, the 18th-century junk trade was conducted by private traders from the southern coastal region of China. It is unfortunate that Chinese traders did not keep records of their trading activities, unlike their European counterparts. Blusse claims that "the Chinese literary tradition ignored the private maritime entrepreneurs who ventured abroad and created the overseas Chinese settlements in Nanyang. Because of this lack of Chinese reliable sources it is very difficult to piece together a general picture of the heyday of Chinese overseas shipping." However, he points out that the Dutch and British East India companies have yielded a lot of scattered information on the Chinese merchants and sailors with whom the Europeans came in contact, and urges Chinese historians to make a fresh approach to reconstruct the maritime history of the Chinese in Southeast Asia.

Evelyn Hu-DeHart, an historian from Brown University, takes us from Southeast Asia to Europe and America and back to Asia again. She examines the consequences of 1492, when America and Asia met in what she called

a "transpacific confrontation" (face-to-face meeting), focusing on Iberians in Asia—Spanish and Portuguese—and their large empires in America. The Iberians interacted with Asians, including Chinese migrants; and some of these Asian migrants also arrived in Spanish America where the images of China and Chinese have remained so strong, and where a lot of myths are being associated with them. In Mexico, for instance, a national symbol of womanhood is called *la china poblana* or the Chinese girl from Puebla.

Chinese trading activities in Southeast Asia, in fact, have never stopped. Daw Win, an historian from Myanmar, briefly examines the coastal trade between Yangon, Penang and Singapore during the 19th and the first 60 years of the 20th centuries, pointing out the fact that it was carried out by the overseas Chinese, mainly from southern China. Daw Win focuses her essay on various enterprises in Rangoon, Penang and Singapore, especially those in the shipping and financial sectors where "overseas Chinese" were rather successful. She asserts that Chinese enterprises encountered serious competition from the West; some Chinese enterprises declined while others remained strong. However, with the rise of local nationalism, overseas Chinese enterprises, like all foreign enterprises, were adversely affected. While the Chinese Banking Corporation and Tiger Balm, both in Singapore, and Ban Hin Lee Bank in Penang managed to survive, all foreign enterprises in Myanmar were nationalized in 1964.

The links between *Qiaoxiang* (homelands of the overseas Chinese) in southern China and the Chinese in Southeast Asia and Taiwan have been strong. Nevertheless, during the Japanese occupation of some parts of China, in order to cut off the Chinese ties with the mainland, the Japanese attempted to promote trade between Taiwan and Manchuria between 1932 and 1939. Man-houng Lin, a Chinese historian from Taiwan, examines this largely overlooked historical development in Chinese history. Lin argues that the Japanese used steamships, refrigeration facilities, tariffs, banks, and other means to enable Manchuria to replace China as Taiwan's most important trade partner during the above mentioned period. Nevertheless, Lin concludes that during this entire period, the fact that the Taiwanese were investing in and migrating to Fujian and Guangdong more than Manchuria shows the importance of the *Qiaoxiang* ties.

After the arrival of the West, the Chinese overseas began to build their business empires. Lee Kam Hing, a Malaysian historian, pays attention to an interesting figure, Lee Hau Shik (HS Lee), who was a tin-miner, community leader, politician and government minister, and eventually a banker. Nevertheless, he focuses more on HS Lee's role as a businessman.