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THE ZHENG HE VOYAGES: A REASSESSMENT¹

by
GEOFF WADE

The Ming eunuch Zheng He, who commanded fleets that voyaged to Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean in the early fifteenth century, is today depicted as an ‘ambassador of friendship’ between China and other nations. The present article suggests a revisionist view of the man and his voyages. By examining these ‘voyages to the Western Ocean’ as simply an element of the southern expansion by the Yong-le emperor (1403–24), linked to his invasions of Đại Việt and Yun-nan, we see these ‘voyages of friendship’ as aggressive attempts to achieve a *pax Ming* in the Asian maritime realm, with Melaka, Palembang, and Samudera as key elements. We also observe Ming efforts to dominate the trade routes linking the Middle East and East Asia. The paper concludes with a discussion of the characteristics of colonialism and imperialism and suggests that the voyages constituted a maritime proto-colonialism.

Introduction

There exists around the world today, or at least within Chinese societies, a range of what one might call ‘popular’ perceptions of the Ming eunuch Admiral Zheng He and the voyages he commanded in the early fifteenth century. These views are well represented by the extracts below:

1. 從鄭和時代到社會主義建設新時期，鄭和下西洋的事蹟成爲中華民族進行愛國主義教育的一片很好的教材
黃慧珍薛金度《鄭和研究八十年》

From the age of Zheng He until the new period of socialist construction, the achievements of Zheng He during his voyages to the Western Ocean have been excellent materials for conducting patriotic education for the Chinese nation.

Huang Hui-zhen and Xue Jin-du, ‘Eighty Years of Researching Zheng He’

2. 正是這樣友好的外交活動，鄭和七次下西洋的整個活動中沒有占領鄰國一寸土地，沒有建立一個軍事要塞，沒有奪取他國一份財富，在商業、貿易活動當中，採取了厚往薄來的做法，贏得了沿途各國人民的歡迎和贊揚。
中國交通部副部長徐祖遠，2004年7月

¹ The author wishes to thank Anthony Reid for comments and criticisms on an earlier draft of this paper.

These were thus friendly diplomatic activities. During the overall course of the seven voyages to the Western Ocean, Zheng He did not occupy a single piece of land, establish any fortress, or seize any wealth from other countries. In the commercial and trade activities, he adopted the practice of giving more than he received, and thus he was welcomed and lauded by the people of the various countries along his routes.

Xu Zu-yuan, PRC Vice Minister of Communications, July 2004

3. 鄭和是歷史上最偉大的航海家

陳達生《亞州文化》第27期，2003年6月

Zheng He was the greatest maritime voyager in history.

Tan Ta-sen, *Asian Culture*, No. 27, June 2003

4. 鄭和是明代偉大的航海家，杰出的和平友好使者，他率領近3萬人的龐大船隊，七次遠航亞，非30多個國家和地區，為世界的航海事業，為中國與各國的友好作出了卓越的貢獻。

孔遠志《鄭和與馬來西亞》2000年出版

Zheng He was a great maritime voyager of the Ming dynasty, and an outstanding envoy of peace and friendship. He led a huge maritime force of close to 30,000 persons on seven voyages to more than 30 distant lands in Asia and Africa. Thereby he made outstanding contributions to global navigation and to the friendship between China and other countries.

Kong Yuan-zhi, 'Zheng He and Malaysia', 2000

These statements were made by a diverse group of people:

1. Two PRC academics who have surveyed most of the studies of Zheng He which have been written up to the present;
2. A PRC government official responsible for the upcoming Zheng He 600th anniversary celebrations;
3. Tan Ta-sen, the chairman of the International Zheng He Association based in Singapore, and the developer of a Zheng He Museum and associated retail arcades and hotel in Malacca; and
4. Kong Yuan-zhi, a historian and linguist of Southeast Asia based at Beijing University.

These are a subset of a similar range of assessments, fairly common in Chinese publications, about the eunuch voyager and his position in Chinese and global history.

The orthodox or traditional view of Zheng He, at least within Chinese traditions, is thus that of a Ming envoy who was sent by the Yong-le emperor on seven occasions (an eighth mission in 1424 is usually ignored) to lead armadas abroad, and who braved the waves and travelled to distant lands to develop relations of peace and friendship with the rulers of those lands. He engaged in trade en route and brought many of the foreign rulers back to China to offer tribute to the imperial court.

Obviously, with the impending 600th anniversary of the first voyage by Zheng He to the polities of what is today Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean (being

commemorated in 2005), there will in the coming years be much more attention paid to the Zheng He voyages and their position in world history. Greater attention will almost inevitably mean a more diverse range of views. As part of this process, I would like to offer a somewhat revisionist view of the maritime voyages, their impetus, their function, and the eunuchs who led them.

Zheng He: The Man and the Voyages

Who was this man? The story of a Muslim lad from Yun-nan, surnamed Ma, captured during the Ming invasion of the region and castrated to serve as a palace eunuch, is well known. He became a close confidante of Zhu Di, the son of the Ming founder Zhu Yuan-zhang, and followed him when he was accorded the title of Prince of Yan and assigned what is today the area around Bei-jing as his fiefdom. Zheng He (a name he was given by the Ming Prince) fought with Zhu Di during his battles against the Mongols, and when Zhu Di launched a coup against his nephew, the Emperor Jian-wen, in 1399, Zheng He followed the Prince of Yan southward to what is today Nan-jing and became part of the new administration. As the new emperor, Zhu Di assumed the reign title 'Yong-le', a name by which the man himself is also often known.

Expansion Under Yong-le

In examining the maritime voyages in which Zheng He was to participate, let us first look at their context. The new emperor's military push to the south from Yan-jing (the modern Bei-jing) did not stop at the Ming capital, situated at what is today's Nan-jing. Rather, Yong-le decided to try to expand his influence to the known world. To this end, he pursued three prongs of southern expansion (see Fig. 1).

I. The Invasion and Occupation of the Yun-nan Tai Polities: Successful Ming Land-based Colonialism

In 1369, only a year after Zhu Yuan-zhang had formally founded the Ming dynasty, he sent proclamations for the instruction of 'the countries of Yun-nan and Japan' (雲南日本等國).² This early recognition of Yun-nan as a 'country' which lay beyond the Ming was to change very soon thereafter. By 1380, Yun-nan was considered to have been 'China's territory since the Han dynasty',³ providing a moral basis for the invasion of the region. About 250,000 troops were then deployed in an attack on the polities of the region, taking Da-li, Li-jiang, and Jin-chi in 1382, and settling Chinese military families throughout the area. Consequently, the Ming founder took control of the major centres of the north-western part of what is today Yun-nan, including several Tai areas. These colonies were the first to be absorbed into Ming 'Yun-nan'.⁴

² *Ming Tai-zu shi-lu*, *juan* 39.1b. (The *juan* is the unit or section into which each *shi-lu* is divided. This reference is to page 1 (verso) of *juan* 39 of the *Tai-zu shi-lu*.) Another reference to Yun-nan as a 'country' can be found at *Tai-zu shi-lu*, *juan* 53.9a-b.

³ *Ming Tai-zu shi-lu*, *juan* 138.5a-b.

⁴ For much of the Ming, in addition to being a provincial designation, the term 'Yun-nan' was a generic term for areas to the south-west, extending as far as knowledge extended. In this respect, Yun-nan was somewhat like the term 'the West' in the European movement across the Northern American continent in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

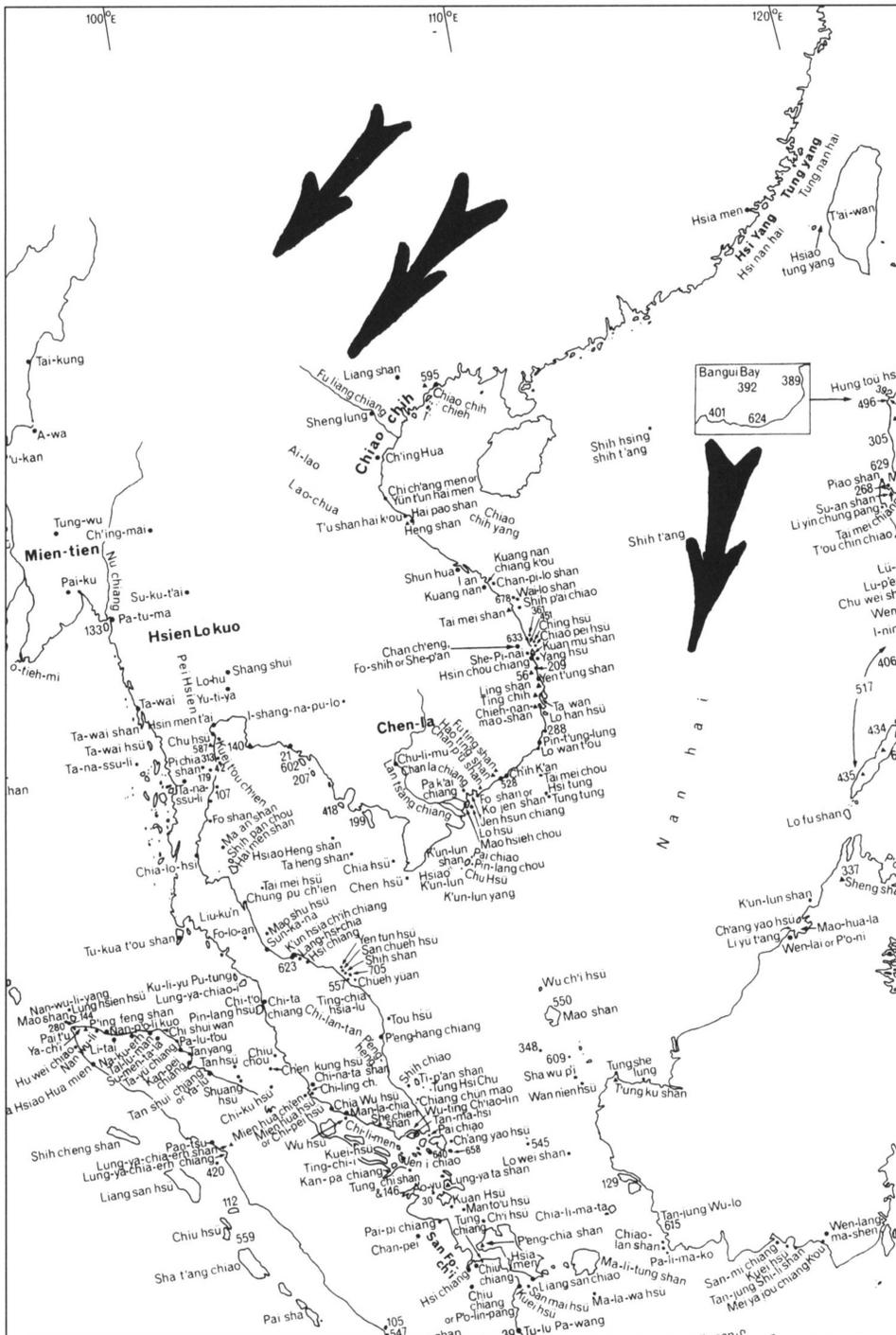


FIG. 1 The three prongs of the Yong-le emperor's southward expansion during the first quarter of the fifteenth century—Yun-nan, Đại Việt, and the Western Ocean. (From Mills, *Ma Huan: Ying-yai Sheng-lan*)

In the process by which they were gradually absorbed by the Ming, these polities were subjected to a wide range of tribute demands, labour levies, and other taxes, including troop provision. As an example, in the case of the Tai Mao polity of Lu-chuan/Ping-mian,⁵ the Ming court demanded 15,000 horses, 500 elephants, and 30,000 cattle from the ruler Si Lun-fa in 1397.⁶ These were real rather than symbolic figures. Subsequently, large silver demands (silver in lieu of labour) were levied on this polity. The annual amount of 6,900 *liang*⁷ of silver was initially set and it was then almost tripled to 18,000 *liang*. When it was realized that this was impossible to meet, the levy was reduced to the original amount.⁸

The reign of the Yong-le emperor (1403–25) was to see a major development in the Ming colonization of Yun-nan. Prior to Yong-le's invasion of the Vietnamese polity of Đại Việt in 1406, he engaged himself in further expansion into Yun-nan. The Ming colonization of the Tai areas of Yun-nan during the fifteenth century was pursued and maintained by either the actual use or the threat of military force. Consequently, the Ming established guards throughout the region to maintain security and political dominance. Independent battalions, directly under the Regional Military Commission, were established in Teng-chong⁹ and Yong-chang¹⁰ in Yun-nan in 1403,¹¹ and these were to be the major control centres for Chinese colonization of the Tai polities over the following century.

In the same year, new Chiefs' Offices were also established in Yun-nan—at Zhe-le Dian, Da-hou, Gan-yai, Wan Dian, and Lu-jiang,¹² and in 1406 a further four Chiefs' Offices were established under the Ning-yuan Guard in what is today Sip Song Chau Tai in Vietnam.¹³ Mu-bang (Hsenwi) and Meng-yang, both located in what is today northern Burma, were made Military and Civilian Pacification Superintendencies in 1404.¹⁴ The recognition of these polities and their rulers by the Ming court came at a cost to their independence and, if they did not accord with what the new Ming emperor required, military actions were launched against them. In 1405, for example, the senior Chinese representative in Yun-nan, Mu Sheng, launched an attack on Ba-bai (Lan Na).¹⁵ The attempts at domination extended even to what is today Assam in India, with envoys carrying threats being dispatched to Da-gu-la, the polity of Uttara-kula, which lay on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra River.¹⁶

⁵ Lu-chuan and Ping-mian were the Chinese names for the Tai Mao polities of Mông Mao and Pong respectively.

⁶ *Ming Tai-zu shi-lu*, juan 190.3b.

⁷ See fn. 52.

⁸ *Ming Tai-zong shi-lu*, juan 17.6a.

⁹ Located in Teng-yue Subprefecture, west of Baoshan, in what is today Teng-chong; approximately 160 km north of Bhamo and 150 km south-east of Myitkying. See also Liew Foon Ming, *Treatises on Military Affairs of the Ming Dynastic History*, 2 vols., Hamburg: Gesellschaft für Nature- und Völkerkunde Ostasiens e. V., 1998, Vol. 2, pp. 94–5.

¹⁰ Previously known as the Jin-chi [Golden Teeth] Guard, this was located in what is today Bao-shan. See Liew, *Treatises on Military Affairs*, Vol. 2, pp. 91–2.

¹¹ *Ming Tai-zong shi-lu*, juan 23.4b.

¹² *Ming Tai-zong shi-lu*, juan 16.3a. These polities were situated in what is today the south-west of the Chinese province of Yun-nan.

¹³ *Ming Tai-zong shi-lu*, juan 53.2b.

¹⁴ *Ming Tai-zong shi-lu*, juan 32.1a.

¹⁵ *Ming Tai-zong shi-lu*, juan 49.1a–b.

¹⁶ *Ming Tai-zong shi-lu*, juan 82.1a–b.

After some sort of recognition or acceptance of the suzerain position of the court in Nan-jing (and, after 1421, in Beijing), through military action or threat, Chinese clerks or registry managers were appointed by the Ming to the 'native offices' to 'assist' the indigenous ruler, and ensure that Ming interests were served. Chinese clerks were appointed to carry out Chinese language duties in the native offices of Yun-nan in 1404,¹⁷ while similar clerk positions (to be filled by Chinese) were established in seven Chiefs' Offices in Yun-nan in 1406.¹⁸ Gradually, formal members of the Chinese bureaucracy were appointed to assist these rulers.¹⁹ Here, then, we see the beginnings of the process by which formerly Southeast Asian polities were gradually absorbed into the Chinese empire through a process of colonization.

The 'native office' polities were then subject to demands in terms of gold/silver in lieu of labour, administered by the Ministry of Revenue,²⁰ and also required to provide troops to assist in further Ming campaigns. Mu-bang (Hsenwi), for example, was required to send its troops against Ba-bai (Lan Na) in the 1406 expedition mentioned above.²¹ This employment of 'native troops' by the Ming colonizers reflected what was being done in Đại Việt.

These processes continued well after the reign of Yong-le. The 1430s and 1440s, in particular, saw massive military expeditions against the Tai polities of Yun-nan, particularly the Tai Mao polity known to the Chinese as Lu-chuan, but those phenomena fall beyond the scope of the present paper.

II. The Invasion of Đại Việt: Unsuccessful Ming Land-based Colonialism

In 1406, in an effort to increase Ming influence and power in Đại Việt (the polity known to the Ming as An-nan),²² the Yong-le emperor attempted to send a puppet ruler named Chen Tian-ping (Trần Thiên Bình) into that polity.²³ Trần Thiên Bình was killed as he proceeded into the country. This killing by the Vietnamese became the immediate pretext for Yong-le to launch a huge invasion of the polity, a move obviously planned well before the event. He appointed senior generals, sea-crossing commanders, firearms commanders, rapid-attack commanders, and cavalry commanders. On a day equivalent to 30 July 1406, the boat-borne forces set sail from Nan-jing. They landed in southern China and joined with other forces in the border province of Guang-xi. These forces included 95,000 troops from the provinces of Zhe-jiang, Jiang-xi, Guang-dong, Guang-xi, and Hu-guang, a further 10,000 cavalry and infantry troops from various other guards, and 30,000 'native

¹⁷ *Ming Tai-zong shi-lu*, juan 35.2b.

¹⁸ *Ming Tai-zong shi-lu*, juan 55.1b.

¹⁹ Much like the advisers appointed by the British to assist the rulers of the Malay States post-1876. Anthony Reid, however, cautions that as the British never tried to fully incorporate the Malay States into the United Kingdom, it is the differences as much as the similarities in the colonialisms that are worthy of study.

²⁰ See, for example, *Ming Tai-zong shi-lu*, juan 17.6a.

²¹ *Ming Tai-zong shi-lu*, juan 57.2a–b.

²² More usually Annam. The polity of Đại Việt (the Great Viet) in the early fifteenth century was nowhere near as large as the modern Vietnam. It was centred on the Red River Valley and controlled some territory to its north and to the south. Not far to its south lay the large Austronesian polity of Champa and to its west lay the Tai polities.

²³ *Ming Tai-zong shi-lu*, juan 52.6a–7a. Chen Tian-ping (Trần Thiên Bình) was a Vietnamese defector who claimed descent from the former Trần rulers.

troops' from Guang-xi.²⁴ An additional 75,000 cavalry and troops were deployed from Yun-nan, Gui-zhou, and Si-chuan. Guang-xi and Yun-nan provinces had also each been ordered to supply 200,000 *shi*²⁵ of grain to feed the expeditionary army, and Yun-nan was to arrange for 10,000 troops as reinforcements. The official account tells us that, in all, some 800,000 troops were mobilized by the Ming for this expedition.²⁶

Firearms were an essential element of this expedition and there is an estimate that about 10 per cent of the troops were armed with them. In a recent article, Sun Laichen examines the use of firearms by the Ming armies in their invasion of Vietnam.²⁷ The Ming forces also built boats in Vietnam to continue their assault, and in January 1407 achieved one of the most significant victories of the campaign when they took Đa-bang City.²⁸ Evocative descriptions of the attack have been left to us, detailing how the Chinese forces disguised their horses with images of lions in order to frighten the elephants which led the Vietnamese forces, and advanced with firearms which shot fire-arrows.²⁹ In subsequent weeks, the Vietnamese Eastern capital collapsed and the Western capital was abandoned to the Chinese. In the middle of 1407, the Vietnamese ruler Hồ Quý Ly and his son were captured, and the short-lived Hồ dynasty of Đại Ngu came to an end. The Chinese forces declared victory, amid claims of seven million of Vietnamese killed in this initial campaign to take the polity.³⁰ In late 1407, Jiao-zhi³¹ became Ming China's fourteenth province, and remained so until 1428, when the Ming forces were driven out and the provincial status was formally withdrawn.

The colonization of the country began in earnest immediately, with the invading forces beginning to employ local forces to assist them. The Ming regional commander Zhang Fu memorialized to the court, 'Due to the circumstances, the expeditionary forces from Yun-nan, Guang-dong and Guang-xi now have depleted ranks. They wish to select men from the Annam native forces to make up their deficiencies.'³² The request was approved and the conscription of the local arm of the colonial army commenced. New administrative boundaries were drawn, new tax offices, salt offices, Confucian schools, Buddhist registries, and other offices were established, while 7,600 tradesmen and artisans (including gun founders) captured in Đại Việt were sent to the Ming capital at today's Nan-jing.³³ By 1408, the Chinese had established 472 military and civilian offices in Jiao-zhi,³⁴ all being administered in a Chinese mode, but many staffed by Vietnamese people. Within two years, three maritime trade supervisorates had been created in this new province, the same number as existed in the rest of China. This was a clear indication of

²⁴ These were non-Chinese troops under the 'native offices' of Guang-xi, and likely people who are today called Zhuang and Yao.

²⁵ A *shi* is approximately equivalent to a hectolitre.

²⁶ *Ming Tai-zong shi-lu*, *juan* 60.1a–4a. This figure of 800,000 cited in the *Ming shi-lu* may well be an exaggeration. Whitmore claims a figure of 215,000 was more likely. See John K. Whitmore, *Vietnam, Hồ Quý Ly and the Ming (1371–1421)*, New Haven: Yale Centre for International and Area Studies, 1985, p. 89.

²⁷ Sun Laichen, *Chinese Military Technology and Dai Viet, 1390–1497*, Asia Research Institute Electronic Working Paper No. 11, Singapore, 2003. http://www.ari.nus.edu.sg/docs/wps/wps03_011.pdf See especially pp. 6–11 for the use of firearms by the invading Ming armies.

²⁸ Situated to the west of modern-day Hanoi.

²⁹ *Ming Tai-zong shi-lu*, *juan* 62.3a–b. See also Whitmore, *Vietnam, Hồ Quý Ly and the Ming*, pp. 91–2.

³⁰ *Ming Tai-zong shi-lu*, *juan* 68.3b–7a.

³¹ The new name of the occupied Đại Việt.

³² *Ming Tai-zong shi-lu*, *juan* 67.3b–4a, dated to the equivalent of 26 June 1407.

³³ *Ming Tai-zong shi-lu*, *juan* 71.6a.

³⁴ *Ming Tai-zong shi-lu*, *juan* 80.3b–4a.

the desire of the Ming to control maritime trade to the south and exploit the economic advantage of such control.³⁵ Other economic exploitation involved grain taxes, annual levies of lacquer, *sapan* wood, kingfisher feathers, fans, and aromatics, and the imposition of monopolies on gold, silver, salt, iron, and fish.³⁶ In addition, eunuchs were sent to Jiao-zhi with the task of treasure-collecting for the Emperor, but an equal amount of treasure collection appears to have been done for themselves.

III. The Third Prong: The Zheng He Voyages and Ming Maritime Proto-Colonialism

The dispatch of various eunuch-led maritime missions to the 'Western Ocean' (maritime Southeast Asia west of Borneo, extending to the Indian Ocean), as well as other lesser-known missions to the Eastern Ocean (today's Philippines, Borneo, and eastern Indonesia) was thus the third of the three prongs of southern expansion pursued by the Yong-le emperor. Most people note seven voyages but the dates are still debated with inscriptions and other texts not always in accord. However, these were not of course the earliest Ming maritime voyages to Southeast Asia. There had been frequent maritime intercourse with the polities of Southeast Asia in the final thirty years of the fourteenth century under the Hong-wu emperor. Peng Hui has recently produced an excellent article detailing these missions,³⁷ which were generally led by civil officials.³⁸

The nature of the voyages dispatched under Yong-le was different from those ordered by Hong-wu, in that they were generally commanded by eunuchs. The most widely known of these maritime 'envoys' was Zheng He, otherwise known as 'San-bao' (the 'Three Protections' or 'Three Treasures'). It is around this eunuch that many of the legends still current today in Southeast Asia are centred. However, there was a wide range of other eunuch commanders who led missions to maritime Asia, including Wang Gui-tong and Hou Xian. Zhang Qian and other eunuchs were apparently responsible for the polities in the Eastern Ocean—Bo-ni, Pangasinan, Sulu, and Luzon—and brought envoys and rulers to China from there. The listing in the Appendix to this article shows the eunuchs dispatched to the maritime realm during the first thirty years of the fifteenth century, as recorded in the *Ming shi-lu* (明實錄). This listing puts Zheng He in some sort of context. Another, even broader, context is suggested by the fact that an equal or greater number of eunuchs were sent during the same period to the polities of 'Yun-nan' and to Jiao-zhi, the name of occupied Đại Việt.

It is obvious that these fleets were crewed by a wide range of peoples. Many of the eunuch commanders were Muslims, the navigators were often non-Chinese, and it is

³⁵ The importance of Vietnamese maritime trade in this period is underlined in Momoki Shiro, 'Đại Việt and the South China Sea Trade: From the 10th to the 15th Century', *Crossroads*, 12/1 (1998): 18–23.

³⁶ Tobias Rettig has elsewhere drawn comparisons with the opium, alcohol, and salt monopolies implemented by the French in Vietnam more than 450 years later.

³⁷ Peng Hui (彭蕙), 'Ming-dai Hong-wu nian-jian chu-shi Nan-yang shi-jie yan-jiu' [Research on the diplomatic missions sent to the Nan-yang during the Hong-wu reign], *Dong-nan-ya yang-jiu*, 1 (2004): 80–6. My thanks to Liu Hong for drawing this article to my attention.

³⁸ From Peng Hui's article, we note only three eunuch envoys to Southeast Asia over the approximately 30 years of the Hong-wu reign—Chen Neng (陳能) to Annam in 1378, and Zhao Da (趙達) and Song Fu (宋福) to Siam in 1395.

possible that descendants of Fu-jian Arabs were also included in the crew. The mariners would have been from the coastal provinces, and the troops would have been conscripted from a wide range of military guards, and likely included descendants of Yuan military forces from Central or Western Asia. These missions were, like Yong-le's expansion into Yun-nan and his occupation of Đại Việt, intended to create legitimacy for the usurping emperor, display the might of the Ming, bring the known polities to demonstrated submission to the Ming, and thereby achieve a *pax Ming* throughout the known world and collect treasures for the Court.³⁹

To achieve these aims, the maritime forces dispatched needed to be both huge and powerful. Shipbuilding began almost as soon as the Yong-le emperor assumed power. In 1403, the Fu-jian Regional Military Commission was ordered to build 137 ocean-going ships (see Fig. 2).⁴⁰ In the same year, various military units were ordered to build additional ships, numbering almost 400. In 1405, just after Zheng He departed on his first expedition, Zhe-jiang and other regional military commissions were ordered to build 1,180 ocean-going ships.⁴¹ By 1408, the task was assigned to a central ministry and the Ministry of Works was required to build 48 'treasure-ships' ('bao-chuan' 寶船).⁴² The individual missions comprised between 50 and 250 ships, making them huge armadas by any scale,⁴³ which stayed away from China for several years. The sources differ on the number of personnel who accompanied these missions, but figures between 27,000 and 30,000 are cited for the largest missions. A typical mission comprised, in the senior ranks, almost 100 envoys of various grades, 93 military captains, 104 lieutenants, 103 sub-lieutenants, as well as associated medical and astrological staff members. In one case cited, 26,800 out of 27,400 on board were the rank and file, the irregular troops, the crack troops, as well as the sailors and clerks.⁴⁴ It is likely that all of the missions carried something in excess of 20,000 military men. In a *Ming shi-lu* reference of 1427, there is reference to '10,000 crack troops who had formerly been sent to the Western Ocean',⁴⁵ also suggesting that a relatively large ratio of the members of these fleets were military men. And, like the forces sent to Yun-nan and Đại Việt, these forces would have been equipped with the best and most advanced firearms available in the world at that time.⁴⁶ They were military missions with strategic aims. The military aspect of these voyages

³⁹ The eunuchs sent to Jiao-zhi (the occupied Đại Việt) and Burma by the Ming emperors were also engaged in collection of precious stones, gold, and pearls. A later reference from 1459 suggests that the obtaining of gold was a major task of the eunuch-led voyages. See *Ying-zong shi-lu*, *juan* 307.3b.

⁴⁰ *Ming Tai-zong shi-lu*, *juan* 19.

⁴¹ *Ming Tai-zong shi-lu*, *juan* 43.3b.

⁴² *Ming Tai-zong shi-lu*, *juan* 279.1a.

⁴³ Anthony Reid has provided, by way of comparison, a note that the VOC (Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie or Dutch East India Company), generally considered the inventor of a very different kind of trade-based empire, sent 181 ships from the Netherlands to Asia between its foundation in 1602 and 1620, providing an average of 10 ships per year of 480 tons each. The number of people on board averaged 111 per ship over the period 1602–10 and 162 per ship in 1610–20. See J. R. Bruijn, F. S. Gaastra, and I. Schöffner, *Dutch-Asiatic Shipping in the 17th and 18th Centuries*, Den Haag: Nijhoff, 1987, pp. 144 and 174.

⁴⁴ J. V. G. Mills, *Ma Huan: Ying-yai Sheng-lan, 'The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores [1433]'*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970, pp. 31–2.

⁴⁵ *Xuan-zong shi-lu*, *juan* 26.2a.

⁴⁶ A 1393 Ming directive required that seagoing ships be armed with 16 hand-guns, four 'bowl-muzzle' (perhaps 8 inch) guns, 20 fire lances, 20 rocket arrows, 20 fire forks, 10 'fire gorse' cannons, 1,000 cannon balls, and 20 rockets. See Tang Zhi-ba (唐志拔), 'Shi-lun Zheng He chuan-dui zhuang-bei de wu-qi' ['On the weapons with which the maritime forces of Zheng He were equipped'], in *Zheng He Yan-jiu*, Vol. 50 (Special Edition, 2003), p. 204.

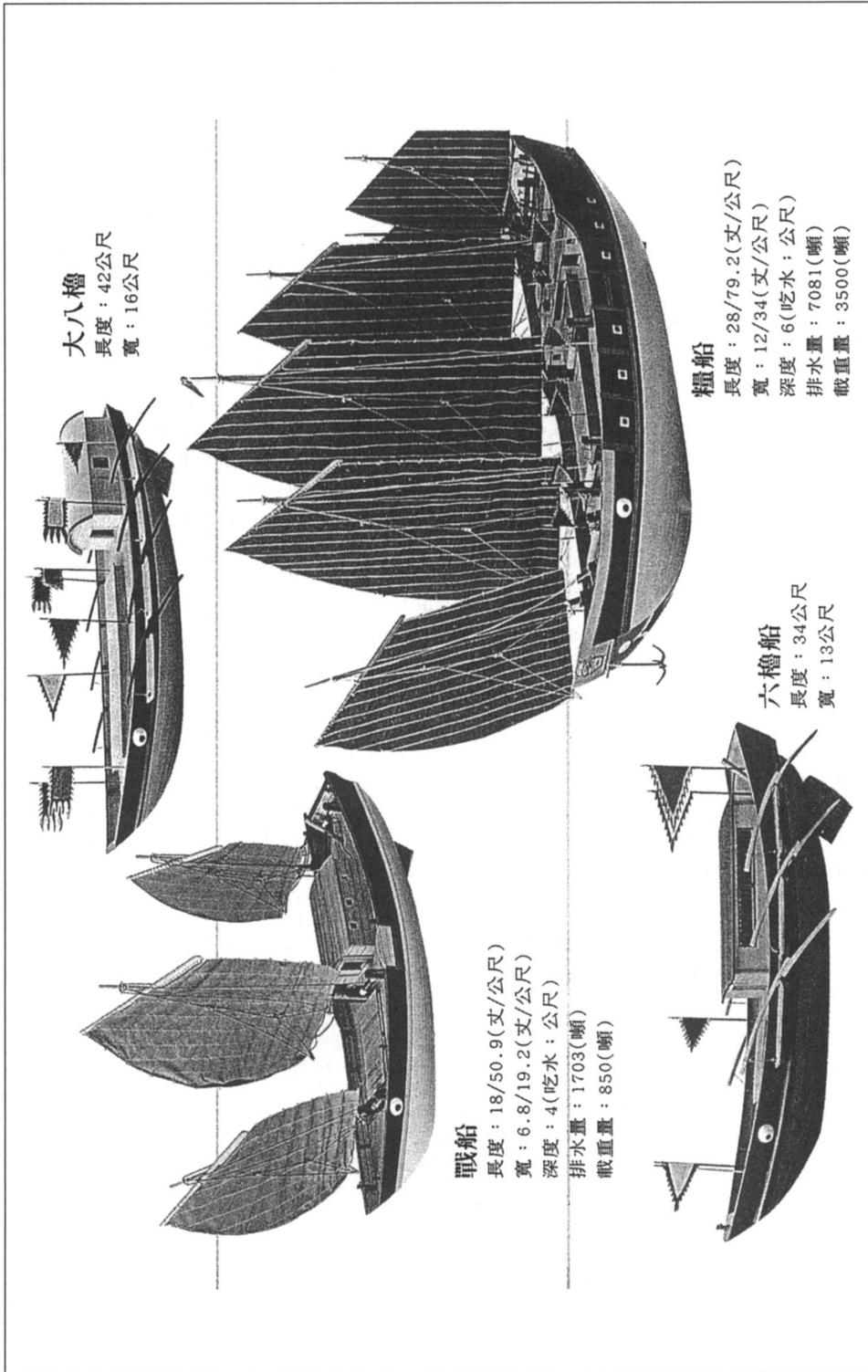


FIG. 2 Reconstruction of some ships from the Zheng He voyages.
(From *Chieng-tien* [Rhythms Monthly], Issue No. 13, August 1999)

needs underlining, in part because of the stress placed on these missions in much current scholarship, both Chinese and non-Chinese, as ‘voyages of friendship’.

To enable these great fleets to maintain the *pax Ming* in the immediate region and sail through the Indian Ocean to Africa, it was necessary to create staging posts in what is today Southeast Asia. These depots (‘guan-chang’ 官廠), which comprised military garrisons-cum-treasuries, were established at Malacca and at the northern end of the Straits of Malacca near the polity of Samudera on Sumatra.⁴⁷ The depots can be seen on the *Wu-bei-zhi* maps, which appear to have been the charts used by or drawn from these voyages in the first half of the fifteenth century (see Fig. 3). The Straits of Malacca were probably more vital in the fifteenth century, when international linkages were entirely dependent on shipping, than they are today, and controlling this waterway was an essential first step in controlling the region. It was also thus that the Ming assisted the growth of the new port-state of Malacca,⁴⁸ alongside the Ming maritime base at that place. The links between Malacca and the Ming thereby remained intimate for much of the first half of the fifteenth century. The degree to which the development of the port-city of Malacca, and the northern port-polities of Sumatra, was a product of Ming maritime policies in Southeast Asia in the early fifteenth century needs to be further investigated.

It is clear that such a force would have played a major threatening role—‘to shock and awe’—and have been useful in encouraging foreign rulers to come to the Ming court. However, there were other times when more than a military presence was required and the history of the Zheng He voyages is replete with violence as the eunuch commanders tried to implement the Ming emperor's requirements. Major military actions included the following:

(A) ATTACK ON THE OLD PORT PACIFICATION SUPERINTENDENCY
IN SUMATRA IN 1407

In 1407, Zheng He returned from his first major mission abroad, bringing with him a ‘pirate’ named Chen Zu-yi captured at Old Port, for reportedly having ‘feigned surrender but secretly plotted to attack the Imperial army.’⁴⁹ The Ming fleet reported 5,000 persons killed, with 10 ships burnt and 7 captured. Later in the same year, the Ming recognized the polity of Old Port. However, because of the large numbers of Chinese, both ex-military personnel and civilians, from Guang-dong and Fu-jian who lived there, it was deemed not to be a country. Rather, it was recognized as a ‘pacification superintendency’, a term which was commonly used to refer to polities ruled by non-Chinese on the Chinese borders. The person recognized as the Superintendent, Shi Jin-qing, was more than likely someone appointed by Zheng He as the local ruler to represent the Ming state.⁵⁰ Here we have a Chinese colony in Southeast Asia. References to this polity end in 1430, implying that its fortunes were tied to the continuance of the Ming presence in Southeast Asia, which further suggests that the rulers were indeed agents of the Ming state.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Samudera was a major entrepôt-polity located near the modern port city of Lhokseumawe in Aceh.

⁴⁸ The rise of the entrepôt-polity of Malacca began in the early fifteenth century. The chronological collocation between its rise and the Ming voyages was no coincidence. It is obvious that the military support provided by the Ming forces allowed Malacca to disregard the threats posed to new polities at this time by both Majapahit in Java and Ayudhya in what is today Thailand.

⁴⁹ *Tai-zong shi-lu*, juan 71.1a.

⁵⁰ *Tai-zong shi-lu*, juan 71.5a.

⁵¹ Another likely instance of such an arrangement was Brunei. Following the death of the Brunei ruler

(B) VIOLENCE IN JAVA IN 1407

- (i) In 1407, when Zheng He's troops went ashore in Java, 170 were killed in an altercation with local forces. That these forces likely belonged to Majapahit, which was the Ming's major competitor for regional hegemony in maritime Southeast Asia, or Javanese forces opposed to Majapahit, is indeed significant. The Chinese records suggest that the Chinese troops 'went ashore to trade', 'where the Eastern king had ruled', indicating Chinese involvement, intentional or otherwise, in a Javanese civil war.
- (ii) In response, the Ming imposed a demand for compensation on the Western king of Java. 'Immediately pay 60,000 *liang*⁵² of gold in compensation for their lives and to atone for your crime ... Fail to comply and there will be no option but to dispatch an army to punish your crime. What happened in Annam can serve as an example.'⁵³ The reference was to the Ming invasion of Annam noted above.⁵⁴

(C) THREATS TO BURMA IN 1409

In the early years of his reign, while vying with Ava-Burma for influence in Yun-nan, Yong-le was particularly concerned about the polity of Mu-bang (Hsenwi). When the Mu-bang envoy came to the Ming court in 1409, reportedly complaining about Na-luo-ta,⁵⁵ the Ava-Burma ruler, the response by Yong-le included the following: 'Na-luo-ta, with his petty piece of land, is double-hearted and is acting wrongly. I have long known of this. The reason that I have not sent troops there is that I am concerned that good people will be hurt. I have already sent people with instructions requiring him to change his ways and start anew. If he does not reform, I will then order the generals to dispatch the army. The troops will attack from the ocean route and you can arrange to have your native cavalry attack overland. The despicable fellow will not be equal to that.'⁵⁶ This reference to a maritime force was to the Western Ocean ships of the eunuch commander, Zheng He, who, together with Wang Jing-hong and Hou Xian, had been commanded to proceed on another mission to the Western Ocean. This threat by the Ming emperor underlines the militaristic and intimidating nature of the maritime voyages.

(D) ATTACK ON SRI LANKA IN 1411

Perhaps the event most telling as to the nature of the eunuch-led maritime voyages was the military invasion of Sri Lanka, the capture of a local ruler, and his being carried

Ma-na-re-jia-na-nai (Maharajadhirat?) in China in 1408, his son Xia-wang was sent back to the country with Chinese escorts who remained in Brunei for close to two years. At the same time, Majapahit was warned not to require Brunei to submit camphor as tribute. It is worthy of attention that Palembang and Brunei were major trade-based entities on the furthest boundaries of the Majapahit empire, areas where the Ming was trying to impose its dominance.

⁵² A Chinese unit of weight, often referred to as a 'Chinese ounce'. During the Ming, it averaged 37 grams.

⁵³ *Tai-zong shi-lu*, *juan* 71.6a-b.

⁵⁴ The methods of the later European colonial armies in Asia, demanding compensation from the vanquished following their own military adventures, might be seen as useful comparative examples of such imperial opportunism.

⁵⁵ The phonetics suggest Nawrahta, but this name does not accord with existing lists of Burman rulers.

⁵⁶ *Tai-zong shi-lu*, *juan* 94.5b.

back to the Ming court in modern Nan-jing in 1411. Zheng He invaded the royal city, captured the king, destroyed his military, and carried the king and his family members back to the court.⁵⁷ Some say that the Tooth Relic of the Buddha was also taken, but there are no contemporary texts which support this. As happened in similar scenarios in Yun-nan, the Ming appointed a puppet ruler to replace the king, presumably to act in ways beneficial to the Ming.⁵⁸ The Chinese troops who returned from the expedition to Sri Lanka were rewarded in the same manner and at equivalent levels to those forces which invaded Đại Việt in 1406, suggesting similar aims of the forces.⁵⁹

(E) ATTACK AND CAPTURE OF SU-GAN-LA OF SAMUDERA IN 1415

A further example of the aims and methods of the maritime missions is seen in 1415, when Su-gan-la, the reported 'leader of the Samudera bandits', was captured and taken to China from Sumatra by Zheng He. While the events which did occur in 1414 and 1415 remain obscure because of contradictory sources,⁶⁰ it is likely that Zheng He and his forces inserted themselves in a civil war in northern Sumatra, supported the side which was not hostile to the Ming, and engaged in warfare against the other. Again, we see an instance of the maritime expedition acting mainly as a military force in an attempt to impose a *pax Ming* on what we now know as Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean.

(F) VIOLENCE IN AYUDHYA

In the *Dong-xi-yang kao* of 1618, Zhang Xie reported a claim that Zheng He had ordered the razing of at least one stupa in Ayudhya in the early fifteenth century. The text notes, under the 'Landmarks' section: 'The Western Stupa: This stupa has no spire. It is said that when the barbarians⁶¹ first built the stupa, they completed it successfully. However, Zheng He ordered that it be razed and later, despite repeated efforts, they could never complete it again.'

(G) OTHER VIOLENCE

- (i) Fei Xin reported that the people of Mogadishu were quarrelsome, suggesting some dissension with the Chinese, while Luo Mao-deng's novel *Sanbao taijian xiyangji tongsu yanyi* of 1597, which seems to have some basis in the events of the voyages, also notes how the Chinese forces used gunpowder explosives against a city called La-sa, on the Arabian peninsula, and engaged in all manner of cruelty and massacres throughout the voyages.
- (ii) Joseph of Cranganore, in the *Novus Orbis* of Simon Grynaeus, published in Basel in 1555, noted: 'These men 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

⁵⁷ *Tai-zong shi-lu*, juan 116.2a–b.

⁵⁸ *Tai-zong shi-lu*, juan 130.1b–2a.

⁵⁹ *Tai-zong shi-lu*, juan 118.4a.

⁶⁰ For a likely romantic account of the origins of Su-gan-la, see the account of Samudera in *Ying-yai sheng-lan*. This has been translated in Mills' *Ma Huan: Ying-yai Sheng-lan*, pp. 116–17.

⁶¹ A reference to the inhabitants of Ayudhya.

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 drive their trade.' In addition, De Barros notes that the city of Diu was built by a king of Gujarat in memory of victory in a sea fight with the Chinese who had frequented Indian shores.⁶² While the dates of these events are not specified, there has never been another age when powerful Chinese fleets visited the shores of India, and these are thus very likely references to the Zheng He fleets.

Overall Assessment of the Eunuch-led Missions

The examples above suggest that the maritime forces sent abroad in the first third of the fifteenth century were intended to achieve the recognition of Ming dominance of (or perhaps suzerainty over) all the polities of the known maritime world. To achieve this, they used force, or the threat thereof. The number of Southeast Asian rulers travelling to China with the Zheng He missions suggests that coercion must have been an important element of the voyages. It was almost unheard of for Southeast Asian rulers to travel to other polities, because of both ritual practices and security concerns at home. That such a large number of rulers did travel to the Ming court in this period suggests coercion of some form. 'Gunboat diplomacy' is not a term which is usually applied to the voyages of Zheng He. However, given that these missions were nominally involved in diplomacy and it appears that the ships were indeed gunboats, with perhaps 26,000 out of 28,000 members of some missions being military men, this seems the appropriate term to apply to the duties of these armadas.

These missions were also intended, through this coercion, to obtain control of ports and shipping lanes. It was not control of territory which was sought—this came with later colonialism. Rather, it was political and economic control across space—control of economic lifelines, nodal points, and networks. By controlling ports and trade routes, one controlled trade, an essential element for the missions' treasure-collecting tasks. The colonial armies which manned these ships were the tools necessary to ensure that the control was maintained. In their methods, the Ming, through these maritime missions, were engaged in what might be called maritime proto-colonialism; that is, they were engaged in that early form of maritime colonialism by which a dominant maritime power took control (either through force or the threat thereof) of the main port-polities along the major East–West maritime trade network, as well as the seas between, thereby gaining economic and political benefits.

The maritime proto-colonialism of the Ming, as suggested in respect of the Zheng He voyages above, had its equivalent in the later maritime colonialism of the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Portuguese voyages. Pearson⁶³ describes the Portuguese empire as, in some ways, a continuation of the Italian city states. He notes that, at the official level, there was a very tight connection between the Crown and trade. This was undoubtedly also true in the Ming case. Further, on the basis of Rothermund's *Asian Trade and*

⁶² For both these references, see Henry Yule, *The Book of Ser Marco Polo, the Venetian Concerning the Kingdoms and Marvels of the East*, 2 vols., London: John Murray, 3rd edition, 1929, Vol. II, pp. 391–2.

⁶³ M. N. Pearson, 'Merchants and States', in James D. Tracy (ed.), *The Political Economy of Merchant Empires: State Power and World Trade, 1350–1750*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp. 41–116. See p. 77.

European Expansion and Steensgard's *Asian Trade Revolution*, Pearson notes that 'this was an empire that used military coercion to try and achieve a strictly noneconomic advantage. Basically a tribute was demanded from Asian trade; the Portuguese created de novo a threat of violence for Asian shipping and then sold protection from this threat, as seen in the requirement to take passes and pay customs duties. No service was provided in return; in modern terms this was precisely a protection racket. As we know the effort failed anyway.'⁶⁴ By replacing the word 'Portuguese' with 'Chinese' we would have an excellent description of the Ming activities in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean in the first third of the fifteenth century. The military who constituted the force on which the Ming armadas depended were tasked with the maintenance of the *pax Ming* which provided the Ming with political and, at least in some ways, economic advantage.

The ending of the Ming voyages was one of the reasons why China's maritime proto-colonialism never developed into the more formal colonialism pursued by the Europeans. The factors contributing to the ending of the voyages were numerous. The death of the Yong-le emperor was a factor, as was the huge expense of the missions. Senior civil ministers had been arguing against the missions for decades as they were seen as wasteful and an essentially eunuch-driven venture. After the death of the voyages' patron, it was not long before the missions were finally wound down.

However, a reference in the Ming reign annals from 1445 suggests that the maritime control (or attempted control) was maintained until at least the mid-1440s. The reference notes that three Javanese persons who had sailed from Java to trade in the country of Siam had been captured by the Ming and sent to the Chinese capital.⁶⁵ That the Ming was policing private trade between Java and Siam in this period suggests that the attempts at controlling regional maritime trade continued, in all, for at least half a century.

'Colonialism' and the Ming

Having examined three spheres of fifteenth-century Ming military activity in Southeast Asia, and attached to each a variant of the 'colonial' tag, it is beholden upon the author to provide some justification for the labels.

Is 'colonialism' an appropriate term to apply to these acts by the Ming state? Herold Wiens suggests a positive response, as in his 1954 work, *China's March Toward the Tropics*, he wrote of the 'national autonomous regions' instituted by the People's Republic of China post-1949 as being used to 'disguise an old colonialism'.⁶⁶ However, his work was researched and published during some of the most intense years of the Cold War and his book was seen, in some ways, to have been a response to the political dichotomy

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 79. For a periodized study of Portuguese maritime expansion, see Sanjay Subramanyam and Luís Filipe F. R. Thomaz, 'Evolution of Empire: The Portuguese in the Indian Ocean During the Sixteenth Century', in James D. Tracy (ed.), *The Political Economy of Merchant Empires: State Power and World Trade, 1350-1750*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp. 298-331. They detail three models of imperial organization (a network of coastal fortresses in an endemic state of war in north Africa; agrarian and territorial colonization and settlement in the Atlantic Islands; and a coastal network with less violence on the coast of Guinea and more commerce), and suggest that the initial phase of their 'Asian venture' involved variants of all three. The Ming maritime experience seems to have followed something closest to the Guinea model.

⁶⁵ *Ming Ying-zong shi-lu*, juan 132.8a.

⁶⁶ Herold J. Wiens, *China's March Toward the Tropics*, Hamden, Conn.: Shoe String Press, 1954.

which existed at that time. Were his views overstated? Or does the history of China's expansion in the early Ming truly suggest a 'colonialism'?

The term 'colonialism' itself has a variegated history, being used to refer to the settlement of Romans in areas conquered by that empire, to the eastward expansion of the Russian empire, to the expansion of the Ottoman Turk empire, and to the overseas activities of the European powers subsequent to the fifteenth century. The debate over colonialism has, however, now been so tightly linked with the expansion of the European overseas empires that its application to China as an agent rather than victim of colonialism appears to some to be precluded almost by definition.

Others choose to distinguish European 'imperialism', funded by the resources of the industrial revolution, and resulting in de-industrialization and non-food agricultural production in the colonies, from the earlier European colonial expansion of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But can we employ the term 'imperialism' to refer to Ming expansion? Does this Chinese expansion in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries accord with Schumpeter's definition of imperialism as being when 'a state evinces a purposeless propensity to expansion by force beyond all definable limits', so that its conquering activities occur 'without being actually the means to some end other than what is implicit in the very exercise'.⁶⁷ That is to say, were the expansionist actions of the Ming state precipitated only by a 'will to dominate' or by something more calculated which can be classed as 'colonialism'?

Was the early Ming expansion and occupation of other polities a product of economic demand? Could the words of J. A. Hobson, used in reference to British imperialism, have been as applicable to the Ming? Hobson noted: 'From this standpoint, our increased military and naval expenditure during recent years may be regarded primarily as insurance premiums for protection of existing colonial markets and current outlay on new markets.'⁶⁸

Or was the stimulation to expansion during the Hong-wu (1368–98) and Yong-le (1403–24) reigns predicated on the exigencies which caused the Russian Prince Chancellor Gorchakov in 1864 to describe Russia's eastward push as follows: 'The situation of Russia is that of all the civilised states which come into contact with nomads who have no well established state organisation.... To provide against their raids and their looting, we must subdue them and bring them under strict control. But there are others further away ... consequently we too must proceed further still.... We march forward by necessity as much as by ambition.'⁶⁹

A number of definitions have been proposed for 'colonialism', the diversity of which suggest that it is a rather elusive concept. In his *Modern Colonialism: Institutions and Policies*, T. R. Adam defines colonialism as 'the political control of an underdeveloped people whose social and economic life is directed by the dominant power'.⁷⁰ Hans Kohn suggests that 'colonialism is foreign rule imposed upon a people'.⁷¹ Michael Doyle

⁶⁷ Quoted in Marc Ferro, *Colonization: A Global History*, London: Routledge, 1997, p. 13.

⁶⁸ J. A. Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study*, London: Unwin Hyman, 1988 (original edition 1902), p. 64.

⁶⁹ Quoted in Ferro, *Colonization*, p. 14.

⁷⁰ T. R. Adam, *Modern Colonialism: Institutions and Policies*, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1955, p. 3.

⁷¹ Hans Kohn, 'Reflections on Colonialism', in R. Strausz-Hupe and H. W. Hazard (eds.), *The Idea of Colonialism*, Philadelphia: Foreign Policy Research Institute, University of Pennsylvania, 1958, pp. 1–15.

considers that colonialism is one of the possible outcomes of imperialism, which in turn is the process of establishing 'a relationship, formal or informal, in which one state controls the effective political sovereignty of another political society'.⁷² R. J. Horvath maintains that the important difference between colonialism and imperialism is that the former involves the presence of a significant number of settlers from the colonizing power in the colonized state. Ferro also agrees on this point, saying that colonization is 'associated with the occupation of a foreign land, with it being brought under cultivation, with the settlement of colonists'.⁷³

The 'salt water doctrine', which conditions much writing on colonialism and decolonization and which holds that the term colonialism exclusively applies to the relationship between European colonial powers and their 'overseas territories', appears to be an arbitrary division, based on the 'widespread though unwarranted assumption, which had its origin in the fifteenth-century age of discoveries, that colonial empires are established by sea-powers, whereas expansion into contiguous land masses does not produce ... colonialism'.⁷⁴ For this doctrine, territories need to be separated from the metropolitan state by sea in order to qualify as colonies. The doctrine relies on what has been referred to by some writers as the 'principle of distance' as an indispensable element of colonialism. Does this distance produce a qualitative difference in the phenomenon?

The arguments of David Armitage seem to provide a more encompassing and convincing idea of colonialism. He recognizes a narrative of English colonialism that runs in a straight line from England, through Ireland to the Caribbean and thence to the eastern seaboard of America.⁷⁵ Distance and separation by sea are not the determining characteristics. It is the ideologies, policies, and practices of the colonizing power that determine the nature of the phenomenon. He also sees Scotland, like England, as 'colonialist' in that it used settlement, acculturation, and economic dependency as a means to 'civilize' its territorial margins and their inhabitants.⁷⁶

The general definitions provided by Osterhammel and Emerson perhaps come closest to the way in which I am utilizing the term colonialism in this paper. Osterhammel and Frisch speak of it as 'a relationship of domination between an indigenous (or forcibly imported) majority and a minority of foreign invaders. The fundamental decisions affecting the lives of the colonized people are made and implemented by the colonial rulers....'⁷⁷ Emerson defines 'colonialism' as the 'establishment and maintenance, for an extended period of time, of rule over an alien people that is separate from and subordinate to the ruling power.'⁷⁸

Returning now to the three sets of Ming policies and practices detailed above, and in the light of the ideas and definitions of Armitage, Osterhammel, and Emerson, it appears that there is some basis for classifying them as the actions of a colonial state.

⁷² M. Doyle, *Empires*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986.

⁷³ Ferro, *Colonization*, p. 1.

⁷⁴ L. C. Buchheit, *Secession, the Legitimacy of Self-determination*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978, p.18.

⁷⁵ David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 45.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁷⁷ Jürgen Osterhammel and Shelly L. Frisch, *Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*, Princeton: Markus Weiner, 1997, pp. 16-17.

⁷⁸ R. Emerson, 'Colonialism: Political Aspects' in D. L. Sills (ed.), *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 17 vols., New York: Macmillan and Free Press, 1968, Vol. 3, pp. 1-6.

Firstly, the eunuch-led voyages at the beginning of the fifteenth century constituted only a maritime proto-colonialism as there was no real rule over a people or territory. There was rule over nodes and networks. The military constituted the force on which the Ming armadas depended and their role was the maintenance of the *pax Ming*, which provided the Ming state with a capacity to influence polities and, at least in some ways, to achieve some short-term economic advantage.

Secondly, the Ming invasion of Đại Việt is perhaps the most obvious example of a colonial adventure. There was invasion, occupation, the imposition of a military and civil administration, economic exploitation, and domination by a court in the capital of the dominating power. The obvious decolonization which occurred following the failure of this enterprise underlines its colonial nature.

Thirdly, the Ming invasion and occupation of the Yun-nan Tai polities during the fifteenth century was the most successful of the colonial ventures examined, as many of the areas colonized during the Ming still form a part of the People's Republic of China today. There can be little doubt that these actions by the Ming rulers were colonial in nature. They involved the use of huge military force to invade peoples who were ethnically different from the Chinese, to occupy their territory, to break that territory into smaller administrative units, to appoint pliant rulers and 'advisers', and to economically exploit the regions so occupied. The Ming colonial armies, local and Chinese, provided the actual or threatened violence necessary to maintain the Ming colonial administration in the Tai areas of Yun-nan.

Examination of the colonial experience in Southeast Asia has long remained limited to the period subsequent to the arrival of European forces in the region. The discussion above, even if not sufficient to sway all readers to all of its argument, should at least open an avenue for recognizing that in investigating colonialism in Southeast Asia, we need to extend the existing temporal limits and include within our considerations the actions of the successive polities we know under the rubric 'China'.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Anthony Reid has suggested that we need to extend our considerations to examine what made Chinese empires so successful over land and essentially unsuccessful in expansion by sea. Obviously the failure to create a sustainable economic base for the overseas ventures was a key factor.

Appendix

Eunuch-led Voyages to the Western and Eastern Oceans

Date of MSL Entry	Eunuchs Named	To Which Places
1 Oct 1403	Ma Bin 馬彬	Java (Western king)
10 Oct 1403	Li Xing 李興	Siam
28 Oct 1403	Yin Qing 尹慶	Melaka
11 Jul 1405	Zheng He and others 鄭和等	Various countries in the Western Ocean
12 Aug 1405	Wang Cong 王琮	Cambodia
30 Oct 1407	Wang Gui-tong 王貴通	Champa
6 Sep 1408	Zhang Yuan 張原	Siam
17 Oct 1408	Zheng He and others 鄭和等	Various countries in the Western Ocean
7 Oct 1410	Ma Bin 馬彬	Champa
13 Oct 1410	Zhang Qian (return) 張謙	Bo-ni
31 Dec 1410	Zhang Yuan 張原	Siam
24 Feb 1411	Zhang Qian 張謙	Bo-ni
1 Sep 1412	Wu Bin 吳賓	Java (Western king)
18 Dec 1412	Zheng He and others 鄭和等	Various countries in the Western Ocean
15 Jan 1413	Hong Bao 洪保	Siam
1 Apr 1414	Zhu Yuan 祝原	Cambodia
13 Aug 1415	Hou Xian 侯顯	Bengal and other countries
27 May 1416	Guo Wen 郭文	Siam
15 Oct 1417	Zhang Qian 張謙	Gu-ma-la-lang
15 Oct 1418	Lin Gui 林貴	Champa
3 Jun 1420	Yang Min 楊旻	Siam
16 Oct 1420	Hou Xian 侯顯	Zhao-na-pu-er
27 Feb 1424	Zheng He 鄭和	Old Port
29 Jun 1430	Zheng He and others 鄭和等	Various <i>fan</i> countries
1430s	Wang Jing-hong 王景弘	Samudera

Source: Ming shi-lu (明實錄).

Note: The edition of the *Ming shi-lu* cited is that which was published in a photolithographic edition by the Institute of History and Philology under the Academia Sinica in Taiwan from 1963 to 1968. All *Ming shi-lu* references cited within this article are now available online in English translation at <http://www.epress.nus.edu.sg/msl/>.

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The *Ming shi-lu* Southeast Asian Database

The *Ming shi-lu* (also known as the Veritable Records of the Ming Dynasty) is a collective name for the successive reign annals of the emperors of Ming China (1368–1644). These collected texts, which run to close to 40,000 pages of unpunctuated manuscript in Classical Chinese, constitute one of the most important primary texts of the Ming dynasty and contain a wealth of materials unrecorded in other sources.

Among the unique materials contained within the *Ming shi-lu* (MSL) are a wide range of references to policies and societies which today we consider to be parts of 'Southeast Asia'. This work identifies all of the 4,000 plus references to Southeast Asia contained within the MSL and provides them to readers in English-language translation. In addition to the more obvious Southeast Asian polities of maritime and mainland Southeast Asia, this database also includes references to the many Yunnan Tai polities which have subsequently been incorporated within the Chinese state.

The collection can be browsed chronologically or searched by specific terms. To assist in searches, an index of personal and geographical names, with their Chinese equivalents appended, is provided separately. The database also includes some introductory essays on the nature of the source. An analytical volume which examines the relevance of these materials for the study of Southeast Asia is in preparation and slated for publication by NUS Press in 2007.

This database is intended to remain a gratis resource and it is hoped that readers will help improve it by submitting comments, criticisms, corrections, and additions. All correspondence relating to the database should be addressed to Geoff Wade at arigpw@nus.edu.sg or c/o Asia Research Institute, Level 4, AS7, Shaw Foundation Building, 5 Arts Link, NUS, Singapore 117570.

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