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FROM EAST ASIA TO EAST AFRICA

In the early years of the fifteenth century, before the Portuguese came to India, Chinese navigation and trade were highly flourishing in the Indian Ocean. The scale and frequency of Chinese activities in the Western Ocean had increased so dramatically during this period that it appears, as some authors said, as though China was attempting for purposes of trade and diplomacy to turn the Indian Ocean into a Chinese lake. The great maritime adventures were launched by the third Emperor of the Ming dynasty, Yung-lo, who seven times sent the Chinese fleet to the South Seas, thus developing the international contacts between East Asia and the countries surrounding the Indian Ocean. The Commander-in-Chief of these expeditions was a man called Chêng Ho, who was a eunuch and a Moslem and won the reputation of being a great military leader and diplomat. His father was a ḥājī and his original family name was Ma, which is common among Chinese Moslems. Our knowledge of these Chinese maritime activities was greatly advanced in the 1930s by the studies of PELLIOT, DUYVENDAK, FÊNG CH'ÊNG-CHŪN, and others, and scattered Chinese texts and inscriptions were collected and studied. But there were still many problems left to be solved. After World War II, in 1948, the text of *Hsi-uang fan-kuo chih*, "A Description of Foreign Countries of the Western Ocean", by Kung Chên, a member of the expeditions, was rediscovered in Peking. So we have now at our disposal three reports on the southern countries written by Ma Huan, Fei Hsin, and Kung Chên. Taking in account the recent studies of Professor HSIANG TA and others, our present knowledge of the great Chinese voyages can be summarized somewhat like the following.

(1) The first expedition was ordered by the imperial edict issued in July 1405. An armada consisting of 62 ships with more

than 27,800 men started from the port Liu-chia near Nanking, which at that time was the capital of China. The fleet left the coast, from the bay close to Fu Chou, early in the next year, visited Champa on the coast of Indo-China, descended to the south to East Java and then turned to the West, visited Palembang, Malacca, Samudra (North Sumatra), crossed the Ocean to Ceylon, and went to the West coast of South India, arriving at Cochin and Calicut. The final destination of this voyage was Calicut, an important emporium reached by Vasco da Gama at the end of the same century in 1498. On the way home to China, the ships passed the Malacca Strait and went north from Singapore. Chêng Ho, the leader, was back in Nanking and was received in audience by the Emperor in October 1407. During this voyage, the imperial edict and presents were distributed to the rulers of southern countries and their allegiance to the Middle Kingdom was demanded. Peaceful relations developed with several countries, but in some cases military action was taken. It is recorded that 170 persons were killed in East Java, and much fighting took place in Palembang. In this seaport of Sumatra, there already existed a fairly large community of oversea Chinese, and its leader Ch'ên Tsu-i was antagonistic to the imperial fleet. 5,000 of his army were reported to have been killed and he himself was captured, taken to China, and executed.

(2) The second expedition started in 1407 and returned in 1409 after visiting Java, Cochin, Calicut, and Siam. This was a small-scale enterprise and Chêng Ho himself did not participate in the voyage.

(3) While this second expedition was still at sea, the third expedition was ordered by an edict of October 1408, and this time 48 new vessels were built by the Ministry of Construction. The fleet left the Chinese coast in January 1410, and followed almost the same route as that of the first voyage: Champa, Java, Malacca, Samudra, Ceylon, Quilon, Cochin, as far as Calicut. This time Chêng-ho brought a special message to Malacca and set up a memorial stone in order to protect the legitimate ruler of Malacca against the attacks made by Siam. In Ceylon he left a trilingual inscription in Chinese, Persian, and Tamil, dedicated to the Lord Buddha as the protector of navigation. This stone slab was found in Galle, and is now preserved in the National

Museum of Colombo. On the way home from Calicut, there was much fighting in Ceylon, and Chêng Ho captured the King of this country, Alagakkōnāra, who opposed the Chinese imperial order. This is a striking event in Ceylonese history and it is recorded in different forms in Chinese and Ceylonese records: by Ta-Ming Shih-lu, Rājāvalī, Saddharmaratnākara, and others. The captive King was taken to Peking, which had become the capital of China in 1411. But the Emperor released him and appointed a new King, Parākramabāhu VI, in his place. The party of Chêng Ho returned to China in July 1411; envoys came from Calicut, Cochin, Kayal (on the east coast of South India), Lambri, Samudra, Aru, Pahang, Kelantan, and East Java; and the King of Malacca arrived in person.

(4) The next great voyage, Expedition No. Four, began by the order issued in December 1412, and from this time on the Chinese became active in the Western part of the Indian Ocean. Chêng Ho's fleet went to Java, Palembang, Malacca, Ceylon, Cochin, and Calicut, and then proceeded to the Persian Gulf, visited Ormuz, a flourishing trading centre of this period. On his way home, he fought an action at Samudra in order to consolidate the power of the Moslem ruler, who was called Zaynu-l'Ābidīn. Chêng Ho returned to the Chinese capital in August 1415, and many countries of the south sent tribute to the Emperor. It should be noted that during the expedition some ships were detached from Chêng Ho's armada at a point somewhere around Sumatra, went round the Western coast of the Indian Ocean, and returned to China in November 1416. On this occasion, according to the imperial record Ta-Ming Shih-lu, envoys and tributes came to China from 18 countries: Champā, Java, Palembang, Pahang, Malacca, Samudra, Lambri, Ceylon, Cochin, Calicut, the Maldives (Laccadives), Malindi, Brawa, Mogadisho, Aden, Ormuz, La-sa, and Sha-li-wan-ni. La-sa was once identified with al-Aḥsā on the coast of The Persian Gulf, but I suggest that it should be placed on the east coast of Arabia. In the encyclopaedia of Nuwayrī, who died in 1332, there is a place-name Las'ā on the coast of Ḥaḍramaut. As for Sha-li-wan-ni, it could be located on the island of Ceylon. In the text of Muḥiṭ usually known as "Indischer See-spiegel", which was compiled by the Turkish Admiral Sidī 'Alī in 1554, there is a place called Salāwānī on the west coast of

Ceylon. Three ways of reading the place-name have been proposed, Salāwānī, Salāwām, and Salāwat. I prefer the reading of W. Tomaszek, Salāwānī, based upon the manuscript preserved in Vienna.

(5) The next expedition, Expedition No. Five, followed almost the same route as that of No. Four. Chêng Ho's fleet started in 1417, returned in 1419, and probably travelled as far as Ormuz on the Persian Gulf. This time, too, part of the fleet was detached and went round to the coast of East Africa and Arabia, thus in 1419 envoys and tributes came to Peking from 16 countries including Aden, Dhofar, Las'ā, Mogadish, and Brawa. As a result of these far-reaching expeditions many new trading centres became known to China, and in the inscriptions set up by Chêng Ho himself, there is found a passage about fancy animals. "The country of Hu-lu-mo-ssū (Ormuz) presented lions, leopards with gold spots, and large western horses. The country of A-tan (Aden) presented *ch'i-lin*, of which the native name is *tsu-la-fa* (giraffe) as well as the long-horned animal *ma-ha* (oryx). The country of Mu-ku-tu-shu (Mogadisho) presented *hua-fu-lu* ("striped" zebras) as well as lions. The country of Pu-la-wa (Brawa) presented camels, which run one thousand li, as well as camel birds (ostriches)." Among the animals which came to Peking, the giraffe = *ch'i-lin* attracted special attention. The identification of the giraffe with the legendary Chinese animal *ch'i-lin* may be partly due to the *Somali* name of the giraffe *giri*, but there are also several points of resemblance in bodily descriptions. According to the Chinese classics, the *ch'i-lin* is the extremely auspicious animal which only appears at the time when the Emperor's virtues are exceptionally lofty and predominant. Thus the arrival of the giraffe created a sort of literary turmoil, and flattering poems and writings appeared and were presented to the Emperor. The Emperor first refused the congratulation, but finally went out in person to the gate Feng-t'ien and in great state received this auspicious animal coming from Malindi.

(6) Expedition No. Six started in 1421 and returned in 1422, and this time 41 large ships were built. The fleet was divided at Sumatra, one group going along the West coast of the Indian Ocean. It is recorded in Ta Ming Shih-lu that in 1423, 1,200 persons came to Peking as envoys from fifteen countries, Malacca

and the West, including again Brawa, Mogadisho, Aden, Las'ā, Ormuz, etc.

(7) The Emperor Yung-lo died in 1424, and the great naval enterprise was given up for some time, but the Emperor Hsüan-tê (the Emperor after next) resumed the expeditions, again under the command of the eunuch Chêng Ho. As for this final great voyage, rather detailed accounts are available. It is recorded that the fleet consisted of 61 vessels carrying 27,550 men. It left the coast of China in January 1432, went around the Southern countries, reached Ormuz early in the year 1433, and returned to the Chinese port T'ai-ts'ang near Nanking in July 1433. During this voyage a special mission consisting of seven interpreters was sent out from Calicut to Mecca; they travelled the Arabian coast after a visit of the Holy City, and rejoined Chêng Ho's fleet, which was mooring at Ormuz. It is recorded that it took 36 days to go from Samudra to Ceylon (Berwala), 35 days from Calicut to Ormuz, 23 days from Ormuz to Calicut, and 17 days from Calicut to Samudra, etc.

This is roughly the general features of the seven great voyages, but taken as a whole, what was the real nature and meaning of this great enterprise? The traditional explanation, that the fleet went around in pursuit of the fugitive former Emperor Chien-wen is difficult to accept. It appears to me that these navigations had a strong objective of trade as well as of glorification of the imperial rule. The enterprise was directly controlled by the Emperor, and the exchange of commodities took the form of a tributary system: tributes and envoys from barbarian countries on one hand, bounty and grants from the Son of Heaven on the other. It is noteworthy that in the Ming period eunuchs played a very important role in international relations and economic activities. There existed close ties between eunuchs and the imperial household, and the Emperor could employ eunuchs without going through the complicated administrative procedure. In the early years of the Ming dynasty, private foreign trade was strictly forbidden, thus the tributary relations were the only means of trade officially approved. There was a great variety of commodities, mainly luxury goods, – spices, aromatics, ivory, rhinoceros horns, textiles, etc. – and from China they exported different kinds of silk, porcelain, iron ware, etc.

Recent archaeological findings of Chinese porcelains and coins in the South Sea countries are important materials for the study of Chinese foreign trade. It is also interesting to note that the Chinese art of navigation was highly developed in this period; a trading ship carried 5 to 600 persons, the compass was in use, and the latitude was calculated by the unit *chih* "finger", by which the altitude of a star above the horizon was measured. This is similar to the unit *işbo'* used by Moslem pilots in the Indian Ocean. The great Chinese maritime activities in the fifteenth century suddenly declined after the Seventh Voyage led by Chêng Ho. The main reason for this was that the expeditions were the enterprise of a single person, the Emperor. It was not sponsored by merchants, not connected directly with the general increase in production.

Finally it should also be remembered that, thanks to the great voyages, the geographical knowledge of the Chinese people extended far to the West. A member of the expedition Fei Hsin left a description of the Southern countries, Hsing-ch'a shêng-lan (Triumphant View of Starry Raft — starry Raft meaning big trading ship —). In this book there are, among many other things, four chapters on African countries: Mogadish, Brawa, Malindi, and Jubo, on the sea coast of Somalia and Kenya. After the comparison of the various versions, we can now rather safely use Fei Hsin's account as based on first hand observations of this part of Africa. In another Chinese book, which is called Wu-pei chi, "Description of Military Preparation", there is an interesting map of Southern countries which shows the geographical knowledge acquired during the great voyages led by Chêng Ho. This map covers the countries of the Indian Ocean as far as the East Coast of Africa. Mombasa appears together with Mogadish, Brawa, and Malindi. All these materials may be used not only for the study of the Chinese navigation, but also as sources of the history of Africa before the Europeans came to this part of the world.

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