



Chinese maritime relations with Malabar Coast, 1200–1500 AD: A quest for naval dominance

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ABSTRACT

China has had a long history of maritime expedition. Its Indian Ocean connectivity, long before European explorers arrived at the Malabar Coast, had made significant impact on the maritime trade in the Indian Ocean region. China's expedition to the Southern Asia was aimed to expand the benevolence of Chinese emperor and to establish its suzerainty in maritime trade rather than to establish the permanent position on land. The political dynamics at home caused the rise and fall of the maritime might of China. The famous explorer, Zheng He's expeditions represented China's ambition to expand its control over the Indian Ocean regions. The Malabar Coast with its geographical advantages had developed maritime activities enhancing its commercial fortunes. China had to accept the strength of Malabar kingdoms in terms of political power, trade and commercial advantages. Importantly, Malabar kingdoms did not accept the Chinese assertions of supremacy but engaged with the Chinese on equal terms. An attempt is made here to trace China's maritime strategy to expand their power beyond the immediate periphery and establish its supremacy in the Indian Ocean.

KEYWORDS

China and Indian Ocean; maritime heritage; maritime trade; sea power; land power; Malabar Coast and Ocean dominance

China has had a long history of maritime relationship with peninsular India. Chinese maritime power flourished during the thirteenth to fifteenth century. In the fifteenth-century Chinese Emperor, Yongle, sent a tablet to Zamorin, the ruler of Calicut in the fleet of the first voyage of Zheng He (1405–07 A. D.), on which was inscribed, “Your kingdom is more than ten thousand li away from China. Our people and products are alike and customs similar; we enjoy identical prosperity. I inscribe this stone so that it lasts forever as a monument”.¹ This expression of friendliness, mutual collaboration and respect for each other's interests etched in the historical chronicles remains valid today, even when the relationship between India and China has been affected by several conflicts. Taking note of the underlying commonalities between the kingdoms, the intention of the extended greetings, perhaps were suggestive of the Chinese emperor's desire to further prosperous trade and diplomatic relations between the states. The extended greetings could also indicate that the Chinese emperor took cognizance of the strategic importance in terms of the strength and commercial advantages of the Indian states on the coastal

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regions. Until then, trade was conducted mostly via land routes, primarily, through the silk route. Even though there was a possibility of furthering trade relations through land routes, the Chinese took up maritime trade vigorously. The silk route also operated through the sea, which connected the ports of the Malabar Coast with China, and other ports of the Indian Ocean.

Even before European hegemony was established over the Indian Ocean waters, the Chinese had started utilising the maritime resources of the Indian Ocean.² Some trade contacts with South Asia are traced from the time of Han dynasty with the finding of semi precious stones, glass beads and gold jewellery in Hepu, Guangxi province and during Tang dynasty where maritime connectivity was noticed from Guangzhou reaching up to South Asia.³ Ancient India and China got connected even before the rise of the Kushana Empire through maritime routes⁴ although Buddhism connected them on the land routes. Termed as the commercial revolution, the Chinese and Indian rulers' trade and maritime activities had encouraged many groups around the Indian Ocean to venture into sea trade.⁵ The ever-growing Chinese maritime outward expansion had an important role in facilitating the growth and expansion of the empire as well. The kingdoms of the Malabar Coast with their resources could attract foreign merchants which helped them survive.

The presence of the Chinese on the Malabar Coast therefore, witnessed the transitions of the economic and political power from hinterland to the coastal areas of Malabar.⁶ The rich hinterland made the port cities and the commercial enterprises vibrant and active. Income gained from maritime trade was considered and processed with care and control; many kingdoms of the Malabar Coast had specific mechanisms to control and regulate the surplus agricultural produce from the hinterland.⁷ Arab traders and Chinese merchants created a dynamic and enterprising environment in the Malabar Coast with their wide range of productive resources and purchasing capacity. The story of the Chinese and Malabar trade relations reflect the availability of products to conduct large scale trade between the subcontinent of India and China.⁸

This paper analyses the maritime heritage of China and its connectivity to the Malabar Coast, and maps the evolution of maritime power during the thirteenth to sixteenth century. It also explores the traditional maritime practices that China had conducted with India and how it reflects in the contemporary period. The paper argues that the purpose of China's maritime engagement with India had been to promote trade and commercial activities for domestic economic prosperity. Along with this soft power, China did make an attempt to dominate the maritime trade and sought to protect its interests in the maritime domain.

China's maritime heritage

Though China's maritime heritage can be traced back to the ancient civilisation developed in the Yangtze delta, modern Chinese maritime power developed since the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279) established their kingdom in the southern part of China. When tribal invaders took control of inner Asia and set up the Sino-Barbarian dynasty (of Mongols) in North China, Song dynasty lost its ancient land route connecting Europe and Middle East.⁹ The Song dynasty focused on maritime foreign trade for its economic prosperity and eagerly sought oceanic commerce between Near East and Far East through South

and South East Asia. Sea trade gave the Southern Song not only revenue but merchant fleet capable of being used for naval power. There ensued, from twelfth to sixteenth centuries, a combination within the Chinese state between the new Sea and the older land power, with fateful results.¹⁰

The Song dynasty had a number of successful naval expeditions until Mongol domination of China. The trade and commerce flourished by means of an internal system of rivers and canals that supplied goods throughout the empire and the empire was responsible for defending such networks. The Yangtze River was the northern line of defence and eastern line was the coast. The Song navy grew rapidly from a patchwork force of merchant vessels and coastal petrol boats to an effective fighting navy. The main task of the navy was to protect the coastal water and carry out the state sponsored tribute-trade of silk and porcelain with South East Asian countries and the littoral states in South India.¹¹ In 1130 AD there were eleven squadrons and three thousand men: in 1174 AD, fifteen squadrons and 21000 men; and in 1237 AD, twenty squadrons and 52,000 conscripted men.¹² By the early thirteenth century the Song navy not only controlled East China Sea from Fujian province to Japan and Korea and patrolled China's main rivers but also extended its influence to the Indian Ocean and had captured the bulk of the Sea trade from the Arabs.¹³

Chinese naval power was initially introduced to protect its coastal trade but gradually it understood the necessity of controlling the sea borne trade. So it constructed large ships that could carry three hundred tones and five to six hundred people and towed lifeboats. However, seaborne trade faced threats from pirates as well as powerful kingdoms in different choke points. The Song dynasty also fought with the Jin Empire, which launched a three pronged attack against Song in 1161 AD. The Jin attacked with cavalry forces from the Western province of Sichuan. With other troops they tried to cross Yangtze near Nanjing and from the sea they attempted to seize the capital with a fleet of six hundred warships and seventy thousand men. The Song dynasty repulsed Jin's threat because by that time they had mastered gunpowder and on 16 November 1161 AD, the Song Navy defeated the formidable Jin Armada of the Shandong Peninsula. The Song, though they had lesser number of warships, was able to pick off the Jim boats one by one with their gun powder weapons. The four decades that followed this great victory paved the way for the supremacy of Song navy and laid a strong foundation to the strength of imperial China in the subsequent centuries. Even during the Mongol invasion and finally when the Mongols conquered Song China, the naval prowess of the conquered empire did not diminish. With the formation of a formidable navy, which was joined by a large number of defected Song commanders, a large fleet, and merchants, maritime connections of the Mongols became stronger.¹⁴ The navy played a significant role in capturing the Song capital Hangzhou, in the conquest of Xiangyang, and in the control of Yangtze leading to the occupation of China. Developing sea power as a strategic weapon, the maritime connections of Mongols became stronger. Kublai Khan sent emissaries to Sumatra, Ceylon and South India with the intention of expanding his influence, and sent his fleet to attack Japan twice, and Korea, Annam and Java once.¹⁵ Concentrating on ship building and naval training, his second invasion of Japan had 4,500 ships and 150,000 men. The massive ships with their watertight bulkhead compartments, gardens aboard and gun powder weapons were the show pieces of the powerful navy of the mighty empire.

The second phase of China's maritime consolidation happened during the Ming dynasty after the Mongol era ended. Like the Song, the Ming also focused on constructing merchant as well as naval fleets. At its height in the early decades of fifteenth century, the Ming navy had coastal guard fleet that cruised out to sea, naval bases with large garrisons on coastal islands and the system of communication by means of dispatch boats and beacon fires.¹⁶ Each major province had a fleet of several hundred ships: big warships carried up to four hundred men. Ming China's naval capability was most clearly demonstrated in the seven great voyages captained by the great eunuch Zheng He and others in the period 1405–1433 AD.

Ming China had a large naval contingent capable of dominating South East Asia before the arrival of the Europeans. Compared to European powers, China was superior in size and wealth, in many lines of technology and in the art of bureaucratic government. She demonstrated sea power in Indian Ocean that was deemed a natural expression of all round capacity at home. China had the wealth and the power to extend its rule in all of Far East and South East Asia but did not utilise its capacity effectively, rather focused on establishing "benevolent supremacy". When Zheng He established China's maritime contacts with kingdoms in the Indian Ocean Region, he focused more on legitimate recognition for the Chinese emperor by them.

Maritime heritage of the Malabar Coast

India's geographical position in the heart of Asia, the long seaboard and the large number of river systems place the country at a strategic advantage in terms of its geo-physical positioning for the development of a Maritime India.¹⁷ Peninsular India cherished a heritage of a long tradition of maritime life¹⁸ as evident from the port of Lothal in the Indus Valley civilisation, the Chola exploration in the Indian Ocean and the daring exploits of Kunjahli Marakkar against the Portuguese on the Malabar coast, which form the greatest episodes in the history of India. Named by Al Baruni, the coast of Malabar¹⁹ and its surrounding region had the uniqueness with a large number of lagoons, rivers and the long coastal line which made the communities familiar with water as a livelihood resource. His experience in the navigable water channels helped him learn the maritime skills necessary to survive in the sea and on its coastal line.

The long history of maritime relations of the Malabar coast is traced to the Roman Empire. The reference to the ports on the Malabar coast in the first century A.D. is found in the work of *Periplus Mari Erithreyi*.²⁰ The trade relations with the Mediterranean world is also known from the archaeological evidences found from different parts of Malabar especially, Pattanam.²¹ Historical records also reveal that the region used to send ships to the Persian Gulf and Red sea for a period of 2000 years exporting various goods like spices, textiles and other products from India.²²

Mongol invasion and the destruction of Baghdad under the leadership of Hulagu Khan in 1258 A.D. and the abolition of Abbasid Caliphate (750 A.D.–1517 A.D.)²³ altered the commercial relations of the Persian Gulf region with Coastal Malabar. The merchants from the Persian Gulf regions under the Abbasid Caliphate frequenting Quilon until 1258 A.D. withdrew from trade relations with Quilon and China. With political changes, the merchants from Alexandria, Cairo and the Red Sea regions extended their commercial enterprise to Calicut relegating Quilon to the background. Abbasid Persia

and Tang China (618 A.D.–907 A.D.) had included many ports and regional economies of maritime India into their trading circles.²⁴ Calicut turned out to be the principal centre of international trade in coastal Malabar. From the middle of the thirteenth century to the middle of the fifteenth century, it attracted merchants from West Asia, China and various parts of South Asia and functioned as an international emporium connecting Malacca with Cairo and further to the ports of Genoa and Venice on the Adriatic. Calicut and Khambat were two important trade centres on the western coast of India during the pre-Portuguese era.²⁵ The sea-borne trade that thrived in Calicut during this period had two different directions, one that stretched to the China Sea, and the other to the Red Sea regions.

The tradition of navigation is attested by Marco Polo who referred to the visit of Indian ships to Fuzhou in China and Hormuz in the Persian Gulf.²⁶ Warehouses of merchants of Calicut were found in Cairo, Alexandria and in Fez.²⁷ Regular voyages to the East and West were undertaken by the ships of *Chera* kings from the ports of the Malabar Coast, namely, Calicut, *Kodungallur* and *Kollam*.²⁸ The testimony of Marco Polo about *Kollam* presents the city as a trade centre for pepper, indigo and ginger.²⁹ According to Tome Pires, merchants of Malabar used to trade with Cambay, Coromandel, Ceylon and Maldives and there were about four hundred cargo boats in Malabar.³⁰ Ludovico Di Varthema of Bologna also referred to the ships of Malabar sailing to the Persian Gulf.³¹ These are clear suggestions about the knowhow of the Malabar seamen during the Pre-Portuguese era. As littoral communities, they developed their navigational and shipbuilding expertise.

China and the pepper country on the Western Coast

The Malabar Coast was known as pepper country³² and the abundant supply of spices in this region attracted the Chinese. The prominent sources from China for understanding maritime relations between Malabar coast and China are Wang Dayuan's *Tao i chih lio* (Description of the Barbarians of the Isles) (1349), Ma Huan's *Ying yai sheng lan* (Description of the coasts of the Ocean) (1425–32), Fei Xin's *Hsing ch'a sheng lan* (Description of the stary raft) (1436), Huang Shengzeng's *Hsi yang chao kung tien lu* (Record of the Tributary Nations of the West) (1520).³³ Ma Huan and Fei Hisn had accompanied Zheng He's expeditions. Both Ma Huan and Fei Hisn gave descriptions of *Hsiao Ko-lan* (Quilon), *Ko-chih* (Cochin) and *Kuli* (Calicut). Another important work in this regard is *Hsi yang fan kuo chih* (Description of Foreign Countries of the West) which might have been written in 1432 A. D.³⁴

The finding of Chinese porcelain ware of different qualities from the coasts of Tamil Nadu³⁵ and Kerala are good sources to prove the trade relations of China with that of Indian coasts.³⁶ A majority of the Chinese ceramics found from the Malabar Coast belong to the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries.³⁷ Chinese ceramics belonging from thirteenth to sixteenth centuries were found at Dharmadam; Yuan blue and white shards of thirteenth century and celadon pieces of thirteenth century or fourteenth century from Pandalayini-Kollam; celadon shards of thirteenth and fourteenth centuries from Kodungallur and celadon specimen of fourteenth century and some good pieces of *fu-rong* type blue and white dishes from the Jingdezhen kilns of seventeenth or eighteenth centuries from Tangacheri were also found.³⁸

The findings of large number of Chinese coins from the coastal areas of *Kollam* in January 2014 signal the active maritime trade that existed between China and Malabar Coast.³⁹ Considered as the largest collection of ancient Chinese artefacts found from India, it was claimed that the coins belonged to the period between seventh and fourteenth century.⁴⁰ These coins belonged to different dynasties like Tang (AD 618–907), Zhou (AD 951–60), Southern Tang (AD 937–78), Northern Song (AD 960–1127), Southern Song (AD 1127–1279), Jin (AD 1115–1234) and Yuan (AD 1280–1368).⁴¹ Finding of 146 Chinese coins in March 2013 in the *Vattolikadavu* of the *Sasthamkotta* lake in the *Kollam* district reveal the use of them even in interior parts.⁴²

The narratives of Joseph the Indian (Joseph of *Crangannore*), may be the only written Indian reference, also refers to the presence of Chinese in Calicut and their conflict with Zamorin leading to the abrupt ending of their commercial activities.⁴³ Chinese contacts with Malabar Coast are also attested by the Chinese names used in the Malabar region like *cinacatti*, *cinavala* and *cinavedi*⁴⁴ and *cheenakada*.⁴⁵ The Arab record, which included the Japanese work on Zheng He by Torada Takano, is known as another important reference to Zheng He's voyages in the Indian Ocean.⁴⁶

During the Ming dynasty (1368 A.D.-1644 A.D.), Chinese missions were sent to *Kollam*,⁴⁷ an ancient port city on the Malabar coast thrice, in 1407 A.D., 1409 A.D., 1431–33 A. D.; and from Kollam to China, missions were sent in 1368–78 and 1407 A.D.⁴⁸ China showed great interest in spice trade with the port city of Cochin and Calicut where Jews and Arabs were the main traders for centuries. These two port cities became the main trade centres in the Indian Ocean littorals because of its richness in spice and wood. Calicut was a well-established port and had an institutionalised government system. Chinese called Calicut *Kuli*, “the great country of the Western Ocean”. The ruling Zamorin of Calicut had established it as a free port and vessels headed for other destinations could stop for water and provisions. Although the Chinese referred to most other people in the Indian Ocean as “barbarians” they treated Zamorin as an equal and had the utmost respect for the highly structured society with an efficient civil service, a well-trained army and navy and a hard system of justice.⁴⁹ China regarded other well-established societies and kingdoms with a high degree of mutual respect.

Legacy of maritime voyages of China and Zheng He's treasure fleet

The presence of Chinese ships on the Indian seas can be traced from the fourth century A.D.⁵⁰ It is from eleventh to twelfth centuries during the Song dynasty that the maritime trade of China with South Asia reached its highest stage of growth.⁵¹ They welcomed ships from other kingdoms to the ports of Canton and Quanzhou.⁵² Creation of extensive maritime networks with South Asia and the facilitation of the voyages of Zheng He had its development from the maritime heritage of the previous dynasties.⁵³

China's legacy of shipbuilding is astounding. The Song period witnessed the invention of dry dock, watertight compartments, rudders and the compass whereas the Ming dynasty contributed by building the treasure ship which formed Zheng He's fleet.⁵⁴ With its distinctive characteristics, Chinese ships were unique compared to other varieties made elsewhere.⁵⁵ There were three kinds of Chinese vessels as sketched by Ibn Battuta, namely the large ships known as *chunks*, middle sized variety called *zaws* (dhows) and small ones called *kakams*.⁵⁶

During the Yuan dynasty's reign, Kublai Khan had sent four missions under the leadership of Yang Tingbi with the intention to assert his influence in the maritime space in Indian Ocean and to invite foreign traders to the Chinese ports.⁵⁷ The intensification of maritime contacts between Indian coasts and China by the frequent visits of officials, traders and ships during the Yuan period might have contributed to the Indian coast being selected for the main destination of Zheng He's first two expeditions.⁵⁸

As Chinese products like silk, porcelain, lacquer ware, tea and other superlative products were being eagerly sought in the oceanic commerce, China wanted to establish their dominance over Arabs, Persians, Indians, Koreans and Japanese in maritime trade. One of the most wanted items in the overseas trade was China's blue and white porcelain, first produced during the Yuan period, which reached its zenith of production during the Ming and Qing dynasties.⁵⁹ The main trade route was between the Near East and Far East through South and South East Asia. Sea trade gave Southern Song not only revenue but also a merchant fleet capable of being used for naval power.⁶⁰ The decline of the trade on the Silk Road was one of the reasons for the improvement of maritime trade by China and India.⁶¹

The Confucian rhetoric of the Sino centric world order was expressed through the idea of "*Da yitong*, Great Unified Empire" by the founding ruler of Ming dynasty, the Hongwu emperor (1368 A.D.–1398 A.D.). This facilitated the development of a strategy to deal with maritime states peacefully.⁶² He was interested in getting their symbolic acceptance of China's cosmological centrality and extends titles to foreign rulers. The Confucian philosophy continued to guide his son and successor Emperor Chengzu, the Yongle emperor (1403 A.D.–1424 A.D.). He abstained from colonisation. Instead, he participated in the tributary missions and displayed the naval expertise and power wherever required. The Yongle emperor wanted to extend his influence and the civilisation powers to the Malabar Coast and in return, there were tributary missions from Calicut accompanying Zheng-He to the Yongle's court.⁶³ There were envoys from Calicut, starting from October 1405 A.D., when a person named Shamidixi reached the Ming court and met the Yongle emperor.⁶⁴ His visit was a gesture of recognising the Yongle as the emperor of the Chinese Kingdom. Zheng He's expeditions were used continuously to retain the cordiality in the relations between the two states; bestowing patents and conferring titles to both the Rajas of Calicut and Cochin were some of the measures adopted. The cordiality in their relationship with the Cochin ruler has caused friction between the ruler of Cochin and Zamorin of Calicut.⁶⁵ Zheng He was asked during his fifth expedition commencing in 1417 A.D. to confer a seal to Cochin Raja, enfeoffing⁶⁶ a mountain in his kingdom as *zhenguo zhi shan* (mountain that protects the country) and even offer a proclamation on a stone tablet composed by the Yongle emperor.⁶⁷ The Emperor personally composed and conferred an inscription for the tablet that stated, '... Those who respond to the influences and move towards culture are not singular. The country of Cochin is far away in the South-west, on the shore of the vast ocean, further distant than the other *fan* countries. It has long inclined towards Chinese culture and been accepting of civilising influences. When imperial orders arrived, the people there went down on their hands and knees and were greatly excited. ... I am now enfeoffing *Ke-yi-li* as king of the country and conferring upon him a seal so that he can govern the people. I am also "enfeoffing" the mountain in the country as "Mountain Which Protects the Country". An engraved tablet is to be erected on this mountain to record these facts forever'.⁶⁸

This strategy of offering a proclamation to Cochin, which was received only by three other foreign states, by Zheng He and the emperor is to be understood in the context of their grand plan of developing Cochin as one good quality port on their way to Persian Gulf and Red sea and promote the same as a base for their voyages.⁶⁹ The Chinese taking the side of his enemy, the Cochin Raja, seems to have triggered the conflict between Zamorin and China. Zamorin was unhappy with the Chinese overtures to Cochin. After 1416 AD, there was a decline in the diplomatic relations with Calicut and in the last two expeditions of Zheng He, it was not a main destination.⁷⁰ Furthermore, the role of Muslim traders who were prominent and leading maritime trade in Calicut in tackling the issue of the growing Chinese presence leading to the conflict cannot be underemphasised. Regarding the final conflict in Calicut involving the Chinese, there are views that it is the Arab traders who instigated the violence by forcing the Chinese inhabitants of the port to move out from there.⁷¹ It is also claimed that the Zheng He and his troops had pillaged the city of Calicut in retaliation to Zamorin's discarding Chinese interests in Calicut.⁷² There are views that Zheng He was critically injured in the conflict and died in Calicut or on his way back to China.⁷³ Therefore, mid fifteenth century witnessed the decline in the Chinese diplomatic relation of Malabar in general and particularly in the region of Calicut.⁷⁴

The details of the Zheng He's mission to Indo-China and beyond are as follows:⁷⁵

- (1) In 1405, return to China in 1407
- (2) In 1408, return to China in 1411
- (3) In 1412, return to China in 1415
- (4) In 1417, return to China in 1419
- (5) In 1421, return to China in 1421
- (6) In 1424, return to China in 1425
- (7) In 1430, date of return not stated.

The extensiveness of the voyages is attested by the fact that Zheng He had visited 36 countries. The port cities of Malabar Coast visited by him are *Ku-li* (Calicut), *Ko-chih* (Cochin), *Ta Ko-lan* (*Kain Kulam*), *Hsiao Ko-lan* (*Kulam* or *Kollam*).

Naval power was important for China to protect its interests in the competitive maritime trade. The competition within the Chinese state between the new sea power and the old land power contributed towards the sustained effort in protecting maritime interest. China wanted to establish its supremacy in the maritime domain and expected that other seafarers needed to accept the Ming Emperors' benevolence. The first Ming Emperor, Hongwu, a man of enormous vitality, attempted to improve the diplomatic engagement with all known rulers of Chinese civilisational heritage. However it was during Yongle's reign that maritime expeditions reached its summit and pushed the idea of "inclusiveness" and Chinese tradition of accepting Chinese titles as the recognition of Chinese emperor as Son of Heaven.⁷⁶ Yongle sent representatives with Chinese titles and seals to tributary foreign rulers such as Korea, Vietnam, Malacca, Brunei and other major Maritime trading nations that included Japan and Cochin in South India.⁷⁷ The Chinese were conscious of their superior capabilities in all spheres; the ambition to excel, therefore, especially in a competitive environment having other nations as contenders could have been the motivation for their extension as well.

The maritime voyages of Zheng He called the attention to the leadership of the Ming emperor to the known world through tributary missions, granting of titles and imperial proclamations for the local rulers of Malabar Coast, and their interest to involve in the political disputes in other kingdoms.⁷⁸ The real aim of Zheng He's voyages in treasure fleet were understood as missions of peace, friendship and exploration. However, others iterate that the goal of his voyages were tributes and promotion of movement of luxury goods to Chinese markets.⁷⁹ Zheng He's legacy could be seen as a relevant document today that could provide direction to Chinese inhabitants to study the past and think about the future by making sea as its main highway for incoming investment and technology and outgoing exports.⁸⁰

Imperial China had hegemonic ambition in the maritime domain especially in the Ming period. Zheng He's treasure voyages were not just aimed at sustaining and nurturing maritime trade with Calicut and other port cities but to influence the politics, trade and movement of people across the world.⁸¹ The Ming court sought to exert its influence in maritime Asia through the control of several choke points or "nodes of interactions". Even Zheng He used his naval prowess to establish friendly rulers in these trade routes. For instance, on his way back to the Ming court after the first expedition, Zheng He anchored at Palembang, a choke point in South East Asia, and took custody of Chen Zuyi, son of another chieftain of Palembang who allegedly committed "acts of savagery" against the Ming court and brought him to the court and beheaded him. Subsequently, the Ming court appointed Shi Jinqing who seems to have been at the Ming capital through out as the pacification superintendent of the Pacification Superintendency of Palembang. After his death, the Ming court appointed his son to the same post.⁸² The installation of chieftains at choke points by the Ming court suggest that without conquering the territory China exercised its hegemonic dominance through pliable local rulers.

Zheng He's continuous voyages to the Indian Ocean were to establish unparalleled dominance in the maritime trade route connecting the East and the West. Before Zheng He's voyages to Calicut there was a well-established maritime connection between India and China. Zheng He wanted to establish Ming court's influence in the transit port city of Calicut from where Arabs, Jews and others conducted most of their trade. Zheng He's intention to expand his mission to Ormuz in his fourth expedition and upto Eastern Africa in the subsequent expeditions shows that his intention was to control the entire Indian Ocean.⁸³ The Ming Court marginalised private traders and took control of the maritime trade under the state. Zheng He was a diplomat-cum-naval warrior who was the commander-in-chief of the Chinese navy for twenty eight years. His proximity to the Yongle emperor and his bravery ensured the establishing of Imperial Chinese firm tributary control over the peripheries, which allowed the Ming dynasty's supreme position in the continent.

Withering maritime tradition of China

The emergence of new security threat from the northern part of China shifted the political establishment's attention to the land north. Countries formulate their policies and priorities based on the response strategies to mitigate the ensuing threat. Although China prospered through maritime trade when Zheng He conducted maritime explorations in the Indian Ocean but the new security threat from the north constrained China to continue

maritime ventures. Between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries there existed a conflict of interests between sea power and land power within China. The maritime-oriented south brought economic prosperity to the nation while they did not face any obstacles in the maritime trade. On the other hand, tribal invaders from Inner Asia set up their Sino-barbarian dynasties in North China (Khaitan Mongols, Chin Dynasty of Jurchen, Yuan dynasty of the Mongols) who became more interested in foreign trade revenues through land.⁸⁴ Foreign trade was used to replenish imperial coffers by the Chinese as is evident especially from the large amount of cash coming through land trade along the frontiers of China and from the sea-going junks during their return journey.⁸⁵

However, the internal wranglings within the Ming bureaucracy failed to carry forward Yongle's maritime expeditions. Chinese bureaucracy, framed within Confucius tradition, which deplored profit making, including maritime trade and commerce, played a major role in the decline of Chinese maritime tradition. The approach of discouraging maritime trade for profit ultimately won out over the eunuchs who favoured preserving Chinese mastery of Asian seas.⁸⁶ Naturally, the influence of Confucian philosophy brought naval construction to a halt and the number of naval ships reduced to fifteen hundred from thirty five hundred in the early fifteenth century. With the downfall of the Ming dynasty, China lost its maritime presence and the Manchu dynasty abandoned the progress that China had made in maritime expedition.⁸⁷ Manchu rulers focused on building their continental empire and ignored the sea.⁸⁸ During this time, Japan started seafaring activities and focused on unlawful practices to take advantage of their geographical position. Japanese pirates were a formidable force in the sea route and China felt threatened of its sea going activities. Instead of defeating Japanese pirates by building a formidable naval force, after 1644, the Manchu rulers evacuated coastal islands and moved the coastal population ten miles inland behind a patrolled barrier.⁸⁹ One can hardly be more anti-maritime.

Some insights

China started its maritime voyage during Ming dynasty when Southern coastal part of China attained economic prosperity through maritime trade with South East Asia. The land route or silk route was difficult for coastal region because Muslim Mongols had complete control over the silk route. Importantly, the South East Asian kingdoms became economically influential in the maritime trade and China wanted to assert their supremacy over the tributaries. Zheng He carried the mission of cementing the tributary relationship between the centre and the periphery and extend the importance of the Ming emperor in other parts of Asia.

Chinese Maritime voyages during fourteenth and fifteenth centuries indicate the Chinese emperor's interest to expand their power beyond their immediate periphery. Kingdoms of Malabar Coast occupied an important position in the seafaring community because of the products they traded with the foreign countries. Calicut was one of the main destinations of Zheng He during his first two voyages because of the abundance in spices and infrastructure that Zamorin had built to attract foreign traders. At the same time, Zheng He's voyages were programmatic; they were supposed to extend the tributary missions to the Malabar Coast and therefore, carried gifts and titles to native rulers. However, there is no evidence to indicate that Zamorin recognised the Chinese emperor's primacy. Instead, Zamorin held the view that the Chinese emperor is equal to any other foreign

ruler and he returned the same cordiality with gifts and sent representatives to the Chinese court as a customary ritual.

China practiced the *parabellum* strategic culture that is the philosophy that application of force is the last resort when it matters the most. However, the use of force is only in a limited scale to achieve specific objectives. The Ming emperors of China did not have any interest in expanding their empire or conquering any foreign territories; rather they were keen on convincing others to accept the centrality of the Dragon Throne with countries whom China engaged with. At the same time, China was not averse to the use of force to protect its interests in this region. For instance, the Zheng He's marines erected a fortified outpost at Malacca that helped China solidify its supremacy over Malay Peninsula and ensured free transit through the crucial sea passage and the treasure fleet took limited military action against those who were averse to express their loyalty to the dragon throne. In 1411, Zheng He intervened in an internal war on the island of Ceylon, quelling an insurrection led by the Buddhist Chief Alakeswara while asserting Chinese sovereignty over the islands.⁹⁰ Similarly, Zheng He's armada attacked and pillaged the city of Calicut when they found that they had better courtship with the Arabs than the Chinese. The latter was outraged, and left the city forever. It is believed that Zheng He's death had a linkage with the violence incited against the Chinese because he died near Calicut at sea.⁹¹

In short, Zheng He's voyage was an attempt to expand the power of the Dragon throne and influence both its tributaries and independent kingdoms that were influential in trade and commerce. China wanted to establish its supremacy in the maritime trade through the network of ports and warm engagement with rulers across the region. If China had continued the mastery of seafaring activity then Europeans would have had tough time to control the outbound trade from the Malabar Coast.

Notes

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3. Tansen Sen, *India, China, and the World, A Connected History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018), 118, 121.
4. Tansen Sen, "The Intricacies of Premodern Asian Connections," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 69, no. 4 (2010): 992.
5. Fairbank, "China's Foreign Policy in Historical Perspective," 454.
6. K.M. Panikkar, *Asia and Western Dominance, A Survey of the Vasco Da Gama Epoch of Asian History 1498-1945* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1959), 14.
7. Kenneth McPherson, *The Indian Ocean, a History of People and the Sea* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), 88.
8. K.N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean, an Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1985), 53.
9. Fairbank, "China's Foreign Policy in Historical Perspective," 453-4.
10. *Ibid.*, 454.
11. C.P. Fitzgerald, *The Southern Expansion of the Chinese People* (Delhi: MW Books, 1972), 17-18.
12. Louise Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas, The Treasure Fleet of The Dragon Throne 1405-1433* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 43.
13. *Ibid.*, 17-18.

14. K.N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean*, 54, Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas*, 48.
15. Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas*, 49–54.
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17. Radha Kumud Mookerji, *Indian Shipping, A History of the Sea Borne Trade and Maritime Activity of the Indians from the Earliest Times* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1999), 5.
18. Panikkar, *Asia and Western Dominance*, 29.
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20. Wilfred H Schoff identifies Naura with present Cannanore or Kannur, Tyndis with Kadalundy or Ponnani, Muziris is Kodungalloor or Crangannore, Nelcynda is near Kottayam and Bacare which finds mention in the work is Porakad. All these former coastal ports are on the Malabar Coast. Damirica meant the country of Tamils including the Chera, Pandya and Chola Kingdoms and refers to the present day Kerala state. Cerobothra is referring to the Keralaputhra, the western Tamil kingdom. For details, refer to Wilfred H Schoff, *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea, Travel and Trade in the Indian Ocean by a Merchant of the First Century* (New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, 1974), 44.
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25. K.N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean*, 99.
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33. W.W. Rockhill, “Notes on the Relations and Trade of China with the Eastern Archipelago and the Coast of The Indian Ocean during the Fourteenth Century,” *T’oung Pao* 16 (1915);, 61.
34. *Ibid.*, 79.
35. Ray, “South India during the Fifteenth Century,” 104.
36. Himanshu Prabha Ray, “Archaeology of Maritime Travel: Chinese Ceramics in Indian Ocean Trade,” in *Maritime Heritage of Indian Ocean*, ed. Alok Tripathi (Delhi: Sharada Publishing House, 2013), 206.
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45. Sarasan, *Chinese Cash in Ku-lin*, 16.
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63. *Ibid.*, 437.
64. *Ibid.*, 437–8.
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73. Sen, "The Formation of Chinese Maritime Networks to Southern Asia," 440.
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89. Ibid.
90. Holmes and Yoshihara, "Soft Power at Sea," 3–4.
91. Ray, "An Enquiry into the Presence of the Chinese in South and South-East Asia," 99.

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