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Manuscript Studies

Ma Huan MA 马欢 (1380-1460) and His Yingya Shenglan 瀛涯胜览¹

Omar Min Kegin²

Very little is known about Ma Huan's life. We know that his styled name was Zongdao宗道, also Ruqing 汝钦, and his self-appellation as "vulgar woodman of Kuaiji" (Kuaiji shanqiao会稽山樵). Kuaiji 会稽 is an old name for modern Shaoxing 绍兴 in Zhejiang province. He was born in 1380 CE to a traditional Muslim family.³ At about six or seven years of age, he most probably started education in one of the mosques near to his native town. Later, he excelled, in addition to his Chinese proficiency, in Arabic and Persian languages. He was employed by the Admiral Zheng He (1371-1433) as his translator (tongshi通事). Among the crews of Zheng He's expeditions⁴ from 1405 to 1433, Ma Huan was one of

¹ Two different editions (handwritten during Ming Dynasty and wood-block print during Qing Dynasty) of *Yingya Shenglan* 瀛涯胜览, contained in *Huizu Diancang Quanshu* 回族典藏全书 (the Complete Collection of Hui Classics), vol. 219, are found yet un-catalogued in Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas (SMNA) Library, ISTAC.

² Omar Min Kegin, PhD is a Visiting Researcher at ISTAC-IIUM collaborating with Professor Osman Bakar, Al-Ghazali Chair of Epistemology and Civilisational Studies and Renewal.

³ Kristian Petersen, in his recent prominent work *Interpreting Islam in China: Pilgrimage, Scripture & Language in the Han Kitab*, advocates that Ma Huan was a convert from Han Chinese, based on the reason of that Ma Huan was well versed in Chinese language. See Petersen, *Interpreting Islam in China*, p. 95. This rashly conclusion should not be taken for granted, since there is no clear evidence testifying this assumption.

⁴ Zheng He's voyages were all together seven times, started in 1405, ended in 1433, in a span of 28 years. The first voyage departed from Liujiache刘家河 of Suzhou苏州 in 1405, ended in 1407; the second from 1407 to 1409; the third from 1409 to 1411; the fourth from 1413 to 1415; the fifth from 1417 to 1419; the sixth from 1421

the few civilian personnel, who played roles as propagandists (jiaoyu 教谕) of the Chinese Emperor's promulgations and Chinese cultures,⁵ as well as an imam for Muslim crews.⁶

There was no indication that Ma Huan has joined Zeng He's first three voyages, but he did join the fourth voyage in 1413, which visited Champa (in southern Vietnam), Java, Jiugang (Palembang, Indonesia), Ceylon, Guli (Calicut, India), and Hormuz in the Persian Gulf. This voyage ended in 1415. He did not join the fifth voyage for some unknown reasons. But he did accompany the Admiral on the sixth voyage in 1421, during which they visited Malacca, Yalu (Aru), Sumatra, Ceylon, Xiaogelan (Quilon), Kochi, Calicut, Zufar (Sohar in Oman), and Hormuz in addition to the places mentioned earlier. In 1431, Ma again accompanied the Admiral on the seventh and final voyage. This time, the Admiral deployed 27,550 men and 100 ships. Departing from Five Tiger Gate (Wuhumen 五虎门), Fujian province, the expedition visited Champa, Java, Palembang, Malacca, Sumatra, Ceylon, Calicut, and Hormuz. From Calicut at least one ship in the fleet, boarded by Muslim crews only, was sent to the Heavenly Country (Tianfangguo 天方国) for performing pilgrimage (hajj). Ma Huan was among them. He had a detailed record of this trip. However, the accuracy of his record has been questioned to the point of even raising serious doubt about his virtual visit to this Tianfangguo.⁷ On 18th February 1433, the fleet sailed back home, and on 11th March arrived at Calicut. But Admiral Zheng He passed away in the early days of April.⁸ Thereafter, the fleet was led by the

to 1422; the seventh from 1431 to 1433. See Jiang Chun 江淳 and Guo Ying-de 郭应德, *Zhong A Guanxi Shi* 中阿关系史 (History of Interactive Relations between China and Arabs), pp. 104-110. Zheng He died in 1433 during his seventh voyage in Guli 古里 (Calicut, another name [Kozhikode](#)), India. See also Gabriele Foccardi, *The Chinese Travellers of the Ming Period*, (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz 1986), p. 28.

⁵ Jiang Chun 江淳 and Guo Ying-de 郭应德, *Zhong A Guanxi Shi* 中阿关系史 (History of Interactive Relations between China and Arabs), (Beijing: Daily Economics Press, 2001), p. 114.

⁶ Zheng He also employed a Muslim named Hasan from the Grand Mosque of Xi'an, as his Arabic translator and *imam* for Muslim crews.

⁷ See Petersen, Kristian. *Interpreting Islam in China*, pp. 94-96; also J. J. L. Duyvendak, *Ma Huan Re-examined*, (Amsterdam: Noord-Hollandsche Uitgeversmaatschappij, 1933), *passim*.

⁸ The date and month given here are in Chinese lunar calendar.

deputy Admiral Wang Jing-hong 王景弘,⁹ and returned to Nanjing on 6th of July.¹⁰

In these voyages, Zheng He and his crew visited more than twenty countries located along the coast of South China Sea, Bengal Bay, Indian Ocean, Arabian Sea, and the Persian Gulf. During the entire voyage Ma Huan drafted records on the sea route, sea tide, geography, countries visited, and of their kings, politics, people, culture, language, script, weather, produces, feats, trading, and more. These records may be clearly seen in the following translated passages that are selected from the record on Malacca Country 满刺加国:

The king and his people of Malacca all have embraced Islam. They read the Holy Quran, observe fasting and abide by religious disciplines. The king wears dark green cloth printed with the pattern of small flowers; which looks like garment; with his head twined with white fine foreign cloth. He wears leather shoes, while takes sedan chair in and out. The people of this country, man's head are twined with a square handkerchief, while woman keeps her hairs tufted at the back of head. The skin colour of the people is bit dark, the attire is white towel cloth as their trousers, matched with colourful skirt or shirt. People are customarily honest and simple. Their houses are like stored building, without wooden board laid as floor; instead, at the height of four chi (1.3 meter) from ground, floored sparsely with the flat strips striped off coconut trees, tied together with rattans: assimilating to making a sheep shed; with its own styled levels. (Rooms are) furnished with bed and couch, whereon people sitting

⁹ Wang Jing-hong was appointed as deputy admiral by the emperor Yongle (r. 1399-1403), in 1405. See Qiu Shu-sen 邱树森 (ed.), *Zhongguo Huizu Shi* 中国回族史 (History of Chinese Hui), (Yinchuan: Ningxia People's Press, 1996), vol. 1, p. 414.

¹⁰ Gong Zhen 巩珍, *Xiyang Fanguo Zhi* 西洋番国志 (Records on the Nations of the Western Ocean), edited and punctuated by Xiang Da 向达, (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Store, 1961), pp. 56-57.

cross-legged. Their kitchen, cooking, food, and sleep all are (performed) on that floor.¹¹

and the record on Aru Country 哑鲁国 too:

Sailing in free wind, from Malacca, for four days and nights, we reach Aru country; wherein possesses a freshwater harbour. Along the harbour mouth to the country, we see, to its south are huge mountains, north is the sea, west is bordering with Sumatra country, east is flat land; wherein produces domesticated rice, of thin and small grain; which can be planted a few times in a year. Yet, (the majority of) people are living on fishery. People are customarily honest and simple. The rituals of marriage and funeral are similar with that of Java and Malacca. Other daily necessities are scant. They have cotton cloth called kaoni 考泥; yet, their rice, cereal, cows (cattle), goats (sheep), chickens and ducks are plenty; cheese also sold everywhere.

The king and his people all are Muslims.

There in the forest, is a sort of flying tiger, as a cat in its size, with grey fur, and flesh wings, like that of a bat. The flesh wings joint its fore-leg to rear-leg, enabling flying but not too far.¹² It is sometimes hunted by man, but afterwards dies soon due to not accustoming to cooked food. The land here produces huangsuxiang,¹³ honeysuckles, and other more.

¹¹ Ma Huan, *Yingya Shenglan* 瀛涯胜览 (the Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shore) (a handwritten copy), in Wu Hai-ying 吴海鹰 at el (ed.), *Huizu Diancang Quanshu* 回族典藏全书 (the Complete Collection of Hui Classics), (Yinchuan: Ningxia People's Press, 2008), vol. 219; p. 231.

¹² Most probably flying squirrel, Latin name Rodentia, which is mostly found in tropical forest.

¹³ Huangsuxiang 黄速香, also Huangshuxiang 黄熟香, known as agaru, or "bois d'aigle"; see Gabriele Foccardi, *The Chinese Travellers of the Ming Period*, (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz 1986), p. 68; notes to "Chinese Exploration", n. 107.

This is a small country (nation).¹⁴

These records now have become very precious materials for the studies on Zheng He's voyage per se, and on the features of those nations then visited by Zheng He's fleet. It also has great values for the history of navigation in human history. The records may have existed in hand draft for another two decades, until the 2nd year of Jingtai 景泰reign¹⁵ (1451), of Ming dynasty (1368-1644), when only those records were compiled, entitled as Yingya Shenglan 瀛涯胜览, block-printed, and circulated in public. Yingya Shenglan, together with Xingcha Shengla 星槎胜览 (Description of the Starry Raft) by Fei Xin 费信 (1388-?), and Xiyang Fanguo Zhi 西洋番国志 (Records on the Nations of the Western Ocean) by Gong Zhen 巩珍 (1371-1457), retained first-hand information on the actual situations of those nations visited by Zheng He's fleet. It is even indispensable for writing a complete Indian history.

The pilgrimage to the heavenly country (Tianfangguo 天方国) by Ma Huan and his friends was the first official pilgrimage by Chinese Muslims for fulfilling their religious obligation. They brought with them Chinese silks, chinaware, musk, and other precious produces. The pilgrims were warmly welcome and courteously received by the king and his citizens. They were given permission to draw the picture of K'abah and its precincts, which was afterwards named "Tianfangtu Zhenben" 天方图真本 (the authentic picture of the heaven).¹⁶ Upon completing the pilgrimage, the delegation was presented with some rare animals like giraffe,¹⁷ lion, ostrich, turkey, and precious gems, spices, among others.¹⁸ On the way back, the delegation was accompanied by an Arab diplomatic envoy dispatched to China by the king of the heavenly country. The

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 235.

¹⁵ Jingtai 景泰 was reign title for the emperor Daizong 代宗 of Ming dynasty (1368-1644). This emperor's name was Zhu Qi-yu 朱祁钰, Daizong was his emperorship title.

¹⁶ Ma Huan, *Yingya Shenglan* 瀛涯胜览 (the Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shore) (a handwritten copy), in Wu Hai-ying 吴海鹰 at el (ed.), *Huizu Diancang Quanshu* 回族典藏全书 (the Complete Collection of Hui Classics), vol. 219, p. 289.

¹⁷ In *Yingya Shenglan*, giraffe was recorded as kylin (qilin) 麒麟, Chinese unicorn. See *ibid*.

¹⁸ Ma Huan, *op. cit*.

envoy was well received by the Chinese emperor with great warmth and courtesy.

The popularity of Yingya Shenglan is well attested by its translations into various languages like Japanese, English and others. The English translation was brought forth by J. V. G. Mills, entitled as Ying-Yai Shenglan: “The Overall Survey of the Ocean’s Shore (1433)”, and published in 1973. Its text is also analysed by J. J. L. Duyvendak in his work: Ma Huan Re-examined, published in 1933.¹⁹

Ma Huan and his contribution to the history of navigation is also well appreciated by Chinese government, to such a degree, that, for commemoration of his contribution to the literature of historical navigation, an island located at the north of the Nansha islands is named after him as Mahuan Island.

Finally, it should be mentioned here that in 2002, a retired Royal Navy submarine commander Gavin Menzies, after a painstaking inquiry, concluded in his book 1421, the Year China Discovered the World, that Zheng He’s fleet had actually arrived in the American continent well before Columbus. However, this claim is still not widely accepted by scholars who are engaged in this field of scholarly inquiry.²⁰

¹⁹ Very unfortunately, none of these translations is available to me.

²⁰ See Hu Zheng-ning 胡正宁 & Fan Jin-min 范金民, “Zheng He Xia Xiyang Yanjiu Erti” 郑和下西洋研究二题 (Two Questions Pertaining to Zheng He’s Expedition), in *Jiangsu Shehui Kexue* 江苏社会科学 (Jiangsu Social Sciences), no. 5 (2015), pp. 231-235, passim.

TRANSLITERATION TABLE

CONSONANTS

Ar=Arabic, Pr=Persian, OT=Ottoman Turkish, Ur=Urdu

Ar	Pr	OT	UR	Ar	Pr	OT	UR	Ar	Pr	OT	UR
ء	‘	‘	‘	ز	z	z	z	گ	—	g	g
ب	b	b	b	ژ	—	—	ř	ل	l	l	l
پ	—	p	p	ژ	—	zh	j	م	m	m	m
ت	t	t	t	س	s	s	s	ن	n	n	n
ٹ	—	—	ṭ	ش	sh	sh	ş	ه	h	h	h ¹
ث	th	th	th	ص	ṣ	ṣ	ş	و	w	v/u	v
ج	j	j	c	ض	ḍ	ḍ	ž	ی	y	y	y
چ	—	ch	çh	ط	ṭ	ṭ	ṭ	ة	-ah	—	-a ²
ح	ḥ	ḥ	ḥ	ظ	ẓ	ẓ	ẓ	ال	al ³	—	—
خ	kh	kh	kh	ع	‘	‘	‘	¹ – when not final ² – at in construct state ³ – (article) al - or l-			
د	d	d	d	غ	gh	gh	ğ				
ڈ	—	—	ḍ	ف	f	f	f				
ذ	dh	dh	dh	ق	q	q	k				
ر	r	r	r	ك	k	k/g	k/ñ	k			

VOWELS

		Arabic and Persian	Urdu	Ottoman Turkish
Long	ا	ā	ā	ā
	آ	Ā	Ā	—
	و	ū	ū	ū
	ي	ī	ī	ī
Doubled	ي	iiy (final form ī)	iy (final form ī)	iiy (final form ī)
	و	uww (final form ū)	uv	uvv
	و	uvv (for Persian)	—	—
Diphthongs	و	au or aw	au	ev
	ی	ai or ay	ay	ey
Short	ا	a	a	a or e
	ا	u	u	u or ū
	ا	i	i	o or ö
	ا	—	—	ī

URDU ASPIRATED SOUNDS

For aspirated sounds not used in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish add h after the letter and underline both the letters e.g. چھ jh گھ gh

For Ottoman Turkish, modern Turkish orthography may be used.

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