

Zheng He, “Inscription to the Goddess”

ZHENG HE

Inscription to the Goddess

This inscription was carved on a stone erected to the Chinese Daoist goddess called the Celestial Spouse at Changle in Fujian Province of China in 1431. Zheng He left other inscriptions to other deities on his travels so it would be a mistake to read much of a religious motive in this act by the admiral who had been raised a Muslim. In fact, in 1411, Zheng He erected a monument in Sri Lanka dedicated to three deities in three languages. The Chinese portion praised Buddha, a section in Tamil was dedicated to the god Tenavarai-Nayanar, and a third section in Persian was inscribed to Allah.

This selection conveys some idea of how Zheng He must have perceived his mission or wanted it to be understood. Judging from this inscription, would you call Zheng He, to use Joseph Kahn's terms, a good-will ambassador or a military oppressor?

Zheng He, “Inscription to the Goddess,” in *China and Africa in the Middle Ages*, ed. Teobaldo Fiesi, trans. David I. Morrison (London: Frank Cass, 1972), 57-61. Americanized and slightly simplified.

Thinking Historically

Primary sources like this one can be difficult for a modern reader to interpret because they were not written for us, but for another audience in a different time. A modern journalist like Joseph Kahn speaks directly to us; the fifteenth-century mariner does not. This lack of “fit” between ancient source and modern ear can actually be a benefit, however, because it better enables us to distinguish fact from propaganda, truth from spin. As you read this selection, ask yourself what the author wants the reader to believe and what in his writing he could not have crafted for the purpose of persuading or fooling the audience. Your answer to the latter part of this question provides us with historical knowledge of a high degree of certainty.

For an example of how this works, look at the first sentence, the title that declares the nature of the inscription: “Record of the miraculous answer (to prayer) of the goddess the Celestial Spouse.” *We do not* learn from this that the author received a miraculous answer to his prayer. We cannot even be sure that he thought he did (since he may not be telling the truth). But we do learn some things beyond doubt. We learn from this sentence that some Chinese believed in a goddess called “the Celestial Spouse.” We learn that some Chinese prayed to the goddess and that some believed she could provide “miraculous answers.” We learn all of these things because the inscription would make no sense otherwise. These are the assumptions rather than the arguments of the inscription. We learn from primary sources by asking about the things they *assume*. Try this exercise with the rest of the selection.

Record of the miraculous answer (to prayer) of the goddess the Celestial Spouse.

The Imperial Ming Dynasty unifying seas and continents, surpassing the three dynasties even goes beyond the Han and Tang dynasties. The countries beyond the horizon and from the ends of the earth have all become subjects and to the most western of the western or the most northern of the northern countries, however far they may be, the distance and the routes may be calculated. Thus the barbarians from beyond the seas, though their countries are truly distant, have come to audience bearing precious objects and presents.

The Emperor, approving of their loyalty and sincerity, has ordered Zheng He and others at the head of several tens of thousands of officers and flag-troops to ascend more than one hundred large ships to go and confer presents on them in order to make manifest the transforming power of the imperial virtue and to treat distant people with kindness. From the third year of Yongle (1405) till

now we have seven times received the commission of ambassadors to countries of the Western ocean. The barbarian countries which we have visited are: by way of Zhancheng (Champa), Zhaowa (Java), Sanfoqi (Palembang) and Xianle (Siam) crossing straight over to Xilanshan (Ceylon) in South India, Guli (Calicut), and Kezhi (Cochin), we have gone to the western regions Hulumosu (Hormuz), Adan (Aden), Mugudushu (Mogadishu), altogether more than thirty countries large and small. We have traversed more than one hundred thousand li¹ of immense water spaces and have beheld in the ocean huge waves like mountains rising sky-high, and we have set eyes on barbarian regions far away hidden in a blue transparency of light vapors, while our sails loftily unfurled like clouds day and night continued their course rapid like a star, traversing those savage waves as if we were treading a public thoroughfare. Truly this was due to the majesty and the good fortune of the Court and moreover we owe it to the protecting virtue of the divine Celestial Spouse.

The power of the goddess having indeed been manifested in previous times has been abundantly revealed in the present generation. In the midst of the rushing waters it happened that, when there was a hurricane, suddenly there was a divine lantern shining in the mast, and as soon as this miraculous light appeared the danger was appeased. So that even in the danger of capsizing one felt reassured that there was no cause for fear. When we arrived in the distant countries we captured alive those of the native kings who were not respectful and exterminated those barbarian robbers who were engaged in piracy, so that consequently the sea route was cleansed and pacified and the natives put their trust in it. All this is due to the favors of the goddess.

It is not easy to enumerate completely all the cases where the goddess has answered prayers. Previously in a memorial to the Court we have requested that her virtue be registered in the Court of Sacrificial Worship and a temple be built at Nanking on the bank of the dragon river where regular sacrifices should be transmitted forever. We have respectfully received an Imperial commemorative composition exalting the miraculous favors, which is the highest recompense and praise indeed. However, the miraculous power of the goddess resides wherever one goes. As for the temporary palace on the southern mountain at Changle, I have, at the head of the fleet, frequently resided there awaiting the favorable wind to set sail for the ocean.

¹ A li = 1/3 mile. [Ed.]

We, Zheng He and others, on the one hand have received the high favor of a gracious commission of our Sacred Lord, and on the other hand carry to the distant barbarians the benefits of respect and good faith. Commanding the multitudes on the fleet and being responsible for a quantity of money and valuables, in the face of the violence of the winds and the nights, our one fear is not to be able to succeed; how should we then dare not to serve our dynasty with exertion of all our loyalty and the gods with the utmost sincerity? How would it be possible not to realize what is the source of the tranquility of the fleet and the troops and the salvation on the voyage both going and returning? Therefore we have made manifest the virtue of the goddess on stone and have moreover recorded the years and months of the voyages to the barbarian countries and the return in order to leave the memory for ever.

I. In the third year of Yongle (1405) commanding the fleet we went to Guli (Calicut) and other countries. At that time the pirate Chen Zuyi had gathered his followers in the country of Sanfoqi (Palembang), where he plundered the native merchants. When he also advanced to resist our fleet, supernatural soldiers secretly came to the rescue so that after one beating of the drum he was annihilated. In the fifth year (1407) we returned.

II. In the fifth year of Yongle (1407) commanding the fleet we went to Zhaowa (Java), Guli (Calicut), Kezhi (Cochin), and Xianle (Siam). The kings of these countries all sent as tribute precious objects, precious birds, and rare animals. In the seventh year (1409) we returned.

III. In the seventh year of Yongle (1409) commanding the fleet we went to the countries visited before and took our route by the country of Xilanshan (Ceylon). Its king Yaliekunaier (Alagakkonara) was guilty of a gross lack of respect and plotted against the fleet. Owing to the manifest answer to prayer of the goddess the plot was discovered and thereupon that king was captured alive. In the ninth year (1411) on our return the king was presented to the throne as a prisoner; subsequently he received the Imperial favor of returning to his own country.

IV. In the eleventh year of Yongle (1413) commanding the fleet we went to Hulumosu (Ormuz) and other countries. In the country of Sumendala (Samudra)² there was a false king Sukanla (Sekandar) who was marauding and invading his country. Its king Cainu-

liabiding (Zaynu-'l-Abidin) had sent an envoy to the Palace Gates in Order to lodge a complaint. We went thither with the official troops under our command and exterminated Some and arrested other rebels, and owing to the silent aid of the goddess we captured the false king alive. In the thirteenth year (1415) on our return he was presented to the Emperor as a prisoner. In that year the king of the country of Manlajia (Malacca) came in person with his wife and son to present tribute.

V. In the fifteenth year of Yongle (1417) commanding the fleet we visited the western regions. The country of Hulumosi (Ormuz) presented lions, leopards with gold spots, and large western horses. The country of Adan (Aden) presented qilin of which the native name is culafa (giraffe), as well as the long-horned animal maha (oryx). The country of Mugudushu (Mogadishu) presented huafu lu ("striped" zebras) as well as lions. The country of Bulawa (Brava)³ presented camels which run one thousand li as well as camel-birds (ostriches). The countries of Zhaowa (Java) and Guli (Calicut) presented the animal miligao. They all vied in presenting the marvelous objects preserved in the mountains or hidden in the seas and the beautiful treasures buried in the sand or deposited on the shores. Some sent a maternal uncle of the king, others a paternal uncle or a younger brother of the king in order to present a letter of homage written on gold leaf as well as tribute.

VI. In the nineteenth year of Yongle (1421) commanding the fleet we conducted the ambassadors from Hulumosi (Ormuz) and the other countries that had been in attendance at the capital for a long time back to their countries. The kings of all these countries prepared even more tribute than previously.

VII. In the sixth year of Xuande (1431) once more commanding the fleet we have left for the barbarian countries in order to read to them (an Imperial edict) and to confer presents.

We have anchored in this port awaiting a north wind to take the sea, and recalling how previously we have on several occasions received the benefits of the protection of the divine intelligence we have thus recorded an inscription in stone.

² Kerala, India. [Ed].

³ Baraawe, Somalia. [Ed.]