The Dragon Fleet and Chinese Cosmopolitanism or Lack Thereof

ANT 205W

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A preponderance of research has been conducted on the seven voyages of imperial eunuch Zheng He during the Ming dynasty. He commanded a massive armada, the largest navy that the world had ever seen. The fleet remained surpassed until WWI. Traveling throughout the Indian Ocean, his fleet touched down in at least thirty countries. Some resisted these foreign intruders, but most recognized the navy’s power and submitted to Chinese authority. One recurring question is whether or not China in this era subscribed to cosmopolitanism. The voyages of the Dragon Fleet did not openly increase cosmopolitanism in China; however, they did provide syncretization opportunities for overseas Chinese and non-Chinese foreigners.

First, an examination of the events preceding the initial launch of the fleet in is in order. The Mongol Yuan dynasty finally fell to the Chinese in 1368 (Levathes 1994:57). During the campaign, the Chinese captured and castrated a Muslim boy named Ma He, later renamed Zheng He (Levathes 1994:5, 22-23, 57-58). He became a servant of Zhu Di, the Prince of Yan, who is better remembered in history as Emperor Yongle (Levathes 1994:57-58; Dreyer 2007:6). Zheng He accompanied the prince on his campaigns to finish ousting the Mongol invaders and became an accomplished leader and combatant in the process (Dreyer 2007:18-19). After his ascension, Emperor Yongle raised Zheng He to the position of Grand Director of the Directorate of Palace Servants. A eunuch could not attain any higher office, thus this represented a great honor. And, due to his loyal and efficient service in this office, Zheng He became the admiral of the tribute missions that set out between 1405 and 1433 (Dreyer 2007:22, 49-50).

China already had a long nautical tradition that gave them the ability to dispatch such a formidable force. Depictions of long canoes in China and Southeast Asia date back as far as the seventh century BCE (Levathes 1994:25). During later the Song Dynasty, monetary rewards from the emperor encouraged new ship designs. Many specialized vessels,
with adaptations like hidden paddle wheels, came into being during this period of innovation (Levathes 1994: 43). By the 1000s and 1100s, the magnetic floating compass served as a required piece of Chinese naval navigation equipment (Abu-Lughod 1989:326). Around 1161CE, the Song also developed methods for using gunpowder in naval warfare (Levathes 1994:47). A new instrument that had just been introduced calculated the latitude on the treasure voyages. The *qianxingban* measured latitude based on the position of Polaris or the Southern Cross' height above the horizon (Levathes 1994:96). In addition, the sailors had maps and star charts compiled from years’ of sources that included compass bearings and estimated arrival times (Levathes 1994:96).

Yet, despite the Dragon Fleet’s material might, Confucian beliefs proved strong enough to constrain it. To Confucius, only mere barbarians lived beyond the bounds of the Middle Kingdom. Traveling did not serve a purpose because nothing of value existed elsewhere and leaving meant abandoning one’s duties to their family. In addition, the ideology discouraged trade, for “the mind of the superior man dwells on righteousness; the mind of a little man dwells on profit” (Levathes 1994:33). During the Song Dynasty, China found itself hemmed in by aggressive forces to the north. They had to reframe many Confucian texts to encourage maritime trade so the state could continue to function (Levathes 1994:41). In 1279, Khubilai Khan became ruler of the invasive Yuan dynasty in China (Levathes 1994:49). Subsequent Khans continued to reject Confucianism and engaged in extensive long-distance trade. Afterward, the Ming revived Confucianism because it had been rejected by the Mongol invaders (Abu-Lughod 1989:341). Their shameless interest in trade served as a bad example, a mistake to be avoided. So, when Yongle moved to re-assert Chinese dominance, he encouraged a return to Confucianism. This
presented a barrier to trade, and so, the nautical missions he sent abroad were framed in terms of tribute collection, not trade.

Often, commerce is seen as a stimulant for cosmopolitanism. By doing business with people of different backgrounds, beliefs, and customs, merchants begin to respect and sometimes adopt the life ways of others. Whether this exchange is through tribute or trade, the interactions are similar. In the case of the treasure fleet journeys, however, it did not produce overt cosmopolitanism. Additionally, private trade, or merchant activity, did not appear in official documents because it conflicted with the official image of Confucian denunciation of commerce (Abu-Lughod 1989:317-318). Any cosmopolitan stirrings that may have resulted have been obscured through time by the tendency of Chinese officials to omit inconvenient facts from the record (Dreyer 2007:33). What has survived are texts that demonstrate the self-centered view of the Chinese on these journeys:

There were none who did not vie to present gems hidden in the mountains or submerged in the ocean, or pearls buried in the sand or cast up on the shore, and each [tributary] sent a son, paternal uncle, or younger brother of the king [to Yongle], bearing a memorial of submission written on gold leaf, to court with the tribute (Dreyer 2007:198-199).

Because of their superiority, they deemed it their right to have the upper hand at all times. When sailors from the fleet began cutting incense logs on the island of Pulau Sembilan without consulting the native population, the invaders snubbed the aboriginals (Dreyer 2007:64-65). Told that, “We are the soldiers of the Heavenly Court, and our awe-inspiring power is like that of the gods” they had no say in the use of their own resources (Dreyer 2007: 64-65). This is not the attitude of a people who respect the uniqueness of other cultures. Not all lesser people received rough treatment. Some were simply ignored in the records. Despite sending three sets of envoys to the Ming court, the Maldives Islands never so much as had their tribute items listed (Ptak
1987:680-681). The Chinese lumped products together with gifts from other nations’ to such a
degree that it is impossible to say what their envoys brought. Eaton (1993) understood the
favorable impression Calicut made on Zheng He’s translator, Ma Huan, as a sign of
cosmopolitanism. Although well disposed toward the honesty and efficiency of the commercial
center, his opinion did not stem from inherent cultural value. Ma Huan approved because Calicut
had more in common with China than any other port of call that he had seen. In essence, he did
not inherently respect the local practices, he respected Chinese traditions.

Furthermore, the frequent bans on travel abroad and private trade reinforced the notion
that the Chinese leadership lacked any interest in melding with the rest of the Indian Ocean
world. Yongle continued the ban that his father, Hongwu, set in place that forbade Chinese
merchants from trading outside of China (Dreyer 2007:3). Only Zheng He and the armada had
permission to venture abroad. Although the state tasked its representatives with handling tribute,
they also seem to have taken part in private trade on the side. The Chinese court knew about such
practices, though it may not exactly have encouraged them (Abu-Lughod 1989:318). Yongle put
a moratorium on the fleet's activity in 1421 (Dreyer 2007: 32). After Yongle's death, Emperor
Hongxi permanently ended the Dragon Fleet’s journeys under his rule (Dreyer 2007:32). His
successor, Xuande, ordered the seventh and final voyage only because tribute had stopped
coming from overseas (Dreyer 2007: 32). In the closing days of the Ming’s oceanic tribute
collection, additional strictures ensured that no illicit trade took place. “You must warn your
envoys to respect the rites and the laws, and to not engage in improper actions… it is not
permitted to privately trade jewels, clothing and other precious things with foreign lands” (Hall
2006:458). So long as lesser nations continued to pay homage to the Middle Kingdom with
tribute, further Chinese contact with them would be superfluous.
Contrastingly, the Treasure Fleet’s voyages spread Chinese culture to other countries, which often adopted it, in part. As per Sen (2006:423), China primarily sought to advance its rhetoric, not obtain commodities or colonize. Records give credence to the theory that, “he [Emperor Chengzu (meaning Yongle)] wanted to display his soldiers in strange lands in order to make manifest the wealth and power of the Middle Kingdom…proclaiming the edicts of the Son of Heaven and giving gifts to their rulers and chieftains” (Dreyer 2007:187-188). And, it worked. States that sent representatives to China to pay homage to the Emperor earned official recognition by the Middle Kingdom, as well as the use of their calendar system and silk and paper money as gifts (Dreyer 2007:3-4). Their envoys and kings received gifts of Chinese silk clothing and writing implements that would facilitate acculturation to Chinese ways (Dreyer 2007:59; Levathes 1994:105-106). And, although linked to China by land rather than by sea, Korea demonstrated how extensively other countries bought into China’s authority. In 1423, the Korean emperor sought to secure recognition for his son as the heir to his title, thus he sent the Son of Heaven 10,000 horses (Rockhill 1889:5).

The fact that foreign rulers looked to the Ming emperor to grant them legitimacy speaks volumes. Four nations went so far as to request, and receive, what amounted to fief status in relation to China. Although Japan, Malacca, Cochin and Brunei all did so for differing reasons, the message is clear (Sen 2006:439). China held the balance of power. Shortly before dying during his trip to bring tribute to Emperor Yongle personally, the king of Brunei said that, “if in death my body and soul are put to rest in China, I will not be a barbarian ghost. I regret only that having received the great favor of the Son of Heaven, and having not been able to repay him in life, I truly shall be beholden to him in death” (Levathes 1994; 104). There could be no greater expression of foreign adherence to China’s propagated influence.
Alternately, colonization promoted another route to cosmopolitanism. This is not surprising; living in another place prompts individuals to adjust to new rules and experiences. Thus, Ming colonization throughout the Indian Ocean expressed a willingness to coexist with other cultures. There is one problem with this scenario. Contrary to Geoff Wade’s argument, the Dragon Fleet did not set up colonies (Sen 2006:423). Admittedly, at the dawn of the fifteenth century, Chinese diaspora communities existed in Manila, Java, Brunei, Siam, Champa, Malacca and Sumatra (Hall 2006:460). Java housed about one thousand Chinese families of traders who had made Gresik their home in spite of the Emperor's ban on private trade (Levathes 1994:99). These Chinese insulated themselves from the island’s other populations—Muslims, Malays and some indigenous people (Levathes 1994:99). They had been founded before the fleet arrived. Similarly, in Palembang on the island of Sumatra, “Many of the people of the country are from Kuangtung and from Changchou and Chuanchou, who fled away and now live in this country. The people are very rich and prosperous” (Hall 2006:463). These diaspora enclaves certainly existed, but outside of official channels and without imperial consent. As such, their actions did not reflect the will of the Chinese state or its people on the mainland. The thought of ethnic Chinese willingly mixing with other populations horrified the Chinese elite.

In fact, these populations continued to exist because of their continued Chinese identity. Hall (2006:455-456) notes that the Chinese elite assumed that nationals living abroad would always harbor a longing to return. While laws kept mainland Chinese from venturing off internationally, those residing outside the Middle Kingdom received encouragement to come to China. For instance, Huang Fuxing, who lived in Java originally came from China, received 159,050 ding of paper money for his work as an envoy whereas non-Chinese envoys only received a few hundred ding for the same duties (Hall 2006:461). But, if it became apparent that
one had left China of their own free will, it reflected poorly upon them. In order to be repatriated, most Chinese living abroad claimed to have been either shipwrecked or kidnapped by pirates (Hall 2006:461). By making such claims they could avoid the problematic issue of reporting to the Ming court that they, in some cases, had fled China due to social problems. The records of Chinese trader Song Yun, who lived in Sumatra, give evidence for maritime networks other than the government recorded tribute missions (Sen 2006:441-442).

Curiously, foreign powers often sent resident Chinese members of their populations to the Ming court as ambassadors. It has been speculated that having non-native representatives go to the Ming court gave the illusion of a more ‘objective’ national presentations (Hall 2006:457). As a result, many ethnic Chinese accompanied foreign parties as translators or envoys. When the Ming discontinued the tribute missions, ethnic Chinese abroad had no economic reason to hold tightly to their heritage. They began to assimilate into their host countries’ ways. For example, ethnic Chinese living in Java often converted to Islam and married into the local population. By the time an individual attained a level of cosmopolitanism by living outside China, they ceased to be considered Chinese since they had renounced their country.

Not surprisingly, warfare is the antithesis of cosmopolitanism; it represents an inability to relate and compromise. As exhibited by Yongle's wars against the Mongols and Vietnam, he had no compunction against sending out potentially violent missions. He even gave Zheng He leave to intervene in the internal affairs of the countries of the Western Ocean (Sen 2006:437). The Treasure Fleet engaged in three armed conflicts over the course of its use and China celebrated these battles as wonderful victories (Dreyer 2007:28-29). If China had been cosmopolitan, these battles would have been seen as a failure of foreign policy, not a cause to celebrate. The Chinese instigated all three fights and passed off the responsibility. For example, Sinhalese accounts of
Zheng He's third voyage claim that his attempt to steal the Buddha’s tooth relic from Ceylon failed and the offense led to combat (Dreyer 2007:68-69). The Chinese account notes that the king of Ceylon slighted and tried to kill Zheng He and that led to a ground battle (Dreyer 2007:67-68).

To illustrate, an inscription that Zheng He left for posterity in Changle, China does a good job of summarizing the state’s view, “The Imperial Ming [Dynasty] has unified [the lands within the four seas] [and under the] canopy [of Heaven]… From the edge of the sky to the ends of the earth there are none who have not become subjects and slaves” (Dreyer 2007:195).

Yongle’s father, Hongwu, viewed himself as the world head of a vast, Great Unified Empire (Sen 2006:436). He took the responsibility of civilizing the ignorant peoples, maintaining order and prosperity and obtaining the acknowledgement of all people deemed to be under his rule. The Dragon Fleet continued this policy into his son’s reign.

In conclusion, despite its participation in activities that could give way to cosmopolitan tendencies, Ming China remained staunchly self-absorbed. The revival of Confucian thought curbed the possibility of state tolerance for other ways of life. If a citizen wanted contact with the world outside of China, or to pursue private trade as a career, they had to establish themselves in the Indian Ocean. Commodities flowed into China as less powerful states sent tribute to court China’s favor or, at the very least, to keep it from using its staggering naval might to attack if they did not cooperate. The Middle Kingdom did join a cosmopolitan system, one in which other countries adopted its practices- not the other way around.

“On my honor, I have not given, nor received, nor witnessed any unauthorized assistance on this work.”
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