

CHINESE ACTIVITIES IN THE INDIAN
OCEAN BEFORE THE COMING
OF THE PORTUGUESE

I. EARLY CHINESE RELATIONS WITH THE COUNTRIES ALONG
THE INDIAN OCEAN

The earliest Chinese record of the maritime relations between India and China can be found in the "History of the Former Han Dynasty" (*Chien Han-shu*) which covers the period from B.C. 206 to A.D. 23. In its chapter (28b) on geography it is stated that ever since the time of the Emperor Wu (Wu Ti, B.C. 140-87) the country called Huang-chih has sent tribute to the Chinese court, which in turn dispatched envoys to this remote country. Huang-chih has been identified by many scholars with Kāñcī (Conjeeveram) on the east coast of South India. It is recorded that there were chief interpreters belonging to the Yellow Gate (the office of eunuchs serving in the palace) who went to sea to buy bright pearls, opaque glasses and other rare articles, taking with them from China gold and various kinds of silk for exchange.

The traditional route from China to Huang-chih started from

the coast of Kuang-tung Province, following a course by sea, and then by land, and again by sea before reaching the final destination. The homeward journey, from Huang-chih to China, however, followed only the sea route and finally reached the coast of Middle Vietnam. This means most probably that there were two ways of travel, one crossing the Malay Peninsula at some point, and the other passing the Straits of Malacca. The date of the first journey of the Chinese envoys could be placed between B.C. 111 and B.C. 87: between the year of the subjugation by the Emperor Wu of the Kingdom of Nan-yüeh which had occupied the sea coast of Kuang-tung and probably North Vietnam, and the year of demise of the same emperor. At the end of the former Han Dynasty, when the political power was in the hands of Wang Mang, he sent out an official mission to Huang-chih with "generous gifts," and the return mission from Huang-chih brought to the Chinese court as tribute a live rhinoceros. This envoy of Huang-chih arrived in China in the year A.D. 2. It is written in the text that the Chinese envoys were transferred or "carried in turn" by the merchant ships of the barbarians. This could be taken as a proof that the envoys followed the commercial routes commonly used at that time by the non-Chinese merchants, and Chinese ships did not play an active role in the South Seas, particularly not in the Bay of Bengal.

In the early centuries of the Christian era, the maritime activities of Indian ships became prominent, and the influence of Indian civilization spread widely in Southeast Asia. In the Chinese dynastic histories and other documents covering the third to the eighth centuries, we find numerous records of foreign envoys coming from India, Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, as well as of the Chinese envoys sent out to southern countries. But besides these governmental relations, we have to take into consideration the travels of Chinese Buddhist monks to and from India by way of the South Seas. The famous monk Fa-hsien came back from Sri Lanka to China via Javadvīpa in about A.D. 412, and later in the seventh and eighth centuries I-ching, Wu-hsing, Sêng-chê and others travelled across the Bay of Bengal. It is not difficult to suppose that these monks made their voyage on board merchant ships of some kind, but unfortunately we have almost

no records about the nationality and the nature of the vessels they used. According to Chinese historical sources, we are informed that, besides Indian vessels, large ships of Fu-nan and K'un-lun were actively working in the South Seas before and during the T'ang period. Fu-nan was situated in the southern part of the Indo-Chinese peninsula, while K'un-lun is usually understood as the Malayo-Polynesian people. In addition to this, recent studies in archaeology and ethnology have revealed to us the very early development of techniques of naval architecture in China. In 1976 the ancient shipbuilding yard of the Ch'in or Han period was excavated near the city of Canton (Kuang-tung), and the discovery of the linear picture of a storied ship, *lu-ch'uan*, on a big flat tile of the Han period also attracted the attention of historians. According to the study carried out by Ling Shun-sheng, the pictographic writing of the Shang period, in the second millennium B.C., shows the existence of outrigger boats which were used in later years, and which are still being used extensively in the Pacific and Indian Oceans.

Although East Asian historical records do not tell us how far the Chinese ships navigated to the west, their activities in the Indian Ocean are mentioned in Arabic writings. It is widely known that Persians and Arabs were actively engaged in international trade in the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, in particular since the eighth century, and their settlements were established at the trading ports of China: Kuang-tung, Ch'üan-chou, etc. In the Arabic text entitled "Observations on China and India" written in 851—formerly attributed to the merchant Sulaimān—we find a passage which reads as follows:

As for the places whereto the ships come, it is reported that the majority of the Chinese ships loaded cargo at Sirāf, whereto the commodities are transferred from Basra, from 'Omān and other places, and where the people load them on the Chinese ships. This is because of the abundance of great waves and of the lack of water in some places.

This is likely to prove the existence of Chinese seafaring through the Indian Ocean up to the Persian Gulf. In the book entitled *Arab Seafaring in the Indian Ocean* (Princeton, 1951) the author, G.F. Hourani, argued that these "Chinese ships" could be re-

garded as Muslim ships bound for China, but this explanation could not be considered valid at least for all the Arabic text concerning "Chinese ships."

In the "New History of the T'ang Dynasty" (*Hsin T'ang-shu*, 43b), we find the description of a sea route which started from Kuang-tung and terminated in the Persian Gulf. This is the text derived from the *Huang-hua ssü-ta chi* ("Travel Routes of Imperial China in Four Directions") written by Chia Tan who was the Prime Minister of China in the years of the end of the eighth and the beginning of the ninth centuries. After having passed through the Straits of Malacca, the route proceeded to Sri Lanka and then to Quilon on the coast of Malabar, and there it broke into two: one route being directed to the north and reaching the estuary of the Indus River, which was called Hsin-t'ou or Mi-lan, where it turned to the west towards the Persian Gulf; and the other route crossing the Arabian Sea, where it followed the coast of Yemen and Hadramaut, stopping at Shê (Shihr) and Suhār, which was called Mêi-sun, and then went into the Persian Gulf. The final destination of these two routes was the same place called Wu-la, which can be identified with the port city of Obolla, situated at the mouth of the Euphrates.

Around the middle of the tenth century Mas'ūdī wrote in his *Golden Meadows*—or perhaps more correctly "Gold Washing"—about the meeting of the Chinese and Arab trading ships at the Port of Killah (Kalah) which is identified with Kedah on the west coast of the Malay Peninsula. The text reads as follows:

At present this city (of Killah) is the general meeting place of the Muslim ships of Sīrāf and 'Omān where they meet the vessels of China, but it was not like this in the past. At that time, the vessels of China went to the countries of 'Omān, Sīrāf, the sea coast of Persia and of Baḥrain, to 'Obollah and to Basrah, and those (ships) of these countries navigated in their turn directly towards China. It is only since we cannot rely upon the justice of (their) government and upon the righteousness of their intention, and (since) the situation of China became as I have described, that people meet at this intermediary point. Thus the merchants embarked on the Chinese ships in order to go from Killah to the Port of Khanfu (Kuang-tung).

In this text the Chinese ships cannot be regarded as Arabo-Persian ships going to China. Mas'ūdī described the state of

affairs of the period of the Five Dynasties when the political situation of China was extremely unstable. And then after this period, during the time when China was under the control of the powerful dynasties of Sung and Yüan, the trade and commerce in the South Seas underwent a transformation in many respects.

II. CHINESE ACTIVITIES DURING THE SUNG AND YÜAN PERIODS

The four centuries covering the period of Sung and Yüan, that is from 960 to 1367, were the flourishing age of Chinese trade with South Seas countries and of the seafaring activities of Chinese ships. Sung Chinese and Mongols both set up, in the major trading ports of South China, a specialized government agency called *shih-p'o-shih* (Superintendency of Merchant Shipping) in order to control merchant ships and to promote trade and commerce with overseas countries. During the Northern and Southern Sung period, the seaport of Ch'üan-chou in Fukien Province grew increasingly important and it became the topmost center of international trade. It was called Zaytün (Zitün) by Arab writers, and when Marco Polo and Ibn Battutah visited this port during the Mongol reign, they both regarded Zaytün as one of the most flourishing trading ports in the world. It is important to note that during the Sung and Yüan period the ships of Chinese origin and ownership became active in sailing the Indian Ocean. Shipbuilding techniques developed greatly in China, and the ships became larger, better-equipped and improved in the art of navigation. Documentary proof of the mariner's compass can be traced back to 1119. There were Chinese ships which carried several hundred persons, and according to Ibn Battutah—who noticed, in the port of Calicut, thirteen Chinese ships of three different categories—there existed a large Chinese vessel which carried one thousand persons. Odoric of Pordenone, Ibn Battutah and other persons who went to China from India, took Chinese ships from the Malabar coast. Based upon their travel accounts, we can infer with certainty that this was the usage in those days. In the texts of the *Sung hui-yao* ("Assembled Essential Institutions of the Sung Dynasty") and

of the *Yüan tien-chang* ("Legal Regulations of the Yüan Dynasty") we can find detailed rules and instructions concerning the foreign trade and the function of the superintendency *shih-p'o-shih*. But we find a great difference between the two: the former is mainly devoted to the trading ships of foreign countries, while the latter concentrates on the outgoing Chinese ships. It seems to me that this shows the growing importance of the role of Chinese vessels. In the text of *Chu-fan chih* ("Records of Foreign Peoples") written in 1225, we find the descriptions of countries of Southeast Asia, and of the Indian Ocean littorals, covering India, Persia, Arabia and the east coast of Africa, and also the brief passages about the Mediterranean region including the southern part of Spain. The book was written by Chao Ju-kua, who was in charge of the affairs of the trading ships in the Province of Fukien. He never travelled abroad, but could collect information about foreign countries during his stay in the port city of Ch'üan-chou.

The flourishing development of international trade had a great influence on the economic situation of China. Throughout the Sung period the out-flow of copper coins became a serious problem, and the repeated prohibitions on the export of the coins remained fruitless. The shortage of coins was so conspicuous that the people in those days used the special term *ch'ien-huang* which means "famine of coins." The government derived an impressive income from the tax levied on imported commodities and from the sale of tribute articles. According to the statistical account of 1128, 20% of the total cash revenue came from the maritime trade. The commodities coming from the South Seas were so varied that the inventory compiled in 1141 listed no less than 339 items. China imported varieties of spices, aromatics, drugs, textiles, precious stones, ivories, rhinoceros horns, etc.; and we can also find cotton textiles from South India, putchuk from the Himalayan slopes, myrobalans and indigo from Gujarat, camel-hair cloth from Ghazni, gardenia flowers from Ispahan, myrrh from Murbat, frankincense from the ports of the Hadramaut coast, ambergris from the shores of East Africa, etc. Frankincense was a commodity of great importance, classified into thirteen categories, and Chau Ju-kua gave a fairly detailed account of the method of collecting frankincense

on the uplands of Hadramaut and Somaliland. The exported goods were far less varied than the imported ones, the main articles being different kinds of silk, porcelain, copper coins, gold, silver and utensils made of iron. Quantities of Chinese porcelain found in the region of the Indian Ocean—India, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Iran, Arabia, Madagascar, the east coast of Africa,—as well as in Egypt and other places, are the remnants of the magnificence of the Chinese trade. It is equally important to note that we have found Chinese copper coins in many localities of the same region: Sri Lanka, India, the shores of the Persian Gulf, the East African sea coast—Kilwa, Mogadishu, Mombasa, Zanzibar—etc. Although the datings of the excavated porcelain and the copper coins are varied, covering the periods from T'ang to Ch'ing, we should notice that the comparative majority are those of the Sung production. In the case of the copper coins, which can be dated more or less precisely, the frequent appearance of the Northern Sung specimens is noteworthy.

When the Mongol Emperor Khubilai, Shi-tsu of the Yüan Dynasty, overthrew the Southern Sung in 1279, he immediately started to control the international trade in the South Seas, ordering the collaboration of the *shih-p'o-shih* of Ch'üan-chou (Zaytün) called P'u Shou-kêng, who was a Muslim of foreign descent. The first imperial envoy sent out by Khubilai Khan went to South India and arrived at Quilon. He carried a special title (*hsüan-wei-shih*) which could be interpreted as a proof that Khubilai had the intention of treating Quilon as a region in the sphere of his political control. Khubilai was an expansionist who sent out expeditions to Japan, Vietnam, Champa, Burma and Java, and there also existed an idea of sending out an expedition to Siam, Sumatra and South India. But this was abandoned at the warning of a Uigur official of his court.

As to the Chinese activities in the South Seas in the Mongol period, we have the important text *Tao-i chih-lüe* ("Brief Accounts of Barbarians of Islands") written by Wang Ta-yüan. He travelled twice extensively in the South Seas between 1330 and 1334, and left a description of 99 countries or localities which were scattered widely in South-east Asia and the Indian Ocean region. It is interesting to find in this text two special words,

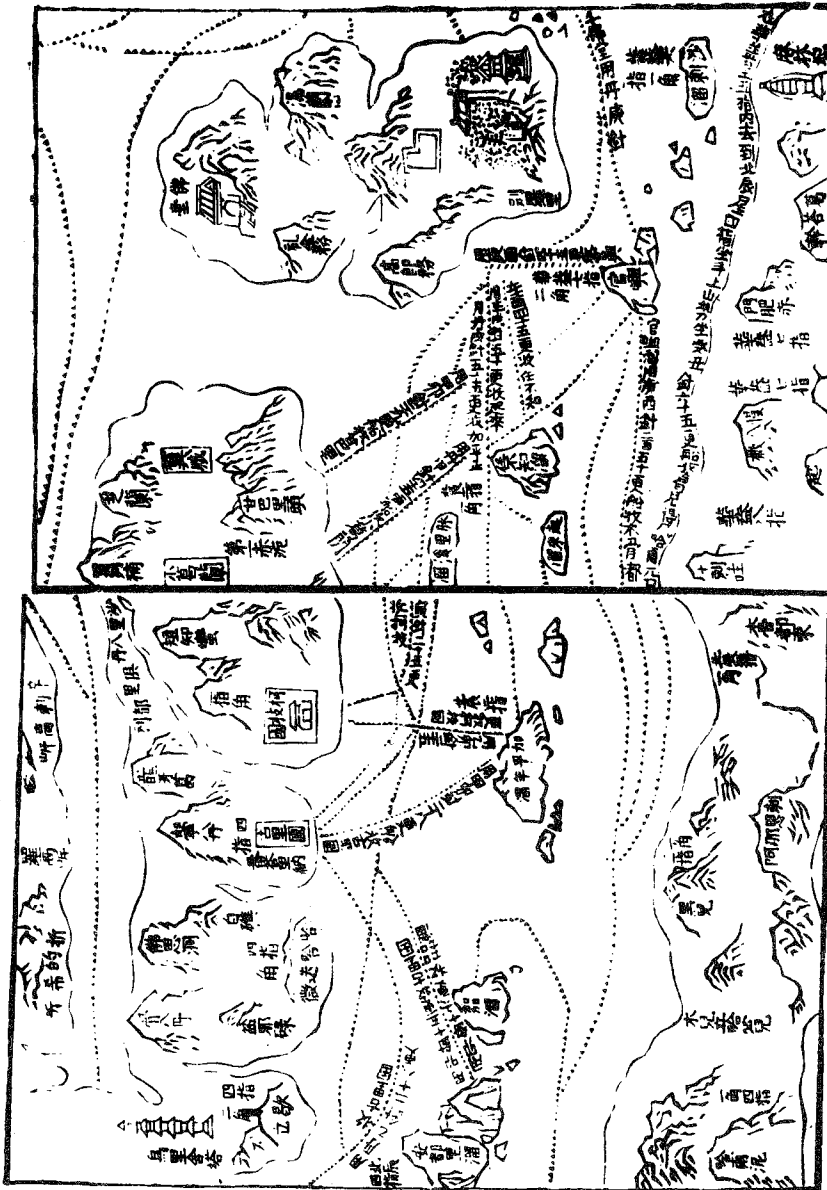
Tung-yang and *Hsi-yang*, which mean, respectively, Eastern Ocean and Western Ocean. These two words are used at present as equivalents to Orient and Occident, but in *Tao-i chih-lüe* they indicated two important trading areas in the South Seas, from the point of view of the Chinese merchant ships. *Tung-yang* was limited to Java and the neighbouring islands, while *Hsi-yang* meant the coastal regions of South India. Wang Ta-yüan regarded this *Hsi-yang* to be more or less under the sphere of political control of the Vijayanagar kingdom, and thus we know that one of the two main destinations of Chinese ships was the South Indian coast.

III. CHINESE ACTIVITIES DURING THE EARLY MING PERIOD

After the downfall of the political power of the Mongols, the first Emperor of the succeeding Ming Dynasty, Hung-wu, took up the policy of prohibiting Chinese ships from going abroad while, on the other hand, he invited foreign vessels to come to the seaports of China. However, this policy again changed under the rule of the third Emperor, Yung-lo, who launched great maritime adventures into the Indian Ocean. Expeditions were repeated seven times between 1405 and 1433: six times under the reign of Yung-lo, and once under the fifth Emperor, Hsüan-tê. The commander-in-chief of these expeditions was Chêng Ho who was a eunuch and Muslim, and who won the reputation of being a great military leader and diplomat. His father was a *badji*, and his original family name was Ma, which was common among Chinese Muslims. His great voyages were called *Hsia Hsi-yang*, "going down to the Western Ocean," which implies that the navigation was mainly in the direction of the South Indian coast.

We have considerable information about these voyages in *Ming Shih-lu* ("Reign Chronicles of the Ming Dynasty") and other historical records.

(1) The first expedition was ordered by an Imperial Edict issued in July 1405. An armada consisting of 62 ships loaded with more than 27,800 men started from the port of Liu-chia near Nanking, which was at that time the capital of China. The fleet left China early the following year; visited Champa on the



Fragment of the marine chart, known as Cheng Ho's chart (*Wu-pai chih*, vol. CCXL). India (at the top), the Maldives (in the centre), the East Coast of Africa (at the bottom) and Sri Lanka (to the right) are clearly recognizable.



The ship sailing from Ormuz to Calicut, on the return journey, framed by notes giving the estimated height of the constellations which guide it (*Wu-péi chih*, vol. CXI).

coast of Vietnam, descended to the south to East Java, and then turned to the west; visited Palembang in South Sumatra, and then Malacca and North Sumatra; crossed the ocean to Sri Lanka and arrived at Cochin and Calicut, which was the important emporium reached by Vasco da Gama 92 years later. On the way home to China, the fleet passed the Malacca Straits and went north from Singapore. Chêng Ho was back in Nanking and was received in audience by the Emperor in October 1407. During this voyage, the Imperial Edict and presents were distributed to the rulers of the southern countries and allegiance to the Middle Kingdom was demanded. Peaceful relations developed with many countries, but in some cases military action was taken. It is recorded that the Chinese troops killed 170 persons in East Java, and heavy fighting took place in Palembang where 5,000 soldiers of the powerful Chinese leader were reported to have been killed.

(2) The second expedition started in 1407 and returned in 1409 after visiting Java, Cochin, Calicut and Siam.

(3) In order to prepare the third expedition, 48 new vessels were built by the Ministry of Construction. The fleet left the Chinese coast in January 1410, followed almost the same routes as those of the first voyage, and went as far as Calicut. This time, Chêng Ho brought a special message to Malacca, and set up a memorial stone there with inscriptions aimed at protecting the King of Malacca against attacks made by Siam. In Sri Lanka he left trilingual inscriptions in Chinese, Persian and Tamil, dedicated to the Lord Buddha as protector of navigation. This stone was found in Galle and is now preserved in the National Museum of Colombo. On the way back from Calicut, heavy fighting occurred in Sri Lanka, and Chêng Ho captured the King of the country, Alagkkonara, who was taken to Peking, which had become the capital of China in 1411. Chêng Ho returned to China the same year, and foreign envoys came from Calicut, Cochin, Kayal (on the east coast of South India), the countries of Sumatra, the Malay Peninsula and East Java; and the King of Malacca arrived in person.

(4) The next voyage, No. 4, was launched by an edict issued in December 1412, and from this time on the Chinese activities

became prominent in the western part of the Indian Ocean. Chêng Ho's fleet went to Java, Sumatra, Malacca, Sri Lanka, Cochin and Calicut, and then proceeded to the Persian Gulf and arrived at Ormuz. On his way home he fought an action at Samudra (North Sumatra) in order to consolidate the power of the Muslim ruler, and came back to Peking in August 1415. It should be noted that during this voyage some vessels were detached from the armada at a point somewhere around Sumatra, went straight to the west, to the east coast of Africa, followed the waterfront of Arabia to reach the Persian Gulf, and then came back to China in November 1416. Envoys and tributes came from 18 countries, among which we find the names of the countries of East Africa and Arabia: Malindi, Brawa, Mogadishu, Aden, and *La-sa* which can be identified as Las'a on the coast of Hadramaut.

(5) Voyage No. 5 followed almost the same route as that of No. 4. Chêng Ho's fleet set off in 1417, returned in 1419, and probably travelled as far as Ormuz. This time too, a part of the fleet was detached and went around the coast of East Africa and Arabia; thus in 1419 envoys and tributes came to Peking from 16 countries including Mogadishu, Brawa, Aden, Dhofar and Las'a. In the text of the inscription set up by Chêng Ho himself in the Port of Liu-chia, there is found a passage about fancy animals which reads as follows:

"The country of Ormuz presented lions, leopards with gold spots, and large western horses. The country of Aden presented *ch'i-lin*, of which the native name is *tsu-la-fa* (giraffe) as well as the long-horned animals *ma-la* (oryx). The country of Mogadishu presented *hua-fu-lu* (striped zebra) as well as lions. The country of Brawa presented camels, which run one thousand *li*, as well as camel birds (ostriches).

Among the animals which came to Peking, the giraffe attracted special attention. The identification of the giraffe with the legendary Chinese animal *ch'i-lin* may be partly due to the Somali name for giraffe, which is *giri*. According to the Chinese classics, *ch'i-lin* is an extremely auspicious animal which appears only at a time when the Emperor's virtues are exceptionally lofty and predominant. Thus, the arrival of the giraffe created a sort of literary ferment, and flattering poems and writings

appeared and were presented to the Emperor. The Emperor at first refused the congratulations, but finally went out in person to the gate Feng-t'ien to welcome this auspicious animal.

(6) The next voyage, No. 6, started in 1421 and returned in 1422, and this time 41 large vessels were built. The fleet divided at Sumatra, and one part went along the west coast of the Indian Ocean. In 1423, 1,200 persons came to the court of Peking as envoys from 25 countries, again including Brawa, Mogadishu, Aden, Las'a, Ormuz etc.

(7) The Emperor Yung-lo died in 1424. The great naval enterprise was given up for some time, but the next Emperor but one, Hsüan-tê, resumed the expeditions, again under the command of Chêng Ho. As for this final great voyage, rather detailed accounts are available. It is recorded that it consisted of 61 vessels carrying 27,550 men. It left the coast of China in January 1432, went to the southern countries, reached Ormuz early in the year 1433 and returned to the port near Nanking in July 1433. During this voyage a special mission consisting of seven interpreters was sent out from Calicut to T'ien-fang (Mecca); they travelled along the Arabian coast after the visit to the Holy City and joined Chêng Ho's fleet which was moored at Ormuz. It is reported that it took 36 days to sail from Samudra (North Sumatra) to Sri Lanka; 35 days from Calicut to Ormuz; 23 days from Ormuz to Calicut; and 17 days from Calicut to Samudra.

The general features of the seven great voyages are roughly these.

It appears to me that these navigations had the strong objective of trade as well as the glorification of imperial rule, because the exchange of commodities took the form of tributes and imperial gifts.

It is to be remembered that, apart from Ch'êng Ho's great voyages, the Emperor Yung-lo sent out separate maritime missions to the countries along the River Ganga. In this enterprise the leading role was played by Hou Hsien, who was also a eunuch. We have to notice that some of the envoys who went to Bangladesh in 1412 also visited Delhi during the reign of Mahmud Shah of the Tughluq Dynasty. In 1420 the Emperor

dispatched Hou Hsien on a special mission to Jaunpur to ask Sultan Ibrahim to stop his invasion into the country of Bangala (Bangladesh).

As a result of the great voyages led by Ch'êng Ho, Chinese knowledge of the Indian Ocean became remarkably accurate. The members of these voyages, Ma Huan, Fei Hsin and Kung Chên, each left a description of the southern countries. We also have the mariner's chart, showing the sea route from the port of Liu-chia near Nanking down to Ormuz on the Persian Gulf, which contains the place names of India, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Arabia and East Africa. This long chart is preserved in the *Wu-pêi chih* ("Records of Military Preparations"), and it ranges over 40 pages. It should also be mentioned that records exist of the Lung-chiang shipbuilding yards of Nanking (*Lung-chiang Ch'uan-ch'ang chih*) in the Ming period, where we can find a special kind of large vessel called a *pao-ch'uan* (treasure ship) which was used for Ch'êng Ho's voyages.

These seven great voyages of the early fifteenth century marked the climax of Chinese activities in the Indian Ocean before the coming of the Portuguese.

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