

## BOOK REVIEW

Li Xinfeng, ed., Shelly Bryant, trans. *Zheng He's Voyages to Africa in the 15th Century: The Maritime Silk and Porcelain Road*. Pretoria, South Africa: African Institute of South Africa, 2023. 362 pp. \$42.00. Paper. ISBN: 978-0-7983-0538-9.

Between 1417 and 1419, the sultans of Mogadishu and (possibly) Malindi received at least one, and possibly two, visits from Chinese military officials representing the third Ming (Yongle) Emperor, Zhu Di (r. 1402–24). These visits represented the utmost reaches attained by seven naval expeditions that Zhu Di and his second successor, the Xuande Emperor, had sent between 1402 and 1433. Several previous scholars have discussed and debated Zheng He's voyages, and this latest one is the first written and edited by three Chinese historians and made available in an English edition.

Although the volume's title suggests that the voyages' ultimate objective was to reach East Africa, the authors devote almost the entire book to other topics. They have arranged it into eleven chapters that range broadly from their historical background and the technology used in ship design to the makeup of the crews to claims of visits to East Africa and beyond. The editor, Li Xinfeng, also inserted a chapter on his extensive excursions to Pate Island in search of evidence of Zheng He's visit and to claims by some in Siyu and Shanga to be descendants of shipwrecked crewmen from Zheng's expedition.

Generally speaking, all works concerning these Ming era "treasure fleets" suffer from a deficiency of verifiable sources, including this one. Zheng kept detailed records of his travels, but in the decades after 1433, reactionary court officials destroyed them. All that survived were three inadequate personal accounts. The most widely cited source, the so-called *History of Ming*, was compiled more than 200 years after the voyages; however, again, it provides little information of the records, if any, on which its authors had relied for supporting evidence.

Aside from literary sources, what about physical (archaeological and monumental) evidence? Nothing exists from East Africa, save for porcelains and other trade items imported from China. Archaeologists have excavated, catalogued, and discussed these imports for many decades. Although abundant, they do not provide evidence, specifically, that there ever existed direct contacts between Africans and Chinese at any time throughout the long history of Indian Ocean trade.

This new contribution provides readers with the most detailed discussion yet of many aspects of the seven voyages of Zheng He's massive expedition. Despite the tantalizing title, the authors provide the reader with little evidence—aside from Mogadishu and southern Somalia—that actual contact was made with

communities south of the Jubba River. Zheng He himself states only that Malindi and other points south of the Jubba region are “a very long way” from China. That said, the authors have missed an opportunity of providing African historians an updated discussion of several relevant questions. What, for example, were the purposes of the visits? What impact did these purported sojourns have on Africa, and, perhaps, China itself in the years after 1431?

Aside from the febrile claims that exist in Chinese sources and the authors of this volume, there exists an oral tradition at Shanga and Siyu that a local clan, the Famao, claim to be descended from shipwrecked Chinese sailors. Oral traditions have proved to be relevant and even accurate to a degree elsewhere in coastal history, but Li’s informants repeat and embellish this claim, hoping to benefit from Chinese largesse (220). The authors show themselves to be overly eager to accept the claims of old and long-standing contacts between their homeland and many Western Indian Ocean lands, including Kenya, South Africa, and beyond. However, their contributions to historiography would be more convincing if they tempered their nationalist fervor with a more critical use of their sources.

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