

Zheng He's Seven Voyages to the West Sea and Malacca: The Rise of the Malacca Straits

Ming Wan*

To cite this article: Ming Wan (2021). Zheng He's seven voyages to the West Sea and Malacca: The rise of the Malacca Straits. *Malaysian Journal of Chinese Studies* 10(1): 45–58. [http://doi.org/10.6993/MJCS.202106_10\(1\).0004](http://doi.org/10.6993/MJCS.202106_10(1).0004)

To link to this article: [http://doi.org/10.6993/MJCS.202106_10\(1\).0004](http://doi.org/10.6993/MJCS.202106_10(1).0004)

Abstract

The significance of Malacca Straits was inseparable from the rise of the Malacca Sultanate and Zheng He's seven voyages to the West Sea. It is commonly acknowledged that Zheng He visited Malacca on five occasions and that he first arrived at Malacca during his third voyage. The purpose of this study is to establish the fact that Zheng He made seven visits to Malacca during his voyages to the West Sea. This exploration will provide insights on the rise of the Malacca Straits and how Zheng He's voyages changed the world. This development was the direct result of the positive China-Malacca bilateral relations during this episode of history. It also marked the shift in the focus of attention from the Eurasian continent to the maritime Asia symbolising the beginning of a community with a shared future.

Keywords: Malacca Straits, Malacca Sultanate, Zheng He's voyages, international trade centre, global history

Introduction

The Straits of Malacca or Selat Melaka in Malay is one of the most strategic waterways in the world. It is hemmed in by the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra island and it is connected to the Andaman Sea to its west and the South China Sea to its east. Then and now, it is the geographical pivot that links the four continents of Asia, Europe, Africa and Oceania, and the main channel that connects the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean. Thanks to its strategic significance, its long history stretches back to ancient civilisations of China and India. For centuries, Arab merchants had sailed from the Indian Ocean to China via this narrow channel. In view of the current profound changes in Sino-American relations and China's position in the

region, the traditional reliance on the Malacca Straits could pose uncertainties and risks for safe and uninterrupted passage in the conduct of maritime affairs. Research on reviewing the history of Malacca Straits is an academic exercise but it also has practical significance.

At the beginning of the 15th century during in the Ming Dynasty of China, Zheng He's seven voyages to the West Sea (Xi Yang) signified China's attention on the sea. This was a move that potentially linked the continental and the maritime Silk Roads and which converged in the Indian Ocean. This historical episode also marked a shift of the ancient Silk Road from its overland to maritime routes and inevitably elevating the strategic importance of the Malacca Straits.

This study is underpinned by a research framework of textual analysis of primary historical materials. Although certain recent publications also refer to the subject of the study, citing these sources is not consistent with the research aim which is to verify historical facts based on first-hand materials. These historical sources include Ma Huan's *Yingya Shenglan* (*The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores*), Fei Xin's *Xingcha Shenglan* (*The Overall Survey by the Star Raft*), Gong Zhen's *Xiyang Fanguozhi* (*A Record of Foreign Lands of the West Sea*), Zhang Xie's *Dongxi Yang Kao* (*East-West Maritime Investigations*), the *Zheng He Navigation Charts* as well as other titles such as *Ming Taizong Shilu* (*True Record of Emperor Taizong's Reign*), *Zhengde Da Ming Huidian* (*Collection of Official Institutions of the Ming Dynasty*), and Wang Dayuan's *Daoyi Zhilue* (*A Synoptical Account of the Foreign Lands and Their Peoples*).¹

After a review of the history of the Malacca Straits, this study will examine the close correlation between of the rise of the Straits and the prosperity of the Malacca Sultanate in the early 15th century. This is followed by an investigation on the influence of Zheng He's voyages on the ascendancy of the Sultanate to become a maritime centre of international trade and a regional power. This event and the emergence of the maritime Silk Road reflects the far-reaching influence of China's maritime diplomacy during the time of Zheng He's voyages. This study will throw light on the heyday of the maritime Silk Road to offer a new perspective on the history of the Malacca Straits in the context of the 21st century Belt and Road Initiative.

Malacca and Zheng He's Voyages

From the perspective of global history, the voyages led by Zheng He at the turn of the 15th century initiated maritime contacts between East and West Asia through the Malacca Straits to complement the ancient overland contacts in Eurasia. Little known in the East before then, this narrow waterway became identified with the ancient city of the coastal settlement of Malacca or Man-La-Jia to the Chinese during the Ming period. The founding of Malacca just prior to Zheng He's voyages augured well for the fortunes of the settlement during this time. Its commanding position overlooking the narrow straits was a decisive factor in its emergence as a regional centre and this advantage was soon much enhanced by the visits of Zheng He and his fleet. Both these events were to establish the importance of the Malacca Straits and to consolidate its role in regional affairs.

The Rise of the Malacca Sultanate

The name “Man-la-jia” (Malacca) featured prominently in the classical accounts of members of Zheng He’s voyages as they chronicled their travels and encounters or through the works of Ming Dynasty officials. Among them were Ma Huan’s *Yingya Shenglan*, Fei Xin’s *Xingcha Shenglan*, Gong Zhen’s *Xiyang Fanguozhi*, Zhang Xie’s *Dongxi Yang Kao* or *East-West Maritime Investigations* as well as the ground-breaking *Zheng He Navigation Charts*. All these sources recorded the place-name of “Man-la-jia”. According to the *Malay Annals* (*Sejarah Melayu* in Malay) believed to be authored by Abdullah Ham’mat Shah (1612/1966), when Parameswara, the founder of the Kingdom of Malacca, was resting under a shady tree, he saw his hound chased a mouse deer but was itself driven back into the water. He said, “This is a good place, even the mouse deers are very brave. Let us build a city here.” Then he named the city after the tree which he was resting under as “Malaca” (see also Zhang, 1941). “Malacca” has also been explained as “gathering” or “assembling” possibly after the Arab term for market or a commercial centre, “Molakot.” Regardless of how the name original from a historic perspective, the Straits of Malacca was named after the Malacca kingdom in the 15th century whose rise was inseparable from the Malacca Straits.

“During the reign of Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang (1368–1398), the first emperor of Ming Dynasty, Malacca was not recorded among the 30 countries which had diplomatic links with China. According to Chinese historical documents, Malacca was first mentioned in Chinese records in 1403 or in the first year of the reign of Emperor Zhudi, the third emperor of Ming Dynasty. According to the *Ming Taizong Shilu*, an official chronicle compiled by the Ming court, it was in October 1403 in the lunar calendar that the Emperor sent the eunuch Yin Qing to issue imperial proclamations in countries including Malacca and Kochi and to bestow woven gold valances and umbrellas to their kings. Two years later, Parameswara, the ruler of Malacca, instructed an envoy and his entourage to sail to China with Yin Qing to pay tribute to the Ming court. Ma Huan, an interpreter accompanying Zheng He’s voyages, recorded in his book *Yingya Shenglan* that Malacca was formerly not designated as a ‘country.’ The territory was controlled only by a chief and was subordinated to Siam. It paid an annual tribute of forty *liang* (a traditional Chinese weight unit equivalent to about 37.3 grams), spangled gold silk gauzed rapes and parasols, together with patterned fine silks and coloured silks, and if it did not pay, then Siam would send men to attack it” (Ma, n.d./1970, p. 108).

It was obvious that Malacca was a dependency of Siam and Parameswara was only a chief. It was after the visit of his envoy to China that he was confirmed by Emperor Yongle as a king. Furthermore, in response to the envoy’s request, Emperor Yongle also granted Malacca a stone tablet with an inscription as a sign of China’s protection of the Sultanate. Wang Gungwu (1987) claimed that “Malacca was the first overseas country to receive a stone tablet bestowed

by Emperor Yongle, and this fact is remarkable.” Indirectly, this act might reflect the Emperor’s awareness of the geographical importance of Malacca and its strategic position leading directly to the Indian Ocean. For Parameswara, “the arrival of Zheng He’s ships provided a powerful mechanism to cement connections between the imperial centre and its distant tributary” (Clulow, 2018).

An account of the geographical environment and living conditions of Malacca was given by Ma Huan who accompanied Zheng He in his third voyage in 1409:

“On the south-east of the country is the great sea; on the north-west the seashore adjoins the mountains. All is sandy, saltish land. The climate is hot by day, cool by night. The fields are infertile and the crops poor; and the people seldom practise agriculture...the men mostly practise fishing for a livelihood; they use a dug-out boat made from a single tree-trunk, and drift on the sea to get the fish” (Ma, n.d.,1970, pp.109-110).

An immediate impact of the new relationship between the Ming court and the Sultanate enabled Malacca to shake off the control of Siam. According to historical records, in October 1407, the kings of Sumatra and Malacca dispatched envoys to China to complain about Siam for invading them and seizing their seals issued by the Ming court. In order to maintain regional peace and the trust of Malacca, the Ming court ordered Siam to return the seals to Malacca. Siam was to abide by diplomatic protocols and observe good-neighbourly relations. Siam subsequently sent envoys to China in recognition of the Ming court’s role in keeping regional peace. In September 1409, Zheng He arrived as an envoy to Malacca during his third voyage. According to the official chronicles of Ma Huan and Fei Xin who accompanied Zheng He in his voyages, the ruler of Malacca was bestowed two silver seals, an official cap, a girdle, a robe and the title of “Sultan” by the Ming Emperor. Malacca subsequently became a kingdom and “thereafter Siam did not dare to invade it” (Ma, n.d./1970, p. 109).

Determining the Number of Visits by Zheng He to Malacca

The Malacca-China relationship was inseparable from the visits of Zheng He. A key issue in examining this relationship is the number of visits made by Zheng He to Malacca. The general assumption is that five such visits were made. A mural on the wall of the Malaysian National Museum in Kuala Lumpur depicts a ship flying a flag with Zheng He’s family name “Zheng” and the year “1409”. The implication is that Zheng He first arrived at Malacca during his third voyage in 1409, and thus visited Malacca only on five occasions. However, this assumption is subject to dispute.

The claim that Zheng He’s first visit to Malacca occurred on his third voyage is based on three historical sources. Both Ma Huan’s *Yingya Shenglan* and Fei Xin’s *Xingcha Shenglan* mentioned that Zheng He’s first visit was made during his third voyage. The third source, the *Mingshilu* was silent on whether Zheng He visited Malacca during his first two voyages. The

inscriptions carved on the stone tablet which was set up by Zheng He to record the seven voyages made no mention of Malacca in the first and second voyages. However, careful analysis of the records cast doubts on the veracity of these claims.

To date, there is insufficient evidence to show who was the Chinese envoy who extended formal recognition to the Malacca Sultanate on behalf of the Emperor. The purpose of this study is to ascertain the identity of this envoy. The general belief was that China-Malacca relation was established during Yin Qing's voyage, and that Zheng He's first voyage showed no direct contact with Malacca. Yin Qing was sent to Malacca in October of the first year of Yongle reign's (1403); he returned to China in September two years later (1405) but there is no evidence that he was ordered to extend the Ming court's formal recognition of the Sultan of Malacca. The envoy and entourage of Malacca came with his fleet to pay tribute to China and received Emperor Yongle's recognition of their ruler's status and the imperial seals. In response to the envoys' request, Emperor Yongle granted Malacca a stone tablet with inscriptions written in his own hand. This historic event is documented in *Ming Shilu* and another court document known as *Zhengde Da Ming Huidian* provided a similar account. Compiled during the reign of Emperor Zhengde, the tenth emperor of Ming Dynasty. The *Zhengde Da Ming Huidian* documents the laws and affairs of the preceding rulers of Ming Dynasty. The chapter on *Malacca Kingdom* recorded that in the third year of Yongle's reign, the envoy of Malacca arrived to pay tribute. However, the account in the *Ming Shilu* is incomplete as the records did not mention when the Sultan's envoy returned to Malacca and who accompanied him in this journey. The question remains as to whether it could have been Zheng He himself.

Possibility

Based on the time and duration of Zheng He's first voyage it was possible that Zheng He sailed to Malacca as the emperor's envoy. This was supported by official documents including the *Ming Taizong Shilu*. In June 1405, Emperor Yongle issued an order sending Zheng He on his first voyage to the West Sea. Three months later, in September 1405, the ruler of Malacca was formally recognized when his envoys visited China. There was seemingly no connection between these two events because Zheng He's first voyage was ordered before Emperor Yongle's formal recognition of the Malacca ruler. Based on this argument, it is not surprising to conclude that Zheng He did not go to Malacca during his first voyage. However, there is no historical record of Zheng He's first voyage in the imperial chronicles. Considering that Zheng He and his retinue might have taken a period of time after the Emperor issued the order in June to make preparations for the voyage, it is highly possible that Zheng He met the Malacca envoys in China in September. According to the *Ming Xuanzong Shilu* which is the official records of fifth Emperor's reign, Zheng He's seventh voyage was officially commissioned by the Emperor in June 1430. Remarkably, the imperial orders of Zheng He's seventh and first voyages were issued in June. But the embarkation of the seventh voyage took place only at the beginning of 1431 (Zhu, n.a./1993, p. 1415). It may therefore be logical to infer that Zheng He might have

spent a period of time to prepare for his departure on his first voyage. Although the Emperor issued the order in June 1405, Zheng He's fleet might have set off as late as in the following year because of the monsoons. This would have provided an opportunity for Zheng He to meet the envoys from Malacca in September 1405. Since the documents are silent on the envoy's return trip to Malacca, it may be inferred that they have been escorted back by Zheng He's fleet in his first voyage. It was also Zheng He's responsibility as the Ming court's envoy to extend formal recognition to the Sultan.

Inevitability

Voyages between China and Southeast Asia were naturally affected by the monsoons and ocean currents. Ma Huan's records show that Zheng He's fleet arrived at Zhan City (Champa or central Vietnam) and Java as the first and second stops before sailing to Malacca. In the chapter on the Malacca Sultanate, the *Yingya Shenglan* begins with an account of the location of Malacca:

“From Zhan City you go due south, and after travelling for eight days with a fair wind the ship comes to Long Ya Men; after entering the Straits you travel west, and you can reach this place in two days. Formerly the place was not designated a ‘country’; and because the sea hereabouts was named ‘Five Islands’ (Ma, n.d./1970, p. 108).

This description indicates that Malacca is located on the navigation route after Lung Ya Straits (Long Ya Men) and Five Islands (Wu Yu). Lung Ya Straits is the current Selat Panikam south of Singapore. It was once called the Dragon's Teeth because there are high peaks standing on both sides, like sharp teeth piercing the sky. Today, it is called Keppel Harbour. The sequence of Zheng He's arrivals at different places along this route is also evidenced by Ma Huan's poem commemorating the journey in *Yingya Shenglan*: “From She-po again [the envoy] the Western Ocean broached; passing on by San Fo-chi, Wu Yu he approached” (Ma, n.a./1970, p. 74). San Fo-chi is the ancient name of present-day Palembang in Sumatra island.

The Malacca Straits was already the thoroughfare of East-West traffic and where the monsoons from the Indian Ocean, the South China Sea and the Java Sea intersected. Maritime travel then was determined by the monsoons and ocean currents that enabled smooth sailing to and from the Asian mainland and Southeast Asia on alternative seasons. In the Indian Ocean, the northeast trade winds blow from the Indian subcontinent in winter and the southwest monsoons reverse the flow in summer. Zheng He's voyages entailed sailing to and from across the North Indian Ocean. His fleet sailed westward in winter and eastward in summer. Similarly, he embarked on his return voyages to China when the monsoons flowed northeast in summer, taking advantage of sailing downwind along the entire route. It was from Malacca where the fleet would set sail to China.

In his book entitled *Qian Wenji*, Zhu Yunming (n.d./1993) offered anecdotal accounts of Zheng He's seventh voyage. The details help to reconstruct a comprehensive understanding of Zheng He's voyages to the Indian Ocean. Zheng He's fleet assembled at Changle port in the estuary of Minjiang River in southeast China on February 26, 1431. Hindered by the monsoons, his voyage was delayed until winter when the northeast monsoons began to flow toward insular Southeast Asia. Setting off from the estuary of Minjiang River on the 9th day of December, Zheng He arrived at Zhan City 15 days later. Subsequently, on January 11, 1432, the voyage continued southward to the Sunda Islands with the monsoons and arrived at east Java's Su-lu-ma-i (Surabaya) on February 6. As the monsoons and ocean currents were not favourable for sailing westward, the fleet was forced to wait for the arrival of southeast trade winds that blow from the south of the equatorial region in summer to sail northwest. Specifically, the fleet set out on June 16 and arrived at Palembang on June 27, before continuing from here on July 1 and arrived at Malacca a week later. After a one-month break the fleet headed northwest on August 8 on a ten-day voyage to Sumatra. The monsoons would then assume a clockwise circulation from the North Indian Ocean to impede the travel further to the northwest. The fleet had to make a temporary stop in Sumatra until October until the monsoons gathered speed in winter and the North Indian Ocean currents moved anticlockwise. They departed on October 10 and arrived at Beligam in Sri Lanka on November 6, where they sailed onward on November 10 and arrived at Kuli (present-day Calicut in southwest India) on November 18. Four days later, on November 22, they sailed to Hormuz and arrived on December 26.

In February 18, 1433, the fleet started the return voyage to China. Upon arriving at Kuli on March 11, the fleet sailed full speed with the monsoons until March 20 before arriving at Sumatra on April 6. They left on April 12 and reached Malacca on April 20. The voyage from Malacca sailed through the dangerous waters of the surrounding Kunlun Sea near the Vietnam coast on May 10. The fleet arrived at Chikan May 23, at Champa on May 26, and finally returned to Taicang in Jiangsu Province of China on June 21 (Zhu, n.a./1993, pp. 1415-1416).

A careful examination of Zheng He's routes reveals that the monsoon regime and ocean currents were determining factors on the direction and duration of the arrival and department of the fleet. The conventional view that Zheng He arrived at Malacca on only five occasions lacks logical basis, and it is most possible that he made seven visits.

Certainty

To sail from China to the Indian Ocean, Zheng He's fleet must pass through the Malacca Straits. In the inscriptions written by Zheng He and his assistants, the destination of his first voyage was Kuli and an important goal was to capture the pirate leader, Chen Zuyi. Malacca was right on the route of Zheng He's voyage after Old Haven or Palembang. Starting the journey from Palembang, with a fair wind he would arrive here after eight days and nights (Fei, n.d./1938, n.d./1996). Ma Huan also described the location of Old Haven in *Yingya Shenglan*:

“Old Haven is exactly the same country as that formerly named San Fo-ch’i, and the foreigners call it by the name ‘P’o-lin-pang’. It is under the sovereignty of Java. On the east it adjoins the country of Java, on the west it adjoins the borders of the country of Malacca” (Ma, n.d./1970, p. 98).

After capturing Chen Zuyi in Old Haven, it was natural for Zheng He’s fleet to sail up to Malacca. Returning from his first voyage in September 1407, *Ming Taizong Shilu* recorded that Zheng He was ordered to sail to several countries, such as Kuli and Malacca. This is the reference to Zheng He’s visit to Malacca during his first voyage. It can be confirmed that Zheng He’s first voyage to the West Sea was at the beginning of the fourth year of Yongle, and he returned to China in September of the fifth year of Yongle.

Piracy was a threat in the Malacca Straits before the 15th century. Wang Dayuan, a Chinese navigator in the Yuan Dynasty, gave an account of the Malacca Straits before the 15th century in his book *Daoyi Zhilue*. Specifically, he described the piracy in the Malacca Straits in the chapter named *Long Ya Men*.

“When returning to China after sailing to the West Sea, once arriving at Karimon (island near Java), the ship’s crew have to drive an arrow shed, set up a curtain and use sharp weapons to guard against pirates. Two or three hundred ships of pirates will surely come, so they need to fight against the pirates for several days. If they are lucky enough to get along with the wind, they might miss the pirates. Otherwise, people will be killed and the goods will be seized, then people will die in an instant” (D. Y. Wang, n.a./1981, p. 214).

Long Ya Straits is the entrance to the Malacca Straits. The Malacca Straits was pirate infested and a dangerous route. With the capture of Chan Zuyi, the suppression of piracy established a degree of security in the Straits and promoted travel and trade, and directly contributing to the prosperity of the Malacca Sultanate.

Identification of Errors in the Historical Materials

Based on the analysis above, it was very probable that Zheng He and his fleet visited Malacca on each of the seven voyages to the South Seas. The error on the number of voyages made by Zheng He to Malacca may be traced to the dating recorded in the writings of Ma Huan and Fei Xin. Both these chroniclers had accompanied Zheng He to the West Sea and mentioned Zheng He arrived at Malacca during his third voyage. In the chapter on the *Kingdom of Malacca in Yingya Shenglan*, Ma Huan wrote:

“In the seventh year of Yongle reign (1409), the Emperor ordered the plenipotentiary envoy the grand eunuch Zheng He and others to assume command of the treasure-ships, and to take the imperial proclamation and to bestow upon this chief two silver seals,

a hat, a girdle and a robe. Zheng He set up a stone tablet and raised the place to a city; and it was subsequently called the country of Malacca” (Ma, n.d./1970, p. 108).

Similarly, Fei Xin in the chapter *Kingdom of Malacca* in *Xingcha Shenglan* also recorded 1409 as the date of Zheng He's first arrival. Ma Huan referred to Parameswara as “this chief” in 1409. This was obviously inconsistent with other records which recognised the Sultan as a king in 1405. In October 1405, Emperor Yongle granted the inscription of the stone tablet on the status of Malacca. It was unlikely that this tablet was brought by Zheng He to Malacca as late as 1409. Instead, attention should be focused on the fact that the Ming emperors had formally recognised the Sultan twice. A reasonable explanation is that in 1405 during Zheng He's first voyage, he was ordered by Emperor Yongle to confirm Parameswara as the king of Malacca. Two years later, in 1407, the imperial seal granted to Malacca was seized by Siam and Parameswara sent envoys to the Ming court to lodge his complaint. Zheng He was ordered by Emperor Yongle in 1409 to re-confirm the status of Parameswara which occurred during his third voyage. This historical fact was recorded in several Ming Dynasty official documents such as *Ming Shilu*, *Ming Taizong Shilu* and *Zhengde Da Ming Huidian*. These documents were compiled by imperial authorities and all gave the same dates. The accounts of Ma Huan and Fei Xin may be scrutinised further. Despite their reliable accounts of the places visited, this might not be the case with the recording of dates. This could be due to several reasons. Firstly, Fei Xin and Ma Huan only joined Zheng He during the third and fourth voyages respectively. Hence they probably had limited information on the events of the earlier voyages. They might not be clear on Zheng He's prior confirmation of the Malacca ruler's status in his first voyage or that Zheng He was ordered to re-confirm formally the Malacca Sultan in the third voyage. Secondly, Ma Huan and Fei Xin who only chronicled Zheng He's voyages after his third voyage, completed their accounts as individual writers and thus did not have the authoritative status as the official chroniclers of the Ming court.

The above analysis shows that the Chinese fleet sailing to Kuli must pass through the Malacca Straits. Following the first voyage, Zheng He established a strong connection with the Malacca Sultanate. In view of the strategic position of Malacca, the fact that Zheng He's fleet dropped anchor in Malacca during each of his voyages and on the way to or from the Indian Ocean was a logical and rational decision. According to Chinese historical documents, the friendly relations between China and Malacca during the period from 1411 to 1433 were cemented by the visits of envoys from Malacca on up to 15 occasions. Besides, Parameswara himself made the visit to China on five occasions. The grandest visit took place in 1411 when the Sultan led an entourage of more than 540 people, including his wife, to pay his homage to Emperor Yongle, who welcomed them with a royal banquet. The record states that “the emperor then granted them a newly-built large ship and ordered them to sail back to Melaka and defend the land” (Gong, n.d./1959, p. 17). During the reign of Yongle, there were 60 translators and interpreters in the Ministry of Rites, among whom one was proficient in the languages and

affairs of Malacca. This shows that China-Malacca relations were those between a major power and an emerging country. This symbolised a new form of international relationship that was different from that of the Yuan Dynasty's attack on Java to set up a local administration, and that of the later Portuguese policy of conquest.

After Zheng He completed his seventh voyage, the Sultan of Malacca, Sultan Muhammad Shah who had once took the title of Seri Maharaja, visited China in 1433 and was warmly entertained. He stayed in China for one and a half years and witnessed the occasions of the death of Emperor Xuanzong and the ascension of Emperor Yingzong. The imperial edict confirmed the special status of Malacca when the Emperor assigned eight large ships to accompany the ruler's return voyage to Malacca. In contrast, the envoys of 11 other countries had to make their own arrangements to sail home.

The development of close relations between China and Malacca was beneficial to the interests of both countries. The Ming court had demonstrated its recognition of Malacca by both ceremonial and military means. The Ming emperor also instructed Zheng He to suppress pirates to guarantee the security of the Malacca Straits as a key maritime route and thus accelerated the rise of Malacca. The monsoons too further reinforced the nodal position of Malacca for maritime navigation between East and West Asia and the essential intermediate station for voyages to India and distant lands.

From the rule of the first Sultan, Parameswara, Malacca was to be seen as a safe haven for the Chinese fleet to stow goods and to facilitate the onward voyage to the Indian Ocean. In this manner, the co-operation of Malacca contributed to Zheng He's success in maritime diplomacy while at the same time boosted the rise of Malacca. Zheng He's seven visits to Malacca during his voyages to the West Sea opened up a peaceful maritime route and encouraged multilateral co-operation and contributed to the expansion of international trade and the prosperity of Malacca. Specifically, Zheng He's voyages made the Maritime Silk Road safe, consolidated Malacca's "commercial appeal" to merchants from different territories and enhanced its international status as a regional entrepot port (Kennedy, 1970, p.3). The role of Malacca as a staging post for Zheng He was vividly described in *Yingya Shenglan*,

"Whenever the Chinese treasure ships arrived there, they at once erected a line of stockading, like a city-wall, and set up towers for the watch-drums at four gates; at night they had patrols of security guards carrying bells; inside, again, they erected a second stockade, like a small city-wall, within which they constructed warehouses and granaries; and all the money and provisions were stored in them" (Ma, n.d./1970, p. 113).

From Malacca, ships from Zheng He's fleet set off to different countries in the Indian Ocean and promoted maritime diplomacy and trade. Back in Malacca, the fleet waited for the Southwest monsoons in the middle of May before putting out to sea on its homeward voyage with cargoes of foreign goods (Ma, n.d./1970, p. 113). According to Keith Taylor, an American historian,

Malay history “as a collective memory, can thus be said to begin with Malacca” (1992, p.176). The Malacca Sultanate was in fact the embodiment of the glorious past of Malaysia and the historical memory of the Malacca Straits.

The Establishment of International Trade Centre in Malacca and the Highlight of the Malacca Straits

The establishment of relations between China and Malacca in the early 15th century was a symbol of active co-operation among countries along the Maritime Silk Road. For nearly 30 years, Zheng He's travels to the Indian Ocean furthered regional trade in commodities through Malacca. The desire for peaceful and friendly relations in pursuit of common interests between Ming China and the territories of Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean had given a strong impetus to the emergence of a regional trade network (Wan, 2019, p.121). The vibrant commercial and trade activities led to an influx of traders from different countries leading to the development of an international trade centre in the Malacca Straits for the first time in the history of the region which grew into one of the most prosperous ports of the time. Malacca had linked Asia, Africa and Europe in economic and cultural contacts and promoted trade across the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean. The maritime route provided the shortest and best conduit that facilitated economic exchanges between West Asia and the robust market demands in East Asia, enabling all countries to seek their “ideal resources and markets at a lower cost” (Z. G. Zhang, 2018, p. 85).

Nearly a century later, the Portuguese arrived at the East through the Cape of Good Hope. Vasco Da Gama reached Kuli in India in 1498. He was followed later by Afonso de Albuquerque who captured Malacca in 1511. This aggressive act of the first Western power, as recorded by Tomé Pires in *The Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires* of 1512, marked the beginning of the colonial era of Southeast Asia. In this early Western account on Malacca, Pires stated Malacca began to attract attention when Parameswara “settled down here” and three years later, the population reached 2,000. After his death, Malacca was a settlement of 6,000 (Pires, 1513/1944, p. 238).

Pires was a personal witness of the thriving trade of Malacca as it grew in international stature. In his accounts of the four Shahbandars or the major administrators in charge of trade and the collection of port duties, he documented their work in managing traders and merchants from Gujarat, Coromandel, Bengal, Bagu and Pasay, Java, Maluku, Banda islands, Palembang, Luzon as well as those from China and Champa. He observed that this management system was “extremely fair” (Pires, 1513/1944, p. 265). In terms of the prosperity of Malacca, Albuquerque, the Portuguese governor of Goa once commented,

“I hold it as very certain that if we take this trade of Malacca out of their hands, Cairo and Me'ca are entirely ruined, and to Venice will no spices be conveyed except that which her merchants go and buy in Portugal (Commentaries, 1774/1875, p.118).

His observation confirmed the appeal of this centre of international trade to traders from many countries. Pires claimed that, while walking along the streets, he could hear no less than 84 different languages to portray the cosmopolitan face of Malacca. Malacca was then a major maritime power after Zheng He's voyages and effectively controlling the strategic trade routes. It was "the secret of Malacca's quite exceptionally rapid rise to a position of world importance at the end of the fifteenth century" (Hall, 1968, pp. 212–213). On the significance of the Malacca Straits, Pires's view was that whoever had control over Malacca would naturally seize "the throat to Venice" and the Western world (Pires, 1513/1944, p. 287).

From the perspective of the history of human civilization since ancient time, the focus of East-West exchanges was oriented towards the Eurasian continent. But it was Zheng He's voyages to the Indian Ocean that shifted this focus to the maritime route. In the process, these voyages led to the rise of the Malacca Sultanate and to the growing importance of the Malacca Straits. Unwittingly, too, this opened the way later for the rapid infiltration of Western influence through economic activities and colonisation in the entire region.

Conclusions

From the perspective of human history, Zheng He's voyages to Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean marked an era of navigation on a grand scale. The navigation technology of Ming China was ahead of its time and the scale of the voyages was unprecedented. This study of Zheng He's maritime feat not only unveils China's great navigation achievements in the 15th century but yields insights on the understanding of global history. As to whether Zheng He's voyages changed the world, part of the answer is manifested in the rise of the Malacca Straits as a vital maritime passage. It was this passage that allowed Zheng He's mission to fulfil its diplomatic objectives and at the same time projected the strategic importance of the Malacca Straits. The Chinese and Portuguese accounts all noted the changes in the Straits during and after Zheng He's visits. Contemporary western scholars also interpreted that Zheng He's mission "had an enormous effect in stimulating Southeast Asian trade and commerce" (Reid, 1992, p. 464). The waters of the Straits were rendered from being dangerously pirate-infested to become a safe and secured trading route. Overall, Zheng He's voyages provided the impetus to the emergence of Malacca and the Straits as much they opened the way for European penetration that played such a crucial part in the shaping of global history.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their detailed comments and suggestions.

* Ming Wan [万明] is Professor, History Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing. Email: ming_7@163.com. This paper was translated by Yi Ji [季翊] of Shandong Youth University of Political Science, Jinan, China.

References

- Abdullah Ham'mat Shah, Sultan (1966). 马来纪年 [*Malay Annals*]. (Y.-T. Hsu [许云樵], Trans. and Annotator). Singapore: Singapore Youth Book Company. (Original work published in 1612).
- Clulow, A. (2018). Zheng He (1371–c. 1433). In G. Martel (Ed.), *The encyclopedia of diplomacy* (pp.1–2). London & New York: Wiley Press.
- Commentaries (1875). *The commentaries of the great Afonso Dalboquerque, second viceroy of India* [Walter de Gray Birch, Notes and introduction. London: the Hakluyt society (Original work published in 1774).
- Fei, Xin [费信] (1938). 星槎胜览 [*The overall survey by the star raft*]. (C.-J. Feng [冯承钧], Annotator). Beijing: Shangwu Publications. (Original work n.d.).
- Fei, Xin [费信] (1996). 星槎胜览 [*The overall survey by the star raft*] (J. V. G. Mills & P. Roderich, Eds.) Weisbaden, Harrassowitz, South China and Maritime Asia Series No. 4. (Original work n.d.)
- Gong, Zhen [巩珍] (1959). 西洋番国志 [*A record of foreign lands of the West Sea*] (D. Xiang [向达], Annotator). Beijing: Zhonghua Company. (Original work n.d.).
- Hall, D.G.E. (1968). *A history of South-east Asia*. London: MacMillan & Co Ltd.
- Kennedy, J. (1970). *A history of Malaya*. London: MacMillan & Co Ltd.
- Ma, Huan [马欢] (1970). 瀛涯胜览 [*The overall survey of the ocean's shores* (C.-C. Feng [冯承钧] & J. V. G. Mills, Trans. and Annotators). London: Cambridge University Press. (Original work n.d.)
- Ming Shilu* [明实录] (n.a.). *Chronicle of the Ming Dynasty*, Photocopy Collected in National Beijing Library.
- Ming Taizong Shilu* [明太宗实录] (n.a.). *Chronicle of Ming Emperor Taizong*, Manuscript.
- Pires, Tomé (1944) *The Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires*. (A. Cortesao, Ed.). London: Hakluyt Society. (Original work published in 1513).
- Reid, A. (1992). Economic and social change, c. 1400-1800. In N. Tarling (Ed.). *The Cambridge history of Southeast Asia (Vol. 1): From early times to C. 1800* (pp.460–507). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, K. (1992). The early kingdoms. In N. Tarling (Ed.), *The Cambridge history of Southeast Asia (Vol. 1): From early times to C. 1800* (pp.137–182). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wade, G. (2005). The Zheng He voyages: A reassessment. *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 78(1): 37–58.
- Wan, M. (2019). Zheng He's seven voyages into the Namoli Ocean —the Indian Ocean. *China & Asia, A Journal in Historical Studies*. No.1: 92–125.
- Wang, Dayuan [汪大渊] (1981). 岛夷志略 [*Synoptical account of foreign lands and their peoples*] (J. Q. Su, Annotator). Beijing: Zhong Hua Book Company. (Original work n.d.).
- Wang, G.-W. (1987). *Southeast Asia and Chinese people: Collected papers of Professor Wang Gangwu*. Beijing: China Friendship Publishing Company.
- Zhang, Xie [张燮] (1981). 东西洋考 [*East-West maritime investigations*]. (F. Xie [谢方], Annotator). Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company (Original work published in 1617).
- Zhang, Z.-G. (2018). Managing pattern transformation of maritime choke points: in the case of the Straits of Malacca. *Pacific Journal*, 26(10), 79–90.
- Zheng He Hanghaitu* [郑和航海图] *Zheng He Navigational Charts* (1961). (D. Xiang [向达], Annotator). Beijing: Zhong Hua Book Company. (Original work n.a.).
- Zhang, L.-Q. [张礼千] (1941). 马六甲史 [History of Malacca]. Singapore: Zheng Chengkuai Memorial Committee.

Zhengde Daming Huidian [正德大明会典]. [*Collection of Official Institutions of the Ming Dynasty*] (1989). (D.-Y. Li [李东阳], Ed.). Tokyo: Jigu Shuyuan. (Original work n.d.).

Zhu, Yunming [祝允明] (1993). 前闻记 [*Historical events of early ages of the Ming Dynasty*] (Z.-C. Deng, Annotator). Beijing: Peking University Press. (Original work n.d.).

Notes

- 1 The historical manuscripts are in the form of different drafts and editions without any “publication” date. There are 29 editions of Ma Huan’s manuscript and block copies. The *Mingshilu*, *Ming Taizu Shilu* are available in three revised versions but were not published in the Ming or Qing Dynasties. The original years of appearance of other historical titles are similarly unavailable.