Early-modern globalization and de-globalization of Ming China: A case of Zheng He’s expeditions and their aftermath in the fifteenth century

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Introduction

Though it may be well-worn cliché, Zheng He’s expeditions to oceans of which destinations cover areas from the coast of the Eastern Africa to islands of the Southeast Asia, are still masked in mystery. Inquiries into their details – including the intendment, landing-places and dates, particularized processes, and the products and results of the seven journeys – have been conducted by plentiful writers regardless of their academic backgrounds, including Fujita Toyohachi, Paul Pelliot, Yamamoto Tatsurō, Jan Duyvendak, Lo Jung-pan, Louise Levathes, and Gavin Menzies more recently. In China, the memory of its maritime triumph during the early Ming has also encouraged its nationals since as early as the late Qing. As Chinese literati largely felt insulted and alienated after confronting the overwhelming power of European (and Japanese) navies, Sun Yet-sen referred to Zheng He’s enterprise in his famous blueprint plan of nation-building, so as to enhance the sense of national identity.

Even after 1949, the legend still continues to provide Chinese people with a comforting story of the past, when China ruled the world. PRC’s open policy in the post-Mao era, and archaeological findings as well, also fueled heated discussions on issues such as Zheng’s bibliographical evidences, details of his fleet, and so forth. Since 1986, academic societies specialized in study of Zheng He have been in sequence organized at Nanjing, Kunming, and specialty journals concurrently published.

2 Liang Qichao, “Zuguo dahanghai jia Zheng He zhuan,” in Liang, Yinbingshi Heji vol. 6 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1989 [1905]).
3 Sun Wen, “Jianguo fanglűe,” in Sun Wen Xuanji 1 (Guangzhou: Guangdong Renmin Chubanshe, 2006 [1915]).
4 As to the review for the studies respecting Zheng He’s expedition, see Shi Ping, “Jin bainian de Zheng He yanjiu,” Huizu Yanjiu 2003 (1), 2003.
2005, a headline-making national ceremony was held at Beijing commemorating six hundredth anniversary of the first expedition. Meanwhile, a series of campaigns are launched in various cities, including those in the Southeast Asia and others, all of which are to be latterly interpreted in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) promoted by China’s incumbent leader, Xi Jinping. Thus, today, Chinese version of Gavin Menzies’ searing bestseller 1421 is laid out flat at the gate of Zheng He Treasure Ship Park, which locates at the site of the Longjiang dockyard of Nanjing.

Implicitly or explicitly, by evaluating and depicting Zheng He’s whole projects, we have been trying to identify China’s potential capacities of enterprisingly reaching out to the outside world, and those of handling global factors. Most of literatures as to Zheng He’s adventures accordingly presume that the close of the project signals an overall China’s shift from an expansive and extroverted attitude to an introverted one, which was entirely different from the trajectory of the European world. However, things were more complicated. It is still not always safe to simply classify polities and periodize their histories according to whether they are/were outward-directed or introverted, from the modern perspective which sees the development of borderless commercial activities and mutual involvement as the manifest and irreversible destiny. Instead, what now we ought to dig into is how the border and trade control and foreign policies have been wedded to the whole empire management, not merely in economic and fiscal terms. Exactly by understanding this point, can we properly explain the process in which the overseas issues were ostensibly lowering their priority within the Ming court, and discuss its implication in global history. In this paper, after briefly outlining Zheng He’s expeditions, the author argues further over what the beginning and the end of the campaign connotes, especially from perspectives of the Ming’s political configuration and the governmental logistics.

1. Eunuchs, tributary trades, and Zheng He

Tribute paranoia

It is well-known that Zheng He (c. 1371–1433), whose name originally was Ma He, was born to a Muslim family of Kunming, Yunnan, and was presented to the court as a castrated juvey captive, when the Ming army took this area from a Mongol prince

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6 This is not to dismiss the maritime trade empire model, presented by Thomas Barfield. See “Shadow empires,” in Susan Alcock et al. eds., *Empires* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Nevertheless, we cannot forget that this sort of explanation is prone to engender a monotonous, essentialist, and unfalsifiable stereotype which is attributed transhistorically to each nationality.
Basalawarmi (–1381). After the Sui period (581–618), when castration was principally excluded from official punishment system, many of palace eunuchs were gathered through tributes from surrounding countries and recruitment for self-castrated males or boys castrated by destitute parents⁷. Due to their international backgrounds, especially during the era of the Yongle emperor (r. 1402-24), eunuchs of foreign origin often played a significant role as diplomatic agents to various countries, such as Jurchen eunuch Yishiha dispatched to Manchuria and Li Da to the Timurid empire⁸. While the detailed process in which Zheng was elected the commander is not clear⁹, expendability as a eunuch – a man without heir – and supposedly his accessibility to Muslim networks active in the South China and the Southeast Asia¹⁰, might have encouraged the Yongle emperor to appoint this talented eunuch whose father and grandfather had once visited Mecca.

The aim for the expeditions was also multifaceted: Zhu Di, the Yongle emperor after 1402, seized power in a coup against his nephew, the second emperor Zhu Yunwen. The process of his enthronement may have casted a shadow on his legitimate imperial reign. Zhu Di was prone to exhibit inordinately his power by conducting colossal projects, such as relocation of the capital from Nanjing to Beijing, construction of the Grand Canal, compilation of an encyclopedia with more than 20,000 volumes, and massive campaign against Mongols and Vietnamese. Above all, he was eager to attract tributes from foreign countries so as to act as if he was the authentic and legitimate agent of heaven. “Tribute paranoia” had been a shared symptom among Sinic polities which were lacking the time-honored hegemonic position, especially during the early stage of each dynasty. Zhu Di’s father Zhu Yuanzhang, the first emperor of the Ming was no exception. He even accepted the tribute from — or authenticated the dominion of — one of the faltering leaders in the midst of civil war of Japan, Prince Kaneyoshi.

Zhu Di also tried to prove his status of the son of heaven by piling up tributaries, much more ardently than his father. Thus the quest began. Exotic tributaries were the most suitable for staging the universality of the new regime. Making a search for the former emperor Zhu Yunwen, who allegedly had escaped from Zhu Di’s assault and run away south, may have been just a ready-made excuse (none would have urged the former emperor to exile as far as the Indian Ocean). Zheng He set out for his first voyage in 1405, and visited port-states in the South China Sea, the Java

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⁷ As an overview of Chinese eunuchs, see Mitamura Taisuke, Kangan (Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1963).
⁹ The reason why the emperor placed confidence on Zheng was, according to a physiognomist who advised the emperor to appoint him, the splendid physical features [Yuan Zhongche, Gujin Shijian (1451 edition, National Library of China), vol.8].
Sea, Thailand, the Andaman Sea, the Laccadive Sea, and the Arabian Sea. As the result of seven expeditions carried out between 1405 and 1433, Zheng He’s naval force drastically shifted political structure of states such as Galle in south Sri Lanka, Majapahit in Java, and Palembang and Malacca across the present Malacca Strait. In the case of Sri Lanka, he left a monument commemorating his visit known as the Galle Trilingual Inscription written in three languages (Chinese, Tamil, and Persian).

In terms of the fruits of the voyages, as well as a long list of emissaries from tributary states, tribute goods themselves also mattered. A variety of luxury goods such as jewels, coral, ambergris, and sappanwood were brought back to the Ming court, and thereafter steady flow of them followed through the regular tribute trades. These goods functioned as prestige goods: sappanwood (often utilized for disinfection, pain relief, and dyeing) stocks were so increased that they were distributed to officials and army officers even as a part of salary in-kind during the fifteenth century. This example can also be seen in the context of ritual re-distribution to enhance the imperial integrity and unity. Thus material profit of the trade was deeply intertwined with political symbolism.

Most notably, tropical animals were figurative representation of the totality of imperial virtue, of which sacred charms attracted both men and animals all the way from afar. For instance, Giraffes, which had been unknown in China, were sent from East Africa in the fourth fifth expedition. They were identified as the mythical creature
*gilin*, of which visitation was the very testimony of the great governance of a Sage emperor, and not a few scholar officials commonly cerebrated this exceptional event.

**The structure of the tribute trade**

Aside from the quest for the tributaries which strengthened the third emperor’s political basis, Louise Levathes rightly points out motives for profit-making. Given the political and symbolical nature of trade goods mentioned above, however, factors cannot simply divide into economic and political. Hence it should be worth touching briefly upon trade activities accompanying the tributary rituals.

Kings, princes, and chieftains (the titles were defined within the ritual system of the Ming court) were instructed to send emissaries regularly (intervals varied from every year to once in many years, according to time and place), and for the special occasions such as enthronement of new kings, cerebration of milestone birthdays of emperors and their families, and testimonial for enfeoffment. When emissaries accompanied by foreign merchants arrived at border cities or ports, provincial magistrates enlisted the goods they brought. Except the gifts immediately dedicated to the throne, a certain amount of commodities were purchased by the government with the paper currency (*baochao*). As *baochao* was steadily declining in value after the early Ming period, this part of trade was not profitable for foreign merchants. However, the rest was left for “free” trade conducted en route to Beijing, though most of the transactions had to go under the mediation of authorized brokers (*yahang*).

How lucrative the trade was for the Ming side is not definite, on the other hand. The mainstream scholarship, in Japan at least, is skeptical about the overall profitability of the trade-tribute system for the Ming government, both in terms of its subjective motive and particular outcome. Two factors were at work: much more

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11 Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas*: chap. 5.
rewards (huici) were paid to emissaries than the original tributes (houwang baolai); total expenses for emissaries (including travel, accommodation, meals) were also imposed on local governments. Costs for building Zheng He’s treasure ships included, quests for tributaries were none other than the act of futile extravagance.

Regardless of the total balance of the tribute trades (and the expeditions themselves as well) in the national account terms, if any, the structure of income distribution should have been the real root of the problem. In principle, the tribute system worked within a centripetal network structure, of which nodes were respectively connected as “personal” ties between principal and agents. Likewise, most part of the tribute trades were also carried out in the form of “private” business. Things are twofold: firstly, quotas of commodities purchased by the court were sent to storehouses adjunct to trading-ship offices (shibosi), and then to the Palace Storehouse (nei chengyunku) in Beijing. As a rule, everything under the heaven ought to be belonging to the throne, and the borderline between the imperial household’s budget and the governmental finance were not clear. In this circumstance, paradoxically, the budget execution was always exposed to the government officials’ strong jurisdiction. Commodities derived from the tribute trades were then not only precious in value, but also treasurable as one of the resources spent at the ultimate discretion of the imperial household.

Secondly, the tribute trade accompanied uncountable private commercial activities. Official regulations could not reach this portion of trade, and sometimes this engendered disputes between foreign merchants and Chinese during the transactions. In the same way, crews on Zheng He’s treasure ships were presumably engaging in sidelines anywhere along the way. While some cyclopedic records based on the expeditions such as Fei Xin’s Xingcha Shenglan or Ma Huan’s Yingya Shenglan still remain the main materials for studying the subject, detailed activities of the crew during the campaigns are not fully available. In this sense, entries on an epitaphic material recently found at Taicang (a subprefecture during the Ming era, and one of the departure ports of Zheng He’s fleet) in Jiangsu province is quite suggestive. This newly discovered stone inscription written by a senior member of Hanlin Academy at the request of his friend Chen Sheng, a former military officer of Taicang Garrison, includes fragmentary description on three expeditions joined by Chen’s father. The

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name of his father was Chen Xian, who volunteered for the “campaign to the west conducted by a eunuch (that is, Zheng He)”, and “went over thousands of miles without any accident happened”. Interestingly, it was specially emphasized that his father “never took goods and money with him privately”. This entry exactly demonstrates flourishing private trade among the military officers on the expedition fleet.

In general, maritime ban during the early Ming period was not always depressing long-distance trade activities. Rather, even if the main parts of tribute activities were ritual protocols to define and represent the order under heaven, commercial transactions attached to them was a sort of managed-trade, which was conducted by imperial household and its agents. This form of trade undoubtedly has an inner-Eurasian origin, typically seen in the Mongol period. As has been commonly known, the Mongol empire succeeded in providing public goods to enhance the market transaction, such as consolidating trade routes and relay stations, and monetary system, for example\textsuperscript{16}. They were not exactly a neutral protector or disinterested coordinator of the market. More importantly, imperial families in steppe empires, including empresses, empress dowagers, concubines, princes, each of whom had their own households (Mong. hord), often managed to maximize profit by trusting their asset to agents (Mong. ortoq). The agents often had foreign origin, such as Sogdian, Uyghur, or Arabian for instance, and developed widespread trade networks across the Eurasian continent\textsuperscript{18}. Judging from the fact that expeditions of Zheng He (and other eunuchs dispatched to surrounding polities, more generally) accompanied with, or resulted in, commercial activities mostly monopolized by limited groups of people who had direct and indirect accesses to the “diplomatic” protocols, the Yongle emperor merely followed examples of such “inner Eurasian” empires. In a way or another, European countries during the age of mercantilism likewise pursued a similar course, but only more competitive naval forces.

2. The end of expeditions: its rationales and implications

Costs for the tributes

If that was the case, how can we explain the termination of the great exploration? A succinct remark made by Kenneth Pomeranz prior to the publication of

\textsuperscript{16} ibid, p. 110.
the Great Divergence seems to have a point:

To make big ships and long voyages worth the investment required ulterior motives, such as missionary work, military competition, or the desire to monopolize the seas and bypass the competitive markets ... The Chinese left such ambitious projects to the Europeans, who proved willing to defy market principles, thereby launching a new era and pattern for world trade.  

Surely the Yongle emperor had motives, if not quite ulterior: to boost his imperial legitimacy, to (re-)assert his regime as the genuine core of universe, and to pile up sufficient amount of prestige goods and money for deserved redistribution.

However, it was also clear that things changed drastically after the death of the Yongle emperor in 1424. At first, thanks to the efforts to lure tributes during the early Ming period, emissaries from afar were steadily increasing even to unexpected level. In the Mongol Plateau, a nomadic political leader was gaining his power by concentrating and allotting slots for engaging in the tribute trade with Ming. He, whose name was Esen Taishi (1407-55), tried to send over 3,000 emissaries to the frontier cities in the north of Beijing, which was eventually rejected by the Ming court on the ground that receiving “barbarian” merchants in unprecedented scale as such might incur disorder. Then massive invasion followed, ended up with the capture of the sixth (and afterward became the eighth) emperor Zhu Qizhen (r. 1435-49 and 1457-64) in 1449. The incident spoke for itself: first, the tribute trade would come with a high price: second, as long as Beijing remained the capital of the Middle Kingdom, the principal threat would come from the inland northwest, not from the oceanic southeast.

Firstly, critics of Zheng He’s campaign (and proactive engagement to the tribute and trade, more generally) was often focusing on the cost-benefit structure attached to a series of “globalization” – the wide-ranged campaigns and then foreign emissions to come. Immediate expenses for building ships and human damages accompanied to voyages were of course part of issues, but moreover, the Ming government became much aware that by encouraging the tribute trade it largely destabilized the power distribution structure outside (and also inside, potentially at least) the border areas. Receiving guests from abroad and escorting them safely to the throne per se inevitably entailed burdens and troubles, as well as marketing chances,

for those who involved.

What made things even harder was that once formally entering into “diplomatic” relations with tributaries, the Ming court became obliged to uphold these cordial associations as long as counterparts were faithfully going along protocols. When the political structures of tributary polities happened to shift drastically evoked by coups, civil wars, or invasions from neighboring polities, the Ming emperors as sons of heaven had to decide their own attitudes: sheer silence, full permission of regime changes, mandates to restore status quo ante, or the immediate military intervention. The last option was what was actually chosen by the Yongle emperor in 1406, when the Trần dynasty of Dai Viet was overthrown by Hồ Quý Ly, a member of imperial consort kin, in the midst of internal dissentions and warfare against the Champa kingdom.21

Immediately before the Ming army withdrew from Vietnam in 1426 after twenty one years of occupation, the fifth emperor Zhu Zhanji (r. 1425-1435) rationalized this decision: “it was totally against his will that the Yongle emperor dispatched troops to Vietnam. It was just that he responded to Vietnamese people’s request.” Ministers replied: “the country had located outside the civilized realm (huawai), ever since the ancient times anyway22.”

No matter how much the remarks in the post-Yongle period sound like sour grape, the Ming court become increasingly recognizing that it was very hard task to maintain the tribute system properly. That is to say that the Ming’s foreign policies of post-Yongle period may not exactly represent its retreat into self-centered autosynnoia: above all, tribute emissaries and corresponding trades did continue, if less frequently.23 Therefore it seems more adequate to regard the policy turnaround just in the context of lowering priority of developing new tributaries and keeping full-scale relationship with all of them, than to interpret things as irreversible transformation from strategic cosmopolitanism into Confucian isolationism. In short, abandoning treasure ships and withdrawing from diplomatic activism were part of the “normalizing” processes – rearrangement of excessively expanded frontal line, by disposing orderly numerous nodes within tribute-trade fabric, and then undergoing steep cuts into the whole structure of the tribute trade, which was supposedly inherited from the former Yuan dynasty. This should have been quite a natural way of doing things for successors of tribute-maniac founding fathers, inasmuch as they were trying to perpetuate the Ming’s

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23 This is the case especially with Ryukyu. See Okamoto Hiromichi, Ryūkyū ōkoku kaijō kōshōshi kenkyū (Ginowan: Yōjushorin, 2010).
regime, and as long as they never intended to step forward to cope (or share profits) with, if any, formidable lobbies claiming for prolonged warfare.

In the course of the reconfiguration, as the tribute trade shrunk in scale and decreased its repetition, the Ming court was eventually refraining from indiscreetly accepting missionaries from outside. A case during the late fifteenth century is quite suggestive: lions with emissaries who claimed that they were sent by the Shaybanids (1422-1599) in Samarkand, arrived at Guangdong, a port city in South China. The tenth emperor Zhu Youtang (r. 1488-1505) declined the gift, noticing that he did not intend to collect “strange animals (chénqín qíshòu)”. Moreover, when Chinese officials were totally unsure whether lions were really a mythical creature shízì, and even whether envoys were really sent from Shaybanids or not, the emperor did not want to risk of being laughed at for accepting a fake24.

By then, once the Ming empire succeeded in establishing their power over rival polities, no auspicious animals were any longer necessary, contrary to giraffes of several decades before. They became something just represented a fancy but insubstantial stuff. They were never worth paying the cost of being involved with non-descript groups or being involved in disputes. Mayhem actually took place, in the form of a proxy conflict at Ningbo in 1523 between Japanese warlords Ōuchi Yoshioki and Hosokawa Takakuni. Thus, foreign trade thereafter was to be differentiated clearly into formal (tribute-trade) and informal (smuggle and piracy). The dichotomous structure lasted until mutual trade (hushì) – trade without tribute protocols – was finally authorized for Fujian in 1567 and for Shanxi (northern frontier) in 1571, which allowed coastal population to carry out maritime trades under the surveillance of local governments25. This shift, which was

24 Ming Xiaozong Shilu, vol. 32, the eighteenth day of the eleventh lunar month, 1489 (rpt. Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishiyuyan yanjusuo, 1962), p. 948. According to another material, the statement came from Ni Yue (c. 1440-1501), the minister of rites, and this was happened in 1494 (Lei Li, Guochao lieqingji, vol. 25. 31). Either way, it is safe to say that the decision itself was seen as highly praiseworthy.

25 As to the notion of “mutual trade”, see Iwai Shigeki, “Chōkō to goshi,” in Wada Haruki et al. eds., Higashi ajia no kindai (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2010).
fulfilled after long and heated discussions, officially reaffirmed an implicit orientation toward the deliberate insulation of the official realm (at least, that of the central government) of ritual procedure from private trade activity, which became dominant inclination throughout the post-Yongle period. In a sense or another, foreign policy of Ming China was an extension of domestic one, as always has been.

Geopolitical and fiscal shift

Secondly, we turn to the geopolitical issue. The relocation of political and military center (that is, from Nanjing to Beijing) surely had a meaning that the Ming state morphed into the politically, militarily, and culturally genuine super power, not only a regional polity which governed a limited area around the Lower Yangzi Valley. Exactly toward this goal, the Hongwu and Yongle emperors held the control of the East and the South China Seas, sieged the Yuan capital Dadu (Beijing after 1402), drove Mongols from Yunnan and the North China, and endeavored to gather emissaries from a wide range of continents and islands. Still, the capital city at the foot of the Yanshan Mountain, which was known as “the border between the civilization and the barbarians”, could be maintained only by mobilizing a large amount of goods, money, and manpower from all over the empire. Notably the confrontation with the Mongol during the fourteenth century across the Great Wall – still remained the formidable superpower in the inner and northeastern Eurasia – forced the Ming government to deploy nearly a million of soldiers stationed permanently at the north frontier and Beijing. Beijing and its vicinity alone, four hundred thousands of armed force were garrisoned after the Yongle reign26.

Naturally, urgent need for establishing a stable logistic system followed. During the Yongle period, the Ming government restored an inland canal route which had long been abandoned since the Mongol period, by connecting natural streams, dredging up riverbeds, exploring new waterheads, and building locks and sluice gates. The Grand Canal, which stretching for over thousand miles between Beijing and the Yangzi Valley, conditioned the distribution of goods, money, and labor within the Ming empire. Along with the development of logistics, the Ming court devised the governmental tax system, as well as allotment of prison labor and even the selling-rank to military officers so as to concentrate a gigantic amount of goods (particularly, hundreds of thousand tons of husked rice gathered from the southern part of the empire as land tax) into the capital city and the northern frontier. For this purpose,

cadastral surveys were conducted in an unprecedented scale and frequency\textsuperscript{27}, and hundreds of granaries were constructed alongside of canals and rivers in order to facilitate the smooth flow of staples from south to the north\textsuperscript{28}. In this way, the Ming government achieved huge success in establishing an unshaken revenue source notably from the Lower Yangzi. There was a significant shift in governmental taxation: while revenues from commerce – including those from salt and wine monopoly – made up nearly 40\% of annual income of entire imperial coffer during the Song (960-1276) and more than half during the Yuan (1271-1368), those for the early Ming was quite negligible\textsuperscript{29}. This may well explain why the regimes after the Yongle era could scale down the governmental trade activities.

A question may rise: why the Ming government in the post-Yongle era clung to the capital location of Beijing as status quo, while it required considerable costs for the material provision? Actually, some claimed that the governmental seat should return to the former capital Nanjing after the Yongle emperor’s death, especially under the siege by Oirat Mongol in 1449. But the proposals were declined. For most of scholar officials, abandonment of Beijing inevitably opened a path to the loss of the whole north China, and this was often invoked as a reminder of the atrocious fall of the Song’s capital Kaifeng in 1127\textsuperscript{30}. Throughout the mid fifteenth century, the focus of the Ming state was increasingly being anchored in the warfare against the Mongols. In such a circumstance, engagement in unstable maritime activities should have been seen as exorbitant in both political and economic terms.

3. Logistical reconfiguration: a preliminary survey of military officers’ personnel records

The Military Appoint Books

We can find evidences backing up aforementioned story from primary sources, if fragmentary. Recent scholarship is increasingly paying attention to entries in

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{27} Hamashima Atsutoshi, “Nōson shakai,” in Mori Masao et al. eds, \textit{Minshin jidaishi no kihonmondai} (Tokyo: Kyūko shoin, 1997).
\item \textsuperscript{29} Iwai Shigeki, \textit{Chūgoku kinsei zaiseishi no kenkyū} (Kyoto: Kyoto Daigaku Gakujutsu Shuppankai, 2004), p. 31.
\end{itemize}
personnel records of the military appointment books (wuzhi xuanbu)\textsuperscript{31}, related to Zheng He expeditions. During the early stage of the dynasty, the Ming court attempted to build a massive standing force, by establishing a system in which military officers and soldiers assigned to Garrisons (wei) or subdivision (suo), and their posts and ranks were transmitted by inheritance. The whole system derives from the Mongol period, and several millions of soldiers were stationed at key areas all around the empery, especially across the northern border\textsuperscript{32}.

The whole volume of extant military appointment books, originally kept in the First Historical Archive and Beijing University in Beijing, the Academia Sinica in Taipei, and Tōyō Bunko in Tokyo, was mostly compiled by each Garrisons in the end of the sixteenth century. Photographic reprint of these collections are published in 2001\textsuperscript{33}. The main purpose of compiling the appointment books was to give reference materials for promotion and demotion of military officers, which were arranged according to those held by their fathers, rewards and punishments, and their own performances at the skill tests. Therefore, almost without exception, summaries of previous compilations of appointment books were attached to each officer’s personnel records, so as to make sure ranks and posts were genuinely inherited generation by generation.

Out of over a hundred Garrisons’ appointment books, Chinese scholars such as Xu Gongsheng and Fan Jinmin found out 180 cases in military officers’ records, whose ancestors had been promoted (including posthumously) due to their achievements during the “voyages to the western ocean (xia xiyang)”\textsuperscript{34}. Here, based on their findings, the author further focuses upon from which Garrison the military officers were deployed to Zheng He’s expeditions. By going deeper into this point, we can get some clues as to how the Ming government reallocated human resources in the post-Yongle period. According to the appointment books, 180 military officers whose original ranks had been those ranging from Assistant Commanders (zhihui qianshi) to Squad Commander (xiaoqi), and soldiers, belonged to 34 Garrisons which well dispersed across


\textsuperscript{32} As for an outline of the military formation during the early Ming, see Edward Dreyer, “Military origins of Ming China,” in Frederick Mote et al, eds., The Cambridge History of China vol. 7, part 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 104-105.

\textsuperscript{33} Mingchao Dang’an Zonghui (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2001), vol. 49-101.

geographically wide areas [Table][Map].

[Table] Military officers who had promotion records during the Zheng He expeditions

(masked cells: Garrisons for tribute grain transport*)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Locations of Garrison</th>
<th>Names of Garrisons</th>
<th>Number of officials</th>
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<td>Beijing</td>
<td>Fujun Anterior Garrison</td>
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<td>Liushou Posterior Garrison</td>
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<td>Yingyang Garrison</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Zhili*</td>
<td>Xuanzhou Garrison</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Suzhou Garrison</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jingshan Garrison</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gaoyou Garrison</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Huben Right Garrison</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhejiang</td>
<td>Dinghai Garrison</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fujian</td>
<td>Fujian Right Garrison</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jianning Left Garrison</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jianning Right Garrison</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dingzhou Garrison</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huguang</td>
<td>Huangzhou Garrison</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guangxi</td>
<td>Liuzhou Garrison</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>total</td>
<td></td>
<td>34</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Garrisons for tribute grain transport: see text.

*North Zhili and South Zhili: a provincial unit corresponding approximately to present Hebei and Jiangsu/Anhui, respectively.

It worth noting that the figures acquired from appointment books cannot represent the
whole number of officers who attended the campaigns, as the extant source materials are just a part of the total records, and just cover those who were promoted. At the same time, however, the statistics above clearly shows that many of officers were recruited from two capitals (75.6%), especially from Jinyi (Embroidered Uniform) Garrison in Nanjing (26.7%), while extant appoint books provide the data for totally 125 Garrisons and lesser units\(^{35}\). This is quite understandable, because those two localities were the main cores in both political and military terms, where the emperor and eunuchs often appropriated direct links with military officers\(^{36}\). Especially Jinyi Garrison, which sent off totally 53 officers both from Beijing and Nanjing (indicated by boldface in the table), was a huge imperial guard unit which exercised special jurisdiction, skipping all of the due procedures in judicial institutions. It is also well-known for its functions as the secret police and intelligent agency for the emperors\(^{37}\). Considering that Zheng He’s expeditions (and the tribute trades as a whole) was conducted almost in the form of


\(^{36}\) Taguchi, “Kiho deno kōzei,” p.71, f. 35.

imperial household’s “private” enterprises, it was quite natural that those closest to the Yongle emperor preferentially took part in the voyages, or recruited those who boarded the treasure ships.

**Reallocation of the workforce**

More importantly, seen in the light of the post-Yongle regime, unproportional distribution of 180 Garrisons was quite suggestive. As is indicated as the masked rows in the table[^38], a large part of garrisons which dispatched officers to the voyages (12 out of 34 garrisons, 103 out of 180 officers) were transformed into those contributing water transportation corps, after the death of the Yongle emperor. During the Yongle period, immediately after the relocation of the capital from Nanjing to Beijing, one of focal issues was how to mobilize goods from the Yangzi Valley, which had become the most populous and prosperous area throughout the empery, to the new capital. As is mentioned above, the government elaborately built and maintained the trunk line known as the Grand Canal, but the remaining problem was to secure the human resources for providing Garrisons in Beijing with ample grain to feed them. At the beginning, farmers who made the payments of land tax in grain had to carry them themselves to the relay granaries along the Grand Canal. From the relay points, Garrison officers and soldiers took over the shipment. This method placed a heavy burden on the ordinary people, most of whom resided the Yangzi Valley.

As the shipment system of the tribute grain were changed into that carried out thoroughly by officers and soldiers (and the burden for the civil population was largely diminished) after 1431, instead a need for manpower to conduct transport fleet was steadily growing. Before then, many of military staffs who had taken part in the expeditions were deployed to other duties, such as the campaign to Vietnam, and construction work in Beijing and Nanjing[^39]. As early as 1425, shortly after the fourth emperor Zhu Gaozhi passed away, ten thousands of officers and soldiers who had embarked the treasure ships were ordered to join the construction of Zhu Gaozhi’s mausoleum at the north of Beijing, and to carry the tribute grain on their way. This decision was made on the basis that “they belonged to the Garrisons in the Lower

[^38]: For the identification of the water transportation Garrisons, see Xie Chun, *Caoyun Tongzhi* (c. 1528, rpt. Beijing: Shumuwenxian chubanshe, c. 1987), vol. 4, pp. 440-46.

[^39]: As for entries about the conversion of officers and soldiers who had boarded on the treasure ship to construction labor, see *Ming Xuanzong Shilu*, vol. 11, the eighth day of the eleventh lunar month, 1425 (rpt. Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishiyuyan yanjiusuo, 1962), p. 295. Records of officers who took part in both Zheng He expeditions and the campaign to Vietnam were also seen in appointment books [eg. *Mingchao Dang’an Zonghui*].
Yangzi and usable as shipmen. The Garrisons being allotted the carriage of the tribute grain, shown as the masked rows in the table, well exhibits that the reallocation of manpower was made in permanent-term, not tentative one. In fact, it was via his son, incumbent Centurion for Shipment (zhuancao baihu) that the aforementioned former military officer of Taicang Garrison Chen Sheng, asked his friend in Beijing to compose the epitaph for his parents. While Chen Sheng’s father who had boarded the treasure ship does not appear in the extant appointment books, to our regret, there is high possibility that they hereditarily served in the position of supervising the governmental logistics to Beijing.

Treasure fleet to transport corps – this example well demonstrates in a way drastic transformation, or incorporation more correctly, of the expedition corps into the whole system of material accumulation in Beijing, which was previously borne by rural population. As the result of multi-layered political shift, the large part of Zheng He’s tradition was to be well melted in logistical institution of governmental standing force.

**Conclusion**

What Zheng He’s expeditions implied within Ming China become much obvious when seen from the viewpoint of how they drew conclusion and how they had an impact in the post-Yongle history. In sum, the way in which diplomatic hub and trade network were built had a lot to do with the Ming’s state formation: it was exactly following the Mongol way of things – those of nomadic regimes across the Inner Eurasia, more broadly. What was at stake was a complex of problems, including the political implication of the imperial household’s engagement to the trades, the relationship between imperial kin and agents such as eunuchs, military officers, and foreign merchants, decisions for the extent to which the Ming court committed to political turmoil within foreign polities, and the total scheme for allocating human and material resources among the large part of the empery, notably between the northern border and the southern coasts.

The solution was hardly Confucian, if the term connotes something introverted

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40 Ming Xuanzong Shilu, vol. 10, the twenty fifth day of the tenth lunar month, 1425, pp.285-86.
41 Shao and Zhu, “Qianxi yu Zheng He xia xiyang youguan de liangzhong wuguan muzhi,” p. 110.
and uncommercial. Rather, “de-globalization” in the post-Yongle period is to be characterized, following the author’s argument, by its deliberate isolation of commercial sectors from the formal domain of the governmental activities, and relegation of most of cross-border trades to informal realm. The point is that the Ming state of the post-Yongle era managed to avoid the direct involvement of the central government with the external issues, including diplomacy and commerce, obviously referring to the example of comparably short-lived dynasty, the Yuan. Instead, it tried to drive political uncertainty totally out of the central government, regardless of inner and outer court, and keep governmental and official activities highly controllable and predictable. Intensive resource allocation to the governmental logistics may well represent the intention as such, and this became possible only after the land tax from the Lower Yangzi poured into the governmental treasury – not the imperial “private” budget. In terms of inland commercial tax, a large part of it became important revenue for the local governments, partly informally. Likewise, along the coastal area, smuggling from neighboring countries was prevailing with the involvement of Garrison officers and soldiers, but not officially, of course. This is what the post-Yongle regime actually was.

How can we understand, then, the historic significance of Zheng He’s expeditions? Before addressing this question, we would better off reflecting on the epistemology of ourselves first. In a sense, undue attention attracted by the expeditions, both in the western scholarship and those in Asia, indicates almost indestructible institutional desire to evaluate “great” explorations. This is also the case with China after the Mao’s era, as has been well exemplified by a sequence of commemoration campaigns introduced in the opening section of this paper. Along with almost uniformed concern about the long-distance and therefore eye-catching campaigns and trades, more mundane and continuous conjunctures which include the explorations themselves as one of constitutive parts within were to be wiped out from this picture. Rather, asking following questions seems more vital for keeping distance from euro-centrism: how did the intellectual concerns about the outer world actually change (or unchanged) between before and after the expeditions in Ming China? What were the political and intellectual evaluations for the foreign and maritime policies of the Yongle era (and

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43 Taguchi, “Kiho deno kōzei”.
45 Inquiries into the worldview of Chinese intellectuals during the imperial period, including their geographical knowledge have been quickly developing. Laura Hostetler, Qing Colonial Enterprise (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001) ; Zou Zhenhuan, “Xiyangji de kanke yu mingqing haifang weijizhong de Zheng He jiyi,” Anhui Daxue Xuebao 2011(3), 2011: idem, Wanming hanwen xixue jingdian (Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 2011).
the Mongol period as well) like\textsuperscript{46}? And how did this evaluation channel the opinions of literati and subsequent domestic politicking? What roles did military officers and eunuchs play in the border regions, especially during post-Yongle age of "isolation"\textsuperscript{47}? Only after addressing and discussing the above issues, we could properly understand the continuation and discontinuation of global nodes, and be able to narrow the gap between global historiography and regional historiography.

\textsuperscript{46} It is interesting that some scholar official during the sixteenth century criticizes the logistical policy during the Mongol period, mostly composed of sea transportation, as being "discounting human loss of Chinese people." Zhu Guozhen, \textit{Yongchuang xiaopin} (1619, rpt: Yangzhou: Jiangsuguangling guji keyinshe, 1995), 6. pp. 739-40. In this sense, The Ming state was surely a shadow empire of the Yuan, but in more nuanced way.

\textsuperscript{47} This also necessitates more organized study on the military history of China, and comparative ones as well. Recently David Robinson set out for exploration as such. David Robinson, \textit{Martial Spectacles of the Ming Court} (Harvard: Harvard University Asia Center, 2011); idem, "Why military institutions matter for Ming history," \textit{Journal of Chinese History} 1, 2017.