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THE FORMATION OF CHINESE MARITIME NETWORKS TO SOUTHERN ASIA, 1200-1450

BY

TANSEN SEN*

The Imperial Ming [Dynasty] has unified [the lands within the four] seas [and under the] canopy [of Heaven], excelling the Three Dynasties and surpassing the Han and Tang.

Zheng He et al. in 1431

Abstract

The period between the thirteenth and mid-fifteenth centuries marked a distinct and important phase in the history of India-China relations. This new phase was triggered by the formation of Chinese maritime networks to southern Asia. While the Song period witnessed the formation of private trade and shipping networks, the aggressive foreign policy of the Yuan court led to the establishment of a government maritime network. The maritime networking to southern Asia culminated in the increased numbers of Ming emissaries, including the fleets of the admiral Zheng He, who visited Indian ports in the fifteenth century and intervened in the diplomatic affairs of several strategic Indian commercial zones.

La période qui s'étend du treizième jusqu'au milieu du quinzième siècles présente une phase distincte et importante des relations indo-chinoises. Cette nouvelle phase résulta de la création des réseaux maritimes chinois vers l'Asie du Sud. La période Song est marquée par la formation d'un commerce privatisé et des réseaux maritimes; or, l'agressive politique extérieure de la dynastie Yuan eut comme conséquence la création d'un réseau maritime officiel. Les voies maritimes qui s'ouvraient vers le sud d'Asie ont fait augmenter le nombre d'émissaires, dont la flotte de Zheng He; celui-ci visita les côtes indiennes au XV^e siècle et intervint dans les affaires diplomatiques de plusieurs stratégiques zones commerciales des Indes.

Keywords: Cochin, Calicut, Bengal, Zheng He, India-China diplomacy

INTRODUCTION

Maritime links between India and China existed since at least the first century BCE, when ports in southern Asia were important transshipment centers for

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Chinese and Roman goods.¹ For instance, Chinese silk yarn that reached India was shipped to Rome through the Indian ports of Barbarican and Barygaza. In the same way, Roman merchandise such as coral and glass entered Chinese markets through Indian ports (Lin 1998; on early trade between southern Asia and Rome, see Begley and De Puma 1992; Parker 2002). Exchanges between the coastal regions of southern Asia and China grew rapidly during the first millennium CE with the emergence of intermediate ports-of-trade in Southeast Asia, the Buddhist networking between South Asia and China, and the formation of a Muslim trading network in the eighth and ninth centuries. Traders involved in the first millennium maritime exchanges between South Asia and China were mostly multi-ethnic, including Persians and other Middle Easterners, and South and Southeast Asians (Liu 1988; Sen 2003), but not Chinese.

In the twelfth century, initially with the Song court's (960-1279) encouragement of maritime commerce (Shiba 1968, 1970, 1983), Chinese merchants began to travel to southern Asia. Chinese traders not only frequented Indian ports, but also used the Coromandel and Malabar coasts of southern India as major transit points for their trips to the Persian Gulf. The Indian ports thus consolidated their status as vital transshipment centers for goods originating from or destined for the Chinese markets. The Indian subcontinent also assumed a key position in the Yuan (1279-1368) and early Ming (1368-1644) courts' foreign policies. This can be discerned from the Yuan and Ming sources that document an unprecedented number of diplomatic missions to the Indian kingdoms through the maritime channels.

This study argues that the Song-era expansion of commercial activities and the aggressive policies of the Yuan court under Qubilai Khan (Shizu 世祖, r. 1260-1294) facilitated the creation of Chinese maritime networks to southern Asia, consisting of intertwined private trade, governmental, and shipping segments. Consequently, for the first time in the history of India-China relations, court officials, traders, and ships from China made recurrent trips to the coastal regions of India and contributed to the surge in maritime commerce and official exchanges between the two regions. These exchanges, it is suggested, lay the base for the selection of the Indian coast as a primary destination for the first two armada expeditions led by the Ming admiral Zheng He 鄭和 (1371-1433) in 1405 and 1407.

¹ "India," "South Asia," and the "Indian subcontinent" in this essay refer to the region that is now comprised of Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan. "China" for the most part was under the control of the Song, Yuan, and Ming dynasties.

This paper also analyzes the activities of Zheng He and other Ming emissaries on the Indian coasts. Recent scholarship has questioned the portrayal of the seven Zheng He expeditions as missions of peace, friendship and exploration. A recent study by Geoff Wade (2005) argues that these expeditions were part of Ming colonial ambition; in another, Edward Dreyer (2006) contends that the primary goal of the voyages was to exact tribute and to promote the flow of luxury goods from maritime states to markets in China. The analysis of the Ming-era contacts in Calicut, Cochin, and Bengal presented in this paper demonstrates the Ming court's willingness to interfere in local politics and to assert their own interest, which included the role of a negotiator in disputes between regional states. In many ways, such aggressive and ambitious Ming maritime policies were similar to those of the Yuan court under Qubilai Khan. As argued in this essay, however, the Ming court seems to have been more interested in advancing the rhetoric of a Chinese world order rather than colonizing or just profiting from maritime commerce.

Private Chinese traders played an appreciable role in the formation of the enhanced maritime networks to southern Asia from roughly 1100 onward. Unfortunately, the lack of textual and archeological evidence limits a thorough discussion of their contributions. While the presence of Chinese traders at South Asian ports is acknowledged in the textual sources, there are no detailed accounts of their commercial activities or interactions with local populations. Archeological evidence does not indicate the establishment of permanent Chinese settlements in the Indian ports during the Yuan and early Ming periods. This dearth of sources lends to the conclusion that Chinese merchants never established long-term diasporic communities in India. Rather, as suggested in this paper, they were more likely sojourners who frequented the Indian coasts from their bases in Southeast Asia. Trading diasporas, as Philip D. Curtin has noted, usually included two types of merchant communities: one "who moved and settled and those who continued to move back and forth" (1984: 2). The Chinese seafarers frequenting India, it seems, belonged to the latter category.

THE FORMATION OF THE MARITIME NETWORKS TO SOUTHERN ASIA

In the early twelfth century large Chinese ships of more than thirty meters in length, with nailed hulls, multiple masts, a carrying capacity of over hundred tons along with a crew of at least sixty people, were sailing across the seas surrounding China.² Written sources fail to make clear if any of these ships,

² See, for example, Xu Jing's 徐兢 (1093-1155?) *Xuanhe fengshi Gaoli tujing* 宣和奉使高麗圖經 (Illustrated Text of the Embassy to Korea during the Xuanhe [Reign Period]),

navigated by sailors from China, played a major role in the transportation of commodities to the Indian coast before the thirteenth century. The early-twelfth-century work *Pingzhou ketan* 萍洲可談 (Talks from Pingzhou) suggests that foreign ships, including those from Śrīvijaya, dominated the shipping lanes between China and the ports in the Indian Ocean (2: 18-19). Zhou Qufei 周去非 (c.1135-c.1189), the author of another Chinese work on maritime exchanges known as the *Lingwai daida* 嶺外代答 (Information of What is Beyond the Passes), reports that “Chinese seafaring traders planning to go to Dashi (i.e., the Persian Gulf) changed to smaller boats in Kollam” (90-91 and 126-127). While it is evident from Zhou’s statement that traders from China were venturing to southern Asia and the Persian Gulf in the twelfth century, it is not clear if they were traveling to the Indian ports on ships built and operated by Chinese merchants. In fact, even Zhao Rugua 趙汝适, who held the position of Superintendent of Maritime Trade and wrote the famous work called *Zhufan zhi* 諸蕃志 (Description of the Barbarous People) in c. 1225, is not explicit about Chinese ships venturing to southern Asia.³

A shipwrecked vessel excavated from the Quanzhou Bay in southern China, which seems to have sunk sometime after 1271, provides the archeological evidence of China’s entry into the shipping channels to southern Asia (*Fujian sheng Quanzhou haiwai jiaotong shi bowuguan* 1987; Wake 1997). The thirteen compartments of the sunken ship contained a cargo mainly of import items, including spices such as black pepper, frankincense, and ambergris, sandalwood, tortoiseshells, glassware, and cotton textiles. While most of these products were exports from Southeast Asian ports, ambergris, frankincense, and glassware may have originated in the Middle East or the eastern coast of Africa. The black pepper and cotton textiles likely came from southern Asia.

Indication that sailors and ships of Chinese origin were navigating to southern Asia during that time comes from the record of a diplomatic mission from the

completed in 1124, which describes ships used in the diplomatic interactions between China and Korea. On the development of shipbuilding technology during the Song period, see Lo (1955, 1957, 1969), Needham et al. (1971), Dars (1992), and Manguin (1993).

³ It should be noted that the *Lingwai daida* mentions “Guangbo” 廣舶, which some scholars have taken to mean “[Chinese-made] ships [from] Guangzhou.” Rather, it perhaps only stands for “ships [coming] from Guangzhou.” Thus, the relevant sentence in the *Lingwai daida* (90) should read: “Ships [coming] from Guangzhou [take] forty days to reach Lanli 藍里 (i.e., present-day Banda-Aceh in the Sumatra island of Indonesia).” A similar sentence in the *Zhufan zhi* (68), probably copied from the *Lingwai daida*, reads, “Ships [coming] from Quanzhou 泉舶 [take] forty days to reach Lanli.” Almut Netolitzky (1977: 40) is correct when he translates the passage in the *Lingwai daida* as: “Die Schiffe, die von Kanton kommen, erreichen nach 40 Tagen Lamuri.”

Yuan court to the Malabar coast in 1281. The *Yuanshi* 元史 (210: 4669) reports that a Yuan mission led by Yang Tingbi 楊庭璧, which sailed on a ship from Quanzhou, encountered unfavorable wind patterns around the Gulf of Mannar and it was recommended by the “sailor” (*zhouren* 舟人) Zheng Zhen 鄭震 and others that it make an emergency landing at a port in the Ma’bar kingdom. The fact that Zheng Zhen, clearly a person of Chinese origin, was mentioned as a “sailor” and not a “merchant” (*shangren* 商人) suggests that he was not merely a passenger, but held a position of employment on the vessel, whether as a seaman or a commander. This source also indicates that ships from Quanzhou were making direct voyages to the South Asian coast.

A decade later, Marco Polo provides the first eyewitness account of Chinese vessels sailing between coastal regions of Yuan China and ports in southern Asia. Marco Polo, who embarked at Quanzhou in 1292 for his return voyage through the Indian Ocean, describes in detail the ships engaged in transporting goods between Quanzhou and India. These ships, built with fir and pine wood and nailed hulls, and having multiple masts and cabins, were capable of carrying a load of as much as 1860 tons (*Marco Polo: The Description of the World* 1: 354-357; Wake 1997: 56-57). Almost half a century later, the Moroccan traveler Ibn Baṭṭūṭa reported of seeing thirteen Chinese ships anchored at the harbor in Calicut and remarked, “On the sea of China travelling is done in Chinese ships only” (*The Travels of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa* 4: 813). Evidently, by the first half of the fourteenth century Chinese vessels were no longer a rarity along the shipping lanes across the Bay of Bengal.

In fact, the discovery of a boat in the Thikkal-Kadakkarappally region of Kerala in southern India, tentatively dated to between the thirteenth and the fifteenth century, suggests that the shipbuilding techniques developed by Chinese and Southeast Asians during the Song period may have been transmitted to the Indian coast (Tomalin et al. 2004; Nair et al. 2004). Similar to the contemporary Chinese ships, the Thikkal-Kadakkarappally boat is flat-bottomed, it lacks a keel, and reveals the use of iron fastenings (Tomalin et al. 2004: 259). While some scholars (Lin 2005a: 19) have identified it as a Chinese ship, the analysis of the timber indicates that the vessel was built locally (Tomalin et al. 2004). Perhaps the Chinese ships frequenting the Indian coast introduced the design to the local ship builders. Since the Thikkal-Kadakkarappally boat is the only indigenous vessel of its kind excavated at an Indian coast site, and because written sources fail to specify the use of similar ships by Indian sailors, the impact of Chinese and other eastern Indian Ocean shipbuilding technologies on the local region cannot be fully ascertained.

THE EXPANSION OF MARITIME NETWORKS DURING THE YUAN PERIOD

It would be hard to envision the maritime exchanges between Ming China and the Indian kingdoms, highlighted by the expeditions of Zheng He, without acknowledging the contribution of the Yuan court and Yuan-era traders to the expansion of the maritime networks to southern Asia. By the time Qubilai Khan overthrew the Song dynasty and occupied the flourishing ports in coastal China, seafaring traders from China had already established diasporic communities at foreign ports in the Indian Ocean. In the *Pingzhou ketan* (19), for example, Zhu Yu 朱彧 suggests that traders of Chinese origin, whom he calls *zhufan* 住番 (lit. “living abroad”), were residing at the Southeast Asian ports. Li Tao 李濤 (1115-1184) in the *Xu zizhi tongjian changbian* 續資治通鑑長編 (Continuation of the Comprehensive Mirror for the Aid in Government) reports the existence of Chinese settlers in Jiaozhi (southern Vietnam) (see Clark 1991: 380-381).

Wang Dayuan 汪大淵 (ca. 1311-?), who sailed with seafaring traders from China in the 1330s and returned to write the work *Daoyi zhilüe* 島夷誌略 (Brief Records of the Island Barbarians), completed in 1349, hints at a Chinese presence in southern Asia. Wang reports seeing a pagoda at Nāgapattṇam on the Coromandel coast that was constructed or financed by traders from China. “In the plains of Badan 八丹 (i.e., Nāgapattṇam),” Wang relates, “surrounded by trees and rocks, is a pagoda constructed with mud bricks. [It is] several meters high. Chinese characters written [on it] say: ‘Construction completed in the eighth lunar month of Xianchun 咸淳 3 (1267).’ It is said, people from China visited the place that year and wrote [the characters] on the stone and engraved them. Up to the present time, they have not faded” (*Daoyi zhilüe* 285).

Wang Dayuan does not mention meeting these “people from China” at Nāgapattṇam, nor does Marco Polo, who visited the Coromandel coast in the early 1290s. Minimally, the Nāgapattṇam pagoda is indicative of the presence of Chinese sojourners, who visited the port based on the seasonal monsoons.⁴ The collapse of the Cola rule (c.850-1279) on the Coromandel coast and the Song court’s battles with the invading Mongols in the 1270s, which severely affected commercial activity in the coastal regions of China, could have played some role in the withdrawal of this seasonal residency of Chinese traders at Nāgapattṇam. The Yuan court’s initial decision to restrict the overseas voyages

⁴ Such “semipermanent” communities of foreign merchants were common on the Indian coast, since the Indian peninsula was situated in the middle of the southwestern and north-eastern monsoonal winds. The existence of these semipermanent communities of traders from Western Asia on the Malabar coast, for example, is noted by Richard M. Eaton (1993a: 73-74). For more details about the pagoda, especially the later records on the monument, see Sen (forthcoming).

of ethnic Chinese in favor of non-Chinese, especially Quanzhou's Muslim population that had a Middle Eastern heritage (Chaffee in this volume; see also Schurmann 1956: 225), also may have affected these sojourning traders.

The last quarter of the thirteenth century, after Qubilai took control of the major ports in coastal China, marked the beginning of an aggressive maritime policy undertaken by the Yuan court that was executed through the display of military might and a flurry of diplomatic missions to the states in the Indian Ocean. These activities were related to Qubilai's desire to expand his military and political influence beyond the southern coastal region. Another important motive seems to have been the Yuan court's interest in reviving maritime commerce, from which they derived significant fiscal revenue (see Chaffee in this volume).

Disputes among the several Mongol khanates seem to have played a key role in the formation of Qubilai's strategy toward the maritime states in the Indian Ocean (Sen forthcoming). First, Qubilai tried to continue his predecessors' policy of expansion, probably to assert his Mongol heritage. This included the naval attacks launched against Japan (in 1274 and 1280) and Southeast Asian states (against Champa and Java in 1281 and 1293 respectively). Second, Qubilai attempted to persuade the rulers of these states to submit to the Yuan khanate and recognize him as the great khan of the Mongol Empire. Third, because the Chaghadayid alliance blocked commercial and communication routes through Central Asia, the maritime route along the coastal regions of Southeast and South Asia to the Persian Gulf proved to be the main conduit through which Qubilai could maintain contact with the Īlkhāns in Persia, his main ally in the Chinggisid civil war.

The maritime route through the southern Indian coasts was equally vital for trade between Yuan China and ports in the Persian Gulf. Indeed, the importance of the south Indian ports to maritime commerce during the thirteenth and fourteenth century is highlighted in a number of sources, including stone inscriptions from the Malabar and Coromandel coasts written in south Indian and Arabic languages, works of the Persian historians Waṣṣāf and Rashīd al-Dīn (Elliot 1966: 1-54), and Marco Polo's *The Description of the World*. Tamil and Telegu inscriptions, for example, provide an extensive list of commodities traded through the Coromandel coast and the duties levied on various items. They also indicate the continued dominance of the south Indian guilds, especially the Tamil merchant associations Ayyāvoḷe and Maṇigrāmam, along the southern coast of India and northern Sri Lanka (Abraham 1988: 143-150; Champakalakshmi 1996: 323-326). Arabic inscriptions (especially those inscribed on epitaphs) from the region evidence the existence of Muslim merchant communities in the coastal towns of Kayal, Calicut, and Cochin (Shokoohy 2003). And

Marco Polo reports the presence of Muslims, Christians and Jewish traders at Kollam (*Marco Polo: The Description of the World* 1: 414).

For the Yuan court and traders, the Malabar coast was the main source of pepper, the consumption of which had increased significantly in China since the eighth century (Schafer 1977: 110). According to Marco Polo, during the Yuan period, the consumption of the commodity in the city of Hangzhou alone amounted to about ten thousand pounds everyday (*Marco Polo: The Description of the World* 1: 340). He also reports that large quantities of pepper imported into Quanzhou (noted as Çaiton) came on ships arriving from India. He writes, “Moreover I tell you that for one ship load of pepper which may go to Alexandre or to other place to be carried into Christian lands, there come more than a hundred of them to this port of Çaiton” (*Marco Polo: The Description of the World* 1: 351). As noted below, cotton textiles, pearls, and horses were also exported to the Chinese markets from ports in southern India. Therefore, preserving commercial relations with these important ports in southern India may have been pivotal for the Yuan court.

The significance of the Indian coasts to the Yuan court’s diplomatic and commercial policies can be discerned from the fourteen official missions dispatched to India during the reign of Qubilai Khan. A majority of these missions visited the Malabar and Coromandel coasts (Sen forthcoming). Never before had a court located in China sent this many diplomatic missions, or so frequently to southern Asia. Moreover, there are few, if any, precedents for the use of the maritime channel as the primary route for official contacts between the rulers of China and Indian kingdoms. Clearly, because of the civil war and the blockage of the routes through Central Asia and the availability of ocean-going vessels, Qubilai sought to assert his influence in the maritime world of the Indian Ocean. At the same time, perhaps on the urging of local officials in Quanzhou and Guangzhou, Qubilai wanted foreign traders to return to these ports. Both these objectives of Qubilai are evident from the missions of the Yuan official Yang Tingbi to the Indian coasts.

Yang traveled to southern India on four occasions between 1280 and 1283. Upon reaching the Malabar coast port of Kollam (Kaulam/Quilon) on his first mission, in the third lunar month of Zhiyuan 17 (April-May, 1280), Yang Tingbi quickly secured “conditions of surrender” (*jiangbiao* 降表) from the ruler of the kingdom called Binadi 必納的 (Pāṇḍya?).⁵ The Kollam ruler also promised to send a tributary mission to the Yuan court within a year (*Yuanshi* 210: 4669). In the latter half of 1280, seemingly because of the diplomatic overtures of the

⁵ The “conditions of surrender,” we are told, was written in “Muslim script.”

Yuan court, embassies arrived at the Yuan capital from the kingdoms of Ma'bar (located on the Coromandel coast) and Kollam. While the kingdom of Ma'bar reportedly submitted memorials acknowledging "vassalage" (*chengchen* 稱臣) to the Yuan court (*Yuanshi* 11: 225-227), Qubilai was disappointed that Kollam had failed to "submit" to him (*Yuanshi* 210: 4669). It appears that in order to express his dissatisfaction, Yang Tingbi was ordered to return to Kollam.

Accompanying Yang Tingbi on his second mission to southern Asia was Hasaer-haiya 哈撒兒海牙 (Qasar Qaya), who was given the title of "commissioner of the Pacification Office [in-charge of] Kollam" 俱藍國宣慰使 (*Yuanshi* 210: 4669). The mission departed in the first lunar month of Zhiyuan 18 (January-February, 1281). However, due to unfavorable winds and diminishing provisions on the ship on which they were traveling, the Chinese embassy had to disembark at the Xincun 新村 port (lit. "New Village"=Punnaikayal? — i.e., present-day Kayal) of the Ma'bar kingdom (Ptak 1993: 140; Karashima 1989). In Kayal, Yang Tingbi enquired about the land route to Kollam, but the local officials refused to reveal it to the Yuan entourage. Unable to accomplish their mission, Yang Tingbi and Qasar Qaya returned to China (*Yuanshi* 210: 4669-4670 and 11: 236; Sen forthcoming).

Yang Tingbi was sent to southern Asia for a third time in the eleventh lunar month of Zhiyuan 18 (December 1281-January 1282). He reached Kollam in the second lunar month of the following year (March-April, 1282) and had an audience with the king, presumably the same person he had met in 1280, his minister Mahema 馬合麻, and other officials of the kingdom. The *Yuanshi* (210: 4670; Rockhill 1914: 434-435) tells us that the king and his officials "received with reverence" the imperial seal and letter that Yang Tingbi had brought with him. In the following month, the king of Kollam sent one of his officials named Zhu'alishamanglibadi 祝阿里沙忙里八的 on a tributary mission to the Yuan court. Before departing Kollam in the fourth lunar month (May-June, 1282), Yang Tingbi met representatives of the Syrian Christian and Muslim communities settled in the region. The representatives, perhaps belonging to local trading diasporas, sought Yang Tingbi's permission to send annual tributary missions to the Yuan court. He also met a person from the kingdom of Sumuda 蘇木達國 (Semenat?/Somnath, in present-day Gujarat state), who, we are told, came especially to see the Yuan envoy because Kollam had officially submitted to Qubilai. During his return voyage, Yang Tingbi stopped at and secured "submissions" from the kingdoms of Nawang 那旺國 (Nakur, present-day Nicobar Island?) and Sumatra.

In the first lunar month of Zhiyuan 20 (January-February, 1283), only a few months after his return, Yang Tingbi was appointed the commissioner of the

Pacification Office and sent on a fourth mission to Kollam. Yang Tingbi was given imperial gifts that included bows, arrows, saddles, and a bridle (*Yuanshi* 20: 250). Although the details of Yang Tingbi's visit to Kollam in 1283 are not given in the Yuan sources,⁶ the outcome of his four missions to South Asian kingdoms is highlighted in the *Yuanshi*. An entry from Zhiyuan 23 (1286-1287) states that as a result of Yang Tingbi's missions, ten kingdoms, including Ma'bar, Semenat, Nakur, and Samudra, sent their representatives to submit to the Yuan court (*Yuanshi* 210: 4670).⁷

It seems that Yang Tingbi and the Yuan court were also involved in defusing a political struggle within the kingdom of Ma'bar. In 1281, when Yang Tingbi disembarked at the port-city of Kayal on the Coromandel coast because of unfavorable winds, he was secretly informed of a political discord within the Ma'bar kingdom (*Yuanshi* 97: 4669-4670; Rockhill 1914: 432-433). A resident of the port-city reportedly requested the Yuan court to protect him from one (or more) of the co-rulers of Ma'bar. This person has been identified as a local Muslim official named Sayyid, who was "at odds" with the rulers of Ma'bar. The Yuan court granted asylum to Sayyid and sent envoys to bring him to China. Sayyid arrived in China in 1291 and was bestowed a Korean wife by Qubilai Khan (Sen forthcoming).

Why the Yuan court agreed to grant asylum to the Ma'bari native and what it intended to gain from the defection of Sayyid is difficult to ascertain from the Yuan sources. Additionally, there are no records from southern India that refer either to the diplomatic exchanges with the Yuan court or to the defection of any individuals from the local region to Yuan China. We can only speculate that the Yuan court might have believed that Sayyid would be able to provide strategic information, both political and commercial, regarding coastal India.

The fact that preserving commercial relations with ports in southern India also formed an important part of Yang's agenda is apparent from the events leading to his first mission to Kollam. The mission was dispatched shortly after Qubilai's army had taken control of Fuzhou, Quanzhou, and Guangzhou. The Mongols had already expressed their support for long-distance and domestic trade when they invaded northern China. The administration of commercial activity, they had already recognized, generated considerable revenue for the

⁶ *Yuanshi* (20: 251) reports that a golden badge was presented to Wani, the king of Kollam. See also Rockhill (1914: 338).

⁷ See also *Yuanshi* (14: 292), where envoys from the same ten kingdoms are reported to have arrived in the ninth lunar month but the role of Yang Tingbi in prompting these missions is not mentioned.

government.⁸ Soon after the occupation of the flourishing ports of southern China by Qubilai's forces, local officials called attention to the potential profits from maritime trade. One such official was Pu Shougeng 蒲壽庚, the superintendent of maritime commerce at Quanzhou (Kuwabara 1928 and 1935; So 2001: Chapter 5 and Appendix B).

Pu Shougeng, who shifted his allegiance from the Song court to the invading Mongols in 1277, actively lobbied the Yuan court to promote maritime trade.⁹ In August–September, 1278, Pu Shougeng and the Mongol general Sögetü presented a memorial to the Yuan court emphasizing the benefits of encouraging maritime trade. In response, the court ordered the two petitioners to undertake appropriate measures to attract seafaring traders to China (*Yuanshi* 10: 204 and 129: 3152; Rockhill 1914: 429–430; Kuwabara 1935: 66 and 80–83). However, the measures taken by Pu Shougeng and Sögetü failed to induce a larger influx of foreign traders to the ports. Perhaps the foreign traders were deterred by the lingering skirmishes between the Yuan forces and the remnant Southern Song troops in the coastal region. Thus, when Pu Shougeng, in the fifth lunar month of the following year (June–July, 1279), sought to renew imperial support for encouraging maritime trade at Chinese ports, the court rejected his petition (*Yuanshi* 10: 221; Kuwabara 1935: 81).

Within a few days of the court's rejection, however, envoys were reported to have arrived from Ma'bar. But, as noted above, the Yuan court expressed its disappointment that the king of Kollam had neglected to send appropriate representatives. As the *Yuanshi* (210: 4669; Kuwabara 1935: 81) reports, "the Branch Secretariat wanted to dispatch fifteen persons as envoys to invite [representatives from] the kingdoms [that had failed to submit to the Yuan court]."

⁸ On the encouragement and administration of foreign trade by the Mongol rulers, including the important role played by Muslim merchants, see Rossabi (1981) and Endicott-West (1989). On the collaboration between the Yuan court and the seafaring merchants, see K. Satō (1962). Pointing to a record in the *Yuanshi* (94: 202), Satō (1962: 336) writes that during the Yuan dynasty "officials of the government office of foreign trade (*shih-po-szu* [*shih-bosi*] 市舶司) entrusted ships and capitals belonging to the government to the merchants who applied for the position of the trustee, and the profits were divided between the government and the merchant in proportion of seven percent for the former and thirty for the latter."

⁹ Maritime trade and local economy at the port-city of Quanzhou, where Pu held the post of the superintendent of maritime commerce, witnessed a decline in the period between 1200 and 1279. Pu seems to have been particularly affected by this economic slump at Quanzhou because he and his family are known to have owned and operated a large number of mercantile ships that were engaged in private trade with foreign countries. Thus, Pu may have lobbied the Yuan court not only because of the possible economic benefits to the national and local economy, but also due to his personal monetary interests. On the economic slump at Quanzhou between 1200 and 1276, and the revival of maritime trade under the Yuan, see So (2001: Chapters 4 and 5) and Chaffee (in this volume).

[But,] the emperor said, ‘[The issue of sending envoys] cannot be solely determined by Sögetü and others. Unless I give the orders, no one should send the envoys.’” Despite the objection, the emperor, in the twelfth lunar month of Zhiyuan 16, sent officials from the powerful Hanlin Academy to consult with Sögetü on the strategies to attract foreign traders to China (*Yuanshi* 10: 217; Kuwabara 1935: 82). It was in the same month, perhaps as a result of the discussions between the Hanlin officials and Sögetü, that the Yuan court ordered Yang Tingbi to proceed to Kollam (Sen forthcoming).¹⁰

Because of Yang Tingbi’s missions, it seems, the rulers of Ma’bar and Kollam began sending regular tributary missions to the Yuan court. The Syrian Christian and Muslim trading communities in coastal India also may have dispatched their own representatives to China. Perhaps the primary purpose of these tributary missions was to reestablish commercial links with the coastal regions of China after the clashes between the Mongols and the Southern Song forces. In fact, a bilingual inscription found in Quanzhou indicates that traders from southern India began reappearing at coastal China shortly after Yang Tingbi’s first mission. Written in Tamil and Chinese, the inscription bears the date April 1281 and notes the installation of an idol of Śiva in a Brahmanical temple at the Chinese port for the “welfare” of the Yuan ruler (Subramaniam 1978; Sen 2003: 227-231).

At the same time that the Yuan court was successfully establishing its official maritime network to coastal India, private traders from China were strengthening their contacts with the Indian ports. Marco Polo, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, and Wang Dayuan all testify to the presence of Chinese merchants on the Indian coasts during the Yuan period. Baṭṭūṭa, for example, not only mentions the continued diplomatic relations between the Yuan court and Indian kingdoms through the maritime channels after the death of Qubilai, he also provides an eyewitness account confirming the presence of Chinese traders and ships at Indian ports.

Ibn Baṭṭūṭa reports that an embassy from the Yuan court, which had an audience with Muḥammad b. Tughlug (r. 1324-1351), the ruler of the Delhi Sultanate, in 1340, brought with it a bounty of gifts, including slave girls, velvet cloth, musk, a bejeweled robe, embroidered quivers, and swords (Dunn 1986: 213). The delegation consisted of fifteen people and was led by a person named Tursi. In response to the Yuan embassy, Muḥammad ordered Ibn Baṭṭūṭa and other officials to accompany the delegation to the court of the reigning Yuan ruler, Toghon Temür (Shundi 順帝, r. 1333-1368).

¹⁰ *Yuanshi* (10: 218) reports that envoys were also sent in the same month to Champa and Java.

Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's account of his voyage to the Yuan court offers significant insights into the contemporary maritime networks between coastal India and Quanzhou during the fourteenth century. Especially noteworthy is his record of the assistance seafaring merchants provided to diplomatic missions traveling between India and China. In Kollam, for example, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (4: 813-815) writes that Chinese merchants offered clothing to the Yuan envoys whose belongings were lost in a shipwreck. Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's work also includes information about some of the lesser-known items traded between southern Asia and China in the fourteenth century. He reports that areca nuts were exported to China from the Malabar coast. China also imported fish and coconut cords from the Maldives. Among the Chinese porcelain exported to India were platters, which, according to Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, had "remarkable properties; they can fall from a great height without breaking and hot food can be put in them without their colours changing or being spoiled" (*The Travels of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa* 4: 811, 832, 827, and 904-905).

The expanding maritime exchanges between India and China during the Yuan period, especially the participation of traders from China in these interactions, can be observed from the work of Wang Dayuan as well. Similar to Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, Wang was an eyewitness to the maritime interactions across the Bay of Bengal region. He seems to have sailed with Chinese traders on two occasions, first from 1330 to 1334 and then between 1337 and 1339. Wang's records on Indian kingdoms permit us to speculate on the activities of Chinese traders at Indian ports, the pattern of their voyages, and the commodities they traded in local markets.

Wang Dayuan's work contains descriptions of about ninety-nine ports and kingdoms located on the Indian Ocean (Ptak 1996). Wang usually gives a short ethnographical description of these sites, followed by an account of the local produce and a list of trading items. Some twenty sites referenced in Wang's book were located along the coastal regions of India. These included Bengal and Orissa in the east, Ma'bar and Calicut in the south, and Mumbai and Gujarat in the west. As Roderich Ptak (1996) has pointed out, the "sequential arrangement" of the ninety-nine locations in the *Daoyi zhilüe* seems to be symbolic, making it impossible to reconstruct Wang Dayuan's itinerary. Nonetheless, it is evident that the traders with whom Wang was traveling sailed from coastal China to the Indian subcontinent, from where they made further voyages to the Persian Gulf and to the eastern coast of Africa. This pattern of mercantile travel from the Chinese coast to the Indian ports would change, as suggested in the next section, during the early Ming period, when traders of Chinese origin made their voyages to southern Asia mostly from their bases in Southeast Asia.

Wang Dayuan's account also reveals that Bengal (Pengjiala 朋加刺) was gradually becoming an important destination for Chinese traders. He observes,

The Five Ranges 五嶺 (i.e., Rajmahal Hills) have rocky summits and are covered by a dense forest. The people [of the kingdom] reside around these [hills]. [They] engage in plowing and sowing throughout the year, so there are no wastelands. The rice fields and arable lands are spectacular. Three crops are harvested every year. Goods are all reasonably priced. During the ancient times, it was the capital of Sindu.

The climate is always hot. The customs [of the people are] extremely pure and honest. Men and women cover their head with a fine cotton cloth and wear long skirts.

The official tax rate is twenty percent. The kingdom mints silver coins called Tangjia 唐加 (i.e., *tangka*), two of which weigh eight hundredth of a *tael* (i.e., Chinese ounce), that is circulated and used [by the court]. They can be exchanged for more than 11,520 pieces of cowrie shells. The lightness of the coins is convenient and very beneficial to the people.

[The kingdom] produces [fabrics such as] *bibu* 苳布 (*bairami/bafta*), *gaonibu* 高你布 (*kain* cloth?), *tuluojin* 禿羅錦 (*malma*), [and also] kingfishers' feathers. [Chinese traders] use southern and northern [varieties of] silks, pentachrome taffetas and satins, cloves, nutmegs, blue and white porcelain ware, white tassels and such things [to trade with native merchants]. . . . (*Daoyi zhilüe* 330; Bagchi 1945)

The above record is more detailed than any previous Chinese account of Bengal. In this record, Wang not only suggests the presence of Chinese traders in Bengal, he also specifies the items they traded at the local ports. Similar records about other Indian kingdoms in the *Daoyi zhilüe* suggest that fabrics and other manufactured goods were becoming important items in the commercial exchanges between China and southern Asia. Spices, especially pepper, continued to be exported to China from the Malabar coast.

Additionally, Chinese merchants were purchasing large quantities of luxury items from the Coromandel coast, which forced the Yuan court, in Yuanzhen 2 (1296), to issue a prohibition on the trade in luxury goods with the kingdom of Ma'bar (*Yuanshi* 94: 2402-2403; Schurmann 1956: 233; Abraham 1988: 154-155). This order was part of the general attempt of the Yuan court to limit the outflow of Chinese metallic currency in payment for imports and was directed toward seafaring traders who purchased luxury goods like pearls and kingfishers' feathers (*cuimao* 翠毛) from the Indian kingdom (Rockhill 1914: 423; on the ban on the import of kingfishers' feathers, see Hirth and Rockhill 1966: 235-236). Despite the court's injunction, Wang Dayuan's record indicates that kingfishers' feathers and other luxury items continued to be imported into China from Ma'bar and other Indian kingdoms during the Yuan period.

In fact, the list of goods imported from Indian kingdoms, either local produce or items from other regions, was quite extensive. In addition to spices, fabrics, pearls, and kingfishers' feathers, the Chinese merchants also procured horses from the Indian ports. Trading at Indian ports was mostly conducted with gold. The value of a transaction sometimes reached, as in the case of Calicut, several thousands pieces of "gold cash" (*jinqian* 金錢). Since porcelain and silk seems

to have been the main Chinese commodities exported to southern Asia, the balance of trade may have been in the favor of the Indian kingdoms.¹¹

The Yuan period thus witnessed a significant expansion and diversification of the Chinese maritime networks to southern Asia. Officials, traders and ships from China frequented Indian ports in unprecedented numbers and with increasing frequency. Indeed, there seems to have been a substantial growth in the volume of commodities traded at the Indian ports by seafaring merchants from China. At the same time, officials from the Yuan court, especially during the reign of Qubilai Khan, tried to integrate the Indian subcontinent into its expansionist foreign policy. Consequently, Chinese maritime networking with southern Asia, which had started taking shape during the Song period, developed into a complex and multifaceted system. While the Yuan court pursued its diplomatic and political agenda with the Indian kingdoms through the maritime channel, private traders operated their own commercial and shipping networks to the Indian coast. The fact that court officials traveled to the Indian coast on mercantile ships and were assisted by Chinese traders indicates that these networks were intertwined and beneficial to both the Yuan court and the private traders.

The intensification of maritime exchanges between the coastal regions of China and India also contributed to a better understanding of the Indian ports and markets among merchant communities and court officials in China, as is evidenced in Wang Dayuan's *Daoyi zhilüe*. Both these groups seem to have recognized the significance of the Indian ports in the maritime communication and commercial exchanges across the Indian Ocean. In fact, such recognition and the growth in commercial and diplomatic interactions during the Yuan period may have substantially contributed to the selection of the Indian coast as the main destination for Zheng He's first two expeditions.

THE MARITIME NETWORKS AND THE MING RHETORIC

The Ming court under the founding ruler Taizu 太祖 (i.e., the Hongwu 洪武 emperor, r. 1368-1399) revived and emphasized the Confucian rhetoric of the Sinocentric world order in its relations with foreign states (Wang 1968 and 1998). The Hongwu emperor did not resume the militarist policies of the Yuan

¹¹ After initially promoting maritime trade, the Yuan court soon realized that the demand for luxuries in China had significant impact on its treasury. Of special concern to the court was the depletion of metallic currency used by seafaring traders from China to purchase luxury goods from foreign countries. Consequently, the Yuan court enacted various laws, including the one mentioned here, to regulate the outflow of cash. For more details, see Rockhill (1914: 423-428). The use of gold by Chinese traders in Calicut is reported in *Daoyi zhilüe* (325).

court toward some of the Indian Ocean kingdoms. As Wang Gungwu (1998: 303) explains, “he sought, instead to obtain their symbolic acknowledgement of China’s cosmological centrality and their acknowledgement that his succession to power was legitimate.” Shi Ping 時平 (2005) has pointed out that this intention of the Hongwu emperor, in addition to the early Ming court’s emphasis on tributary missions, the practice of granting titles to foreign rulers, and even the expeditions of Zheng He, formed an integral part of the so-called “*Da yitong*” 大一統 (“Great Unified [Empire]”) ideology. A concept formed during the Spring and Autumn period (722–481 BCE) of Chinese history, the “Great Unified [Empire]” signified the unification of the world under the leadership of the Chinese emperor. As the world leader, the Chinese emperor was responsible for civilizing the “barbarians” and maintaining peace, order, and economic prosperity across this “Unified Empire.”

By the time the Hongwu emperor established the Ming dynasty, the knowledge of foreign states and peoples had grown significantly. Recognizing that bringing far-flung nations into the fold of “Great Unified [Empire]” by military force was impracticable, the Hongwu emperor sought to emphasize the rhetoric rather than pursue full-fledge conquest of the maritime world. In fact, he developed, for the first time in Chinese history, a strategy to deal with maritime states peacefully and within the context of the Confucian rhetoric. In 1373, the Hongwu emperor wrote,

The overseas foreign countries like Annan [Vietnam], Champa, Korea, Siam, Liuqiu [the Ryūkyū islands], the [countries of the] Western Oceans [south India] and Eastern Oceans [Japan] and the various small countries of the southern *man* [barbarians] are separated from us by mountains and seas and are far away in a corner. Their lands would not produce enough for us to maintain them; their peoples would not usefully serve us if incorporated [into the empire]. If they were so unrealistic as to disturb our borders, it would be unfortunate for them. If they gave us no trouble and we moved troops to fight them unnecessarily, it would be unfortunate for us. I am concerned that future generations might abuse China’s wealth and power and covet the military glories of the moment to send armies into the field without reason and cause a loss of life. May they be sharply reminded that this is forbidden. As for the *hu* and *rong* barbarians who threaten China in the north and west, they are always a danger along our frontiers. Good generals must be picked and soldiers trained to prepare carefully against them (*Huang Ming zi xunlun* in *Ming chao kaigui wenxian*: 1686–1687, trans. by Wang 1998: 311–312; see also Wu 1981 and Dreyer 2006: 16).

Clearly, the Ming ruler was aware of his naval prowess but concerned about attempted military exploitations beyond the Chinese shores by future rulers of the dynasty. Perhaps he also believed that the use of military force against the maritime states would be a diversion from the real threat posed by the Mongols and other Inner Asian tribes (see Rossabi 1998). While maintaining a defensive posture toward his northern neighbors, the Hongwu emperor sought to incorpo-

rate the states within the reach of the Ming navy into the symbolic “Great Unified [Empire].” He did this by ordering that the mountains and rivers in foreign kingdoms “receive the rites of sacrifice together with those of China.” The list of such kingdoms, which numbered twelve in 1375, ranged from Korea and Japan in East Asia, to Śrīvijaya and Java in Southeast Asia, and the “Colas” in southern Asia.¹²

Hongwu’s son, Emperor Chengzu 成祖 (i.e., the Yongle emperor, r. 1403-1424), who usurped his nephew Emperor Huidi 惠帝 (r. 1399-1402), followed his father’s advice against the colonization of Indian Ocean states and continued the use of Confucian rhetoric in exchanges with foreign kingdoms. Still, he boldly displayed the Ming empire’s naval prowess and used military force to launch attacks on his neighbors. He initiated military offensives against Vietnam in the south and the Mongols in the north. He also allowed his representatives to interfere in the internal affairs of foreign states, especially the Indian Ocean kingdoms. Indeed, the aggressive policies of the Yongle emperor toward the maritime states within the context of the “Great Unified [Empire]” rhetoric is reflected in the following passage found in the two inscriptions laid by Zheng and his associates before their seventh and final voyage:

When we arrived at the foreign countries, barbarian kings who resisted transformation [by Chinese civilization] and were not respectful we captured alive, and bandit soldiers who looted and plundered recklessly we exterminated. Because of this the sea routes became pure and peaceful and the foreign peoples could rely upon them and pursue their occupations in safety (trans. in Dreyer 2006: 192 and 196).

The following discussion of Zheng He’s expedition to southern India and the activities of Ming embassies in Bengal make it evident that the Yongle emperor wanted to extend his influence and civilizing powers to the Indian coastal regions.

Calicut was one of the main destinations of Zheng He during his first two voyages in 1405 and 1407 respectively.¹³ Solicitation of tributary missions and enfeoffment of titles to native rulers were some of the main tasks carried out by the members of these expeditions. Tributary missions from Calicut often accompanied Zheng He and his entourage on their return voyages to the Ming court, where they presented tribute of local products to the Yongle emperor. The Ming ruler, in turn, customarily invited the envoys from Calicut, along with other foreign representatives, to lavish banquets and conferred titles and return

¹² The Cola rule ended in 1279. The Chinese sources seem to be using Suoli 瑣里 and Xiyang Soli 西洋瑣里 in their references to the Coromandel coast.

¹³ Wang Ming (2005: 21) sees Zheng He’s visits to Calicut as evidence of the economic motivation for the Ming naval expeditions in the Indian Ocean. For detailed studies in Western languages on the seven expeditions undertaken by Zheng He, see the works of Pelliot (1933), Duyvendak (1938), Levathes (1994), and Dreyer (2006).

gifts. On one occasion, in October 1405, the ruler of Calicut, an individual named Shamidi 沙米的 (or Shamidixi 沙米的喜), reportedly traveled to the Ming court and had an audience with the Yongle emperor (*Ming shilu* 10: 711-712; *Mingshi* 326: 8440). Although it is doubtful that the Indian ruler made a special trip to China, such records of tributary missions led by foreign rulers, especially when a new emperor ascended to (or usurped) the throne, were usually employed to legitimate the transition of power. Together with the usual tributary missions, these accounts served the general purpose of demonstrating China's symbolic suzerainty over foreign kingdoms.

The enfeoffment of titles of “king” to foreign rulers had a similar function. The Yongle emperor, we are told, enfeoffed Shamidi as the “king” of his kingdom when the latter visited China. In 1407, according to Ma Huan 馬歡 (died c.1460) the author of *Ying-yai Sheng-lan* 瀛涯勝覽 (The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores), the Ming court “ordered the principal envoy the grand eunuch Cheng Ho (Zheng He) and others to deliver an imperial mandate to the king of this country (i.e., Calicut) and to bestow on him a patent conferring a title of honour, and a grant of a silver seal, [also] to promote all the chiefs and award them hats and girdles of various grades” (*Yingyai shenglan* 138).

Ma Huan, a Muslim himself, points out that the majority of the Calicut's Hindu king's (the Zamorin, i.e., “Ocean King”) subjects were Muslims (of Arab origin), two of whom held high positions at the port and administered “the affairs of the country” (*Yingyai shenglan* 138). Some of these Muslim residents, especially those invested in foreign trade, seem to have funded the expansionist policies of the Zamorin in the region. They, and the local Hindu princes, repeatedly lobbied the Zamorin to invade Cochin. Sometime in the late fifteenth century, one of the Zamorins did actually occupy Cochin and installed his representative as the king of the port-city (*The Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires* 1: 79-80; *The Book of Duarte Barbosa* 2: 94-95; see also Ayyar 1938: 127-131; Menon 1970: Chapter 13; Malekandathil 2001: 35). The Ming court must have known about the rivalry between Calicut and Cochin. It was perhaps in order to prevent a military confrontation between the two kingdoms that the Ming court, in 1416, granted special status to Cochin and its ruler Keyili 可亦里.¹⁴

The seaport at Cochin emerged only in the second half of the fourteenth century after floods along the Periyar river caused significant geophysical changes in the region (Malekandathil 2001: 29). By the early fifteenth century, Cochin

¹⁴ According to the *Mingshi* and some other Ming sources, the Indian king, through his envoys, had requested the enfeoffment of the mountain in his kingdom. See, for example, *Mingshi* (326: 8441-8442). For other Ming (and Qing) records on the proclamation presented to the king of Cochin, see Xu Yuhu 徐玉虎 (2005: 83-85).

rivalled Calicut as one of the main ports on the Malabar coast. It offered a lucrative option for merchants trying to procure and ship pepper from India. Moreover, the fact that Cochin was controlled by a local ruler (the *Perumpadappu swarupam*), who wanted to promote and benefit from the developing maritime trade, and not the Zamorin in Calicut, may have also proved attractive to foreign traders, including the Chinese. Already in 1403, the Ming court dispatched an envoy (Yin Qing 尹慶) to confer various goods to the ruler of Cochin (*Mingshi* 326: 8441). Zheng He was ordered to the port in 1408, 1411, and 1414. Then, as part of his fifth expedition, which sailed in 1417, Zheng He was asked to confer a seal upon Keyili and enfeoff a mountain in his kingdom as the “*zhenguo zhi shan*” 振國之山 (“Mountain Which Protects the Country”). The Yongle emperor even composed a proclamation that was inscribed on a stone tablet and carried to Cochin by Zheng He (*Mingshi* 326: 8441-8442; *Ming shilu* 13: 1969-1971; for a translation of the text, see Wade <http://epress.nus.edu.sg/msl/entry/2336>).

It was a rare step by the Yongle emperor to compose a proclamation for a maritime state in addition to enfeoff mountains of a foreign state. Only three other kingdoms, Melaka (in 1405), Japan (in 1406) and Boni (west coast Borneo/Brunei in 1408), received this dual privilege. “All were intended to,” as Wang Gungwu (1968: 57) explains, “the sealing of closer relations between his empire and the four countries concerned.” The kingdom of Melaka received the inscription because it sought protection from the Chinese court. According to Wang (1964: 101, n. 4), the Yongle emperor enfeoffed the mountain in Japan “in recognition of Japan’s help in curbing Wako piracy on the Chinese coasts.” Boni was given the honor because its ruler had come to the Ming court in person. Wang (1964 and 1968), however, is unsure why Cochin received this special attention. “As for Cochin,” he writes, “we do not know why it desired a special relationship. Perhaps it was helpful to the Cochinese in trade and pleasing to Yong-lo personally; it certainly did neither country any harm. Cheng Ho may have favored the move in order to safeguard one good port on the way to the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea” (Wang 1968: 57).

If finding a “good port” was indeed one of the reasons for granting the special honor, then Calicut would have been a better alternative. Not only did Calicut and the Ming court have intimate diplomatic relations, it was a more vital port on the Malabar coast than Cochin. Rather, the Ming court may have decided to support Cochin because, as it had done in case of Melaka (Hall 1985: 225-228; Wade 2004), it was an emerging state. Perhaps similar to Melaka (Wade 2004: 10), the Ming planned to develop Cochin as one of its bases for voyages and linkages to other ports of the Indian Ocean. The Zamorin clearly took issue with the Ming court’s decision to support a rival ruler on the

Malabar coast. Diplomatic missions from Calicut to China declined after 1416, and it ceased to be one of the main destinations of Zheng He's remaining two expeditions.¹⁵

Additionally, the relationship between the Zamorin and the Chinese merchants frequenting Calicut seems to have deteriorated. In the early sixteenth century, the Portuguese traveler Joseph of Cranganore provides the following report on Chinese merchants in Calicut:

These people of Cathay are men of remarkable energy, and formerly drove a first-rate trade at the city of Calicut. But the King of Calicut having treated them badly, they quitted that city, and returning shortly after inflicted no small slaughter on the people of Calicut, and after that returned no more. After that they began to frequent Mailapetam, a city subject to the king of Narsingha; a region towards the East, . . . and there they now derive their trade" (Yule 1875, 2: 391).

The skirmish between Chinese traders and the Zamorin reported by Joseph is believed to have taken place in the mid-fifteenth century. Some have suggested that it was the local Muslim traders who, "with the powerful aid of the Zamorin massacred the Chinese inhabiting the ports of Malabar" (Menon 2001, 1: 287). Others have speculated that this incident may have involved Zheng He, who was critically injured during the conflict and died in Calicut or on his way back to China in 1433 (Ray 2003; Lin 2005b).¹⁶ Although the dates, causes, and the extent of Zheng He's involvement in this incident are speculative, it is evident that diplomatic relations between the Ming court and Calicut and the commercial activities of traders of Chinese origin at the Malabar coast declined after the mid-fifteenth century.

While some of these traders, as Joseph of Cranganore suggests, relocated to the Coromandel coast, others continued to frequent Bay of Bengal ports. As noted above, very little is known about the activities of Chinese merchants at the various Indian ports. It can be speculated from fragmentary notices that during the early Ming period merchants of Chinese origin may have set up their networks to the Indian coasts from their bases in Southeast Asia. The Ming court's prohibition on private overseas trade was one of the main reasons for

¹⁵ Only three embassies from Calicut, in 1421, 1423, and 1433, arrived at the Ming court after the seal was conferred upon the ruler of Cochin. Sources are ambiguous about Zheng He's trips to Calicut during his fifth and sixth expeditions. During his seventh, and last, expedition, Zheng He's entourage seems to have stopped at Calicut for only four days on the way to Hormuz. On its way back to China, however, the entourage stayed at the Indian port for about nine days. Scholars speculate that Zheng He died in Calicut on his way back to China. On the diplomatic exchanges between Calicut and China, see Ptak (1989).

¹⁶ While it is generally believed that Zheng He died in Calicut, the reason for his death cannot be ascertained from available sources.

the use of Southeast Asian ports as their base of operations. In fact, members of Chinese diasporic communities in Southeast Asia would have found it easier and profitable to operate from Java, Melaka, or other ports in the region not only because they had easy access to the Chinese and Indian ports, but also because they could also evade the regulations imposed on private Chinese seafarers by the Ming court. Moreover, as residents of foreign ports, these overseas Chinese traders benefited from participating in the tributary system emphasized by the Ming court.

At the Indian ports, on the other hand, Chinese merchants had to compete with other well-entrenched foreign traders. Moreover, Indian rulers (as in the case of the Zamorin of Calicut) may have been less than enthusiastic in giving concessions to Chinese traders. Chinese traders who frequented Indian ports during the Ming period most likely traveled from the Southeast Asian ports with the northeastern monsoon winds (between December and March) and returned with the onset of southwestern monsoon (between April and August). This pattern of maritime networking between coastal China and India through Southeast Asia can be discerned from two short passages related to the Chinese trader called Song Yun found in the *Ming shilu* 明實錄 (Veritable Records of the Ming [Dynasty]). The first passage, in the *Yingzong shilu* 英宗實錄 (Veritable Records of [Emperor] Yingzong), reports that Song Yun 宋允 visited the Ming court as the deputy envoy of the mission from Bengal in mid-1439. He also sought funds to repair his damaged ship and requested protection from the Ming ruler. “As Yun was Chinese and had been able to bring a foreign country to China,” the *Yingzong shilu* records, “the Emperor approved both his requests” (*Ming shilu* 24: 1046; trans. by Wade <http://epress.nus.edu.sg/msl/entry/949>, accessed April 21, 2005; see also Hall in this volume). In a record for 27 May, 1446, the *Yingzong shilu* provides additional detail about this Chinese trader who had represented Bengal:

The Ministry of Rites memorialized: “The Samudera person Aiyān 霧淹 has advised that his uncle Song Yun came to the capital to offer tribute to the Court in the first year of the Zhengtong reign (1436/37). However, he was murdered by the *fan* person Daxi 打昔 and others from the country of Java. Song Yun’s wife Meimeidawai 眉妹打歪 complained to officials and Daxi was punished in accordance with the law. At this time, Meimeidawai, her female attendants (女使人) and so on are still residing in Guangdong (alt: Guangxi) and, as they have no relatives, it is very difficult for them to clothe and feed themselves day by day. They are alone and have no one to depend on. It is requested that the three offices of Guangdong be instructed to have them sent back to their country.” This was approved *Ming shilu* 28: 2783, trans. by Wade <http://epress.nus.edu.sg/msl/entry/2059>, accessed April 21, 2005).

These accounts of Song Yun, whose family seems to have been based on the northeast coast of Sumatra (see Hall in this volume), are extremely important

for several reasons. First, similar records are lacking for other traders of Chinese origin involved in the exchanges between India and China during the Ming period.¹⁷ Second, they confirm the existence of a maritime network, within which private traders of Chinese origin operated from Southeast Asia and facilitated diplomatic and commercial exchanges between Indian kingdoms and the Ming court. Third, the records on Song Yun suggest that the practice of sending representatives of Chinese origin by foreign states to the Ming court, common in the Southeast Asia-Ming relations, also extended to the kingdom of Bengal. And fourth, these passages indicate that the maritime network linking the coastal regions of China and Bengal was distinct and as vibrant as the maritime channels that connected the Chinese ports to the Malabar and Coromandel coasts in southern India.

The distinct and vibrant nature of the maritime network between China and Bengal is also demonstrated in another entry in the *Ming shilu*, the compilation of a Bengali-Chinese lexicon during the Ming period (Sen 2005), and the diplomatic relations between the Ming court and Bengal. The *Yingzong shilu* reports that in the tenth lunar month of Zhentong 3 (November 1438),

The Auxiliary Ministry of Rites memorialized: “The interpreter Chen Deqing 陳得清 and others from the country of Bengal¹⁸ has advised that they have long been travelling far away from their homes and that their bags are empty. They have thus requested that cotton clothing to protect them from the cold of winter be conferred upon them.” As the Emperor felt that people from afar should be very well-treated, he ordered the Auxiliary Ministry of Rites to not restrict themselves to the regulations, but to confer on these people cotton clothing and other items for keeping out the cold (*Ming shilu* 24: 916, trans. by Wade <http://epress.nus.edu.sg/msl/entry/733>, accessed April 30, 2005).

Similar to the notice on Song Yun, this is a rare account of an individual of Chinese origin who represented an Indian kingdom to the Ming court. The presence of Chen Deqing in Bengal might explain how Bengali script and a list of more than two hundred Bengali words transcribed in Chinese found their way into the sixteenth-century work *Siyi guangji* 四夷廣記 (Extensive Record of the

¹⁷ The names of people who accompanied Zheng He to the ports in southern India are mentioned in some Ming sources. Perhaps the most intriguing of them was Shaban 沙班, a native of Calicut residing in Nanjing, who accompanied Zheng He on his seventh and last voyage. Shaban was a member of a battalion of the imperial bodyguard based in Nanjing. After returning to China, Shaban was promoted to battalion vice commander (*fu qianhu* 副千戶). The next seven generations of his family continued to live in Nanjing and served as government officials. For details, see Lin (2005b: 15-18).

¹⁸ Although this statement seems to indicate the presence of Chinese settlements in Bengal during the Ming period, there are, as yet, no other textual or archeological sources to confirm the existence of a Chinese base in the region. Rather, it is possible that Chen Deqing, similar to Song Yun, was based in Southeast Asia, annually sojourned to Bengal, and was enlisted to represent Bengal in the diplomatic exchanges between the Indian kingdom and the Ming court.

Four Barbarian [Regions]). Compiled by Shen Maoshang 慎懋賞, the *Siyi Guangji* provides a detailed record of Bengal, much of it borrowed from various Ming sources, including the *Yingyai shenglan*, *Xiyang chaogong dianlu* 西洋朝貢典錄 (Record of the Tribute Presented by the Western Ocean [Kingdoms]) and the *Shuyu zhouzi lu* 殊域周咨錄 (Record of the Dispatches Concerning Various Regions), followed by a discussion of Indian script (where Bengali script and their pronunciations are supplied) and a list of Bengali words in Chinese transcriptions (see Sen 2005). Chinese interpreters, such as Chen, may have used this list, which includes words related to terrestrial objects, types of clothing, names for birds and animals, etc., as a lexicon.

Even though admiral Zheng He did not make special trips to Bengal, the above sources show that the Indian kingdom was a key destination for Chinese traders (Phillips 1895; Yamamoto 1977; Ray 1993).¹⁹ Haraprasad Ray (1993: 131) has suggested that Bengal may have been exporting as many as sixty items, including cotton and horses, to China during the Ming period. Additionally, porcelain fragments found along the route from the Bay of Bengal to the urban centers of the Delhi Sultanate indicate that the ports in Bengal were entrepôts for Chinese goods destined for markets in the Indian hinterland (Gray 1964; Carswell 1978; Das 1991-1992). The itinerary of a Ming mission visiting the Delhi Sultanate in 1412-13 similarly illustrates the position of Bengal as the gateway to the Indian hinterland. The embassy from the Ming court seems to have disembarked at Bengal and taken a route along the river Ganges, passing through Jaunpur, to Delhi (Yamamoto 1977; Bagchi 1945).

The Ming court even became involved in a dispute between Bengal and its neighboring Jaunpur Sultanate. This dispute between Bengal and Jaunpur was a result of the usurpation in Bengal by a local Hindu noble named Raja Ganesh. Probably a descendent of the former, non-Muslim, ruling family of Bengal, Raja Ganesh deposed the Turko-Muslim ruler and, in 1415, installed his twelve-year old son as the new king of Bengal. Due to pressure from the local Muslim nobility and the neighboring Sultanate of Jaunpur, the son converted to Islam and took on the name Jalāl ud-Dīn Muḥammad. But the military threat from Jaunpur persisted. To resolve the dispute with Jaunpur, Jalāl ud-Dīn requested help from the two most powerful rulers in the contemporary world: the Timurid ruler Shah Rukh (Major 1974: 15) and the Ming emperor Yongle (*Yuanshi* 326: 8443; *Ming shilu* 14: 2226; Eaton 1993b: 50-63; Hussain 2003: 104-115).

In 1420, Jalāl ud-Dīn complained to the Ming ruler that Jaunpur forces had carried out several military raids on his territory. In response to the complaint,

¹⁹ None of these works, however, mentions the Bengali-Chinese lexicon found in the *Siyi guangji* or the records on the presence of Chinese natives in Bengal reported in the *Ming shilu*.

the Ming court dispatched the eunuch Hou Xian 侯顯 (a deputy commander of Zheng He) and others “with Imperial orders of instruction for them (i.e., Bengal and Jaunpur), so that they would both cultivate good relations with their neighbors and would each protect their own territory” (*Ming shilu* 14: 2226, trans. by Wade <http://epress.nus.edu.sg/msl/entry/2690>, accessed May 02, 2005). The decision by the Ming court to send a special embassy to Bengal to mediate in the local dispute was clearly part of the “Great Unified [Empire]” doctrine.

The entourage led by Hou Xian arrived in Bengal in August or September 1420 and was welcomed by a grand reception. It was Hou Xian’s second visit to the region and this time he seems to have brought along soldiers from the Ming army, who were all presented silver coins by the ruler of Bengal.²⁰ The entourage proceeded to Jaunpur to convey the Yongle emperor’s message to resolve the territorial dispute peacefully.

Bengal’s request to the Chinese emperor suggests that rulers in India were aware of the Ming court’s willingness to arbitrate in local disputes. Bengal had sent at least eight embassies to the Ming court before 1420 and traders from the region were actively engaged in commerce across the Bay of Bengal (Ray 1993). Through these embassies and traders the rulers of Bengal must have come to know about the naval prowess of the Ming court and their interventions in other Indian Ocean states. In 1406-07, Zheng He had fought and defeated the pirate Chen Zuyi in the Straits of Melaka; in 1411, the Chinese admiral captured the Sri Lankan ruler Vijaya Bahu VI and took him back to China; and in 1414, he defeated the usurper Sekander and resolved a civil war in Sumatra (Levathes 1994; Dreyer 2006). Because of the regular commercial contacts between Bengal and the Malabar coast,²¹ the king of Bengal also may have been aware of the Ming backing for Cochin in 1416.

Hou Xian’s mission seems to have succeeded in averting a major war between Bengal and Jaunpur. By dispatching a powerful mission to Bengal, which brought an imperial edict, a strong contingent of Chinese soldiers, and precious gifts for the king, his family, and officials, the Ming court may have also provided Jalāl ud-Dīn an opportunity to demonstrate his diplomatic capabilities and assure his wealthy Muslim citizens about the continuing trading ties between Bengal and China. Not only did Jalāl ud-Dīn successfully rule over Bengal for the next thirteen years, but also diplomatic and commercial links

²⁰ On Hou Xian’s first visit to Bengal in 1415, see Bagchi (1945), Yamamoto (1977), and Ray (1993).

²¹ Fei Xin reports that Kollam had to rely on the supply of rice from Bengal “to get enough to eat.” See *Xingcha shenglan* (66). Additionally, Abder Razzak in c. 1442 notes the diplomatic exchanges between Bengal and Calicut (Major 1974: 14-22).

between Bengal and China witnessed significant growth until the Ming court, in the mid-fifteenth century, decided to reverse its policies regarding maritime interactions.

In sum, maritime exchanges between China and the kingdoms along the Indian coast sharply increased during the early Ming period. The expeditions of admiral Zheng He were undoubtedly the most significant aspect of these exchanges. Zheng He and his deputies visited ports located on the Malabar coast and Bengal, locations that had become important destinations for Chinese traders and ships during the preceding Yuan period. The growing demand for pepper and the use of Calicut and Kollam by the Chinese traders as transit points for their trips to the Persian Gulf had made the Malabar coast a vital segment in the expanding Chinese maritime networks. Already during the Yuan period, court officials were making special trips to the Malabar coast in order to preserve commercial links with the region. Similarly, by the Yuan period, Bengal had emerged as a key destination for Chinese traders. Thus, Zheng He and his deputies called on ports in India that were regularly frequented by Chinese traders during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

For the Ming court, the expeditions of Zheng He, the tributary missions that ensued, the granting of titles to or writing imperial proclamations for the local rulers, and the involvement in the political disputes, all formed an integral part of its ideology to underscore the leadership of the Ming emperor in the known world. Moreover, as the epigraph to this essay suggests,²² the Ming court through these actions wanted to demonstrate its supremacy over previous Chinese dynasties in regard to controlling and civilizing foreign states.

The activities of the Ming emissaries in the Indian subcontinent suggest that the region was considered an integral part of the “Great Unified [Empire]” doctrine. It was the furthest region on the Indian Ocean to which the Ming court sent emissaries to enfeoff local mountains and rivers and resolve local disputes. Unlike the previous Song and Yuan dynasties, the early Ming court was not interested in profiting from the commercial exchanges that took place between the coastal regions of China and India. Nor did the Indian kingdoms form part of any expansionist policies of the Ming court. Rather, the Ming court used its naval power to advance its rhetoric of civilizing and transforming Indian kingdoms under the patronage of the Chinese emperor. Indeed, resolving local disputes, bestowing of titles and solicitation of tributary missions were the main goals of the Ming emissaries visiting the Indian coasts.

²² This passage is from one of the inscriptions written by Zheng He and his associates before their seventh expedition (Dreyer 2006: 195).

CONCLUSION

The specifics of the Chinese maritime networks to southern Asia between the thirteenth and the mid-fifteenth centuries are difficult to ascertain from existing sources. The task is daunting because of the lack of relevant sources from the Indian coasts. Therefore, such basic issues as the impact of Chinese mercantile and diplomatic activities on the local region, the religious background of Chinese traders active at the Indian coast (some of these traders, for instance, may have been Muslims), and the interactions between local populations and seafaring traders from China cannot be addressed with certainty. The resulting dependence on Chinese records invariably gives the impression of one-sidedness, not only for the period under examination but also for the previous phases of India-China relations.

Despite these drawbacks, some tentative conclusions can be reached about the Chinese maritime networks to India based on the above discussions. First, the encouragement of maritime trade during the Song period made it possible for traders in China to explore and establish links with ports on the Indian coasts. Initially the trips of these traders might have been sporadic and possibly entailed voyages on foreign vessels. Nonetheless, the importance of the Indian subcontinent as a transit point to markets in the Persian Gulf and source for spices and fabrics, knowledge that had been previously acquired through foreign traders, may have become apparent to these seafaring traders from China. More important, traders from China were by the eleventh century partaking in the commercial activities between the coastal regions of India and China and the transshipment trade to the Persian Gulf through the Indian ports.

Second, with the development of shipbuilding technology during the Southern Song period, traders from China seem to have started sailing to the Indian ports on indigenous vessels during the second half of the thirteenth century. And by the mid-fourteenth century, as Ibn Baṭṭūṭa suggests, Chinese vessels dominated the shipping lanes between the Indian ports and the coastal regions of China.²³ Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's account also indicates that the Chinese maritime sojourners may have used Calicut as a major hub in their communications with ports in the Persian Gulf. With the ability to use indigenous vessels, the trips of Chinese merchants to the Indian coast became recurring and their involvement in the trading activity in the region may have increased manifold. Despite the surge in their maritime activity, traders from China preferred to be sojourners rather than permanent settlers at the Indian ports.

²³ One must caution, however, that the presence of "Chinese" ships does not demonstrate voyages of Chinese ships from China. More likely, with the exception of Zheng He's fleet, the "Chinese ships" Ibn Baṭṭūṭa and other travelers report were based in Southeast Asian ports.

Third, the establishment of a mercantile network from the Chinese coast to the Indian ports by Chinese traders facilitated diplomatic exchanges between the Yuan and early Ming courts and the Indian kingdoms, including the dispatch of court officials from China to the coastal regions of India. Such visits were unprecedented and furthered the maritime links between the two regions. While during the Yuan period court officials sailed on mercantile ships operated by Chinese traders, the Ming court organized its own maritime expeditions to the Indian coast, led by the armada under the command of admiral Zheng He.

Fourth, the formation of the maritime networks to the Indian coast by private traders and court officials from China augmented the knowledge about Indian geography, coastal kingdoms, and commercial prospects. Such understanding of the Indian subcontinent may have played a crucial role in the integration of the region into the foreign policy goals of the Yuan and Ming courts. The Yuan court, under Qubilai Khan, explored the Indian coast to establish tributary, commercial, and strategic relationship as part of his imperialistic endeavor. The early Ming rulers, on the other hand, tried to use their superior naval force to bring the Indian kingdoms within the folds of the rhetorical Chinese world order.

Fifth, the Malabar coast was the main destination for the Yuan officials and the Zheng He expeditions visiting the Indian subcontinent. The ports of Kollam and Calicut were not only important emporia of cross-cultural trade on the Malabar coast, they were also key transit points for Chinese traders and ships traveling to the Persian Gulf. Furthermore, the coast was a major source for pepper destined for the Chinese markets. The emergence of Cochin in the late fourteenth century provided the Ming court an opportunity to develop new links with the Malabar coast. This was done through the enfeoffment of titles to the ruler of Cochin and, it seems, by backing him in his conflict with the Zamorin in Calicut. Although ports in Bengal did not form a part of Zheng He's itinerary, the activities of his deputy Hou Xian suggests that the Ming court also wanted to extend its influence in this region frequented by Chinese merchants based in Southeast Asia.

Sixth, although the full impact of the formation of the Chinese maritime networks to southern Asia cannot be ascertained from present sources, it is apparent from the above discussion that the rulers and officials in the coastal regions of India were aware of the increasing influence of the Yuan and Ming courts in the Indian Ocean world. The defection of the Ma'bari native Sayyid to Yuan China, the appeal by the ruler of Cochin to enfeoff the mountains and rivers in his kingdom, and Jalāl ud-Dīn's petition to the Ming court to resolve the dispute between Bengal and Jaunpur are all indicative of this awareness. Clearly, the frequent appearance of court officials from China at the Indian coast ports had some impact on local politics. Similarly, the procurement of luxury and manufactured

goods from the Indian ports by Chinese traders would have had significant impact on the local economy and industries.

Unlike the Buddhist phase of India-China interactions in the first millennium, when most of the contact took place overland, communications between the two regions during the Song-Yuan-early Ming period took place primarily through the maritime routes. The period also witnessed a significant change in the ways in which officials and traders from China participated in the bilateral exchanges. In the first millennium, individuals from China who visited southern Asia were mostly Buddhist monks making pilgrimage to Buddhist sites. Similarly, the few early diplomatic missions to the Indian kingdoms from the courts in China also frequented the regions associated with the life of the Buddha. Most of these Buddhist pilgrims and official missions from China traveled to the Indian kingdoms through the overland routes in Central Asia. Furthermore, early traders from China rarely made trips to the Indian markets to explore commercial possibilities. The above study demonstrates a vastly expanded role of the maritime route in exchanges between China and India from the Song to the early Ming periods, the unparalleled interest in the Indian coastal regions by the Yuan and Ming courts in China, and an unprecedented growth in the mercantile activity of traders from China at the Indian ports. The two-and-a-half centuries from 1200 to 1450 thus represent a distinct phase in the historical relationship between India and China.

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