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**„Mainland China’s Global Historiography in Search of
Grand Narratives: A Discourse-Analytical Case Study of
Recent Historiography on the Zheng He Maritime Missions
(1405-1433 CE)“**

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Abstracts in English, German, and Chinese

Mainland China's Global Historiography in Search of Grand Narratives: A Discourse-Analytical Case Study of Recent Historiography on the Zheng He Maritime Missions (1405-1433 CE)

Abstract

The present dissertation is a discourse analysis of recent mainland Chinese historiography on the major maritime missions led by the imperial eunuch and admiral Zheng He 郑和 at the order of China's Ming dynasty between 1405 and 1433 CE. The missions were aimed at establishing tributary and trade relations with a number of foreign states across the Indo-Pacific maritime space as far as the East African coast. In recent academic discourses in China, the missions have often been discussed for their potential referential value for China's present-day maritime strategy. At the same time, they have become a significant part of the Chinese state's cultural diplomacy towards other countries in the Indo-Pacific region, especially since the inauguration of the Belt & Road Initiative in 2013, incl. its "21st Century Maritime Silk Road" constituency. Based on discourse-analytical theory and methodology, the present dissertation analyzes historiography as discourse, focusing on its interlinkages with domestic and global power relations and ideologies/worldviews. In the dissertation, the theoretical frameworks of "Silk Roads Power-Knowledge Complex", "Belt & Road Worldview" and "Belt & Road Historiography" are proposed for the better understanding of the interlinkages of global historical knowledge production, ideologies/worldviews, and state-promoted global historical narratives in today's China.

Keywords: Zheng He, global history, Chinese historiography, discourse analysis, Belt & Road Initiative

**Geschichtsschreibung und globale Metanarrativen in der VR China: Eine diskursanalytische
Fallstudie der jüngsten Geschichtsschreibung über die Seemissionen des Admirals Zheng He
(1405-1433 u. Z.)**

Abstract

Die vorliegende Dissertation ist eine Diskursanalyse der neueren festlandchinesischen Geschichtsschreibung über die großangelegten Seemissionen, die der kaiserliche Eunuch und Admiral Zheng He 郑和 im Auftrag der chinesischen Ming-Dynastie zwischen 1405 und 1433 u. Z. durchführte. Das Ziel der Missionen war es, Tribut- und Handelsbeziehungen mit einer Reihe ausländischer Staaten im gesamten indopazifischen Seeraum bis hin zur ostafrikanischen Küste aufzunehmen. In den jüngsten akademischen Diskursen in China wurden die Missionen häufig wegen ihres potenziellen Referenzwerts für Chinas heutige maritime Strategie diskutiert. Gleichzeitig sind sie zu einem bedeutenden Teil der Kulturdiplomatie des chinesischen Staates gegenüber anderen Ländern in der indopazifischen Region geworden, insbesondere seit der Eröffnung der Belt & Road Initiative, bzw. der "Maritimen Seidenstraße des 21. Jahrhunderts" im Jahr 2013. Auf der Grundlage der diskursanalytischen Theorie und Methodik analysiert die vorliegende Dissertation die Geschichtsschreibung als Diskurs und konzentriert sich dabei auf ihre Verflechtungen mit nationalen und globalen Machtverhältnissen und Ideologien/Weltanschauungen. In der Dissertation werden die theoretischen Rahmen "Macht-Wissenskomplex der Seidenstraßen" (*Silk Roads Power-Knowledge Complex*), "Belt & Road Weltanschauung" (*Belt & Road Worldview*) und "Belt & Road Geschichtsschreibung" (*Belt & Road Historiography*) für ein besseres Verständnis der Verflechtungen von globaler historischer Wissensproduktion, Ideologien/Weltanschauungen und staatlich geförderten globalen historischen Narrativen im heutigen China vorgeschlagen.

Stichworte: Zheng He, Globalgeschichte, chinesische Geschichtsschreibung, Diskursanalyse, Belt & Road Initiative

中国大陆的全球历史学在寻找宏大叙事：关于郑和下西洋（公元 1405-1433 年）的最新历史学的话语分析案例研究

摘要

针对近期中国大陆历史学中关于郑和下西洋（公元 1405 到 1433 年）的话题，本研究对其相关学术出版物进行了话语分析（Discourse Analysis）。在中国明朝的指示下，皇室太监郑和七次带领大规模的船队，访问了东南亚、东亚、中东、东非地区的许多重要海港，并和印度-太平洋海域的不少国家建立了朝贡和贸易关系。在中国近期历史和国家关系的学术讨论中，一个经常讨论的问题是郑和下西洋对中国的当代海洋战略是否会有借鉴意义。在中国政府的外交策略中，特别是从 2013 年“一带一路”以及“21 世纪海上丝绸之路”政策启动开始，赞颂郑和下西洋成为了中国政府对印太地区国家的文化外交策略中的重要成分之一。本论文基于话语分析理论和方法，对郑和下西洋的相关历史研究出版物，以及其与中国国内和全球权力关系以及意识形态/世界观的相互联系物进行话语分析。论文提出了“丝绸之路权力-知识综合体” (Silk Road Power-Knowledge Complex)、 “一带一路世界观” (Belt & Road Worldview)、 以及“一带一路历史学”(Belt & Road Historiography) 的三种理论框架，以更好地理解当今中国的全球历史知识生产、意识形态/世界观和国家推动的全球历史叙事之间的相互联系。

关键词：郑和下西洋，全球史，中国历史学，话语分析，一带一路

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Introduction

1.1 Historical context and relevance today

The present dissertation is a discourse analysis of recent (2000-) mainland Chinese historiography on the Zheng He maritime missions of the early Ming dynasty. Based on primary sources, the Zheng He missions were by all means a major historical episode in Chinese and Asian history. Between 1405 and 1433 CE, the Muslim-born imperial eunuch and admiral Zheng He 郑和 (1371-1433) was ordered by the Ming court to lead seven major maritime missions with a large number of ships and tens of thousands of crew members.¹ The main fleet of the missions visited port cities in Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East, as far as Hormuz in present-day Iran. Some sub-fleets of the missions traveled further to the West, visiting locations on the Arabian Peninsula (Aden, Jeddah, Mecca, among others) and the East African coast (Mogadishu, Malindi, among others).

The missions primarily involved the establishment of tributary and trade relations with foreign political entities. The returning fleets were accompanied by large numbers of foreign tributary envoys and merchants whose mission was to present tributes to the Chinese court and secure trading opportunities in China. It is important to emphasize that China already had significant trade and tributary relations with various parts of the Indo-Pacific region prior to the Zheng He missions and the Zheng He missions by no means meant the “discovery” of previously unknown locations from the Chinese perspective. During the dynasties preceding the Ming (1368-1644), i.e. under the Song (960-1279) and Yuan (1271-1368) dynasties, China’s port cities were home to a large number of foreign traders from the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, and thus trade with these regions was significant already in those

¹ The *Xingcha shenglan* travelogue written by Zheng He’s companion Fei Xin mentions more than 27,000 crew members and 48 ships, see in the chapter on Champa (*Zhanchengguo* 占城国) in Fei Xin 费信, *Xingcha shenglan* 星槎胜览 [*The overall survey of the Star Raft*], Tianyi Ge 天一阁 / Liuqing Kan Congshu 六经堪丛书 Edition, 1436, <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=436710&remap=gb>.

centuries. However, the missions still constituted a major episode of Afro-Asian transregional interaction in terms of their scale and the scope of foreign lands visited by Ming China's official envoys in a relatively short period of time. Their most notable feature was the Chinese ruling dynasty's active role in facilitating the missions, while earlier trade contacts with the Indo-Pacific world were mostly maintained by private merchants. The missions were not entirely pacifistic, and in a limited number of cases, armed conflict with dissident local leaders occurred. The main motivations of the Ming court were, however, apparently not military conquest and direct economic and political control over foreign lands. They were most likely related to political self-legitimization and the overseeing of the main trade centers and networks in the Indo-Pacific region. The missions were apparently a self-legitimizing project for the Yongle 永乐 emperor (r. 1402-1424) per se who ascended to the throne shortly before the first mission, following the violent dethronement of his predecessor, the Jianwen 建文 emperor (r. 1398-1402). Zheng He's death during the seventh mission (1431-1433) led to the end of the large-scale maritime missions. The reasons behind the lack of any similar undertakings in the subsequent eras are generally thought to be related to the high costs of the missions, as well as to the re-focusing of resources on the defense of the Ming empire's continental borders.

As historical evidence suggests, the missions in their own time were unpopular among many of the high-ranking Ming Chinese officials due to their extensive burden on the imperial treasury, and this opposition apparently led to their discontinuation. Meanwhile, with time the remembrance of the missions in China increasingly turned towards their perceived grandiosity, in terms of their scale and the extensive geographical scope of the visited foreign locations, as well as the lack of comparable state-ordered maritime undertakings in China's millennia-long history. Already in the *Mingshi* 明史 [History of the Ming], the 18th-century "official history" (*zhengshi* 正史) of the Ming dynasty compiled by court historians of the subsequent Qing dynasty, Zheng He's biography recounts the story of a great admiral of outstanding

achievements who is seen as a source of pride for Chinese people abroad. The celebratory narrative of the missions was especially revived in the Late Qing period (1890s to 1911), as many authors came to be fascinated by Zheng He as a symbol of China's past maritime glory. In the historical context of China's anti-colonial struggles during the period, the 1904 article *Zuguo da hanghaijia Zheng He zhuan* (Biography of the Great Navigator of the Motherland, Zheng He) written by the influential reformist intellectual Liang Qichao (1873-1929) had an especially important role in initiating the modern-era discourse on Zheng He. During the Mao era, Zheng He came to serve as a reference point in Zhou Enlai's speeches on his visits to Africa, and his role was framed as a symbol of China's traditions of solidarity and non-expansionism towards other Third World nations. During the Reform and Opening-up era starting from 1978, the missions became especially important for emphasizing China's supposed traditions of outward openness, with Deng Xiaoping framing the missions as China's last period of openness before the self-inflicted isolation of the later Ming and Qing eras.

As can be seen, the perceived grandiosity of the missions inspired many subsequent figures to retell them, and to instrumentalize them in order to create globalized narratives of what they saw as China's main global aspirations of the given time period. From anti-colonial struggle to Third World solidarity and Opening-up, Zheng He's figure has played an important symbolic role in various contexts during the modern era. Throughout the dissertation, I argue that the latest tendencies of the Zheng He discourse are characterized by an interest in how they relate to China's newly retained global power status, i.e. the contemplations of whether and how they might have a referential value for reimagining the present and future regional and global order. Zheng He historiography is thus in many ways a "world-making" discourse, in which through global history global orders of the past, present, and future are also renegotiated.

While the present dissertation intends to take a broader view of intellectual discourses in contemporary China, it also deals with the role of the state in shaping the directions of the Zheng He discourse, including via both discursive and non-discursive means (such as the

shaping of public spaces, commemorative events, research funding, publication strategies, etc.). The Chinese state today is especially interested in the question of “maritime power”, in Chinese *haiquan* 海权, which is increasingly seen as a cornerstone of global strategy, and one in which China still considerably lags behind its main competitor, the United States. Following the U.S. American naval officer and historian Alfred T. Mahan’s (1840-1914) thought on maritime power, “maritime culture” (*haiyang wenhua* 海洋文化) is seen as a major constituent of enhancing a country’s overall maritime (and hence global) influence. The remembrance of the Zheng He missions is thus widely promoted by the Chinese state as a way of rediscovering China’s supposed traditions of pacifist and “win-win” approach to interstate relations in the maritime world. At the same time, scholars take a more critical approach to investigate whether during the Zheng He missions China indeed achieved durable sea power, and thus whether it can have a referential value for a successful maritime strategy in the present time.

The temporal range of the present dissertation includes mainland Chinese publications on the Zheng He missions between 2000 and 2022, with shorter discussions of some influential works published before 2000. The quantitative analytical part of the dissertation involves the analysis of publication metadata of 3,466 relevant articles downloaded from China’s largest academic database, the CNKI, dated between 2000 and 2020. The qualitative analysis part of the dissertation involves ca. 30 relevant academic works published between 2000 and 2022. The theoretical framework of the dissertation is aimed at the interpretation of discursive tendencies during the last decade, since the inauguration of the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) by Xi Jinping in 2013, with its maritime constituent known as the “21st-Century Maritime Silk Road” (21 世纪海上丝绸之路). The main topic of the dissertation is the crystallization of the “Silk Roads Power-Knowledge Complex” and “Belt & Road Worldview / Historiography” during the last decade, but it is contextualized and presented as the outcome of longer-term

transformations in power relations, ideologies, and epistemologies, for which reason the corpus of the dissertation is not limited to the BRI (2013-) period.

1.2 The main research questions of the dissertation

The dissertation intends to focus on historiography as a form of discourse and knowledge production interrelated with power relations and ideologies/worldviews. The main research question of the dissertation is how Zheng He historiography is interrelated with broader tendencies of global historiography in China today, and how these are related to power relations (both on domestic and global levels), as well as ideologies/worldviews. While the selected corpus of the dissertation is mostly made up of academic publications, the dissertation also intends to reflect on the question how these intellectual debates are influenced or regulated by state-promoted discourses and other dispositifs, how they reinforce or challenge the state-promoted narratives, and in which way they are instrumentalized by the state. The discourse analysis of Zheng He historiography is referenced as a case study to propose theoretical frameworks of broader applicability to China's contemporary global historiographical discourses (Silk Roads P.K.C., B&R Worldview and Historiography).

1.3 The structure of the dissertation

The dissertation is structured along chapters on theory, methodology, state of the art, analysis, and interpretation/conclusion. Chapter 2 on the "Theoretical approach of the dissertation" introduces the proposed theoretical framework of the "Silk Roads Power-Knowledge Complex" of broader Chinese discourses, as well as the "Belt & Road Worldview" and "Belt & Road Historiography" as characteristics of state-promoted discourses on Chinese and global history. Chapter 2 also includes introductions of the theories of discourse analysis and dispositive analysis, in order to clarify the theoretical bases of the proposed theoretical frameworks. This is followed by introductions of major contemporary mainland Chinese

discourses on nation, empire, and Tianxia in Chinese and global history, in order to relate the contents of the dissertation to these important currents of contemporary historiographical thought. Chapter 3 on “Methodology and operationalization” introduces step-by-step how the theoretical approach of the dissertation translates into its methodological approach, and how this is operationalized. This chapter includes sub-chapters on the preparatory, analytical, and interpretative steps of the discourse-analytical project, introducing both the quantitative (digital) and qualitative methods and tools used throughout the dissertation project. Chapter 4 on the “State of the art” has two main parts, one introducing the state of the art of research on China’s global historiography in general, and one focusing on the state of the art in research on Zheng He history and historiography in particular. This dual structure was chosen in order to emphasize that the present dissertation aims at being a contribution to both research on China’s global historiography in the broader sense, as well as to research on Zheng He historiography per se.

Chapter 5 “The discourse analysis of recent mainland Chinese Zheng He historiography” constitutes the main body of the dissertation, involving three sub-chapters, namely 5.1 on the primary sources on the missions, 5.2 on the quantitative analysis of metadata extracted from the CNKI database on a corpus of 3,466 relevant works, as well 5.3 on the qualitative analysis of ca. 30 selected works. Chapter 6 involves the interpretation of the results introduced in chapter 5, situating them in broader institutional, cultural, and political contexts. Chapter 7 includes the appendices of the dissertation, mostly charts that represent the results described in sub-chapter 5.2.

1.4 Expected theoretical contributions to the relevant disciplinary fields

As discussed in 1.1 and 1.2, the present dissertation proposes several new theoretical frameworks for the better understanding of how global historical knowledge is produced in

China today, and how it is discursively related to power and ideologies/worldviews. In this way, the present dissertation is not merely a contribution to the field of Sinology, but also opens up possibilities of interdisciplinary dialogue with global history, cultural studies, and political studies. In my view, the dissertation is especially relevant for the comparative analysis of global histories produced in divergent locations, cultural backgrounds, and political systems. In my opinion, it also has relevance for the specific interdisciplinary topics of de-colonial studies and nationalism studies, by creating new Sinocentric theoretical frameworks for comparative analysis. In summary, the present dissertation has theoretical innovation and interdisciplinary, as well as global significance, by focusing on the question of how past, present, and future global orders are contemplated through the “world-making discourse” of global historiography in China today.

2. Theoretical approach of the dissertation

2.1 Proposed Theoretical Framework

2.1.1 Belt & Road Worldview

The main theoretical contribution of the present dissertation is the proposal of the term “Belt & Road Worldview”. The term describes a normative view of China’s role in the past and present global order as promoted by the Chinese state and reproduced by a number of publications analyzed here. The term is named after the *Yi Dai Yi Lu* 一带一路 (Eng. Belt & Road Initiative, BRI) global development strategy of the Chinese state inaugurated in 2013. BRI has been primarily studied by economists and political scientists and has been frequently dubbed as China’s geopolitical grand strategy. In the present dissertation, I will argue that in recent years BRI has gone beyond merely being a sum of foreign investments and geopolitical grand strategy, i.e. the concern of economics and political science. BRI in fact has become a cultural phenomenon and has played an especially important role in framing a normative view of the past, present, and future position in the global order within China and to some extent in other countries as well.

“Worldview” in “Belt & Road Worldview” refers to what is generally discussed under “ideology” in discourse-analytical scholarship. Its definition is primarily based on the definition of “ideology” in Reisigl & Wodak’s Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA):

Ideology, in the DHA’s view, is seen as a perspective (often one-sided), i.e. a worldview and a system composed of related mental representations, convictions, opinions, attitudes, values and evaluations, which is shared by members of a specific social group. [...] Ideologies serve as important means of creating shared social identities and of establishing and maintaining unequal power relations through discourse, e.g. by establishing hegemonic identity

narratives or by controlling the access to specific discourses or public spheres ('gate-keeping'). In addition, ideologies also function as a means of transforming power relations.¹

The Belt & Road Worldview as a state-promoted discourse is based on the norms and principles communicated by the Chinese party-state in order to outline its notions of an ideal global order. It did not come into existence all at once at the announcement of the BRI by Xi Jinping in 2013 but emerged gradually in the decades of China's reform and opening-up. I refer to the BRI while coining the term for the reason that its underlying norms and principles became increasingly crystallized and globally communicated since the official announcement of the BRI. These core principles most notably include national sovereignty, non-interference in the domestic affairs of foreign states, and "win-win" economic cooperation. The national sovereignty principle postulates the clear division of the global community along national boundaries. The emphasis on non-interference serves on the one hand to argue for the state narrative of "peaceful rise" or "peaceful development". On the other hand, it also serves as a de-legitimizing mechanism of any objection to CCP rule in the territories regarded by the CCP as part of China (incl. Taiwan, the South China Sea, and disputed areas with neighboring countries). The economic rationale of the Belt & Road Worldview is formulated in terms of "win-win" (*hezuo gongying* 合作共赢) economic cooperation with the outside world, the argument that China's reemergence as a global power will economically benefit all other nation-states.²

¹ Martin Reisigl and Ruth Wodak, "The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA)," in *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies*, 3rd ed. (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2016), 25.

² Zheng Hailin 郑海麟, "Jiangou 'haishang sichou zhi lu' de lishi jingyan yu zhanlue sikao 建构'海上丝绸之路'的历史经验与战略思考 [Historical experience and strategic contemplation regarding the construction of 'Maritime Silk Roads']," *Taipingyang Xuebao* 太平洋学报 [*Pacific Journal*] 22, no. 01 (2014): 1-6; Li Xiao 李晓 and Li Junjiu 李俊久, "Yidai yilu yu Zhongguo diyuan zhengzhi jingji zhanlue de chonggou '一带一路'与中国地缘政治经济战略的重构 [The Belt & Road Initiative and the reshaping of China's geopolitical and geo-economic strategy]," *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* 世界经济与政治 [*World Economics and Politics*], no. 10 (2015): 30-59+156-157; Wang Yiwei, *The Belt and Road: What Will China Offer the World in Its Rise*, 1st ed. (Beijing: New World Press, 2016).

I argue that the Belt & Road Worldview is a state-promoted, normative worldview characterized by both being global in the sense of proposing an alternative global order, as well as by being structurally defined by national boundaries. The question therefore arises how “nation” and “globality” are discursively constructed in relation to each other and how the state is discursively connected to this. To analyze these questions, apart from discourse theory, the theoretical framework of the present dissertation also draws from contemporary Chinese thought on nation and globality (see sub-chapter 2.3). The referenced literature includes the works of prominent contemporary authors such as Wang Hui and Xu Jilin, among others.

The main theoretical influences of the present dissertation are Qing Cao’s conceptualization of China’s globally-oriented “state nationalism”, as well as Xu Jilin’s classification scheme of China’s nationalisms in his Neo-Tianxiaism approach. From a discourse analytical point of view, Cao’s and Xu’s works have special analytical strength due to providing frameworks for analyzing how certain discourses relate “nation”, “state”, “world”, and “Tianxia” to each other. The UK-based scholar Qing Cao’s research focuses on the discursive construction of national and political identities in modern and contemporary China. His conceptualization of “state nationalism” is relevant for clarifying the role of the CCP party-state and party-state interests in the formation and functionalities of the Belt & Road Worldview.³ Xu Jilin is a Shanghai-based historian and public intellectual whose Neo-Tianxiaism approach is concerned with the genealogy and classification of China’s nationalisms in connection to the universalistic Tianxia ideal of pre-modern China. Xu Jilin advocates Neo-Tianxiaism as a form of liberal, cosmopolitan national identity for present-day China, contrasting it with genetically-defined “hard” and culturally-defined “soft” nationalism

³ Qing Cao, “Discursive Construction of National and Political Identities in China: Political and Cultural Construction of the Chinese Nation,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Chinese Discourse Analysis* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 431–43.

based on “we” vs. “them” thinking and Othering of those belonging to other national communities.⁴

2.1.2 Belt & Road Historiography

The idealized realization of Belt & Road Worldview in the field of historiography is discussed as “Belt & Road Historiography” in the present dissertation. Belt & Road Historiography is part of the broader Belt & Road Worldview – it is the component that is concerned with the appropriate interpretation of the past to create ideal narratives for advancement in the present and future. I argue that “Interaction”, in Chinese *jiaoliu* 交流, is the inherent logic and key analytical framework for setting up the narratives of the Belt & Road Historiography. “Interaction” (with a capital I) is used as a reference to this logical and methodological approach to historiography. Interaction focuses on exchange on the one hand, while on the other hand lacks critical reflections on asymmetrical power relations and ideological biasedness. The exchange of trade goods, technology, knowledge, or art forms is narrated as a result of Interaction based on equal terms. The parties involved in Interaction, in many cases the predecessors of modern nation-states or the ruling elites of pre-modern political entities, are treated as unquestionable analytical units. Critical reflection on the constructedness of nationhood or other forms of political identities is largely incongruent with Belt & Road Historiography.

Historiography is thus presented as a de-politicized and neutral field of knowledge whose primary aim is to positively contribute to harmonious relationships among nation-states in the present time. Asymmetrical power relations, oppression based on ethnicity, gender, or religious affiliation, as well as warfare and genocide are de-emphasized or ignored altogether.

⁴ Xu Jilin 许纪霖, “Shenme shi Xin-Tianxiazhuyi? 什么是新天下主义? [What is Neo-Tianxiaism?],” no. 2015 (April 2015), <https://cul.qq.com/a/20150427/020813.htm> (accessed on 2021-01-21); Xu Jilin 许纪霖 and Liu Qing 刘擎, eds., *Xin-Tianxiazhuyi 新天下主义 [Neo-Tianxiaism]* (Beijing, Shanghai: Shiji Wenjing 世纪文景/ Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe 上海人民出版社 [Shanghai People’s Press], 2015).

The influence of Marxism does not go beyond superficial references to some aspects of Marxist historical theory (class struggle, stages of history, etc.). Marxism does not constitute the framework of historical analysis, it is much more present for reasons of political correctness, i.e. to signal a commitment to the current officially-promoted ideology of the CCP, “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics”.

The only common exception from ignoring asymmetrical power relations is the negative depiction of Western and Japanese colonialism and imperialism. As has been argued earlier, the Belt & Road Worldview in general aims at conceiving an alternative global order, one which is presented as radically different from the European-dominated colonial order of the past and from what is framed as the US-dominated hegemonic order of the present. Colonialism and imperialism as practiced by the West and Japan in the early modern and modern era are thus frequently criticized, there is however a lack of critical discussions of the extent to which these patterns of domination were not unique to these regions and historical eras. In this respect, the Belt & Road Historiography is also a way of safeguarding the state-promoted narrative of China and other “Eastern” civilizations being pre-destined for peaceful and “win-win” cooperation due to their essentially different histories from that of the West and its colonizing legacy. I argue that the perceived threat from which Belt & Road Historiography intends to safeguard the state-promoted master narrative is the historical scholarship that has been emerging outside of China in the last decades, taking a critical view of China’s history as a colonizing empire itself.

In recent decades, as Global History has gained prominence in history research across the globe, various critical perspectives on asymmetrical power relations of larger geographical scales have also emerged as its subfields. Most notably, the so-called “histories of Empire” have reinterpreted the meaning of “Empire” as an analytically relevant term in global history. In *Empire: A Very Short Introduction* (2002), Howe argues against simply seeing empires as anachronistic, expansionist political structures of the past deemed to be superseded by the

nation-state. Instead, Howe argues for the validity of the analytical term Empire as a multifaceted power structure characterized by large geographical area, ethnic and cultural diversity, political and military domination by the center over its peripheries, as well as by the regulating role of the center with regard to the flow of goods, people, and ideas, among others.⁵ In *Imperien – Die Logik der Weltherrschaft* [Empires – The Logic of World Domination] (2005), Münkler argues that the emergence of practically all major empires in history involved the securing of control over both *Herrschaftsräume* [spaces of domination] and *Handelsstrukturen* [trade structures]. Empires thus cannot be seen merely as political entities interested in “world conquest”, but need to be analyzed as economic actors motivated in the control of the “world economy” as well.⁶

China’s history as an empire has been primarily discussed with a focus on continuity as a primarily land-based empire since the Qin unification (221 BCE). Various authors have argued that China’s uniqueness lies in being the only large land-based empire that managed to remain extant from antiquity until the present day.⁷ According to Elvin, it was the avoidance of “imperial overstretch” that made China capable of ultimately maintaining itself as an empire for such a long period of time.⁸ The question of whether a continuity of China as an imperial entity indeed existed since the Qin dynasty (221-206 BCE), or whether this narrative is rather an outcome of self-legitimizing discourses of the subsequent ruling elites nevertheless remains debated among today’s scholars.⁹ It is perhaps safer to say that the geographical area of today’s China has been an area where despite a number of interruptions, some sort of imperial center

⁵ Stephen Howe, *Empire: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁶ Herfried Münkler, *Imperien: Die Logik der Weltherrschaft - vom Alten Rom bis zu den Vereinigten Staaten* [Empires: The Logic of World Dominance - from Ancient Rome to the United States], 5th edition (Berlin: Rowohlt Berlin, 2005), 80.

⁷ Howe, *Empire*, 41–56; Mark Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past*, 1 edition (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1973), 17–21.

⁸ Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past*, 17–21.

⁹ Mark Edward Lewis and Mei-yu Hsieh, “Tianxia and the Invention of Empire in East Asia,” in *Chinese Visions of World Order: Tianxia, Culture, and World Politics*, ed. Ban Wang (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2017), 25–48.

has repeatedly managed to establish dominance over a significant geographical area, and a narrative of continuity from earlier centers persisted among the political elite and literati.

Due to China's experience as a semi-colonial state and the prominence of the "one hundred years of national humiliation" (*bainian guochi* 百年国耻) narrative¹⁰, critical discussions of China's history as a colonial empire have not featured prominently in China's historiography for most of the modern era. For most of the 20th century, China's modernization and catching up with the West and Japan, retaking China's central position in the global order have preoccupied the attention of most Chinese historians. Colonialism and imperialism have thus mostly been seen as a feature of the Western and Japanese Other, whose dominance and exploitation of China needed to be overcome in order to advance toward China's reemergence as a power center in the global order.¹¹ It is furthermore important to mention, that the Chinese translation of "empire", *diguo* 帝国 has been widely associated in China with the negative connotations linked to "imperialism" (*diguo zhuyi* 帝国主义) in general and to modern Japanese imperialism in particular. The term *diguo* comes from the 19th-century Japanese translation of "imperium", *teikoku* 帝国 (lit. "emperor-state") and in such usage it did not exist in pre-modern China. As pointed out by various authors, "Chinese Empire" (*Zhonghua Diguo* 中华帝国) is a neologism that does not reproduce the way pre-modern rulers referred to their realm: the name of the dynasty, often with the addition of "Great" (*Da* 大), e.g. *Da Ming* 大明 or *Da Qing* 大清.¹² It has been suggested by some authors that instead of trying to apply the Western-made "empire" framework on Chinese history, pre-modern concepts such as *Tianxia*

¹⁰ Referring to the period between the First Opium War (1839-42) and the end of WWII (1945).

¹¹ Dominic Sachsenmaier, *Global Perspectives on Global History: Theories And Approaches In A Connected World*, Reissue edition (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Nicola Spakowski, "National Aspirations on a Global Stage: Concepts of World/Global History in Contemporary China*," *Journal of Global History* 4, no. 3 (November 2009): 475-95; Q. Edward Wang, "'Rise of the Great Powers'=Rise of China? Challenges of the Advancement of Global History in the People's Republic of China," *Journal of Contemporary China* 19, no. 64 (March 2010): 273-89.

¹² Wang Hui, *China from Empire to Nation-State*, trans. Michael Gibbs Hill (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 30-60.

天下 (“All Under Heaven”) and *wenming* 文明 (“civilization”) should be rediscovered when discussing the Chinese past.¹³

It is remarkable that apart from the better-known Tianxia debate (more on it in 2.3.1), discussions of the relevance of “civilization history” (*wenming shi* 文明史) have become increasingly visible in China recently. The first issue of the 2022 volume of *Shixue Lilun Yanjiu* 史学理论研究 (“Historiography Quarterly”, published by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences) bears the title *Wenmingshi yanjiu de Zhongguo shiye* 文明史研究的中国视野 (A Chinese Perspective on Civilizational History Research). The editorial of the issue emphasizes the need to create a Chinese perspective on global history setting out from the centrality of *wenming* 文明 (“civilization”) to Chinese culture and its distinction from what “civilization” or “civilizing” means in the Western context. It is argued here that pre-modern China’s concept of *wenming* denotes a shared progress of humanity as a whole instead of the “mission civilisatrice” in the Western context.¹⁴ A similar publication in the 2021 volume of *Lishi Yanjiu* 历史研究 (Studies in History) by Wei Xiaoji criticizes Western “histories of Empire” (*diguo shi* 帝国史), arguing that “civilizational history” (*wenming shi* 文明史) in the Chinese context is more qualified to assess how various ethnicities throughout China’s history have interacted and progressed towards shared development.¹⁵ The “civilizational history” trend can be connected to what Wang Hui describes as the “civilizational state” framing of China, in his

¹³ Wang Gungwu, *Renewal: The Chinese State and the New Global History* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2013), 6-10. 132.

¹⁴ Zhu Xiaoyuan 朱孝远, “Wenmingshi yanjiu de Zhongguo shiye 文明史研究的中国视野 [Research on civilizational history from a Chinese perspective],” *Shixue Lilun Yanjiu* 史学理论研究 [Historiography Quarterly] 2022, no. 1 (2022): 9–15.

¹⁵ Wei Xiaoji 魏孝稷, “Xifang hanxue ‘diguo shi’ fanshi ji qi juxian - Jian tan ‘wenming shi’ fanshi de kexingxing 西方汉学‘帝国史’范式及其局限——兼谈‘文明史’范式的可行性 [“Histories of Empire” in Western Sinology and its limitations - The feasibility of the ‘Civilizational History’ model],” *Lishi Yanjiu* 历史研究 [Journal of Historical Research] 2021, no. 5 (2021): 168–91.

discussion of various alternatives to the empire vs. nation-state dichotomization of Chinese history.¹⁶

I argue that there are two main points missed or intentionally ignored by the *Tianxia* and *wenming* critique of histories of Empire. The first is that just because the term “empire” did not exist outside of the Western world until the 19th century, this does not necessarily prevent it from being an analytically useful category in present-day historiography. In other words, this is rather a concern of intellectual history on the various “world-makings” of pre-modern elites in different historical periods, geographical locations, and cultural communities. The Ming and Qing rulers probably did not call their realm *diguo*, but in the sense that it was a large multiethnic and multicultural entity under the rule of one superior political center, it is arguably comparable with other such entities. It is exactly moving beyond the strongly normative connotations of “empire” and reinventing it as an analytical term which is emphasized by recent scholarship on the topic.¹⁷

The other reason is of political nature, namely that adopting *diguo* as an analytical term in discussions of Chinese history would disrupt both the Marxist and nationalist narrative of China being solely a victim of Western and Japanese imperialism and colonialism and never practicing imperialism and colonialism itself. The question whether China can be considered a colonial empire has been increasingly discussed outside of China in recent decades, as well as by some more critical Chinese authors. Wang Hui, while agreeing that expansion and ethnic domination have been part of Chinese history, defines imperialism and colonialism as economically-based phenomena arising from the expansion of West-centric global capitalism in the early modern era.¹⁸ Larsen discards the idea of the Qing not being an imperialist and colonizing power, despite also being a victim of Western, Japanese, and Russian colonialism in

¹⁶ Wang Hui, *China from Empire to Nation-State*, 25.

¹⁷ Sebastian Conrad, *What Is Global History?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 102–3; Howe, *Empire*, 15–30.

¹⁸ Wang Hui, *China from Empire to Nation-State*, 18–25.

the 19th and 20th centuries. The Qing empire practiced informal imperialism, most notably through the tributary system in Korea, as well as settler colonialism in both its continental frontier (esp. Xinjiang) and Taiwan, as Larsen argues.¹⁹ In his criticism of recent historiography on the Ming-Qing tributary system, Perdue argues that armed expansion and settler colonialism were part and parcel of the historical Han Chinese interaction with Mongolia, Xinjiang, Southwest China, and Taiwan. Perdue also argues that the “tributary system narrative” of China’s pre-modern history serves the purpose of disguising Han Chinese expansionism and colonization as cultural universalism.²⁰

The previous paragraphs served to illustrate that there has been a long-running discourse on the meanings of empire, nation, civilization (*wenming*), and Tianxia among scholars of Chinese and global history. I argue that “Belt & Road Historiography” can be seen as the officially-promoted master narrative of global history in today’s mainland China, one which reproduces the Belt & Road Worldview in the field of historiography. Belt & Road Historiography is hence the instrument through which the complexity of the global past is rendered into a present-day global narrative consistent with the interests and priorities of the Chinese party-state. Asymmetrical power relations of the global past are interpreted and evaluated in a way that does not violate the master narrative of the present-day global order. Criticism of Western and Japanese colonialism and imperialism is thus not congruent with developing critical views on the alternative meanings of colonialism and Empire in the Chinese context, e.g. on Han Chinese colonialism in Xinjiang and Tibet. The discussion of (early modern to modern Western and Japanese) colonialism and imperialism thus primarily serves the purpose of advancing the ideological agenda of the Belt & Road Worldview, i.e. the argument that China and other “Eastern” civilizations share particular cultural features and

¹⁹ Kirk W. Larsen, “The Qing Empire (China), Imperialism, and the Modern World,” *History Compass* 9, no. 6 (June 2011): 498–508; see also Julia C. Schneider, “A Non-Western Colonial Power? The Qing Empire in Postcolonial Discourse,” *Journal of Asian History* 54, no. 2 (2020): 311–42.

²⁰ Peter C. Perdue, “The Tenacious Tributary System,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 24, no. 96 (2015): 1002–14.

historical experiences which make them pre-destined for peaceful and “win-win” cooperation in the present. This critique of colonialism and imperialism is thus not conducive to critical and analytically innovative reappraisals of the terms “colonialism” and “imperialism”, which would decouple them from being seen as early modern and modern Western and Japanese particularities. This has apparently much to do with the implications of what this “decoupling” would mean for the reevaluation of Chinese history and the master narrative as a whole.

The “Belt & Road Historiography” proposed here is an “ideal type” of historiography underpinned by state-promoted narratives of global history and global order. In its pure form, the Belt & Road Historiography is reproduced in political propaganda only. The focus of the present dissertation, however, is the discourse analysis of academic historiography. As will be demonstrated throughout the dissertation, the Belt & Road Historiography – in other words the state-promoted narrative – is rarely reproduced in its entirety in academic historiography. I would argue, however, that it is a normative force which in some cases explicitly, in others implicitly influences discourses on history. By explicit cases, I refer to e.g. quotes from speeches of political leaders inserted into academic articles. By influence in implicit terms, I refer to the formation of discourse strands based on the norms and value systems of the Belt & Road Historiography.

2.1.3 Silk Roads Power-Knowledge Complex

Referring to the concept of “power-knowledge complexes” in Foucauldian discourse theory and the *Kritische Diskursanalyse* (KDA) of Jäger et al., I argue that there is a broader power-knowledge complex emerging in China in a mutually formative relation with the Belt &

Road Worldview. I call this the “Silk Roads Power-Knowledge” complex.^{21 22} “Power” in the present dissertation will be used to refer to domestic power relations in China, as well as to global power relations influencing and being influenced by the analyzed discourse. Regarding the definition of power, the DHA approach is referenced here:

Power relates to an asymmetric relationship among social actors who have different social positions or who belong to different social groups. Following Weber (1980), ‘power’ can be defined as the possibility of enforcing one’s own will within a social relationship against the will or interests of others.²³

The present dissertation is concerned with the discourse analysis of historiography, which is a form of historical knowledge production. The significance of the relation between power and knowledge is especially emphasized in Foucauldian discourse theory and the *Kritische Diskursanalyse* (KDA) approach of Siegfried Jäger et al.²⁴ Foucault regarded power and knowledge as inseparable from each other, i.e. not only power is dependent on knowledge for its functioning, it also sets the rules based on which knowledge can be produced. Foucault used the term “power-knowledge complex” to describe the phenomenon resulting from this dialectical relationship.²⁵ In the present dissertation, I argue that the Belt & Road Worldview cannot exist without an underlying power-knowledge complex. This power-knowledge complex emerges on the one hand from state power channeled into controlling knowledge production, in order to produce appropriate forms of knowledge. On the other hand, it is also an outcome of knowledge produced in a way sustaining the type of power relations that characterize the Chinese state’s domestic order and foreign policy approach today.

²¹ Siegfried Jäger, *Kritische Diskursanalyse: Eine Einführung [Critical Discourse Analysis. An Introduction]*, 6. ed. (Münster: Unrast Verlag, 2015); Margarete Jäger and Siegfried Jäger, *Deutungskämpfe: Theorie und Praxis Kritischer Diskursanalyse [Struggles of interpretation. The theory and practice of Critical Discourse Analysis]*, 2007 edition (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2007).

²² The German acronym KDA will be used to refer to the approach of Jäger et al. in order to differentiate it from the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of Fairclough, van Dijk, Wodak et al. prevalent in English-language scholarship.

²³ Reisigl and Wodak, “The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA),” 26.

²⁴ Jäger, *Kritische Diskursanalyse*; Jäger and Jäger, *Deutungskämpfe*.

²⁵ Jäger, *Kritische Diskursanalyse*, 38.

The Silk Roads PKC possesses a considerable cultural and historical depth by relying on the instrumentalization of past linkages between China and the outside world through the network of trade routes known today as the “silk roads”. It relies on the popularity of “silk roads” narratives of global history among a broader segment of the general population in China and abroad, incl. the interest among historians to rediscover global history from this perspective. The emergence of the Silk Roads Power-Knowledge Complex is based on the construction and promotion of a “collectively shared image” of the Chinese and Eurasian past which enjoys state-support and resonates well among many historians and the general population.²⁶ It is a summary of selective and idealized images of peaceful trade exchanges across a wide range of continental and maritime trade routes and throughout a historical period ranging from ancient to early modern (Ming-Qing) times. The concept of the Silk Roads, originally coined as *Seidenstraße* (Silk Road) by 19th-20th-century German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen (1833-1905), is revitalized to emphasize this selective rendering of the past into history.²⁷

Historiography is the principal knowledge-producing element of the Silk Roads Power-Knowledge Complex. This power-knowledge complex is in turn the basis for the creation of a value system of present-day foreign policy which is conceived as being a continuation of Chinese traditions of peaceful interaction with the outside world. In the present-day context of the “Westphalian” order of nation-states, national sovereignty, and ideals of “win-win” economic cooperation, the Silk Roads Power-Knowledge Complex is thus the epistemological basis of making the pre-modern past compatible with the ambitions of the present and the future. As already noted by Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik,

²⁶ For the theory of “collectively shared images” see the *Kollektivsymbolik* approach of Jürgen Link in Jäger and Jäger, *Deutungskämpfe*, 39–60.; see also the similar “cultural codes” concept in Dalia Gavriely-Nuri, “Cultural Approach to CDA (CCDA). From Theory to Practice,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Critical Discourse Studies* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 120–32.

²⁷ For more on the evolution of the “Silk Road” concept see James D. Sidaway and Chih Yuan Woon, “Chinese Narratives on ‘One Belt, One Road’ (一帶一路) in Geopolitical and Imperial Contexts,” *The Professional Geographer* 69, no. 4 (October 2, 2017): 591–603, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00330124.2017.1288576>.

Much in contrast to Maoist times when the past had to be overcome to build a formidable future, now the bright future is said to be the continuation of a glorious past.²⁸

2.2 Discourse and dispositive analysis

2.2.1 Discourse analysis

The discourse analytical approach of the dissertation primarily relies on the *Kritische Diskursanalyse* approach of Margarete Jäger, Siegfried Jäger, Jürgen Link et al. prevalent in German-language scholarship. For the sake of simplicity, this approach will be referenced with its German acronym KDA.²⁹ The discourse analytical approach of the dissertation also borrows from Ruth Wodak, Martin Reisigl et al.'s Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) within the broader Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), prevalent in English-language scholarship.³⁰

KDA and CDA-DHA both share their view of human communication as being interrelated with power relations, the “critical” component of their designations referring to the aim of deconstructing power relations in interrelation with discourses. KDA is primarily based on Foucauldian discourse theory and is distinct from the linguistically-oriented CDA in the sense that it aims to deconstruct abstract “statements” (*Aussagen*) as the basic units of discourses. KDA distinguishes “statements” as the most basic abstract unit of discourses from “utterances” (*Äußerungen*) as the basic elements of human speech. This implies that one statement can take various forms as utterance while retaining the same informative content as a basic unit of discourse. KDA investigates how statements interact and form discourses, and

²⁸ Sebestyén Hompot and Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, “Mainland Chinese Historiography in Search of New National and Global Narratives: Analyzing Recent Historiography on the Tributary System of Interstate Relations under the Ming and Qing Dynasties (1368–1912 CE),” *Comparativ* 31, no. 2 (2021): 266, <https://doi.org/10.26014/j.comp.2021.02.09>.

²⁹ Jäger, *Kritische Diskursanalyse*; Jäger and Jäger, *Deutungskämpfe*.

³⁰ Reisigl and Wodak, “The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA).”

how these come together in “discursive fields” (*Diskursfelder*) to define a certain phenomenon.³¹

Regarding the social function of discourses, KDA regards discourse as “operator” in a social struggle around “truth”, instead of merely being a “reflection” of truth. KDA is skeptical about the existence of one objective “truth” and focuses on the co-existence of various subjective “truths” based on conflicting worldviews and interpretations. KDA thus regards knowledge construction as discursive struggle, i.e. the struggle among various social actors to define what constitutes legitimate “truth” in a given society. KDA presumes a dialectical relationship between “power” and “knowledge” and focuses on the deconstruction of “power-knowledge complexes”.³²

CDA-DHA’s analytical framework sets out from the concepts of power, ideology, critique, context, intertextuality, as well as interdiscursivity. In the DHA formulation, critique is intended to challenge existing power relations (the asymmetrical relations among social actors) and ideologies (worldviews, coherent mental representations) in the quest for self-reflection, enlightenment, and emancipation. Texts are seen as parts of larger discourses, and in most cases of more than one discourse (-> interdiscursivity), and are in a dialectical relationship with broader social contexts. Texts are also interconnected with each other in a historical sense (-> intertextuality) and are often selectively re-/decontextualized as part of discursive strategies (more on the DHA framework of discursive strategies in the Methodology chapter).³³

KDA as the main theoretical and methodological approach was preferred vis-à-vis other discourse analytical approaches (incl. CDA-DHA) on the bases that I regard as more suitable for the analysis of academic discourses. In my view, CDA-DHA is more suitable in the case of

³¹ Jäger, *Kritische Diskursanalyse*, 95; Jäger and Jäger, *Deutungskämpfe*, 25–26.

³² Jäger, *Kritische Diskursanalyse*, 10–12.

³³ Reisigl and Wodak, “The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA),” 23–61.

political and media discourses, where rhetoric and sentiments play a key role. This is due to the focus of CDA-DHA on language usage, in contrast to the focus of KDA on abstract “statements”, discourse strands, and discursive fields. In an academic context, I would argue that it can be expected that rhetoric and sentiments play a relatively lesser role, and therefore the investigation along the KDA framework is more conducive to identifying power relations and ideology in connection with the analyzed discourse. Meanwhile, the concepts of ideology, power, context, and critique are more clearly defined in CDA-DHA than in KDA, for which reason I have incorporated these definitions into the analytical framework of the dissertation.

2.2.2 Dispositive analysis

In Foucauldian discourse theory, the term “dispositive” (from French *dispositif*) refers to the interaction of discursive behavior with non-discursive behavior and structures, such as institutions, laws, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, administrative measures, and scientific statements. The term “dispositive analysis” is used by Keller (2011) and Jäger (2015) to reflect on broader manifestations of power relations and power-knowledge complexes than what is covered by “discourse analysis”.³⁴

In the context of the present dissertation, dispositive analysis is primarily concerned with academic historiography as a form of knowledge production, and its interlinkages with power relations. The role of the state in controlling and influencing the publication of academic works on the Zheng He missions is the focus of the analysis. As will be demonstrated in chapter 5.3 on detailed analysis, various publications on the Zheng He missions include implicit or explicit references to state-led projects such as the “21st-Century Maritime Silk Roads” constituent of BRI and frame the Zheng He missions as having referential value for these. Some publications, such as the *Zheng He yanjiu dongtai* (Trends in Zheng He research) are designed to bring together academic literature with the explicit promotion of BRI, by including editorials

³⁴ Jäger, *Kritische Diskursanalyse*, 113–21.

praising the importance of the missions for re-establishing China's maritime power, as well as reporting on various academic and other events related to the research and remembrance of the missions. This shows, that the Chinese state intends to play a major role in creating and controlling non-discursive means, such as publishing venues and procedures, to maintain its narrative hegemony in historical knowledge production.

2.3 Nation, Empire, and Tianxia in Chinese and Global History – Contemporary Discourses and Theoretical Frameworks

2.3.1 Discourses on modernity and national identity in China

Minzu 民族 (nation) and *diguo* 帝国 (empire) were created as *wasei kango* 和製漢語, or "Japanese-made Kanji words" by 19th-century Japanese intellectuals to translate newly-adopted Western concepts. While these concepts have dominated modern historiography on China and the world, they did not exist in the present-day sense in pre-modern China. One frequently discussed question by many historians with a focus on China is how modern national identity emerged in China and what were its predecessors in pre-modern Chinese thought. In turn, the applicability of "empire" for the analysis of pre-modern China's history is often frequently discussed and questioned as argued earlier.³⁵

Among Chinese scholars, a significant amount of attention has been paid to China's modern-era transformations, i.e. the formation of the modern Chinese nation-state based on pre-modern culture, identities, and political institutions. The Late Qing period (1890s-1911) has been especially widely discussed, as it is often seen as a turning point in China's reception of Western ideologies and models of "modernization". It is frequently argued among Chinese

³⁵ Sachsenmaier, *Global Perspectives on Global History*, 491–511; Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, "Weltgeschichte und chinesische Geschichte. Die chinesische Historiographie des 20. Jahrhunderts zwischen Universalität und Partikularität [World history and Chinese history. Twentieth century Chinese historiography between universality and particularity]," in *Globalisierung und Globalgeschichte [Globalization and global history]*, ed. Margarete Grandner, Dietmar Rothermund, and Wolfgang Schwentker (Vienna: Mandelbaum Verlag, 2005), 139–61.

scholars, that in pre-modern China, only *zu* 族 (“ethnicity”) existed as an identity marker, but it was fluid and based primarily on cultural rather than linguistic and genetic terms. The political legitimacy of the ruling dynasty was discursively linked to receiving *Tianming* 天命 (the “Mandate of Heaven”) and ethnic minority dynasties secured this position at various points in China’s history (see Yuan, Qing dynasties).³⁶

Meanwhile, the exclusively Western origins, linearity, and completeness of China’s “modernization” process into becoming a nation-state has frequently been questioned as well. The renowned historian and public intellectual Qin Hui, in his *Zouchu dizhi* 走出帝制 (“Leaving imperial rule behind”, banned before original publication in 2015, published in 2016) revisits the Late Qing and Republican-era history of China’s constitutionalizing efforts and argues for the incompleteness of “leaving imperial rule behind” until the present day.³⁷ Historian and public intellectual Wang Hui discusses the question of China’s modern-era transformations in detail in his series *Xiandai Zhongguo sixiang de xingqi* 现代中国思想的兴起 (The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought). The volume *Diguo yu guojia* 帝国与国家 (Empire and nation)³⁸, translated into English as *China from Empire to Nation-State*³⁹ focuses on the question of to what extent the West-centric empire vs. nation-state modernization paradigm of

³⁶ Zhuang Guotu 庄国土, “Lüelun chaogong zhidu de xuhuan: Yi gudai Zhongguo yu Dongnanya de chaogong guanxi wei li 略论朝贡制度的虚幻: 以古代中国与东南亚的朝贡关系为例 [On the illusiveness of the tributary system: The case of tributary relations between pre-modern China and Southeast Asia],” *Nanyang Wenti Yanjiu* 南洋问题研究 [Southeast Asian Affairs] 2005, no. 3 (2005): 2; Yin Qiaorui 尹巧蕊, “Qingdai Menggu chaogong falü zhidu zhong de duoyuan fawenhua 清代蒙古朝贡法律制度中的多元法文化 [On diversity in the legal culture of the Qing-era Mongol tributary law system],” *Lantai Shijie* 兰台世界 [Lantai World] 2017, no. July/2 (2017): 101–2; Sun Hongmei 孙红梅, “Yuanchao de ‘Tianxia yi jia’ sixiang ji qi zhengzhi wenhua yitong 元朝的“天下一家”思想及其政治文化一统 [The ‘All under Heaven is one family’ ideology of the Yuan dynasty and political-cultural unification],” *Heilongjiang Minzu Congkan* 黑龙江民族丛刊 [Heilongjiang Nationalities Series] 2009, no. 3 (2009): 91–95.

³⁷ Qin Hui 秦晖, *Zouchu dizhi (Cong Wan Qing dao Minguo de lishi huiwang) 走出帝制(从晚清到民国的历史回望)* [Leaving Imperial Rule Behind - Revisiting History from the Late Qing to the Republican Era] (Beijing: Qunyan Press, 2016); Qin Hui and David Ownby, “Qin Hui, “Jing Ke Stabs Confucius” and “Zilu Sings the Praises of Qinsihuang”[1] - Introduction and Translation by David Ownby,” *Reading the China Dream*, 2020, <https://www.readingthechinadream.com/qin-hui-jing-ke-stabs-confucius.html>. (Accessed on 2023-02-09).

³⁸ Wang Hui 王晖, *Xiandai Zhongguo sixiang de xingqi. Diguo yu guojia 现代中国思想的兴起·帝国与国家* [The emergence of modern Chinese thought. Empire and nation], *Xiandai Zhongguo sixiang de xingqi* 2 (Beijing: Sanlian Shudian 三联书店, 2008).

³⁹ Wang Hui, *China from Empire to Nation-State*.

global historiography is applicable to Chinese history. As Wang Hui introduces, the Kyoto School of the 1910s to 1930s was an early historiographical school aimed at critiquing the West-centric notions of modernity by emphasizing the hybridity of East Asian modernity incorporating both native and Western influences. Kyoto School historians argued that East Asia's proto-modernity emerged during the Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279 CE), through the increasing adaptation of *lixue* 理学 (often framed as “Neo-Confucianism” outside of China) into China's political culture. In the interpretation of the Kyoto School historians, the influence of *lixue* led to a centralization of imperial bureaucracy and canonization of Confucian works, through which a relatively uniform “early nation-state” emerged in Song China.⁴⁰

Wang Hui in general is critical of the binary view of China's history as a linear process from pre-modern empire towards modern nation-state. In his view, many institutions in China, generally attributed to late-19th-century Western-influenced reforms, have already emerged during pre-modern times, such as the treaty system of the Qing dynasty. This is especially relevant to Zheng He historiography, since the Zheng He missions are in general discussed within the tributary system framework, and the tributary system is frequently framed as mutually exclusive with the treaty-based “Westphalian” order of the modern era. Wang Hui, however, argues that

people frequently placed the tribute system in opposition to the treaty system. However, if we look briefly at a number of bilateral treaties from before 1840, we will see that the tribute system not only addressed issues related to trade, but also worked in ways that were parallel (and not opposed) to the treaty system.⁴¹

While various other authors refer to the Tianxia (All Under Heaven) concept of pre-modern Chinese political culture, Wang Hui conceptualizes China's modernization through the lens of intellectual history, as a development process from *Tianli* 天理 (“Heavenly Principle”)

⁴⁰ Wang Hui, 7–11.

⁴¹ Wang Hui, 129.

towards *gongli* 公理 (“Universal Principle”), i.e. from the *lixue* belief in *Tian* (Heaven) as the ultimate source of *li* 理 (reason, logic, rationality) towards scientific rationality.⁴² With regard to the formation of modern China’s territorial boundaries and ethnic makeup, Wang Hui argues especially for the far-reaching impact of the last imperial dynasty, the Qing (1644-1911). According to Wang Hui, modern China is “exceptional” in the sense that no other nation-state has retained so closely the territorial area, ethnic composition, and political structure of a pre-modern empire as China did.⁴³ As Wang Hui points out, despite adopting the concept of “nation” from the West via Japan in the 19th century, the multiethnic, “imperial” setting of the Late Qing made it undesirable for most intellectuals to pursue the European model of ethnically-defined nationalism. While certain intellectuals of the late-19th and early-20th century, like Sun Yat-sen and Zhang Taiyan in some of their writings, had supported the idea of an ethnic Han nation-state, the territorial implications of this made *wuzu gonghe* 五族共和 (“five-nations republic”) the preferred choice of the majority.⁴⁴

Historian and public intellectual Xu Jilin is another author who has published extensively on China’s intellectual history in the Qing and Republican eras. One of Xu’s main research topics is the emergence of national identities and nationalisms in modern China, incl. its continuities and discontinuities with pre-modern Chinese thought. As will be introduced in more detail in subsection 2.3.1, Xu proposes a reinterpretation of the pre-modern Tianxia (All Under Heaven) concept in order to frame a new globally oriented national identity for China, calling this “Neo-Tianxiaism” (*Xin Tianxia zhuyi* 新天下主义).⁴⁵

Wang Gungwu examines the emergence of Chinese national identity through the life and works of Qing- and Republican-era diaspora intellectuals such as Eugene Chen, Liao

⁴² Wang Hui, 61–100.

⁴³ Wang Hui, 25–29.

⁴⁴ Wang Hui, 26.

⁴⁵ Xu Jilin 许纪霖 and Liu Qing 刘擎, *Xin-Tianxiashuyi* 新天下主义 [*Neo-Tianxiaism*].

Zhongkai, Lim Boon Keng, and Tan Lock Cheng incl. their interaction with mainland Chinese society. Wang Gungwu argues that notions of race, ethnicity, and nationality emerged first among the Southeast Asian Chinese diaspora in the 19th century, as these populations lived in multiracial and multiethnic societies and were exposed to the Western-originated categorizations of race, ethnicity, nation, and empire. In Wang Gungwu's words,

Following the industrial revolution, the British nation became the strongest the world had ever known, and the idea of nationality was introduced to the people of Asia, including the overseas merchants from Guangdong and Fujian who lived in Dutch and British colonies. In this way, they learnt that they were "Chinese" just like others were Dutch, English, Malay, Indian or Arab. Given this national label, and living outside China for many generations, their identity was widely recognized and accepted.⁴⁶

As Wang Gungwu argues, the exposure of overseas Chinese intellectuals to the "national empires" of the industrialized West led to unfavorable comparisons with the Qing empire. The pre-modern world-making concepts of Tianxia and *wenming* ("the state of being civilized", i.e. the civilizing impact of the ruling dynasty) were thus questioned as ethnicity and nation were adopted as the principal analytical frameworks of contemplating modernization and catching up with the industrialized world. China came to be regarded by diaspora intellectuals as an empire where the Han majority is ruled by a foreign ethnicity, i.e. by the Manchu "invaders". Based on these evaluative standards, the Han Chinese, unlike the British or French, were seen as not only incapable to expand their global influence overseas but also as unable to secure a leading role in their home society. While the dethronement of the Qing dynasty was greatly supported by most diaspora intellectuals, the preference for the "Five-nation Republic" became dominant among overseas intellectuals as well in the Late Qing and Republican periods.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Wang Gungwu, *Renewal*, 20.

⁴⁷ Wang Gungwu, 30–31.

2.3.1 Tianxia Thought and Xu Jilin's Neo-Tianxiaism

Tianxia 天下 is a Classical Chinese term literally meaning “(all) under Heaven”. In contemporary Mandarin Chinese, it is most commonly meant to refer to “the entire world” in a literary or figurative way. Tianxia as a political-philosophical concept emerged during China’s Warring States period (476-221 BCE), an era marked by competition and armed conflict among several smaller states in today’s China. In this context, Tianxia came to represent the idea of a culturally and politically unified realm. The Warring States period ended with the victory of the Qin state and the establishment of the Qin dynasty (221-206 BCE), which in later eras came to be seen as the first polity “unifying Tianxia”. The meaning of Tianxia went through constant evolution in the subsequent millennia, at times referring only to the realm ruled by the *Tianzi* 天子 (“Son of Heaven”, i.e. the Chinese emperor), at times more broadly referring to the entire world. In general, it has retained its role as both a territorial concept, as well as a cultural and moral concept supposing shared culture and moral values among a broader community of people.⁴⁸ In recent decades, the Tianxia concept has been rediscovered by a number of intellectuals, especially in mainland China, who believe that rediscovering the universalistic aspects of pre-modern Chinese culture can contribute to China’s constructive role towards a stable global order based on shared values.⁴⁹

Rediscovering pre-modern Chinese tradition for envisaging a modern world order based on the abolishment of national boundaries has already appeared in the works of the influential reformist philosopher of the late-19th and early-20th century Kang Youwei (1858-1927). In his posthumously published major work *Datong Shu* 大同书 (*The Book of Great Unity*, 1935), Kang borrows the Confucian concept of *Datong* (Great Harmony) already appearing in the Confucian classic *Liji* (Book of Rites) compiled during the 1st millennium BCE. By

⁴⁸ Lewis and Hsieh, “Tianxia and the Invention of Empire in East Asia.”

⁴⁹ Nele Noesselt, *Alternative Weltordnungsmodelle? IB-Diskurse in China [Alternative models of the world order? IR discourses in China]* (VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2010), 168–72.

reinterpreting *Datong*, Kang advocates the establishment of a world state overcoming national boundaries.⁵⁰

In recent decades, the discourse on the idea of a future world state has been reignited by Chinese philosopher Zhao Tingyang's 2005 book *Tianxia tixi* (*The Tianxia System*). Zhao's book has become widely discussed in China, and in recent years it has been translated into foreign languages as well.⁵¹ In his book, Zhao proposes a Utopian world state beyond ethnic and national divisions, based on shared values that provide a framework for social and economic progress. Zhao formulates his approach as being based on the Tianxia concept as it emerged in China's Warring States. In Zhao's view, the major threat to today's global stability is national self-centeredness and competition among nation-states. As Zhao argues, Western-originated theories of global order only provide various approaches to how nation-states can co-exist with each other but do not provide an alternative in the sense of overcoming nation-state-centeredness. In Zhao's view, this can only be achieved by rediscovering China's pre-modern Tianxia worldview.⁵²

In comparison with Kang Youwei's *Datong* thought and Zhao Tingyang's Tianxia System, the Chinese historian and public intellectual Xu Jilin's Neo-Tianxiaism is stronger on the analytical side by proposing a way to categorize the various strands of Chinese nationalisms and proposing an alternative to them. Xu Jilin identifies "rigid" (*gangxing* 刚性) or exclusionist/anti-foreign (*paiwai* 排外) nationalism and "soft" (*rouxing* 柔性) or cultural nationalism as the common forms of nationalism in present-day China. In Xu's definition, "rigid" nationalism refers to the type of nationalism based on genetically-bound framings of

⁵⁰ Wang Hui, "From Empire to State: Kang Youwei, Confucian Universalism, and Unity," in *Chinese Visions of World Order: Tianxia, Culture, and World Politics*, ed. and trans. Ban Wang (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2017), 49–64.

⁵¹ Tingyang Zhao, *All under Heaven: The Tianxia System for a Possible World Order*, trans. Joseph E. Harroff (University of California Press, 2021); Tingyang Zhao, *Alles unter dem Himmel: Vergangenheit und Zukunft der Weltordnung* [*All Under heaven: The Past and Future of World Order*], trans. Michael Kahn-Ackermann, Deutsche Erstausgabe Edition (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2020).

⁵² Zhao Tingyang 赵汀阳, *Tianxia tixi* 天下体系 [*The Tianxia system*] (Nanjing: Jiangsu Jiaoyu Chubanshe 江苏教育出版社 [Jiangsu Education Press], 2005).

Chinese nationhood and the “we” group, as well as general suspicion or hostility towards “they” groups. “Soft” nationalism is based on culturally-bound framings of nationhood and a relative openness toward interaction with “they” groups. According to Xu, the shared feature of both “rigid” and “soft” nationalisms is that they are based on “we” vs. “they” group distinctions, i.e. the Othering of those being outside of the “we” group (the either genetically or culturally framed category Chinese nation). Xu also notes that his analytical framework is based on “ideal types”, and these strands in practice often exist in combination with each other.

As his preferred alternative to “rigid” and “soft” nationalism, Xu advocates a form of liberal nationalism that embraces the universalistic aspects of pre-modern Chinese thought. He calls this ideology Neo-Tianxiaism (*Xin-Tianxiazhu yi* 新天下主义), referring to the pre-modern *Tianxia* 天下 concept. *Tianxia* literally means “(all) under Heaven”, in Classical Chinese, and had gained various figurative meanings in pre-modern contexts.⁵³ Xu Jilin primarily refers to the meaning of *Tianxia* as denoting “the entire world” and to pre-modern Tianxiaism as the aspects of Confucian elite culture which emphasized the community of humankind based on shared moral values. Xu argues that instead of thinking in “we” vs. “they” groups, an international order based on the belief in the shared progress of human civilization needs to be prioritized. In his opinion, this will benefit the global community as a whole and will lead to China’s “civilizational rise” (*wenming de jueqi* 文明的崛起) matching its economic rise.⁵⁴

2.3.1 Qing Cao’s “state nationalism” framework

Cao defines state nationalism as part of his broader categorization of China’s nationalisms, also including ethnic nationalism (based on ethnically defined nationhood),

⁵³ For a detailed account on the evolution of the meanings of *Tianxia*, see Lewis and Hsieh, “*Tianxia* and the Invention of Empire in East Asia.”

⁵⁴ Xu Jilin 许纪霖, “Shenme shi Xin Tianxia-zhu yi?”; Xu Jilin 许纪霖 and Liu Qing 刘擎, *Xin-Tianxiazhu yi* 新天下主义 [*Neo-Tianxiaism*].

cultural nationalism (based on culturally defined nationhood), and liberal nationalism (based on defining nationhood as a community of free individuals, i.e. on liberal values). In Cao's definition, state nationalism is focused on the nation-state as a political-territorial unit and organizational system. According to Cao, "patriotism" (*aiguo zhuyi* 爱国主义, lit. "ideology of loving the country") is "a key discursive mechanism through which the [CCP] party-state determines the correct form and acts of nationalism."⁵⁵ As Cao points out, state-promoted patriotism in the post-Mao era has constantly been reformulated to serve the interests of the party-state under the rapidly changing socio-economic landscape of the country. "Patriotic education" has paved the way for the CCP to gradually redefine its identity from ideologically-inspired socialism towards nationalist-focused developmentalism, from a teleology based on socialist equality towards economic performance and national competitiveness in a globalized economy.⁵⁶

Cao's framing of state nationalism has been a significant source of theorizing the Belt and Road Worldview, which is the principal theoretical contribution of the present dissertation. I argue that the Belt and Road Worldview emerges from China's state nationalism of the last decades as described by Qing Cao. It is a globalized form of the country's contemporary state nationalism which serves the purpose of providing the discursive power to further CCP interests on the global stage. The present dissertation will focus on how the state-supported form of historical knowledge production, i.e. "Belt and Road Historiography" plays out in the discourse on the major historical event of the Zheng He missions. As a discourse analytical work, it will also emphasize the diversity of the discourse, i.e. how state-promoted narratives are questioned and criticized within the Chinese discourse, despite the constraints on freedom of speech and academic freedom in the country.

⁵⁵ Cao, "Discursive Construction," 438.

⁵⁶ Cao, 437–38.

2.4 Summary

As has been demonstrated in the latter part of the chapter, there has been a significant discourse on the emergence of Chinese national identity, incl. its relation to globality and the historical trajectory of its emergence from its roots in pre-modern thought. Especially among Sinologists outside of China, the Chinese state's role in formulating certain forms of nationalism has also been critically analyzed. Relating these back to the proposed analytical frameworks of B&R Worldview, B&R Historiography, and Silk Roads Power-Knowledge Complex, I argue that these frameworks are the key to understanding how national identity and globality are related to each other under the normative influence of state-promoted world-makings in today's China. As also introduced in this chapter, the dissertation is based on a discourse analytical approach, critically examining the various statements, discourse strands, and entire discourses with regard to power relations and ideologies.

3. Methodology and operationalization

3.1 Introduction

The methodological approach of the present dissertation has been influenced primarily by the methodology of Jäger's KDA¹, with the additional inclusion of digital humanities tools and techniques. Jäger's KDA methodology can be summarized as being made up of three major stages: preparatory steps, analytical steps, and interpretative steps. The preparatory steps involve what Jäger describes as "introduction and justification of the topic" (*Vorstellung und Begründung des Themas*), "characterization of the 'discourse planes'" (*Charakterisierung der Diskursebene*), "capturing the discursive context" (*Erfassung des diskursiven Kontextes*), and "acquisition of the data corpus (*Gewinnung des Datenkorpus*). The analytical steps involve the structural analysis (*Strukturanalyse*) of the entire corpus, as well as the detailed analysis (*Feinanalyse*) of a selected corpus. This is followed by what can be summarized as interpretative steps, involving the interpretation of the analytical results in broader social and political contexts.²

3.2 Preparatory steps

3.2.1 Introduction and justification of choosing the topic

Concerning the introduction and justification of the relevance of the topic, the question to be asked is why a discourse analytical study of recent mainland Chinese historiography on the Zheng He missions is of relevance today and how such a study can contribute to the advancement of the research field, as well as in general to the better understanding of cultural,

¹ Jäger, *Kritische Diskursanalyse*.

² Reiner Keller, *Diskursforschung: Eine Einführung für SozialwissenschaftlerInnen [Doing research on discourses: An introduction for sociologists]*, 4th ed., Qualitative Sozialforschung (Münster: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2011), 33.

social, political trends in today's China. As has been pointed out in the Introduction chapter of the dissertation, the Zheng He missions are not solely important for being a major set of events in the early 15th-century history of China and the Indo-Pacific region, but also for their current relevance in the context of China's reemergence as a global power center. Due to his Muslim background and his major accomplishments as an imperial admiral, Zheng He has symbolic importance in today's discourses on the past and present-day "silk roads" of interconnectivity with the outside world. As frequently argued, by rediscovering Zheng He's major deeds in the past, a "Zheng He spirit" of win-win cooperation is expected to characterize China's present-day interactions with foreign countries.

While no specific publication on the detailed discourse analysis of Zheng He historiography has appeared so far (more on this in chapter 4, "State of the Art"), the importance of global history with regard to China's self-perception as a reemerging major power has been analyzed by various authors. These authors often point to the importance of re-discovering pre-modern world-making concepts such as Tianxia, in order to challenge the conceptual Eurocentrism of global history.³ At the same time, some authors also point to the dangers of a reestablished Sinocentric view of global history, manipulated along the interests of the Chinese party-state.⁴ Global historian Sebastian Conrad, in the "Global history for whom? The politics of global history" chapter of his book *What is Global History?* (2016) discusses the Chinese state's politics of global history in detail, referring to the revived interest in the Zheng He missions as an especially relevant case in point.⁵

The introduction and justifications of choosing the topic are crucial for the further steps and for justifying the choice of methodology as well. It needs to be pointed out here that the aim of the present dissertation is not simply a summary of what has been written on the Zheng

³ Liu Xincheng, "The Global View of History in China," *Journal of World History* 23, no. 3 (2012): 491–511; Wang Gungwu, *Renewal*.

⁴ Spakowski, "National Aspirations on a Global Stage"; Wang, "'Rise of the Great Powers' = Rise of China?"

⁵ Conrad, *What Is Global History?*, 208.

He missions in China in recent decades. Its aim, as outlined in the research questions, is to critically examine power relations and worldviews/ideologies in Chinese discourses on the pre-modern past. It also aims at uncovering how China or Chineseness is discursively related to “globality” (the state of being globalized) in works of historiography, and how is this likely related to factors such as China’s (re)emergence as a global power center, as well as to its specific socio-political system under the CCP’s one-party rule. The choice of methodology, which combines qualitative and quantitative (digital) tools is aimed at deconstructing discourse fragments (in this case academic texts of historiographical scholarship) into statements, discourses, and discourse fields, and critically reflecting on their interconnection with power relations and worldviews/ideologies.

3.2.2 Characterizing the discourse planes

Regarding discourse planes (*Diskursebene*), the present dissertation is primarily focused on the academic discourse on the Zheng He missions. This does not mean that other discourse planes, such as art, media, and political discourses have been fully neglected. The Zheng He missions have in fact generated a considerable amount of interest in the political and media spheres in China and to some extent in other countries as well. Throughout the dissertation project, I have familiarized myself with certain representative examples of non-academic works related to the missions, as well as with secondary literature analyzing these (see chapter 4 “State of the Art”). Characterizing the various discourse planes and critically analyzing their interconnections, as also advocated by Jäger’s KDA approach, is part of the methodological approach of the present dissertation.

3.2.3 Capturing the discursive context

Capturing the discursive context involves several aspects, such as the broader cultural, social, and political context in which the discourse takes place, as well as the institutional and

situational context in which the academic discourse takes place in particular. The broader cultural and socio-political context, as already discussed in the Introduction chapter as well, is China's ongoing transformation as a (re)emerging global power center, as well as the reemerging interest in Chinese society in the rediscovery of pre-modern culture as a source for contemplating the present and future global order. The topic of China's pre-modern traditions of great power politics and their relevance to the present-day global order has become widely discussed in recent decades. The discourse on the "tributary system" of Ming-Qing China's foreign relations, as a system of diplomatic practices rooted in Confucian culture, has drawn a considerable amount of attention in recent decades, as will be explained in sub-section 5.3.3.1.⁶ Zheng He missions arguably constituted a "peak point" of Ming China's tributary exchanges with the outside world and a "global moment" of pre-modern Chinese history whereby the Ming Chinese court established tributary relations with a large number of foreign rulers over an extensive geographical area. While the missions were not entirely peaceful, there is also evidence in the primary sources that in contrast to the practices of subsequent European colonial empires, the Ming rulers refrained from military conquest and the direct economic control of foreign territories. In recent Chinese discourses on history and international relations, the missions have thus come to be widely seen as having a referential value for a Chinese approach to construct a stable, "win-win" multipolar global order with China as one of its power centers.

In terms of capturing the institutional and situational context, the characteristics of scholarly research and publishing need to be clarified as part of the preparatory steps. Reflecting on the possibility of (self-)censorship in the analyzed discourse needs to be part of the present dissertation. Meanwhile, it also needs to be added that the topic of the Zheng He missions, a set of events taking place in the early 15th century CE, does not qualify as a topic of high political

⁶ See also Sebestyén Hompot, "A Discourse Analysis of Recent Mainland Chinese Historiography on the Sinocentric Tributary System of the Ming and Qing Dynasties (1368–1912)," *Vienna Journal of East Asian Studies* 12, no. 1 (December 1, 2020): 149–76, <https://doi.org/10.2478/vjeas-2020-0006>; Hompot and Weigelin-Schwidetzki, "Mainland Chinese Historiography in Search of New National and Global Narratives."

sensitivity in the present-day context. Apart from their temporal distance from more sensitive issues of recent history, the missions also took part mostly outside of China's present-day borders, as well as outside of the territories claimed by the CCP government as part of China. In this latter respect, this topic is far less sensitive than historiography on the Northern and Western continental frontiers, i.e. on the history of Manchuria, Mongolia, Tibet, and Xinjiang. For these reasons, it can be assumed that (self-)censorship is a minor issue in the recent Chinese academic discourse on Zheng He's missions compared to the question of what sort of value systems and ideologies have shaped the way Chinese scholars interpret the missions today. The proposed frameworks of "Silk Roads Power-Knowledge Complex" and "Belt & Road Worldview" are used to analyze these questions, incl. the possible role of the party-state in shaping the interpretative and evaluative standards of today's scholars writing on the topic.

Regarding the situational context of academic publishing, it needs to be pointed out that scholarly research on history is different from other types of discourses on history in terms of adhering at least to some standards of referencing historical evidence (primary sources, archaeological findings) for justifying claims on what constitutes "historical truth". Critical discourse analysis of historiography involves the analysis of intertextual relationships between the primary sources and the analyzed historiographical discourse. The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) of Critical Discourse Analysis defines "intertextuality" as follows:

'Intertextuality' means that texts are linked to other texts, in both the past and the present. [...] The process of transferring given elements to new contexts is labelled 'recontextualization': if an element is taken out of a specific context, we observe a process of 'decontextualization'; if the respective element is inserted then into a new context, we witness a process of recontextualization.⁷

⁷ Reisigl and Wodak, "The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA)," 28.

In Chinese historiography, intertextual relations with primary sources have long played an especially important role. China's traditions of major written historiographical records go back to the 1st millennium BCE and during the subsequent millennia an extensive amount of historical records have been produced continuously. Referencing earlier written sources in the quest of reconstructing "historical truth", as well as re-contextualizing them as part of discursive strategies in discussions of political or social affairs of the time, have been part of China's intellectual culture for several millennia. Mainland China's recent Zheng He historiography is no exception from this, rereading and reinterpreting the primary sources being one of the most significant elements of knowledge production on the missions. For these reasons, the preparatory step of "capturing the discursive context" cannot be realized without the consultation and evaluation of the primary sources, which will be presented in section 5.1.1 of the dissertation.

3.2.3 Acquisition of the data corpus

The acquisition of the data corpus included the acquisition of bibliometric data on a larger amount of publications (mainly used for the "structural analysis" part of the analytical steps), as well as the acquisition of a limited amount of full-text publications for qualitative analysis. The latter group included mostly digitized sources accessed through the University of Vienna Libraries or external databases to which it provides access for its students and employees. A smaller amount of the sources was accessed in print format, via online purchase.

The acquisition of bibliometric data on mainland Chinese publications was carried out via the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI, in Chinese *Zhongguo Zhiwang* 中国知网), the country's largest academic database.⁸ On June 19th, 2020, bibliometric data on altogether 3,466 items were exported from CNKI into a TSV (tab-separated values) data file

⁸ <https://www.cnki.net/> (Accessed on 2021-12-08).

for further analysis.⁹ The search terms were “郑和 OR 三宝太监 OR 三保太监” (items including “Zheng He” or any of his two common alternative names “Three Jewels Eunuch” and “Eunuch of the Three Protections”, used in some publications).¹⁰ No time limits were set (meaning that everything published up to June 19th, 2020 was included), as well as no restrictions regarding language and publication type.¹¹

Apart from sources acquired via CNKI, the author also searched and accessed relevant materials via other databases (such as the Taiwanese academic database Airiti / *Huayi Shuwei* 华艺数位, JSTOR, and other databases accessible via the University of Vienna library system). Furthermore, personal talks and online interaction with scholars of relevant expertise, and the acquisition of literature based on their recommendations also played a role in the formation of the corpus.¹²

The analysis of the bibliometric data, as well as the early-stage consultation of various relevant Chinese and non-Chinese sources, made up the first analytical step in the dissertation project, the so-called “structural analysis”. This step involved the identification of the main discourse strands, actors, and institutions, as well as the main tendencies of change from a historical perspective. While the focus of the present dissertation is recent mainland Chinese historiography written in Chinese, publications in other languages (English, German, French, Japanese) and published outside mainland China (Europe, US, Taiwan, etc.) have also been

⁹ This basic information included at most the following columns: type of publication, subtype of publication, title, language, author, author’s institution, publishing place, publisher, year of publication, keywords, abstract; not all types of publications included information for all columns (more on this in sub-chapter 3.3 “Structural analysis and formation of the selected corpus for detailed analysis”).

¹⁰ These terms were searched in the “topic” (*zhuti* 主题) of the publications available on CNKI, i.e. in their titles, abstracts, and keywords, but not in their “full text” (*quanwen* 全文).

¹¹ CNKI is a primarily academic database, hence academic publication types (journal articles, theses, conference proceedings, etc.) constitute the bulk of the data corpus. Meanwhile, a certain amount of newspaper articles, standards / 标准 (mostly related to the organization of commemorative events related to the Zheng He missions), and patents / 专利 (mostly of replicas of Zheng He’s ships) were also among the items on which basic information was exported (more on this in sub-chapter 3.3 “Structural analysis and formation of the selected corpus for detailed analysis”).

¹² I hereby wish to thank my Ph.D. supervisor Prof. Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik (University of Vienna), as well as Prof. Angela Schottenhammer (KU Leuven, formerly University of Salzburg) and Dr. Elke Papelitzky (KU Leuven).

consulted as part of this initial analytical step. This was done in order to acquire a comparative understanding of the mainland Chinese discourse, and also for analysis of intertextual relations with historiography produced outside of China as part of the detailed analysis step.

3.3 Structural analysis and formation of the selected corpus for detailed analysis

Structural analysis in the present dissertation is primarily based on digitally conducted quantitative text analysis. It aims to gain an overall understanding of the main characteristics and tendencies of the analyzed discourse and thereby also to decide on the selection of works for detailed (qualitative) analysis. The resource used for structural analysis is the data on 3,466 relevant items exported from CNKI on June 19th, 2020. This data is ordered into a TSV file, where each row represents an item and each column represents one feature of it.¹³ The following features of the whole data set have been analyzed:

- number of items by: type and year of publication, author, publisher (incl. publishing journal), language
- keyword counts (which are the most common keywords included in the exported data of the items)
- word/ngram frequencies in titles and abstracts (ngram is the co-occurrence of *n* number of words following each other; here bigrams and trigrams [*n* = 2, 3] were investigated; stopwords filtering was applied)¹⁴
- word/ngram “keyness” in titles and abstracts (which words or ngrams are distinctly frequent in one temporal subset vis-à-vis the dataset as a whole)

¹³ The columns in the final version of the data set are: Reference_type (type of item, e.g. journal article), Title, Language, Author, Author_address (institution), Publishing_place (city), Publisher (in case of journal articles the title of the journal), Year, Keywords, Abstract.

¹⁴ “Stopwords” are functional words (e.g. 是、的、这样) which are removed by using a stopwords dictionary (a file containing a list of them) in order to only analyze words or ngrams of substantial meaning. This means that e.g. neither the word 的, nor the bigram 郑和+是 is analyzed in this context.

As introduced in detail in 5.2 (“Structural analysis”), five temporarily defined subsets of the dataset were created in order to comparatively analyze various periods (e.g. the early Reform and Opening-up period from 1978 to 1989, or the Belt & Road period from 2013 to 2020). Other subsets have been created based on citation and download numbers recorded in CNKI. Combining periodization with citation and download numbers, the subsets “50 most cited items of the last 20 years” and “50 most downloaded items of the last 20 years” are analyzed in particular (see 5.2.3).

The formation of the selected corpus for detailed analysis was based on various criteria: diversity in publication types and publication years between 2000 and 2021, interdisciplinarity, diversity of subtopics within the broader topic of the Zheng He missions, (in the case of CNKI items) citation and download numbers. The selection was carried out based on the general patterns of the discourse identified partly via quantitative means in the structural analysis step, and partly by means of qualitative analysis, namely the so-called “minimal vs. maximal contrasting” (*minimale vs. maximale Kontrastierung*) method of Keller. This method involves the setting-up of a corpus based on identifying common patterns and selecting a larger number of works fitting this pattern (minimal contrasting), as well as selecting a smaller number of works significantly different from it (maximal contrasting). In this way, general tendencies, as well as outliers, i.e. potential initiators of new tendencies can be identified.¹⁵ The minimal vs. maximal contrasting method was applied with regard to subtopics within the broader topic, as well as (in the case of CNKI items) citation and download numbers. The selected corpus of the detailed analysis is made up of 30 Chinese-language works published in mainland China since 2000. These 30 works include 11 journal articles, 9 chapters in an edited volume, 5 journal volumes (analyzing their editorials and tables of contents), 1 documentary series, 1 magazine

¹⁵ Keller, *Diskursforschung*, 92.

article, 1 monograph (431 pages), 1 newspaper article, and 1 Ph.D. dissertation (selected chapters) (more in 5.2.4).

3.4 Detailed analysis (description of methodology)

The detailed analysis (*Feinanalyse*) step of the dissertation is primarily based on the methodology of Reiner Keller's *Wissenssoziologische Diskursanalyse* (WDA, "Society of Knowledge Approach to Discourse"), which has a considerable amount of overlaps with Jäger's *Kritische Diskursanalyse* (KDA) methodology. I decided to use WDA as the main reference with regard to the detailed analysis part because it provides a more detailed methodological framework than KDA, which is more theory-oriented. Concerning theory, WDA shows a considerable degree of overlap with KDA, as it is also strongly influenced by Foucauldian discourse theory. Its other theoretical influences include Bourdieu's habitus theory and the sociology of knowledge approach of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann.¹⁶ WDA methodology will be used in order to deconstruct discourse fragments into statements, identify discourse strands and discursive fields, and critically reflect on power relations and ideologies, as emphasized in KDA theory.

Concerning the situatedness and materiality of a statement, WDA methodology emphasizes the tripartite framework of analyzing "historic-social, time diagnostic context" (*historisch-sozialer, zeitdiagnostischer Kontext*), "institutional-organizational context" (*institutionell-organisatorischer Kontext*), as well as "situative (micro-) context" (*situativer / mikro- Kontext*).¹⁷ The detailed analysis in WDA includes the analysis of the linguistic-rhetorical tools, as well as the interpretative analysis of the contents (with a focus on "statements"). The interpretative analysis of the contents includes the analysis of the phenomenal structure (*Phänomenstruktur*), the interpretative pattern (*Deutungsmuster*, i.e. how

¹⁶ Keller, 57–62.

¹⁷ Keller, 100.

various statements are related to each other), as well as the narrative pattern (*narrative Muster*). The analysis of the phenomenal structure (alternatively “problem structure”, *Problemstruktur*) focuses on aspects such as causativity, responsibility, self vs. other positioning, as well as teleology (e.g. models of progress, notions of development or well-being, etc.).¹⁸

Concerning the structure of the detailed analysis part of the dissertation (sub-chapter 5.3), it is organized along the “discursive field” (*Diskursfeld*) concept of WDA methodology, adopted from Foucauldian discourse theory. Discursive fields can be defined as an “arena in which various discourses compete in order to constitute or define a phenomenon”.¹⁹ The concept of discourse fields thus emphasizes interdiscursivity, the fact that one text or group of texts can rarely be linked solely to one discourse. The detailed analysis will thus be structured along discourse fields such as the political (domestic/interstate), economic, and cultural aspects of the missions, among others. While we might take “the history of the Zheng He missions” as one discursive formation, the texts dealing with various aspects of the Zheng He missions can still hardly be understood without referring to their interdiscursive relationships with other major discourses on Chinese history, politics, etc. As an example, the “political aspects of the Zheng He missions” can be conceptualized as a discursive field bringing together the “history of the Zheng He missions” discourse with the “tributary system” discourse of pre-modern China’s culture of interstate relations, among others. The “tributary system” discourse itself is a complex discursive formation bringing together scholars mainly from the fields of history and political science, the latter ones often with an interest in how pre-modern traditions might influence China’s present-day foreign policy.²⁰

Jäger’s KDA methodology is to a large extent overlapping with WDA methodology. Its detailed analysis includes the five steps of analyzing the “institutional context” (medium,

¹⁸ Keller, 101–12.

¹⁹ Keller, 68.

²⁰ Keller, 66–69.

author[s], etc.), the “text surfaces” (*Text-Oberfläche*, graphical arrangement, and illustrations), linguistic-rhetorical instruments (i.e. linguistic micro-analysis of argumentation strategies, idioms, sayings, vocabulary, etc.), as well as the contents and ideology of statements (*inhaltlich-ideologische Aussagen*, i.e. images and framings of humans, society, progress, etc.).²¹

DHA methodology is primarily referenced for its analytical framework of so-called “discursive strategies”. While both WDA and KDA methodologies involve the analysis of “linguistic-rhetorical tools/instruments”, they are less detailed on providing methodological frameworks for these in comparison with the linguistically-oriented DHA. The main discursive strategies introduced in the DHA analytical framework include the following:

- nomination (discursive construction of social actors, objects, phenomena, processes, etc.)
- predication (discursive qualification of social actors, objects, etc., e.g. in the form of stereotypical evaluative attributions of positive or negative traits by using evaluative adjectives)
- argumentation (justification and questioning of claims of truth and normative rightness)
- perspectivization (positioning the speaker’s or writer’s point of view, expressing involvement or distance, e.g. by using deictics or quotation marks)
- mitigation and intensification (modifying the illocutionary force of utterances with respect to their epistemic or deontic status)²²

²¹ Jäger, *Kritische Diskursanalyse*, 98.

²² Reisigl and Wodak, “The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA),” 33; Martin Reisigl, “The Discourse-Historical Approach,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Critical Discourse Studies* (Routledge Handbooks Online, 2017), 52, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315739342.ch3>.

3.4 Interpretation

The interpretation of the overall results with regard to the research questions and theory is presented in chapter 6 (Conclusion) of the dissertation. According to Keller's WDA methodology, the interpretation of the overall results is a reflection on how much the research question posed in the introductory chapter has been answered, as well as how much the theory presented in the theory chapter can be justified. It is also aimed at clarifying the relations among socio-historical context, power relations, worldviews, discourses, and discourse fields.²³

3.5 Summary

In summary, the methodological approach of the dissertation was chosen in a way that reflects the theoretical approach and makes it possible to provide a satisfying answer to the research questions posed in the introductory chapter. The theoretical approach of the dissertation is based on the proposed frameworks of Belt & Road Worldview, Belt & Road Historiography, and the Silk Roads Power-Knowledge Complex, all of these situated in broader discourses of historiographical theory in present-day China. The theoretical approach of the dissertation also relies on critical discourse analytical theory, especially on Jäger's KDA and Wodak et al.'s DHA, and is primarily concerned with power relations and worldviews/ideologies. It seeks to examine power relations and worldviews/ideologies in connection with historical knowledge production. It argues that this way our understanding of China's evolving self-perception as a reemerging major power (i.e. the understanding of the discourses on this changing status within Chinese society) can be enriched, and the research questions of the dissertation can be satisfyingly answered.

The methodology presented here sets out from the digitally conducted structural analysis of publication metadata and the formation of a selected corpus primarily based on this. This is followed by the detailed qualitative analysis of the selected corpus, based on the discourse

²³ Keller, *Diskursforschung*, 113–17.

analytical methodologies of Jäger's KDA, Keller's WDA, and Wodak et al.'s DHA. The methodology is intended to make sure that the discourse fragments under investigation are appropriately deconstructed into statements and that these statements are appropriately related to various discourses and discursive fields. The critical analysis of statements, discourses, and discursive fields is executed with reference to KDA/DHA theory and with the digital tools and techniques described earlier, as well as based on KDA/WDA/DHA methodologies. The research questions of the dissertation are thus answered based on the thorough deconstruction of the discourse fragments into statements and broader analytical units, with a view on relating the findings to the theoretical framework (incl. own proposed theoretical frameworks) outlined in the chapter on theory.

4. State of the art

4.1 Scholarship on recent trends in world/global historiography in China

The present sub-chapter provides an overview of scholarship on the evolution of China's world and global historiography since the early 20th century, with a focus on those works discussing the trends of the recent decades. It is important to point out that by the Late Qing period (1890s-1911), China had had a historiographical culture for at least two millennia. It is often argued that Sima Qian's *Shiji* 史记 (1st century BCE) constituted the first world historiographical work written by a Chinese author, including a number of historical accounts of foreign lands outside of the Han Chinese empire. Pre-modern Chinese historiography, in general, was characterized by Sinocentric worldviews. The official dynastic histories (*zhengshi* 正史), written on each dynasty during its successor, especially emphasized a world order based on the centrality of the Son of Heaven (the Chinese emperor) and the moral lessons drawn from the rule of each past dynasty in service of the present.¹

The Late Qing interaction with the West and Japan, as already partly discussed in the theory chapter, introduced new world-making concepts into China's intellectual environment, which also necessitated the introduction of new approaches to world historiography. Nation-states became increasingly seen as the main actors of world politics, and the compilation of national histories based on Western models came to be regarded as a crucial step in China's quest for modernization. Historiography was redefined as a modern scientific discipline in need of theoretical and methodological frameworks comparable to those of natural sciences. The present sub-chapter introduces the state of the art in research on China's world historiography along the major theoretical and methodological debates emerging since the Late Qing period.

¹ Michael Puett, "Classical Chinese Historical Thought," in *A Companion to Global Historical Thought*, ed. P. Duara, V. Murthy, and A. Sartori (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 34–46, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118525395.ch2>; Q. Edward Wang, *Inventing China Through History: The May Fourth Approach to Historiography* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), 2.

These include the debate on universalism vs. particularism – the question of how much general patterns of world history can be identified and to which extent Chinese history constitutes a particularism vis-à-vis these supposed patterns. They also include the debate on what constitutes a “global view” of history and whether a truly global history beyond cultural and national centrisms is possible and desirable. With regards to methodological considerations, scholarship on the debate on historical theory vis-à-vis historical data is also summarized here. As argued in this sub-chapter, while taking different shapes in different time periods, and also frequently impacted by political and social factors, these debates are highly relevant for recent world historiography produced in China.

4.1.1 Chinese world historiography between universality and particularity

Several scholars have analyzed China’s modern-era world historiography through the framework of universality vs. particularity, arguing that a major debate of modern China’s world historiography has been concerned with the question of how much China’s history corresponds to supposed general patterns in world history. The influential reformist intellectual of the Late Qing period Kang Youwei 康有为 (1858-1927) is notable for his universalistic views of world history published posthumously in *Datong shu* (The Book of Great Harmony, 1935). In *Datong shu* Kang frames Confucian tradition as a source of reform and scientific progress and envisages a utopian future world of no national boundaries, realized by the joint progress of Chinese and Western civilizations.² Kang’s disciple Liang Qichao 梁启超 (1873-1929) can be considered the earliest proponent of reconceptualizing world historiography for the sake of China’s national modernization. In his 1902 article *Xin Shixue* 新史学 (New Historiography) published in the *Xinmin congbao* 新民丛报 (New Citizen) journal edited by

² Wang Hui, “From Empire to State.”

him during his Japanese exile, Liang stresses the importance of historiography in the context of national modernization and problematizes China's lack of modern historiography,

In contrast to the subjects studied in Western countries today, history is the only one which has existed in China for a long time. History is the foundation of scholarship. It is also a mirror of people's nature and the origin of patriotism. The rise of nationalism in Europe and the growth of modern European countries are owing in part to the study of history. But how can one explain the fact that, despite this long tradition of historical study in China, the Chinese people are so disunited and China's social condition is so bad?³

During his 14-year exile in Japan (1898-1912) and several journeys to Western countries, Liang became deeply engaged with Japanese and Western ideas of modernization. Liang regarded the progress of the industrialized world as a universal pattern to be followed by China, in order for China to become an equal member of the global community of nation-states.⁴ In contrast to Kang and Liang, Zhang Taiyan 章太炎 (also Zhang Binglin 章炳麟, 1869-1936), another influential thinker of the Late Qing and Republican periods, put more emphasis on particularity in his views on history. Zhang emphasized that each nation incl. China needed to know its own history to become aware of its “national essence” (*guocui* 国粹). In Zhang's view, theories of history in each nation-state needed to be created based on an understanding of the particularities of national history. Zhang's views on history can be summarized as being based on the belief that universality is the “sameness of being different” and world history should be seen as a collective of the particular histories of nations and peoples.⁵

³ Liang Qichao 梁启超, *Liang Qichao shixue lunzhu sanzong* 梁启超史学论著三种 [*Liang Qichao's three works on historiography*] (Hong Kong: Sanlian Shudian 三联书店, 1980), 3; translated in Wang, *Inventing China Through History*, 16–17.

⁴ Axel Schneider, “Between Dao and History: Two Chinese Historians in Search of a Modern Identity for China,” *History and Theory* 35, no. 4 (1996): 57; Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, “Weltgeschichte und chinesische Geschichte. Die chinesische Historiographie des 20. Jahrhunderts zwischen Universalität und Partikularität [World history and Chinese history. Twentieth century Chinese historiography between universality and particularity],” 142–43.

⁵ Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, “World History and Chinese History: 20th Century Chinese Historiography between Universality and Particularity,” vol. Working Paper No. 5, Working and Discussion Paper Series (Osaka University) (Global History and Chinese History, Osaka, 2007), 4; referencing Axel Schneider, *Wahrheit und Geschichte: zwei chinesische Historiker auf der Suche nach einer modernen Identität für China* [Truth and history: two Chinese historians in search for a new identity for China] (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1997); Achim Mittag,

During the 1920s and 1930s, as Marxism and with it historical materialism entered the intellectual landscape of China, the debate on universalism and particularism in Chinese history retained its significance. Two influential historians of the era were Chen Yinke 陈寅恪 (1890-1969) and Fu Sinian 傅斯年 (1896-1950), who represented markedly different views in this debate. Fu emphasized universality by conceptualizing world history as a shared progress towards scientific rationalism and argued that the reason behind China's inability to keep pace with the West was its lagging behind in terms of scientific progress. Fu emphasized that the aim of advancing toward scientific rationality was not Eurocentric, but shared by all civilizations of different developmental paths. He regarded the *kaozheng* 考证 (evidential learning) tradition of Qing-era historiography as proof that China possessed native elements of scientific rationality, which had to be reinvigorated in the new era of competing nation-states. Chen on the other hand emphasized particularity by focusing on Confucian ethics as a defining feature of China's "national essence", and hence regarded it as a key topic in the contemplations of Chinese history. Chen saw the existence of historical particularities as the main universality of world history, hence argued that China is no different in this sense to any other nation or civilization.⁶

The universalistic theories of Marxist world historiographical thought, dividing world history into various stages with a supposed linear progress towards a classless society, generated debates among Chinese historians, especially concerning their applicability to non-Western / Chinese history. From the 1920s onwards and during the early decades of the People's Republic, Guo Moruo 郭沫若 (1892-1978) was among the influential Marxist universalists emphasizing the applicability of Marxist theory to Chinese history. Other historians, such as Jian Bozan 翦

"What Makes a Good Historian: Zhang Xuecheng's Postulate of 'Moral Integrity' (Shi De) Revisited," in *Historical Truth, Historical Criticism, and Ideology. Chinese Historiography and Historical Culture from a New Comparative Perspective*, ed. Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer, Achim Mittag, and Jörn Rüsen, vol. 1, Leiden Series in Comparative Historiography (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 365–403, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789047406914_018.

⁶ Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, "World History and Chinese History," 5–7; see also Schneider, *Wahrheit und Geschichte*.

伯赞 (1898-1968) and Wu Han 吴晗 (1909-1969) emphasized that Chinese particularities cannot be ignored when discussing their applicability in the Chinese context. During the early years of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Marxist universalism was declared the official viewpoint of historiography, while all other viewpoints were branded as bourgeois and revisionist. Critics including Jian and Wu were persecuted and died of torture and suicide.⁷

The post-Mao era initiated a new chapter in China's world historiography, marked by a decline in the influence of Marxist theory and an increasing academic engagement with Western scholarship. Criticism of the universalistic claims of Marxist world historical theory became widely tolerated, and theories from Western scholarship, as well as newly created theories by Chinese scholars, entered the discourse. The Harvard-trained historian Wu Yujin 吴于廑 (1913-1993) became a defining figure of this new period of world historiography in China. Wu Yujin played a major role in introducing Western global historical theories of the second half of the 20th century, incl. the works of Geoffrey Barraclough, Fernand Braudel, Oswald Spengler, Leften S. Stavrianos, Arnold J. Toynbee, and Immanuel Wallerstein into China. Also influenced by the Marxist emphasis on integration (of modes of production, as well as social formations) and economic progress, Wu viewed world history as a history of globalization or a "history of the integrated world" (*shijie zhengti de lishi* 世界整体的历史). He primarily distinguished between the horizontal and vertical dimensions of history. "Horizontal" refers to the interaction of diverse modes of production transforming social formations over space. "Vertical" refers to the objective progression of economic development over time.⁸

The decline of Marxism in the world historiographical thought of the post-Mao period was also congruent with a rise of nationalism, especially in historical education and non-

⁷ Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, "On Shi and Lun: Toward a Typology of Historiography in the PRC," *History and Theory* 35, no. 4 (1996): 76–77.

⁸ Xu Luo, "Reconstructing World History in the People's Republic of China since the 1980s," *Journal of World History* 18, no. 3 (2007): 329–31; Xin Fan, *World History and National Identity in China: The Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 160–61.

academic discourses on world history. In the aftermath of the Tian'anmen Incident of 1989, the Chinese state increasingly sought to emphasize patriotism in historical education, and to use history in the service of modernization along the path of "Socialism with Chinese characteristics". The definition of "Chinese characteristics", i.e. Chinese culture vis-à-vis other cultures, has occupied the attention of many intellectuals in the 1980s, resulting in what is often called the "cultural fervor" (*wenhua re* 文化热) of the decade. Xin Fan calls the influential documentary series *Heshang* 河殇 (River Elegy, 1988) the "crystallization" of the "cultural fad" of the 1980s. The series is based on comparing two aspects of Chinese civilization, namely the stagnancy and inward-looking nature of "Yellow civilization" (referring to the Yellow River) with that of the openness and progressivism of "blue" (maritime) civilization. The series served primarily as a critique of China's political system at the time and played a major role in initiating the debates leading to the Tian'anmen protests of 1989.⁹

The cultural iconoclasm of *Heshang* was subsequently blamed by the CCP leadership for leading to political upheaval, and the series has been banned in China ever since. At the same time, as the CCP leadership pushed further the marketization and economic opening-up of the country in the 1990s, the vacuum left by the decline of Marxism and the political intention to avoid the emergence of subversive interpretations of world history led to an increasing promotion of a state-defined patriotism (*aiguo zhuyi* 爱国主义) as the guiding ideology of historical thinking. This state-defined way of interpreting history relied increasingly on emphasizing Chinese particularities, at least those being considered useful from the perspective of the CCP leadership. Meanwhile, a nationalistic turn also occurred among many of China's historians. The historian Lin Zhichun 林志纯 (also known as Rizhi 日知, 1910-2007) is a prominent example of these trends. Once known as a "red professor", in his later career Lin abandoned his Marxist framework of world history, and by the late 1990s became a popular

⁹ Fan, *World History and National Identity in China*, 175.

advocator of “Chinese characteristics” throughout history, such as ethnic harmony, cosmopolitanism, and continuity of political legitimacy.¹⁰

As has been demonstrated in this summary, there has been a number of works dealing with the issue of universality vs. particularity in China’s world or global historiography. As introduced in these works, while China’s world historiographical traditions go back at least to the 1st-century BCE major work of Sima Qian, during the Late Qing period major changes occurred in Chinese world historiographical thought. These changes were mainly caused by the recognition among Chinese intellectuals that in order to catch up with the West and Japan, China’s world historiography needs to serve the purpose of national modernization and hence the achievement of great power status in a global order defined by competing nation-states. The question of how China’s particularities, i.e. its traditional culture and historical experiences can serve this purpose and how much Western historical experience constitutes a universal pattern of progress to be followed by all other parts of the world, has become debated by a number of intellectuals in the Late Qing and Republican periods. Several prominent intellectuals of the time such as Kang Youwei, and later Chen Yinke and Fu Sinian as well, sought to reconcile Chinese tradition with modernization by emphasizing scientific rationalism in pre-modern Chinese thought. In various ways, they argued that universalistic aims were pursued in particular contexts throughout Chinese history.

There have also been several publications produced on the reception and application of Marxism in Chinese world historiography. Since the early decades of the 20th century, Marxism has increasingly entered China’s intellectual landscape, and following the CCP takeover of mainland China in 1949, Marxism-Leninism was established as mainland China’s state ideology. At a theoretical level, Marxist world historical theory generated intense debates

¹⁰ Fan, 14–15; referencing Rizhi 日知, “Lun Zhong-Xi gudianshi shang ‘Hei’an Shidai’ wenti 论中西古典史上‘黑暗时代’问题 [On the question of ‘Dark Ages’ in Chinese and Western classical history],” *Xueshu Yuekan* 学术月刊 [Academic Monthly], no. 01 (1999): 68–71, <https://doi.org/10.19862/j.cnki.xsyk.1999.01.011>.

among Chinese intellectuals with regard to the question of universality vs. Chinese particularity. As introduced in the sub-chapter, the critique of Eurocentrism in Marxist world historical theory, regarding e.g. the intermediary stages of history (slave-holding, feudalism, capitalism) received critique from various scholars in China, for the perceived biasedness of relying on European historical experience. At the methodological level, one significant debate of 20th-century Chinese world historiography was the debate on the relationship between Marxist theory and historical materials/data, as introduced in 4.1.4.

In the last decades, despite the status of Marxism-Leninism as an official ideology of the People's Republic of China until today, its real influence has steadily declined. Universality and particularity in recent Chinese world/global historical discourses are increasingly linked to discourses on nationality and nationhood, as well as to discourses on pre-modern forms of social and political organization (see the Tianxia discourse). For this reason, the state of the art of scholarship on nationalism and globality in China's recent world/global historiography is analyzed in more detail in 4.1.2.

I argue that the universality vs. particularity approach to analyzing Chinese history remains highly relevant today. While there has been a number of articles written on how this aspect of 20th-century Chinese world historiography evolved, the last decade saw a number of important changes in Chinese world historiographical thought with high relevance for the universality vs. particularity question. The inauguration of the Belt & Road Initiative and the announcement of the “shared destiny of humankind” (*renlei mingyun gongtongti* 人类命运共同体) foreign policy framework signals the Chinese state's interest in framing its role in an increasingly globally conscious manner. At the same time, an increasing interest in China's global interconnections and the rising popularity of the term “global history” (*quanqiushi* 全球史) is apparent in Chinese academia as well. The rising popularity of “civilization history” (*wenmingshi* 文明史) as a distinct paradigm (discussed in more detail in 4.1.3) shows a new

wave of interest in comparative studies of various cultures and civilizations. Under these circumstances, it is clear that the “universality vs. particularity” analytical approach to China’s world/global historiography has relevance to the latest tendencies and needs to be taken into consideration when analyzing the discourse on the Zheng He expeditions.

4.1.2 Nationalism and globality in China’s recent world/global historiography

The calls for a “global view” of history have existed in China since the 1940s, as testified in the works of historian Zhou Gucheng 周谷城 (1898-1996). Zhou saw the national and global perspectives of history as inseparable from each other, using the allegory of the various body parts of one single body.¹¹ He was also an early critic of the Eurocentrism of world historiographical frameworks, discussing this in his three-volume series *Shijie tongshi* (General World History) originally published in 1949.¹² During the 1950s, world history as a distinct study and research field went through an increasing institutionalization, with the official promotion of the Soviet model of Marxist world historiography and the ongoing influence of senior professors often with Western educational backgrounds.¹³

The recent decades in China’s world historiographical scene saw a decline in the influence of Marxist theory and an influx of new global historical theories mainly from the West. Simultaneously, the criticism of Euro-/West-centrism and the emphasis on the need to establish new theoretical frameworks have remained frequent. Recent scholarship on China’s world or global historiography has primarily focused on historiography in relation to the ongoing evolution of China’s national identities and their relations to globality, as well as on

¹¹ Zhou Gucheng 周谷城, “Shixue shang de quanju guannian 史学上的全局观念 [The global view of historiography],” *Xueshu Yuekan* 学术月刊 [Academic Monthly], no. 12 (1959): 58–61.

¹² Zhou Gucheng 周谷城, *Shijie tongshi* 世界通史 [General world history], 3 vols. (Beijing: Shangwu Yinshuguan 商务印书馆 [Commercial Press], 2005 [1949]); for a summary of Zhou Gucheng’s life and works see Chen Yu 陈瑜, “Zhou Gucheng: Zonglun gu-jin, huangshuo zhong-wai 周谷城: 纵论古今, 横说中外 [Zhou Gucheng: discussing ancient and modern, Chinese and foreign],” *Zhongguo Zuoazhewang* 中国作者网 [China Writer] (Source: *Wenhuibao* 文汇报), April 7, 2021, <http://www.chinawriter.com.cn/n1/2021/0407/c404063-32071457.html>. (Accessed on 2023-02-09).

¹³ Fan, *World History and National Identity in China*, 1–15.

the question of how pre-modern Chinese thought relates to particularistic (national) and universalistic (global) identities. In the last two decades, a number of scholars have claimed that although translations of “global history” such as *quanqiu shi* 全球史 and *quanqiu hua shi* 全球化史 (“history of globalization”) have entered the academic debate in China, most scholarship on “global history” remains focused on the nation-state as its primary analytical unit. As Sachsenmaier (2011) puts it,

in a climate of opinion which is, generally speaking, in favor of nationalism and globalization at the same time, alternative political imaginaries to the nation as a historically grown and territorially defined body do not play a very prominent role. [... and therefore] It would be erroneous to assume that in the Chinese context, field designations such as “global history” are treated as largely congruent with critical perspectives of nationhood or nationalism.¹⁴

Spakowski (2009) and Q. E. Wang (2010) discuss world and global history in China in connection with Euro-/West-centrism and nationalism. They point to the Eurocentrism of teleologies and conceptual frameworks in China’s world/global historiography in the post-Mao period. As they argue, the quest of catching up with the industrialized world has been at the center of world-historical thought in China since the Late Qing period. The Western-originated conceptual framework of a global order based on competing nation-states has long been appropriated by China’s historians for contemplating the rise of the Chinese nation-state. Meanwhile, according to these authors, the “global” in most cases had remained a shift in geographical scope without constituting a shift away from the nation-state as the principal unit of analysis. “Global” in this sense is primarily the designation of the stage on which various nation-states compete, as well as a broader context in which the rise of the nation-state can be promoted.¹⁵

¹⁴ Sachsenmaier, *Global Perspectives on Global History*, 218.

¹⁵ Spakowski, “National Aspirations on a Global Stage”; Wang, “‘Rise of the Great Powers’=Rise of China?”

In Chapter 10 of *What is Global History?* (2016), global historian Sebastian Conrad discusses the recent trends in China's global historiography as a case study.¹⁶ Conrad argues that Sinocentrism is the only globally influential alternative centrism to Euro-/West-centrism along which world history will potentially be rethought in the coming decades. According to his assessment, it is an alternative only in the sense of power centers, without constituting a methodological alternative to nation-state-centered historiography. Conrad also warns of the dangers of a re-emerging Sinocentric view of world history promoted by part of China's intellectual elite and its authoritarian party-state. Concerning world historiography and Zheng He historiography in China, Conrad notes that

In China, for example, historians have recently revived the memory of the transoceanic voyages of Zheng He and other feats of past trans-regional engagement in order to stimulate Chinese initiative and encourage China's accession to a leadership position in the world. Indeed, the popularity of world history in China is quite clearly connected to the country's status as a global economic and political power. In public discourse, globalization is sometimes seen almost as a political instrument of the Chinese state. Global history is therefore not generally regarded as a methodological alternative, but as a context in which the growth of the nation can be explained and promoted.¹⁷

Concerning the relationship between pre-modern thought and contemporary global historiography, Wang Gungwu (2013) argues that China's recent global historiography is primarily concerned with finding theoretical and methodological alternatives in pre-modern thought to conceptualize globality and China's role in it. Wang Gungwu focuses on the rediscovery of concepts such as *Tianxia* ("all under Heaven") and *wenming* ("flourishment of civility, civilization") in recent global historiography in China.¹⁸

¹⁶ See Chapter 10 "Global history for whom? The politics of global history" in Conrad, *What Is Global History?*, 205–35..

¹⁷ Conrad, 208; referencing Luo Xu, "Reconstructing World History in the People's Republic of China since the 1980s," *Journal of World History* 18, no. 3 (2007): 325–50.

¹⁸ Wang Gungwu, *Renewal*.

As can be seen, non-Chinese authors writing on global historiography in China have often focused on criticizing China's global historiography as being nationally focused and conceptually West-centric at the same time. Meanwhile, in recent years some remarkable new tendencies have been emerging in China's historiographical discourses which have so far not yet been sufficiently analyzed. The state-led creation and propagation of the concept *renlei mingyun gongtongti* (shared destiny of humankind), and the intellectual discourse on China historically being a "civilization" (*wenming*) instead of a nation-state, incl. the related *wenmingshi* (civilizational history / histories of Civilization) discourse pose new questions to those analyzing China's global historiography today. Simply focusing on a nation vs. globality dichotomy and dismissing China's global historiography as national historiography projected onto a global stage runs the risk of being too simplistic and the failure to understand some crucial recent developments in the field. At the same time, as will be introduced in the next paragraphs, authors claiming to write "civilizational history" or "global history with Chinese characteristics" often tell little about what their actual theoretical and methodological approach consists of, beyond decrying epistemological West-centrism and debating the primacy of Western value systems.

4.1.3 Recent trends in China – Criticism of West-centric “global” historiography and the emergence of “civilizational history” (*wenmingshi*)

Among Chinese authors writing on the topic of global historiography in the Chinese context, common topics include the critique of Eurocentrism in the conceptual frameworks of world/global historiography, the advocacy of national narratives with a global outlook (rejecting the dichotomization of national vs. global historiography), as well as the advocacy of alternative frameworks for analyzing China's globally interconnected history, most notably the advocacy of writing *wenmingshi* 文明史 [civilizational history]. It can be observed that Chinese authors writing in the 2000s and early 2010s still called into question the feasibility and

desirability of a “global view of history”, while those works published in recent years acknowledge the necessity of a global perspective, albeit with considerations of how to write a “global history with Chinese characteristics”. In *Do We Really Need a “Global View of History”?* (2005), Wu Xiaoqun criticizes the West-centrism of mainstream global historiography and argues that history must include “local knowledge” apart from “grand narratives” based primarily on Western historical experience.¹⁹ According to Liu Xincheng in *The Global View of History in China* (2012), methodological questions of how to write a de-Eurocentralized global history are in fact only the surface of a debate on value systems. In order to write a truly “global” history, one would have to agree on a universal set of values for the interpretation and evaluation of history, as Liu argues. The debate on whether this is a realistic and desirable aim, or whether one should strive for global history as a collection of various local knowledges, had become a major issue of China’s global historical thought in Liu’s assessment as of 2012.²⁰

In the latest works on China’s global historiography, the question is not anymore whether a “global perspective” of history is desirable, but rather the question of how this should be linked to a Chinese perspective. In *Quanqiushi yu minzu xushi: Zhongguo tese de quanqiushi heyi keneng* (*Global history and national narrative: How a global history with Chinese characteristics is possible*, 2020), Zhang Xupeng discusses the creation of a “global history with Chinese characteristics”. His article is primarily based on countering the dichotomization of national vs. global history, depicting them as mutually transformative and inclusive rather than opposing to each other. On the one hand, he argues that the globalization of historiography is not necessarily intended at overcoming national perspectives. On the other hand, in Zhang’s

¹⁹ Wu Xiaoqun, “Do We Really Need a ‘Global View of History’?,” trans. Xiansheng Tian, *Chinese Studies in History* 42, no. 3 (April 2009): 45–50; translated from Wu Xiaoqun 吴晓群, “Women zhende xuyao ‘quanqiu shiguan’ ma? 我们真的需要‘全球史观’吗? [Do we really need a ‘global view of history’?],” *Xueshu Yanjiu* 学术研究 [*Academic Research*], no. 01 (2005): 22-25+146.

²⁰ Liu Xincheng, “The Global View of History in China,” 491–511.

view national histories diversify and make global history truly global, and it is only radical nationalist historiographies of the past that need to be overcome in order to contribute to global stability.²¹ In *Wenmingshi yanjiu de Zhongguo shiye* (*The Chinese perspective of research on civilizational history*) (2022), Peking University history professor Zhu Xiaoyuan argues that,

China's historians see national unity and the harmony of humankind as the progress of *wenming* 文明 [civilization/civility]. *Wenming* is an expression of historical progress, to which each country adds its contribution. This belief of seeking the *Datong* 大同 [Great Harmony]²² of the world is markedly different from regarding civilizations as [the source of] conflict, as the source of war. Emphasizing the development of *wenming*, social harmony, and the progress of history as *jin gu xiang cheng* 今古相承 [the new following the old], *gu wei jin yong* 古为今用 [using the past to serve the present], *jin sheng yu gu* 今胜于古 [the present surpassing the past], these are all the traditions of Chinese historiography. This method of observing history can also be applied to research on Europe's civilizational history.²³

Zhu's recent article is based on generalizations both in terms of what is presented as "Chinese/Western civilization", as well as with regard to the views of Chinese historians and the supposed traditions of Chinese historiography. Zhu describes "Chinese civilization" as based on gradual progress, in contrast with the "substitutional nature" (*tidaixing* 替代性) of progress in the Western context based on tension (*zhangli* 张力) and readjustment/consolidation (*zhenghe* 整合). Following this approach, Zhu misses addressing some critical questions such as how "progress" is defined and who defines it, i.e. the potential diversity of voices within one entity (e.g. within "Chinese" or "Western civilization" or among "China's historians"). The article nevertheless echoes well the ideological underpinnings of broader discourses in China on harmony (*hexie* 和谐) and the reintroduction of pre-modern concepts such as *Datong*, as

²¹ Zhang Xupeng 张旭鹏, "Quanqiu shi yu minzu xushi: Zhongguo tese de quanqiu shi heyi keneng 全球史与民族叙事: 中国特色的全球史何以可能 [Global history and national narrative: How is a global history with Chinese characteristics possible?]," *Lishi Yanjiu* 历史研究 [Journal of Historical Research] 2020, no. 1 (2020): 155–73.

²² Lit. "great unity", also a pre-modern concept referring to good social order (esp. based on Confucian ethics).

²³ Zhu Xiaoyuan 朱孝远, "Wenmingshi yanjiu," 13–14.

well as the state-promoted discourse of *renlei mingyun gongtongti* 人类命运共同体 [shared destiny of humankind]. It illustrates well how global historiography in China is evolving in a (re)productive way vis-à-vis such broader discourses.

There has similarly been a growing interest in the “histories of Empire” approach in Western academia, and its implications for China’s historiography. In *Xifang hanxue “diguoshi” fanshi ji qi juxian - Jian tan “wenming shi” fanshi de kexingxing* (“Histories of Empire” in Western Sinology and its limitations - The feasibility of the “histories of Civilization” model) (2021), Wei Xiaoji problematizes the excessive influence of Western “histories of Empire” (*diguoshi* 帝国史) in creating narratives of the Chinese past. In his view, the Western “histories of Empire” approach is based on three main narratives, namely the binary opposition of Han ethnicity vs. other ethnicities, the narrative of an “imperial age” extending from the Qin to the Qing dynasty, and the narrative focusing on imperial despotism in the analysis of pre-modern Chinese history. Wei intends to point out the shortcomings of focusing on these aspects of China’s pre-modern history and is critical of the Eurocentrism of the concept *diguoshi* 帝国 [empire] itself. Instead, he emphasizes the importance of paying attention to the long-term interaction processes among various ethnicities and reconstructing the progress of *wenming*, should be the main aim of present-day narratives of the Chinese past. In this way, according to Wei, China can regain the “main seat” (*zhuwei* 主位) in terms of discursive power on its own historical narratives, while Western Sinology will receive its due “guest seat” (*kewei* 客位), i.e. it will continue to provide new perspective without dominating China’s historiographical debates.²⁴ Wei’s article is similar to those of others critiquing the application of *diguoshi* in the Chinese context.²⁵ Meanwhile, Wei and various other Chinese authors miss the fact that “Empire” (usually with a capital E) is increasingly used in Western academia as an analytical

²⁴ Wei Xiaoji 魏孝稷, “Xifang hanxue ‘diguoshi’ fanshi.”

²⁵ For more on this debate see Wang Hui, *China from Empire to Nation-State*, 3–29.

unit to do research on large, multiethnic, and multicultural political and economic units without the necessary negative connotation of “empire” being an anachronistic state-structure characterized by expansionism.²⁶

The legal scholar Jiang Shigong 强世功 (1967-) is notable in the sense that he does not shy away from embracing the term “empire” (*diguo* 帝国) for describing what he sees as an imperialistic world order defined by competition among various major powers. Jiang is a prominent advocate of Xi Jinping Thought, putting it into global historical contexts and arguing for the historical necessity of the development path chosen by the CCP. In *Zhexue yu lishi* 哲学与历史 (Philosophy and History), Jiang divides the history of the PRC into three stages defined by three of its most influential leaders and their main achievements and aims: Mao Zedong’s achievements in terms of “standing up [for independence]” (*zhan qilai* 站起来), Deng Xiaoping’s achievements in terms of “getting wealthy” (*fu qilai* 富起来), and Xi Jinping’s determination for China to “become powerful” (*qiang qilai* 强起来) on a global scale. Jiang uses references to both Marxist and pre-modern Chinese philosophy to underscore the necessity of this historic progress.²⁷ In *Diguo yu shijie zhixu* 帝国与世界秩序 (Empire and World Order) Jiang draws up a narrative of global history focused on various forms of global order dominated by different types of empires: land-based classical empires, maritime colonial empires of Europe’s early modern era, the US-centered global order of the 20th century, and a new form of

²⁶ Howe, *Empire*, 30., see also in sub-chapter 2.3 on “Nation, Empire, and Tianxia [...]”.

²⁷ Jiang Shigong 强世功, “Zhexue yu lishi - Cong Dang de shijiu dabaogao jiedu ‘Xi Jinping Shidai’ 哲学与历史——从党的十九大报告解读‘习近平时代’ [Philosophy and History: Interpreting the ‘Xi Jinping Era’ through Xi’s Report to the Nineteenth National Congress of the CCP],” *Kaifang Shidai* 开放时代 [Open Times], no. 01 (2018): 11-31+5; for an English translation and critical introduction see Jiang Shigong, “Philosophy and History: Interpreting the ‘Xi Jinping Era’ through Xi’s Report to the Nineteenth National Congress of the CCP,” trans. David Ownby, *Reading the China Dream*, accessed June 16, 2022, <https://www.readingthechinadream.com/jiang-shigong-philosophy-and-history.html>. (Accessed on 2023-02-09).

global order to come in the 21st century based on China's value systems and equal status with the West.²⁸

Apparently influenced by Immanuel Wallerstein's world systems theory, when using the term "world empire" (世界帝国), Jiang in fact discusses various systems of global economic, political, and cultural domination. According to Jiang, in today's global order, the struggle among major powers goes for obtaining a central position in the "world empire",

At present, America is under great pressure as it seeks to maintain its world empire, the pressure coming especially from Russian resistance and Chinese competition. But we must acknowledge that this competition is a competition occurring *within* the system of world empire, a struggle to seize economic and political leadership *after* the realization of "world empire." In fact, we can understand it as a struggle to become the heart of the world empire.²⁹

In Jiang's view, the current "World Empire 1.0" (世界帝国第一版), dominated by the United States, is in decline, and its inevitable collapse will be surrounded by chaos and conflict, as in other transitional periods between various imperial orders. In Jiang's view, the fall of World Empire 1.0 is due to the threefold unresolvable challenges of growing economic inequality, the ineffectiveness of political liberalism, as well as the "decadence and nihilism of cultural liberalism". While Jiang does not provide any definitions of what "ineffectiveness" or "nihilism" mean in this context and remains rather vague about how his predicted "World Empire 2.0" should be imagined, he makes it clear that China has to play a major role in it:

As a great world power that must look beyond its own borders, China must reflect on her own future, for her important mission is not only to revive her traditional culture. China must also patiently absorb the skills and achievements of humanity as a whole, and especially

²⁸ Jiang Shigong 强世功, "Chaodaxing zhengzhi shiti de neizai luoji: 'Diguo' yu shijie zhixu 超大型政治实体的内在逻辑: '帝国' 与世界秩序 [The internal logic of super-sized political entities: "Empire" and world order]," *Wenhua Zongheng 文化纵横 [Cultural Review]*, no. 02 (2019): 18-28+143; for an English translation and critical introduction see Jiang Shigong, "The Internal Logic of Super-Sized Political Entities: 'Empire' and World Order," trans. David Ownby, *Reading the China Dream*, n.d., <https://www.readingthechinadream.com/jiang-shigong-empire-and-world-order.html>. (Accessed on 2023-02-09).

²⁹ Jiang Shigong, "The Internal Logic of Super-Sized Political Entities", italics by the translator.

those employed by Western civilization to construct world empire. Only on this basis can we see the reconstruction of Chinese civilization and the reconstruction of the world order as a mutually re-enforcing whole.³⁰

Among contemporary authors writing on global history and global order, Jiang's World Empire theory is notable for its embracement and reinterpretation, rather than criticism of *diguó*. It is also a peculiar case in which global historical theory-making is combined with a worldview more often seen in nationalistic discourses on international relations. The latter ones, seen in media outlets such as the *Global Times* (*Huanqiu Shibao* 环球时报), similarly revolve around the outspoken criticism of what is perceived as U.S. hegemony, and a desire to see China replacing the United States as the world's main power center or at least achieving an equal status. In terms of emphasis on particularity vis-à-vis universality, while most authors of the *wenmingshi* discourse set out from a focus on Chinese particularism and intend to show that different particularities constitute universality, Jiang's approach follows a reverse logic. Jiang intends to frame global history as a constant struggle among various major powers for dominance and argues that at different points of history, the particularities of different civilizations or nation-states made them suitable for achieving dominant positions.

In summary, it can be seen that in the Chinese discourse on global history there is a strong focus on repelling what is perceived as the intrusiveness of West-centric epistemologies of China's globally connected history, and various proposals for replacing this with analytical frameworks based on China's own epistemological traditions. Some authors tend to have an oversimplified view of what actually global history means in the Western academic context and how China is analyzed based on this. It is perhaps Liu Xincheng's statement that captures the state of affairs the most appropriately, namely that the debate on West-centrism is in fact a debate more of value systems than methodologies. In fact, many authors criticizing West-

³⁰ Jiang Shigong, "The Internal Logic of Super-Sized Political Entities."

centrism are not aware of how much it is problematized in Western academia itself, especially since the Orientalism and decolonization discourses have gained widespread popularity in recent decades. There is also a certain vagueness in defining how the *wenmingshi* or “histories of Civilization” approach can constitute a theoretical and methodological alternative to the Western historiographical approach, beyond being an alternative in terms of value systems. Critical discussions of asymmetrical power relations (among political movements, ethnicities, genders, etc.) are markedly absent from such works, apparently in order to avoid the inconvenient discussions on whose perspective defines what progress in *wenming* means. While such scholarship on the one hand can expose certain shortcomings of many non-Chinese authors’ views on the non-existence of truly *global* historiography in China today, it also runs the risk of political instrumentalization for reinforcing the convenient and state-promoted myths of peaceful interaction and harmony as the defining features of China’s history.

4.1.4 Methodological debates – The issue of theory and data/materials

As Edward Q. Wang argues, Liang Qichao and other reformist intellectuals of the Late Qing were critical of China’s millennia-old historiographical traditions, mainly due to their perceived stagnancy and incapability of facilitating social change. Liang saw China’s dynastic historiography as being based on the notion that there is no essential difference between the past and present, and hence the historian’s task is to judge the deeds of present-day rulers based on whether they compare favorably to the standards set by “virtuous” rulers of the past. In *Xin Shixue* 新史学 (New Historiography, 1902), Liang called for historiography to become a critical, reform-oriented discipline facilitating China’s modernization and catching up with the industrialized world. Liang was aware that some historiographical currents in pre-modern China such as the *kaozheng* movement of the Qing dynasty, especially prominent during the Qianlong (1735-1796) and Jiaqing (1796-1820) reigns, strived for the rationalization of

historiography by means of textual criticism.³¹ In today's scholarship, it is widely accepted that scientific historiography in China did not solely emerge out of the increasing adoption of Western methodologies since the Late Qing period. The *kaozheng* tradition is seen by various scholars as an indigenous Chinese precursor to the subsequent Western-influenced scholarship calling into question the authority of Confucian classics, advocating methodologies based on source criticism and evidence-based/empirical research.³²

During the 20th century, as Western theoretical frameworks increasingly entered China's historiographical debates, the methodological debate on theory vs. data/materials gained increasing prominence as well. This was evident in the case of applying Marxist theory in the analysis of Chinese history. According to Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, the discourse on *shi* 史 (historical materials/data) vis-à-vis *lun* 论 (theory) was the most significant methodological debate of 20th-century Chinese historiography. The methodological *shi-lun* discourse is partly interrelated with the universality vs. particularity theoretical discourse discussed in 4.1.1, and was primarily concerned with the relationship between Marxist historical theory and evidence from Chinese history. The slogans invented by various historians of the period to summarize their positions on the *shi-lun* question included “theory leading over data and materials” (*yi lun dai shi* 以论带史), “interpretations have to emerge from data” (*lun cong shi chu* 论从史出), and “data and theory need to be combined” (*shi lun jiehe* 史论结合).³³

The first approach was especially advocated by those who firmly believed in the unquestionable nature of Marxist theory, i.e. in the deterministic nature of human history as progress through various stages of class struggle towards a classless society. Materials and data from the past for such authors were less important than ideological firmness in the present, and the selective recounting of past events served primarily as a confirmation of the pre-determined

³¹ Wang, *Inventing China Through History*, 17–18.

³² George G. Iggers, Q. Edward Wang, and Supriya Mukherjee, *A Global History of Modern Historiography*, 1st ed. (Harlow, England ; New York: Pearson Education, 2008), 53, 135–36.

³³ Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, “On Shi and Lun,” 78–81.

narrative of humanity's progress as a whole. In contrast, historians incl. Wu Han argued for *lun cong shi chu*, i.e. probing historical data before arranging them in a way that interpretation can emerge, Wu believed that if Marxism was true, historical data would necessarily lead to a Marxist interpretation of history. By the early 1960s, Jian Bozan developed the slogan *shi lun jiehe* for bridging the gap between the two opposing approaches. Jian encouraged research into historical documents and their combination with Marxist theory, instead of exclusively relying on either of them.³⁴

As already introduced in chapter 2 on theory and as will be further demonstrated in the detailed analysis part (5.3), in recent Chinese historiographical debates various new theoretical frameworks have been introduced, partly from foreign scholarship (such as e.g. the “histories of Empire”) and partly based on the re-introduction of pre-modern Chinese concepts (e.g. Tianxia and *wenming*). The methodological debate of theory (*lun*) vis-à-vis historical data (*shi*), similarly to the debate on universality and particularity introduced earlier, remains relevant in the context of recent mainland Chinese historiography analyzed for the present dissertation.

4.2 Scholarship on recent trends in the discourse on the Zheng He missions

The present section aims to summarize the state of the art of scholarship on Zheng He historiography, and in a broader sense on the images and perceptions of Zheng He. The first sub-section deals with scholarship on academic historiography, while the latter one introduces various works primarily from the fields of anthropology and cultural studies, dealing with Zheng He's images and perceptions today, to introduce the broader context of Zheng He's impact today.

³⁴ Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, "On Shi and Lun", 78–82; Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, "History and Truth in Chinese Marxist Historiography," in *Historical Truth, Historical Criticism, and Ideology. Chinese Historiography and Historical Culture from a New Comparative Perspective*, ed. Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer, Achim Mittag, and Jörn Rüsen, vol. 1, Leiden Series in Comparative Historiography (Brill, 2005), 431ff.

4.2.1 Scholarship on recent trends in academic historiography on the Zheng He missions

Following the upsurge of interest in the missions in recent decades, summaries of the recent trends in historical scholarship have been published by various authors both inside and outside of mainland China. A major multilingual bibliography with an editorial introduction, focusing especially on primary sources and academic works, was published by Liu, Chen & Blue in 2014. The bibliography includes publications in thirteen languages: Arabic, Chinese, English, French, German, Japanese, Indonesian, Italian, Malay, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, and Thai.³⁵

In general, historians both inside and outside mainland China tend to criticize earlier scholarship for being overtly Sinocentric and continentally focused in its perspectives. In recent publications by non-Chinese experts of Chinese and Indo-Pacific maritime history, the missions are increasingly framed as an important episode in the *long durée* history of interaction across the Indo-Pacific maritime space. In these works, Chinese and non-Chinese primary sources are investigated to determine the motivations and impact of the missions on a transregional scale. These authors are critical of both the propagandistic representation of Zheng He as an “envoy of peace” (common in mainland Chinese media and cultural diplomacy), as well as the efforts of some authors to depict the missions as a form of proto-colonialism.³⁶ It is generally emphasized that based on Chinese primary sources, the motivations of the Yongle emperor to launch the missions were at first aimed at securing his domestic legitimacy after the civil war against his predecessor, the Jianwen emperor (r. 1399-1402). Concerning the foreign states visited during the Zheng He missions, the main aim of the Ming court was apparently the supervision of the main nodes and networks of the Indo-Pacific maritime space. Military conquest was apparently not the purpose of the missions, but military force was used in a couple

³⁵ Ying Liu, Zhongping Chen, and Gregory Blue, eds., *Zheng He's Maritime Voyages (1405-1433) and China's Relations with the Indian Ocean World: A Multilingual Bibliography* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

³⁶ For the latter see Geoff Wade, “The Zheng He Voyages: A Reassessment,” *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 78 (January 2005): 37–58, <https://doi.org/10.2307/41493537>.

of cases against those openly opposing the Ming-dominated regional order. According to Schottenhammer's assessment, China's retreat from the role of the maritime hegemon of the Indo-Pacific region was not forced on it by any other rival maritime power at the time and was more likely related to the high cost of the missions criticized by members of the Ming elite, as well as to the increasing challenge posed by the Mongols on the Ming empire's northern continental border.³⁷ Recent scholarship on the missions published outside of China also emphasizes a Braudelian view of global history concerning maritime vis-à-vis continental perspectives. The transformative impact of maritime exchanges on continental empires is thus increasingly emphasized, instead of the traditional historiographical approach focused on continental imperial centers and maritime exchange as a type of their "peripheric activities". It is thus often pointed out that while the Zheng He missions were a major set of events based on the decisions of China's ruling elite, they did not result in the creation of entirely new transregional connections (such as e.g. the European "discovery" of the Americas did). They relied on long-established connections across the Indo-Pacific littoral and China's trade links with the maritime world which had existed at least since the Qin-Han period.³⁸ Members of the Zheng He missions were apparently already informed on many of the foreign countries to be visited by earlier travelogues written by Chinese travelers of the Song-Yuan period such as the *Zhu fan zhi* 诸蕃志 [Records of foreign peoples] edited by Zhao Rukuo 赵汝适 (1170-1231) and the *Daoyi zhilüe* 岛夷志略 [Brief account of the island barbarians] written by Wang Dayuan 汪大渊 (fl. 1310s-1350s). The Zheng He missions thus rather added a new major episode to the *longue durée* history of Indo-Pacific maritime interactions, and bear little similarities to the European "Age of Discoveries", as it is often pointed out.³⁹

³⁷ Angela Schottenhammer, "The 'China Seas' in World History: A General Outline of the Role of Chinese and East Asian Maritime Space from Its Origins to c. 1800," *Journal of Marine and Island Cultures* 1, no. 2 (December 2012): 80–81.

³⁸ Schottenhammer, 67–70.

³⁹ Roderich Ptak, *China und Asiens maritime Achse im Mittelalter: Konzepte, Wahrnehmungen, offene Fragen* [China and Asia's maritime axis in the Middle Ages: concepts, perceptions, open questions], 1 edition, Das

Besides this, non-Chinese historians generally discuss the routes taken by the missions as well. While the identity of some locations mentioned in the primary sources is still debated, and there are different views on the farthest location visited by the missions, there is consensus on the point that it is highly unlikely that any sub-fleet of the Zheng He missions sailed further than the East African coast.⁴⁰ This is frequently discussed in the non-Chinese academic discourse due to the popularity of pseudo-historiography around the Zheng He missions and its reproduction by certain less critical audiences is frequently pointed out as well.⁴¹ Most notable in this context are the works of the former UK Navy officer Gavin Menzies (1937-2020) including claims of Zheng He visiting Europe, the Americas, and Australia.⁴² With no knowledge of Chinese and a lack of relevant academic degrees, Menzies based his claims on expertise in nautical technology, sea current patterns, and wind patterns. His theses have universally been refuted by acknowledged experts of nautical technology and history, and among those familiar with the primary sources on the missions.⁴³ Meanwhile, his books brought financial success to Menzies, with the idea of America being first “discovered” by a Chinese admiral instead of Columbus being especially popular among certain non-academic circles.⁴⁴

mittelalterliche Jahrtausend [The medieval millennium] (Berlin ; Boston: De Gruyter Akademie Forschung, 2019), 1–3; Tansen Sen, “The Impact of Zheng He’s Expeditions on Indian Ocean Interactions,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 79, no. 3 (2016): 609–36.

⁴⁰ Ptak, *China und Asiens maritime Achse*, 43; also referencing José Manuel Malhão Pereira and Jin Guoping, *Navegações chinesas no século XV. Realidade e ficção [Chinese navigation in the 15th century. Reality and fiction]* (Lisbon: Academia de Marinha, 2006).

⁴¹ Pseudo-historiography, throughout the dissertation, is used in the sense of referring to publications which claim to recount historical events but fail to present convincing archaeological or textual evidence for their historical veracity.

⁴² Gavin Menzies, *1421: The Year China Discovered The World*, 1st edition (London ; New York: Bantam Press, 2002); Gavin Menzies, *1434: The Year a Chinese Fleet Sailed to Italy and Ignited the Renaissance*, 1 edition (London: Harper, 2009).

⁴³ Chen, Jeng-Horng 陈政宏, “Zheng He misi yu zhengming 郑和迷思与正名 [Zheng He: myths and renaming],” *Haiyang Wenhua Xuekan 海洋文化学刊 [Oceanic Culture Journal]*, no. 2 (2006): 49–89; Peng Yong 彭勇, “Zhong shizheng, kuaxueke, quanqiu hua: Gaige Kaifang yilai Zheng He xia Xiyang yanjiu 重实证, 跨学科, 全球化: 改革开放以来郑和下西洋研究 [Evidence-based, interdisciplinary, globalized: Research on the Zheng He missions since the Reform and Opening-up],” *Jinan Xuebao (Zhexue Shehui Kexue Ban) 暨南学报(哲学社会科学版) [Journal of Jinan University - Philosophy and Social Sciences]* 42, no. 08 (2020): 98–109; see also in Ptak, *China und Asiens maritime Achse*.

⁴⁴ Wu Yan 吴彦 and Chen Zhongping 陈忠平, “Huaren ‘faxian’ Meizhou, Zheng He xia Xiyang ji zaoqi quanqiu hua 华人‘发现’美洲、郑和下西洋及早期全球化 [Chinese ‘discoveries’ of America, the Zheng He missions and early globalization],” in *Zouxiang duoyuan wenhua de quanqiu shi: Zheng He xia Xiyang (1405-1433)*

Chinese scholars writing on recent trends in Zheng He historiography generally praise the tendency towards making Zheng He research more primary source-based and globalized, the latter aspect referring to the increased referencing of non-Chinese primary sources on the missions. In his major monograph on “Rethinking the Zheng He Missions” (2013), former assistant professor of history at Xiamen University Zhou Yunzhong 周运中 (1984-) presents a number of newly discovered, less-known Chinese primary sources.⁴⁵ Throughout his monograph, Zhou intends to correct various misunderstandings in earlier scholarship on the missions, including the unfounded myths on the motivations behind launching the missions, incorrect understanding of the exact routes, as well as the myth of their complete pacifism, among others.⁴⁶

In his 2020 article, historian and director of the School of History and Culture at the Central University of Nationalities in Beijing (中央民族大学历史文化学院) Peng Yong 彭勇 (1970-) describes the latest tendencies in history research as being characterized by the progress towards more evidence-based, interdisciplinary, and globalized perspectives. Peng Yong divides Zheng He research into three main periods since the Reform and Opening-up: 1., a “recovery and development period” of the 1980s and 1990s; 2. the “Zheng He fever” of the 2000s incl. the especially large amount of publications around the 600th anniversary of the first mission in 2005; 3. the period of “‘Maritime Silk Roads’ and globalized perspectives” since the

ji Zhongguo yu Yinduyang shijie de guanxi, ed. Chen Zhongping 陈忠平, 1st ed. (Beijing: Shenghuo-Dushu-Xinzhishi Sanlian Shudian 生活·读书·新知三联书店 [SDX Joint Publishing], 2017), 154–200.

⁴⁵ Zhou Yunzhong was fired from Xiamen University in 2018, following a number of controversial Weibo posts made by him under the name *Donghai daozi* 东海道子. As reported in a number of Chinese and some English-language online articles, Zhou made controversial comments generalizing Chinese people as lying and fraudulent, and also insulted the ruling Communist Party of China. Zhou has a strong publication record with more than 90 publications appearing under his name in CNKI as of 2022-10-19. In the academic publications consulted for the present dissertation (published prior to 2018), Zhou’s views can be described as critical towards nationalistic myth-building around the missions, but no comparable views to the ones which led to the 2018 controversy can be observed. For more on the controversy see <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/xiamen-professor-09042018130814.html> (Accessed on 2022-10-19).

⁴⁶ Zhou Yunzhong 周运中, *Zheng He xia Xiyang xin kao* 郑和下西洋新考 [*Reinvestigating Zheng He’s voyages to the Western Ocean*], Xiamen Daxue Renwen Xueyuan Qingnian Xueshu Wenku 厦门大学人文学院青年学术文库 [Xiamen University Faculty of Humanities Youth Academic Series] (Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Chubanshe 中国社会科学出版社 [China Social Sciences Press], 2013), 1–52.

2010s. According to Peng, the latest period is characterized by the interdisciplinaryization of Zheng He research due to the greater involvement of perspectives from political science, economics, and environmental history. In Peng's view, the globalization of Zheng He research entails both more consideration of non-Chinese primary sources, as well as more cooperation with non-Chinese researchers on the topic, especially from North America and Southeast Asia.⁴⁷ The same view is shared by Chen Zhongping 陈忠平, a professor of history at the University of Victoria (Canada) and editor of a major recent Chinese-language edited volume based on the 2014 conference "Zheng He's Maritime Voyages (1405-1433) and China's Relations with the Indian Ocean World from Antiquity (University of Victoria, Canada).⁴⁸ In Chen Zhongping's view, the missions constituted a major step towards a "global revolution of networks" (*quanqiuxing wangluo geming* 全球性网络革命) is necessary for the proper reinterpretation of the role of Zheng He's missions in global history. In Chen's view, understanding the history of the missions also contributes to a multicultural view of global history going beyond West-centric approaches such as the history of colonialism.⁴⁹

Especially among non-Chinese scholars, the politicization of historiography in China in general and the myth-making around Zheng He as a symbol of outward openness and maritime power is also often criticized. Wade has framed the missions as a failed maritime proto-colonial experiment of the Ming dynasty which has been whitewashed in recent Chinese historiography to suit the country's foreign policy needs.⁵⁰ In his 2006 article on "myths and renaming" (迷思与正名), Taiwanese nautical history expert Jeng-Horng Chen 陈政宏 presents a critical review

⁴⁷ Peng Yong 彭勇, "Zhong shizheng, kuaxueke, quanqiuhua."

⁴⁸ Chen Zhongping 陈忠平, ed., *Zouxian duoyuan wenhua de quanqiushi: Zheng He xia Xiyang (1405-1433) ji Zhongguo yu Yinduyang shijie de guanxi* 走向多元文化的全球史: 郑和下西洋 (1405-1433) 及中国与印度洋世界的关系 [Towards a multicultural global history: Zheng He's maritime voyages and China's relations with the Indian Ocean world], 1st ed. (Beijing: Shenghuo-Dushu-Xinzhi Sanlian Shudian 生活·读书·新知三联书店 [SDX Joint Publishing], 2017), 1–21.

⁴⁹ Chen Zhongping 陈忠平, 1–21, 22–75.

⁵⁰ Geoff Wade, "The Zheng He Voyages: A Reassessment," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 78 (2005): 37–58.

of mainland Chinese scholarship on the Zheng He missions, concerning both historicity and the politicization of historiography. Chen points out the implausibility of the ship sizes of Zheng He's main ships thought by many to be as large as ca. 128-146 m in length and ca. 52-59 m in breadth.⁵¹ Chen also criticizes the common Chinese-language designation of the missions as *Zheng He xia Xiyang* 郑和下西洋 (lit. "Zheng He descending to the Western Ocean"). In his view, the verb *xia* ("descending") reproduces the paternalistic attitudes of pre-modern Chinese elites viewing the "Western Ocean" as inferior to China and reinforces expansionist attitudes among contemporary Chinese elites. While acknowledging that Zheng He's missions were unique in their size and geographic extent, Chen also points to the number of other envoys and smaller missions sent by the Ming emperors during the early Ming period. Based on Chen's research altogether 59 foreign maritime missions were dispatched by the Ming court between 1369 and 1457, only 7 of which were led by Zheng He.⁵² Chen thus argues for framing Zheng He's missions as part of a larger process of Early Ming interactions with the maritime world. As a summary, Chen proposes the term *Mingchu huanguan shi Xiyang* 明初宦官使西洋 ("the dispatch of Early Ming eunuchs to the Western Ocean") instead of *Zheng He xia Xiyang*.⁵³ In a more recent work, Sen also problematizes the interference of politics and nationalistic sentiments in historiography, especially during the early 2000s "Zheng He fervor" (in Chinese known as *Zheng He re* 郑和热).⁵⁴

In general, it can be said that since the 2000s "Zheng He fervor" there has been a shift towards more internationalized research on the Zheng He missions in mainland China. This internationalization can be attested in terms of research activities (cooperation with non-

⁵¹ Chen, Jeng-Horng 陈政宏, "Zheng He misi yu zhengming"; for an English-language publication on the topic see Sally K. Church, "The Colossal Ships of Zheng He: Image or Reality?," in *Zheng He: Images & Perceptions / Bilder & Wahrnehmungen*, vol. 15, South China and Maritime Asia (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2005), 155–76.

⁵² Chen, Jeng-Horng 陈政宏, "Zheng He misi yu zhengming," 51–54.

⁵³ Chen, Jeng-Horng 陈政宏, 85.

⁵⁴ Sen, "The Impact of Zheng He's Expeditions," 611.

Chinese researchers) in the increased inclusion of network-based and global historical perspectives, as well as in more attention being paid to non-Chinese primary sources. There have also been efforts towards a more critical analysis of the primary sources, in order to detect mythicized elements in the *Mingshi* and other later sources (e.g. the ship sizes), as well as to debunk pseudo-historical theses such as those put forward by Menzies. Zhou Yunzhong's monograph *Zheng He xia Xiyang xinkao* (2013) and Chen Zhongping's edited volume *Zouxiang duoyuan wenhua de quanqiushi* (2017) set new standards for Zheng He research in China in these regards. Both works reflect on various critical issues less discussed during the earlier "Zheng He fervor" period. Based also on the primary and early sources (see in 5.1), they convincingly question the narrative of the entirely pacifist nature of the missions, emphasize their role as legitimizing tools of the Yongle emperor in the context of Chinese domestic politics, as well as place them into the *long durée* history of interconnectivity across the Indo-Pacific maritime space. At the same time, recent research in China and other countries has also convincingly argued against seeing too deep similarities between the Zheng He missions and subsequent European colonialism, pointing to abstention from armed expansion and direct political or economic control from the side of the Ming elites.

4.2.1 Scholarship on Zheng He's images and perceptions – Political instrumentalization and identity-building

Zheng He's role as an identity figure and the political instrumentalization of his missions have been discussed by various authors in recent decades. One major work in this regard is the trilingual (German-French-English) edited volume *Zheng He: Images & Perceptions / Bilder & Wahrnehmungen* (2005).⁵⁵ In the introduction of the edited volume (pp. 9-38.) "Zheng He: Geschichte und Fiktion" (Zheng He: History and Fiction), Ptak and Salmon provide an overview of the evolution of Zheng He's images and perceptions in relation to China's

⁵⁵ Roderich Ptak and Claudine Salmon, eds., *Zheng He: Images & Perceptions / Bilder & Wahrnehmungen*, South China and Maritime Asia Vol. 15. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2005).

ideological transformations from the time of the mission until the early 2000s. As pointed out by Ptak and Salmon, Liang Qichao's 1905 article *Zuguo da hanghaijia Zheng He zhuan* (Biography of the Great Navigator of the Motherland, Zheng He) played the major role in initiating the modern-era discourse on the missions. Liang's account of the missions is closely connected to China's anti-colonial movements of the time, seeking inspiration from the past to reestablish maritime power in his era (more on this in 5.1 "Capturing the discursive context").⁵⁶ During the Mao era, while not a central part of China's cultural diplomacy, their referential value for China's peaceful approach to engagement with other Third World nations was invoked in some of Zhou Enlai's speeches during his visits to other Asian countries and Africa.⁵⁷

The inauguration of the Reform and Opening-up led to a rediscovery and reinterpretation of the Zheng He missions, as they became increasingly relevant to the newly emerging narrative of outward openness. As introduced by several contributors to Ptak & Salmon's edited volume, beyond the state-promoted image of Zheng He as a supposed predecessor to China's opening up and pacifism, there have been various other identity groups appropriating the image of Zheng He for their own identity-building purposes. As Françoise Aubin and Ralph Kauz demonstrate, Zheng He's image as a prominent Hui Chinese and envoy of China to the Islamic world has been especially popular among China's Hui minority.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Liang Qichao 梁启超, "Zuguo da hanghaijia Zheng He zhuan 祖国大航海家郑和传 [The biography of Zheng He, great navigator of the motherland]," *Xin Min Congbao 新民丛报 [New Citizen]* 3, no. 21 (1904); Ptak and Salmon, *Zheng He*, 25.

⁵⁷ Ptak and Salmon, *Zheng He*, 25; referencing Zheng Zi 郑梓, "'Zheng He xia Xiyang' shishi de xuni yu shijing. Yi jin ershi nian lai Zhongguo dalu 'Zheng He re' wei zhongxin pouxi '郑和下西洋' 史实的虚拟与实境. 以近二十年来中国大陆'郑和热'为中心剖析 [Fabrications and facts of the historical events surrounding 'Zheng He's journeys to the Western Ocean'. An analysis focused on mainland China's 'Zheng He fever' of the last 20 years]," in *Zheng He xia Xiyang guoji xueshu yantaohui lunwenji 郑和下西洋国际学术研讨会论文集 [Papers from the international symposium on the Zheng He missions]*, ed. Chen Xin-xiong 陈信雄 and Chen Yu-nü 陈玉女 (Taipei: Daoxiang Chubanshe 稻香出版社, 2003), 21–40.

⁵⁸ Françoise Aubin, "Zheng He, héros ethnique des Hui ou musulmans chinois [Zheng He, ethnic hero of the Hui or the Chinese Muslims]," in *Zheng He: Images & Perceptions / Bilder & Wahrnehmungen*, vol. 15, South China and Maritime Asia (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2005), 57–74; Ralph Kauz, "Zheng He und der Islam in Fujian: Das Bild Zheng Hes als gläubiger Muslim in der neueren chinesischen Geschichtsschreibung [Zheng He and Islam in Fujian: Zheng He's image as devout Muslim in recent Chinese historiography]," in *Zheng He: Images*

Among Hui Chinese authors, a popular topic has been Zheng He's supposed Muslim piety, which in fact has little evidence in primary sources.⁵⁹ The origins of Zheng He's family, supposedly going back to the Islamic prophet Muhammad's family via Sayyid Ajall Shams al-Dīn / *Saidianchi* 赛典赤 (Yuan-era governor of Yunnan, of Central Asian origin) are popularly discussed among Hui Chinese authors, while generating little interest among non-Hui authors, as Aubin introduces. In less critical academic publications written by Hui Chinese authors and published in China, these supposed but rather debated origins are frequently treated as fact, in order to conform with the common narrative among the Hui population, as Aubin also notes.⁶⁰ Kauz furthermore observes a "competition" (*Wettbewerb*) among various localities within China to claim the missions as part of their cultural heritage and attract tourism based on this. These localities include Kunming in Yunnan (the birthplace of Zheng He), Nanjing (the starting point of the missions), the Changle district of Fuzhou, Fujian (an anchoring place of the Zheng He fleet for longer periods), Quanzhou in Fujian (where an inscription by a member of the missions has been discovered in the Muslim cemetery of the city), as well as Xi'an (where Zheng He supported the restoration of various local mosques).⁶¹

Beyond China's borders, the missions received a significant amount of attention in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, partly due to the large Chinese diaspora populations in these states, and partly due to the importance of diplomatic and economic relations with China. With a focus on the resurging interest in the missions in Indonesia, Claudine Salmon (2005) presents the various legends around the missions and their members in Indonesian folklore, as well as the various Indonesian translations of the late Ming novel *Sanbao Taijian Xiyang ji tongsu yanyi* mostly published in the late-19th and early-20th centuries.⁶² Salmon also discusses

& *Perceptions / Bilder & Wahrnehmungen*, vol. 15, South China and Maritime Asia (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2005), 75–90.

⁵⁹ Kauz, "Zheng He und der Islam in Fujian," 85–89.

⁶⁰ Aubin, "Zheng He, héros ethnique," 61–67.

⁶¹ Kauz, "Zheng He und der Islam in Fujian," 78–83.

⁶² The *Sanbao Taijian Xiyang ji tongsu yanyi* 三宝太监西洋记通俗演义 [Romance of the Three Jewels Eunuch's journey to the Western Ocean] (1597), often abbreviated as *Xiyang ji* 西洋记 (Journey to the Western Ocean), is

the recent restoration of various locations associated with Zheng He legends in Indonesia, such as the Gedung Batu temple complex in Semarang, Java.⁶³

Hrubý's more recent publication (2021) on the role of the Zheng He missions in China's cultural diplomacy in Malaysia suggests that in the years since 2005, the Chinese state has stepped up its efforts to instrumentalize the already existing Zheng He cult to foster good relations with Southeast Asian states. Hrubý argues that Zheng He establishes a "common ground" among various state actors (China, Malaysia) and ethnic groups (Malay majority, Chinese minority) in Malaysia. Hrubý emphasizes convergence between the Chinese state-promoted narrative on Zheng He and the narrative emerging among local populations in Malaysia. As pointed out in the conclusion of his chapter,

While the Malaysian government might be cautious about allowing the overall promotion of Chinese heritage, Zheng He's voyages present a common ground which opens a new civic space in which they can assert their unique identity without jeopardizing their loyalty to the nation-state in which they live or operate.

[...] the synergy of various local interests centered on Zheng He means that members of the overseas Chinese community are willing to adopt and further develop the original PRC narrative of peaceful exploration and cultural exchange.⁶⁴

Japanese anthropologist Matsumoto Masumi 松本ますみ (2017) discusses the "Zheng He discourse" (*Tei Wa gensetsu* 鄭和言説) within the "Belt & Road concept" (*Ittai Ichiro kōsō*

a fantasy novel by Luo Maodeng 罗懋登 loosely based on the Zheng He missions. For more information see Roderich Ptak's contribution to the volume, Roderich Ptak, "Zheng He in Mekka: Anmerkungen zum Sanbao taijian Xiyang ji tongsu yanyi [Zheng He in Mecca: Remarks on the Sanbao taijian Xiyang ji tongsu yanyi]," in *Zheng He: Images & Perceptions / Bilder & Wahrnehmungen*, vol. 15, South China and Maritime Asia (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2005), 91–112.

⁶³ Claudine Salmon, "Sanbao taijian en Indonésie et les traductions malaises du Xiyang ji [Sanbao taijian in Indonesia and the Malay translations of Xiyang ji]," in *Zheng He: Images & Perceptions / Bilder & Wahrnehmungen*, vol. 15, South China and Maritime Asia (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2005), 113–36.

⁶⁴ Jakub Hrubý, "Establishing a Common Ground—Admiral Zheng He as an Agent of Cultural Diplomacy in Malaysia," in *Transnational Sites of China's Cultural Diplomacy: Central Asia, Southeast Asia, Middle East and Europe Compared*, ed. Jarmila Ptáčková, Ondřej Klimeš, and Gary Rawnsley (Singapore: Springer, 2021), 107–8.

「一带一路」構想). The article is based on Matsumoto's field trips to various Zheng He-related touristic sites in Nanjing and Malacca (Malaysia), as well as her participation in various forums of Sino-Islamic intercultural dialogue bearing Zheng He's name, organized in Yinchuan (Ningxia Hui A.R., China), Kuala Lumpur, and Dubai. Matsumoto argues that two parallel discourses on the Zheng He missions co-exist, one of which is the top-down discourse of cultural diplomacy generated by the Chinese state and intended to support its "Belt & Road concept" of international relations. This state-promoted discourse on Zheng He, according to Matsumoto, frames Zheng He as a national hero of the Chinese nation as a whole, playing down the Muslim component of his figure. The other one is the bottom-up discourse on Zheng He as a symbol of Sino-Islamic intercultural understanding and pacifism, emerging esp. among China's Hui minority and ethnic Chinese diaspora communities in Southeast Asia. As for the bottom-up discourse, a peculiar example is the US-based Zheng He International Peace Foundation established by Ma Haiyun 马海云, a US-based Hui historian known for his vocal criticism of the Chinese state's policy towards its Muslim minority, incl. Xinjiang's Uyghur population.⁶⁵

Chinese authors discussing the connection between Zheng He's images and cultural diplomacy include Southeast Asia expert Shi Xueqin 施雪琴 (2011) and the senior Middle East expert Ma Lirong 马丽蓉 (2015). In *Zheng He xingxiang jiangou yu Zhongguo-Dongnanyang guojia guanxi fazhan* (The construction of Zheng He's image and the development of relations between China and the countries of Southeast Asia), professor at Xiamen University's South China Sea Research Institute (南洋研究院) Shi Xueqin primarily focuses on the significance of Zheng He's cult among Southeast Asia's Sinophone communities, emphasizing Zheng He's

⁶⁵ Matsumoto Masumi 松本ますみ, "'Ittai ichiro' kōsō no naka no Tei Wa gensetsu: Chūka minzoku no ei'yū ka, Kaizoku no ei'yū ka 「一带一路」構想の中の「鄭和」言説: 中華民族の英雄か, 回族の英雄か [The Zheng He discourse in China's 'One Belt, One Road' vision: Hero of the Chinese nation or hero of the Hui ethnicity?]," *Kokuritsu Minzokugaku Hakubutsukan Chōsa Hōkō* 国立民族学博物館調査報告 [Senri Ethnological Reports], no. 142 (2017): 31–54.

potential as a symbolic figure in developing mutually beneficial relations with the Southeast Asian states.⁶⁶ In *"Yidai yilu" yu Ya-Fei zhanlüe hezuo zhong de "zongjiao yinsu"* (The "Belt & Road Initiative" and the "religious factor" in strategic co-operation with Asia and Africa), director of the Shanghai International Studies University's Institute for Silk Road Strategy Studies (上海外国语大学丝路战略研究所) Ma Lirong (1966-) sets out with an overview of China's cultural diplomacy with Asian and African countries since the 1950s. Ma puts the rediscovery of Zheng He's missions into a broader historical and geographical context and emphasizes the continuity in China's peaceful approach to international relations since Zhou Enlai's Asian and African visits of the 1950s until the inauguration of the Belt & Road Initiative in 2013, with an interruption during the 1960s and 1970s (referring to the Cultural Revolution). Ma argues that Zheng He's figure can serve as an important symbol of peaceful diplomacy and religious tolerance, due to his embracement of various religions (Islam, Buddhism, Mazu faith) during his life. According to Ma, the rediscovery of Zheng He in China's BRI-related cultural diplomacy can tackle challenges such as those posed by Islamic extremism, due to its potential to emphasize China's own Muslim heritage.⁶⁷ As visible from these works, Chinese academic publications on the images and perceptions of Zheng He are heavily policy-oriented, aimed at providing suggestions on how the Chinese state can further its interests by appropriately instrumentalizing Zheng He's figure in its cultural diplomacy towards foreign states.

⁶⁶ Shi Xueqin 施雪琴, "Zheng He xingxiang jiangou yu Zhongguo - Dongnanya guojia guanxi fazhan 郑和形象建构与中国-东南亚国家关系发展 [The construction of Zheng He's image and the development of relations between China and the countries of Southeast Asia]," *Hainan Shifan Daxue Xuebao (Shehui Kexue Ban)* 海南师范大学 (社会科学版) [*Journal of Hainan Normal University (Social Sciences)*] 24, no. 5 (General No. 115) (2011): 46–52.

⁶⁷ Ma Lirong 马丽蓉, *"Yidai yilu" yu Ya-Fei zhanlüe hezuo zhong de 'zongjiao yinsu' '一带一路'与亚非战略合作中的'宗教因素'* [The 'One Belt, One Road' initiative and the 'religious factor' in strategic co-operation with Asia and Africa], *Xiya Feizhou 西亚非洲* [*West Asia and Africa*], no. 04 (2015): 4–20.

4.3 Summary

In the present chapter on the state of the art, the main recent tendencies of mainland Chinese research on global historiography and the Zheng He missions have been introduced. This also serves as an indication of what the focus of the subsequent discursive analytical chapter is going to be, and how this will contribute to the field beyond what has already been published. As has been introduced in 4.1.2, mostly non-Chinese authors writing in the 2000s and early 2010s have often framed China's global historiography as a national historiography projected onto a global scale. At the same time, as introduced in 4.1.3, in recent years a number of Chinese authors have increasingly criticized the West-centric epistemologies and value systems of contemporary global historiography in the West and called for the construction of globally-oriented Chinese theoretical frameworks such as the *wenmingshi* ("histories of Civilization") approach.

Relating this to the issue of universality and particularity introduced in 4.1.1, the subsequent chapter will investigate how universality and particularity are related to each other in the recent historiographical debates on the Zheng He missions. It is evident that in the recent Chinese discourse on global historiography, there are two parallel tendencies with regard to universality and particularity. One is the necessity to "think globally", i.e. to see global interconnections beyond national or regional boundaries. The other is the urge to avoid relying solely on Western theory-making, i.e. the advocacy of re-introducing Chinese and East Asian particularities into the theory-making process. By focusing on Zheng He historiography, the subsequent chapter will investigate further how these two parallel aims converge or diverge with/from each other, and why in my opinion the new paradigm of "Silk Roads Power-Knowledge Complex"-related thinking about global history is emerging in China's recent Zheng He historiography.

Concerning the state of the art of Zheng He historiography per se, the main contribution of the subsequent analytical chapter to the field will mostly consist of relating the latest

tendencies of Zheng He research to the proposed concepts of “Silk Roads Power-Knowledge Complex”, “Belt & Road Worldview”, and “Belt & Road Historiography”. This goes beyond simply discussing the evolving “images and perceptions” of Zheng He, as other authors have done already (see 4.2.2). I argue that the Zheng He missions constitute an “ideal type” of “Belt & Road Historiography” due to their significance as a major episode of China’s pre-modern transregional engagement with the Indo-Pacific maritime world, and also for Zheng He’s potential as a connecting figure emphasizing shared progress among various ethnicities and civilizational spheres. As will be further introduced, the Zheng He missions are a definitive element of what is conceptualized as the broader “Silk Roads Power-Knowledge Complex” of today’s China, and they also have a great potential for state-led appropriation as part of the Chinese party-state’s BRI-related cultural diplomacy.

5. The discourse analysis of recent mainland Chinese Zheng He historiography

5.1 Capturing the discursive context

As has been introduced in chapter 3 on the methodology and operationalization of the dissertation project, "capturing the discursive context" (*Erfassung des diskursiven Kontextes*) is one of the major preliminary steps of Jäger et al.'s KDA methodology.¹ Capturing the discursive context is in fact a complex task with many different facets, several of which have already been covered in the previous chapters.² There is one further aspect of the discursive context which needs more in-depth clarification, namely the role of primary sources and subsequent (pre-2000) sources on the missions. Referencing the primary sources is of utmost importance in Zheng He historiography, since most authors discussing the missions base their claims on citing them. Becoming familiar with the primary sources, and investigating selective quotations, de-/re-contextualization (see Wodak et al. DHA methodology in chapter 3) have therefore all been crucial parts of the present dissertation project. Apart from the primary sources, it needs to be pointed out that several later sources have also played an important role in the interpretation and evaluation of the missions in the subsequent eras. The first section of chapter 5, therefore, focuses on summarizing the primary sources, as well as a selection of important later sources up until the recent decades, in order to better understand the discursive context of recent (2000-) historiography on the missions.

5.1.1 Primary sources on the missions

Our understanding of the Zheng He missions today is inexorably Sinocentric since the size of the Chinese primary sources on the missions by far outmatch those rather fragmentary

¹ Jäger, *Kritische Diskursanalyse*.

² For general contextualization see chapter 1 ("Introduction"), for relevant theoretical debates see chapter 2 on theory, for the state of the art of China-related global history research and research on the Zheng He missions see chapter 4.

records originating from outside China. In this section, the Chinese primary sources on the missions are introduced first. These sources can be grouped into four major groups: travelogues written by members of the missions, court diaries reporting on the missions, inscriptions made by members of the missions, and the so-called “Zheng He Map” from the 17th-century treatise *Wubei zhi* 武备志, focusing on navigation.

5.1.1.1 Chinese travelogues on the missions

The lengthiest and most well-known primary sources on the missions are the travelogues left by three members of the missions working as interpreters, with a knowledge of Arabic and other languages relevant during the journeys. The three travelogues are:

- *Xingcha shenglan* 星槎胜览, compiled by Fei Xin 费信 between 1409 and 1436³, (translated into English by J. V. G. Mills as *The Overall Survey of the Star Raft*⁴)
- *Yingya shenglan* 瀛涯胜览, compiled by Ma Huan 马欢 between 1416 and 1451⁵, translated into English by J. V. G. Mills as *The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores*⁶)
- *Xiyang Fanguo Zhi* 西洋番国志 (Records of the foreign lands of the Western Ocean), compiled by Gong Zhen 巩珍 between 1433 and 1434⁷

The contents of Ma's and Gong's work show a considerable degree of overlapping.

Since Gong started the compilation of his work later than Ma, it is likely that he was

³ Fei Xin 费信, *Xingcha shenglan*.

⁴ Hsin Fei, *Hsing-Ch'a Sheng-Lan: The Overall Survey of the Star Raft*, ed. Roderich Ptak, trans. J. V. Mills (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1996).

⁵ Ma Huan 马欢, *Yingya shenglan* 瀛涯胜览 [*The overall survey of the ocean's shores*], Guochao Diangu 国朝典故 edition (Wanli period, 1573-1620), 1451, <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=566144&remap=gb>. (Accessed on 2023-02-10).

⁶ Ma-Huan, *Ying-Yai Sheng-Lan: The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores*, trans. J. V. G. Mills (Cambridge Eng.: Hakluyt Society, 1970).

⁷ The text available at <https://zh.wikisource.org/zh-hans/%E8%A5%BF%E6%B4%8B%E7%95%AA%E5%9C%8B%E8%AA%8C> (Accessed on 2023-02-10) references Gong Zhen 鞏珍, *Xiyang fanguo zhi* 西洋番国志 [*Records of the foreign countries of the Western Ocean*], ed. Xiang Da 向达 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju 中华书局 [Zhonghua Book Company], 1961).

influenced by Ma's work. The contents of Fei's work are in several aspects distinct from the other two. Fei's *Xingcha shenglan* is made up of two volumes, the first one dealing with the locations personally visited by the author and the second one dealing with locations about which the author was informed by others (e.g. the Ryukyu Kingdom, or Mecca). In *Xingcha shenglan*, short poems are included in the description of each location under discussion, a feature not found in the other two works. The main body of all three works is divided along the locations visited by the author as part of the missions. The following locations are covered in separate sections in all three works:

- *Zhancheng* 占城国: Champa (Hindu-Buddhist kingdom in present-day southern Vietnam)
- *Zhaowa* 爪哇国: Java (i.e. the Hindu Majapahit polity in Java, present-day Indonesia)
- *Jiugang* 旧港国 ("Old Harbor"): Palembang, Sumatra (Indonesia)
- *Xianluo* 暹罗国: Siam (Thailand)
- *Manlajia* 满刺加国: Malacca (Malaysia)
- *Sumendala* 苏门答腊国: Sumatra (Indonesia)
- *Xilanshan* 锡兰山国 (Fei) / *Xilan* 锡兰国 (Ma, Gong): Sri Lanka, formerly Ceylon
- *Xiao Junan* 小俱喃国 (Fei) / *Xiao Gelan* 小葛兰国 (Ma, Gong): Kollam, formerly Quilon (port city in Kerala, S.W. India)
- *Kezhi* 柯枝国: Kochi, formerly Cochin (port city, Kerala, S.W. India)
- *Guli* 古里国: Kozhikode, formerly Calicut (port city, Kerala, S.W. India)
- *Hulumosi* 忽鲁谟斯国: Hormuz (port city in Iran)
- *Banggela* 榜葛刺国: Bengal (India)

A recent extensive examination and identification of all the locations mentioned in the travelogues and other primary sources (incl. the *Ming Shilu* and the "Zheng He Map") is provided in Zhou Yunzhong's *Zheng He xia Xiyang xinkao* ("Re-examining the Zheng He missions", 2013).⁸ Locations further to the West from Hormuz, such as *Tianfang* 天方国 / *Mojia* 默伽国 (Mecca) and various East African port cities (e.g. *Mugudushu* 木骨都束国: Mogadishu, *Bulawa* 卜刺哇: Barawa, both in Somalia) are mentioned in the travelogues, as well as on the Zheng He Map. Also taking into account the Arabic-language sources, it is likely that various sub-fleets of the Zheng He missions visited these locations, while the main fleet remained anchored in Hormuz.⁹ Zhou Yunzhong claims that based on the *Ming Shilu* and the Zheng He Map, the farthest location visited by any sub-fleet of the missions was the Sofala polity in today's Mozambique.¹⁰ While there are different scholarly opinions on what the farthest extent of the missions was, there is a consensus that no evidence from the primary sources supports the view that they reached beyond the East African coast. The hypothesis of Gavin Menzies and some other authors relies on a handful of unidentified location names from the primary sources. It remains, however, highly speculative that these locations refer to locations in Europe, the Americas, or Australia.

The *Ming Shilu*, apart from providing valuable insights into the political background of the missions (more on this in 5.1.1.2), has also contributed to the debate on the exact locations visited by the missions. In various passages, lists of the foreign polities to which Zheng He was ordered are provided. The furthestmost clearly identifiable location among them is *Malindi* 麻

⁸ Zhou Yunzhong 周运中, *Zheng He xia Xiyang*, 91–317.

⁹ Alexander Jost, "He Did Not Kiss the Earth Between His Hands": Arabic Sources on the Arrivals of the Zheng He Fleet in Aden and Mecca (1419–1432)," in *Early Global Interconnectivity across the Indian Ocean World, Volume I: Commercial Structures and Exchanges*, ed. Angela Schottenhammer, Palgrave Series in Indian Ocean World Studies (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 80–81.

¹⁰ See chapter 6 "Feizhou hangxian xinkao" 非洲航线新考 (Re-examining the African sea route) in Zhou Yunzhong 周运中, *Zheng He xia Xiyang*, 283–317.

林地, the present-day port of Malindi in Kenya, while some locations have not been clearly identified. According to a passage dated to the 10th year and 11th month of the Yongle's reign (1411, the 3rd missions),

The eunuch Zheng He and his companions were ordered by imperial decree to travel to Malacca, Java, Champa, Sumatra, Aru [N. Sumatra], Kochi, Calicut, Lambri [N. Sumatra], Pahang [Peninsular Malaysia], Kelantan [Pen. Mal.], Kayal [Kayalpatnam, Tamil Nadu, S. India], Hormuz, *Bila* 比剌 [?], the Maldives and *Sunla* 孙剌 [?], to bestow fine silkware with brocade and colored thin silk, along with other things, on their rulers.¹¹

Identifying the two locations *Bila* 比剌 and *Sunla* 孙剌 has caused debates among historians. In the *Mingshi* 明史 (History of the Ming), compiled during the early Qing dynasty, the following passage appears,

Furthermore, there are the countries called *Bila* and *Sunla*. Zheng He was once sent there to confer gifts [on their rulers]. They are to the utmost distance from China, and hence their tributary envoys did not manage to arrive.¹²

Zhou Yunzhong argues that the locations called *Bila* and *Sunla* are located further to the south of Malindi, the furthestmost point clearly identifiable in both the *Ming Shilu* and the Zheng He map. Based on comparative analysis with subsequent Portuguese sources on the southeast African coast, Zhou argues that they refer to the Mozambique Island and Nova Sofala ports of present-day Mozambique, two important trading centers in the era.¹³

¹¹ “遣太监郑和等赍敕往赐满剌加爪哇占城苏门答刺阿鲁柯枝古里南渤利彭亨急兰丹加异勒忽鲁谟斯比剌溜山孙剌诸国王锦绮纱罗彩绢等物有差”, Da Ming Taizong Xiaowen Huangdi Shilu juan yibai sanshisi 大明太宗孝文皇帝实录卷一百三十四 [The Veritable Records of Taizong of the Great Ming, Emperor of Filial Piety and Civility vol. 134],” 1411, para. 18, <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=275322&remap=gb>. (Accessed on 2023-02-10).

¹² 又有国曰比剌, 曰孙剌。郑和亦尝赍敕往赐。以去中华绝远, 二国贡使竟不至。“Mingshi Liezhuan di erbai shisi - Waiguo qi 明史列传第二百十四 - 外国七 [History of the Ming, Biographies no. 214 - Foreign Countries vol. 7],” n.d., para. 46, <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=156432&remap=gb>. (Accessed on 2023-02-10).

¹³ Zhou Yunzhong 周运中, *Zheng He xia Xiyang*, 307–17.

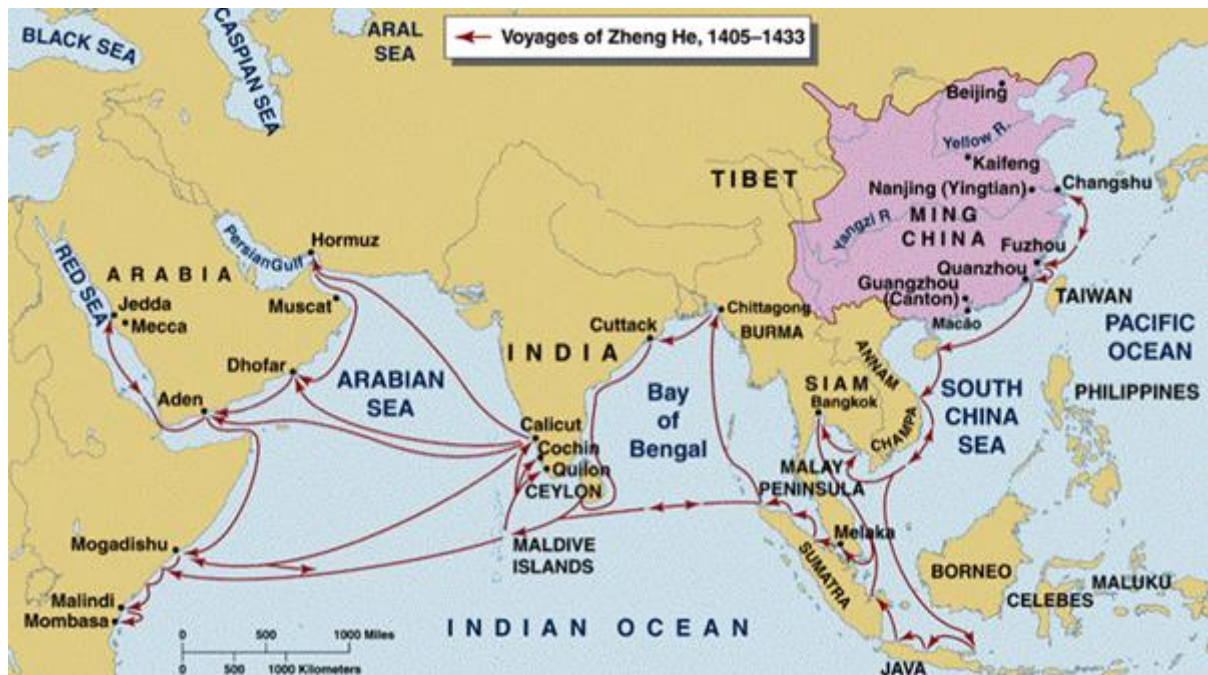


Image 1. Map of locations most likely visited by the Zheng He fleet (Source: <https://www.history.ubc.ca/faculty/lshin/teaching/150/week4/voyages.htm>, accessed on 2019-08.31)

The three travelogues are the most extensive primary sources on the missions which not only provide information on the routes traveled by the Zheng He fleet but also include elaborate descriptions of the foreign port cities visited by them. The topics included in these descriptions range from listing the trade products of the foreign polities to discussing their penal systems, as well as to introducing their social structure, dressing, eating and drinking habits, marital and funeral customs, and forms of entertainment, among others. Apart from their value as anthropological records of the foreign polities visited by the Chinese envoys, they also serve as valuable primary sources of how Chinese travelers in the early Ming period perceived the outside world based on their own cultural background. In the case of Ma Huan, the role of his Muslim background also had a noticeable influence on his descriptions and evaluations of the various foreign polities.

The travelogues, in their general worldview, tend to be influenced by what various authors call the *Tianxia-guan* 天下观 (Tianxia-worldview) and the *Hua-yi zhi bian* 华夷族之辨 or *Yi-Xia zhi bian* 夷夏之辨 (Sino-foreign or Sino-“Barbarian” distinction) of pre-modern

China.¹⁴ Both concepts refer to a hierarchical worldview among pre-modern Chinese elites based on what is often framed as concentric center-periphery circles of the *Tianzi* 天子 (“Son of Heaven”, the Emperor), *Hua* 华 / *Xia* 夏 (the territories directly ruled by the *Tianzi*, largely covering today’s China) and the peripheral lands of foreigners/outside/”Barbarians” (*yi* 夷, *fan* 番 / 藩). In the travelogues, the overarching Tianxia-view of foreign relations is clarified by the significance attached to *gong* 贡 (tribute). In both Ma Huan’s work, and Gong Zhen’s work heavily influenced by it, the word *gong* 贡 appears 20 times, mostly at the end of the various paragraphs describing each foreign polity visited by the missions. In several cases, the list of products sent as tribute is listed as well. In Fei Xin’s work, *gong* 贡 appears 7 times in similar contexts. At the same time it is also obvious that tribute was not the only form of goods exchange, trade being mentioned at various parts in the travelogues, such as in Ma Huan’s account of Siam:

As the Chinese treasure ships reached Siam, smaller boats were also used to trade [with the locals]. Their country produces *huangsuxiang* 黄速香 [“yellow spice”], lakewood, gharuwood, rosewood, green cardamom [...]. Their king sends his chiefs regularly to China with sappanwood, rosewood, and other valuable products to present tribute.¹⁵

The descriptions of the foreign polities are abundant in categorizations by the authors, which reflect on social stratification based on ethnicity, gender, religion, social class/caste, and in some cases skin color/race as well. Furthermore, they also reflect on how the authors perceived their own “Chineseness” in relation to the observed societies, incl. to the Chinese

¹⁴ Xu Jilin 许纪霖, “Shenme shi Xin Tianxia-zhuyi?”; Jian Junbo 简军波, “Zhonghua chaogong tixi: guannian jiegou yu gongneng 中华朝贡体系:观念结构与功能 [China’s tributary system: its conceptual structure and function],” *Guoji Zhengzhi Yanjiu* 国际政治研究 [*Journal of International Studies*] 30, no. 01 (2009): 132–43; Zhuang Guotu 庄国土, “Lüelun chaogong zhidu de xuhuan.”

¹⁵ “中国宝船到暹罗，亦用小船去做买卖。其国产黄速香、罗褐速香、降真香、沉香、花梨木、白豆蔻、大风子、血竭、藤结、苏木、花锡、象牙、翠毛等物。[...] 其王每差头目将苏木降香等宝进贡中国。” (Ma Huan *Yingya shenglan*, chapter on Xianluoguo 暹罗国 [Siam]).

migrant communities settled in the foreign polities. One notable example is Ma Huan's account of Java's multi-ethnic and multi-religious society of the time, which summarizes well his favorable views of Muslims, Buddhists, and Chinese vis-à-vis other populations throughout his work:

The country's population has three ranks: One is that of Muslims [*huihuiren* 回回人], they are all traders of the foreign lands in the West, having settled here. Their clothes, food, and everything else about them are completely pure. One is that of Chinese [*Tangren* 唐人], they are all from Guangdong, Zhangzhou, Quanzhou, and other places, having been expelled and settled here. Their food is nice and clean, and many of them follow the Muslim teaching, keeping its rules and diet. One is that of natives [*turen* 土人], their appearance is ugly, their faces and legs are monkey-like, and they follow a religion of demons [*guijiao* 鬼教]. In the Buddhist scripts, when the country of demons is mentioned, it refers to this place. Their drinks and food are disgusting, such as ants and worms, they slightly bake and eat them. The dogs kept at their homes eat from the same dishes as they do, and at night they sleep together with them, without the slightest scruple.¹⁶

In all three travelogues, dressing habits, hairstyles, as well as marital, funeral, and other customs of the foreign polities are frequently described along the binary gender division of men vis-à-vis women. Certain passages even reflect on the author's perception of gender roles in these societies:

According to their customs, their wives are in charge of all affairs. The king and his subjects, if they need to decide on any plans, sentences, propriety, or trade deals, it is all decided by their wives.¹⁷

¹⁶ “国有三等人：一等回回人，皆是西番各国为商，流落此地，衣食诸事皆清致；一等唐人，皆是广东、漳、泉等处人窜居是地，食用亦美洁，多有从回回薙门受戒待斋者；一等土人，形貌甚丑异，獠头赤脚，崇信鬼教，佛书言鬼国其中，即此地也。人吃食甚是秽恶，如蚰蚁及诸虫蚓之类，略以火烧微熟便吃。家畜之犬与人同器而食，夜则共寝，略无忌惮。” (Ma Huan *Yingya shenglan*, chapter on Zhaowaguo 爪哇国 [Java])

¹⁷ 其俗凡事皆是妇人主掌，其国王及下民若有谋议、刑罚、轻重、买卖一应巨细之事，皆决于妻。(Ma Huan, *Yingya shenglan*, chapter on Xianluoguo 暹罗国 [Siam], see also Gong Zhen, *Xiyang fanguo zhi*, chapter on Xianluoguo 暹罗国 [Siam]).

Concerning ideology and world-making in the travelogues, it is important to add some further remarks on “Chineseness”, i.e. the self-perception of the authors as Chinese vis-à-vis other identity groups encountered throughout the missions. It is clear that *Zhongguo* 中国, the common name for China today had already been in common use during the missions. In Ma Huan’s *Yiyngya shenglan*, it appears 45 times, in Fei Xin’s *Xingcha shenglan* 10 times, and in Gong Zhen’s *Xiyang fanguo zhi* 49 times. *Zhongguo* is often used to refer to products and practices associated with China (which are often referenced in comparison with their local counterparts). *Zhongguoren* 中国人 (Chinese person), along with *Tangren* 唐人 (Tang / Chinese person) occurs with reference to diaspora communities encountered in Southeast Asia, incl. those who fled China around the time of the Yuan-Ming transition (see also first quote from Ma Huan above).¹⁸ Furthermore, it is also important to note that *Zhongguo* often appears as a political concept, in the context of tributary exchanges. The view among some modern scholars that China (*Zhongguo*) did not exist as a political concept in pre-modern times¹⁹ is thus highly questionable based on the travelogues. In Ma Huan’s and Gong Zheng’s travelogues in particular, *gong* 贡 (tribute) mostly appears together with *Zhongguo*, i.e. in phrases such as *jin gong Zhongguo* 进贡中国 (“... is presented as tribute to China”). On the contrary, it never appears together with (*Da*) *Ming* 大明 (“the [Great] Ming [dynasty]”).

5.1.1.2 The Ming Shilu Court Chronicles

While the travelogues provide elaborate descriptions of how their authors perceived the foreign polities which they visited and reflect on their worldviews, value systems, and cultural milieu in which they were socialized, a more in-depth understanding of the political rationale behind the missions can be gathered from focusing on the court chronicles of the period, known

¹⁸ More on this in Alexander Wain, “Chinese Muslims and the Conversion of the Nusantara to Islam” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Oxford, 2016).

¹⁹ See also David C. Kang, *East Asia Before the West - Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

collectively as the *Ming Shilu* 明实录 (Veritable Records of the Ming). These primary sources reflect in particular the political ideology, i.e. both normative world-makings and pragmatic considerations behind the missions. Some key features of the *Ming Shilu* account of the missions can be summarized as follows:

- In normative terms, these records rely on referencing the missions to reproduce the so-called Tianxia-worldview and Sino-foreign distinction (*Hua-yi zhi bian*) mentioned earlier. The world-making discourse around the missions sets out from the centrality of the *Tianzi* in a hierarchical world order. In accordance with Neo-Confucian (*lixue* 理学) moral philosophy, this hierarchical order is divided between the righteous ruler spreading *de* 德 (virtue), as well as *wen* 文 (civility) and his subjects showing *xiao* 孝 (filial piety). In this elite worldview, *gong* 贡 (tribute) presented by subordinate rulers and *ci* 赐 (gift) granted by the *Tianzi* in return are practices of symbolic importance, which in normative terms contribute to upholding the ideal world order.
- In pragmatic terms, the *Ming Shilu* framing of the missions serves on the one hand as a legitimizing discourse for domestic audiences. These are informed about the might and generosity of the Yongle 永乐 emperor (r. 1402-1424) ordering the first six of the missions, and that of the Xuande 宣德 emperor (r. 1425-1435) ordering the last of them. On the other hand, they also inform us about the pragmatic considerations with regard to interstate security in the Indo-Pacific region and the Ming rulers' willingness to establish and maintain trade relations with the foreign polities.
- The *Ming Shilu* records of the Zheng He missions support most present-day historians' views of the missions as the Ming dynasty's policy to maintain supervision of the "key nodes and networks" of the Indo-Pacific maritime

space²⁰ and show little similarity with subsequent European colonialism.²¹ From an ideological point of view, the *Ming Shilu* sets out from a Sinocentric worldview, and from one centered around the nominal superiority of the “Son of Heaven” (the Ming ruler) vis-à-vis other rulers. Based on the *Ming Shilu*, the Ming elites had a paternalistic approach to interstate relations in the Indo-Pacific space and saw their role as guarantors of overall regional stability. They were willing to offer political support for foreign rulers troubled by certain “rogue actors”, and did not shy away from military confrontation against such actors in a limited number of cases (see the armed conflicts in Sri Lanka and Sumatra). They apparently had little interest in militarily subjugating and directly controlling other states visited by the missions. This apparently also had to do with the fact that their main strategic concerns were related to the northern continental frontier and the conflicts with the Mongols (Northern Yuan)²², as well as to the military subjugation and occupation of Vietnam (1406-1427).²³

²⁰ Ptak, *China und Asiens maritime Achse*, 1–3; Sen, “The Impact of Zheng He’s Expeditions.”

²¹ See Wade’s conceptualization of the missions as “failed Ming maritime proto-colonialism”, Wade, “The Zheng He Voyages,” 2005.

²² Schottenhammer, “The ‘China Seas’ in World History,” 80–81; on the strategic significance of the northern continental frontier see Perdue, “The Tenacious Tributary System.”

²³ Annam / Annan 安南国 (the Vietic polity of today’s northern and central Vietnam, locally known as Đại Việt 大越) was included among the “foreign countries not to be invaded” (不征诸夷国) in the *Huang Ming Zuxun* 皇明祖训 [Instructions of the Ancestor of the Auspicious Ming], issued by the founder of the Ming dynasty Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 (Hongwu 洪武, r. 1368-1398), see <https://zh.m.wikisource.org/zh/%E7%9A%87%E6%98%8E%E7%A5%96%E8%A8%93> (accessed on 2022-06-29). The list includes altogether 15 countries located in East and Southeast Asia. The Ming-Đại Việt war was a result of the usurpation of the Đại Việt throne by the newly-established Hồ 胡 dynasty, and its armed aggression against Ming envoys escorting members of the dethroned Trần 陈 dynasty in their attempts to restore their rule. Following the defeat of Hồ forces in 1407, Annam was incorporated into the Ming empire as its Jiaozhi 交趾 province. Numerous anti-Ming rebellions emerged in the next two decades, and by 1427 the Ming retreated from Annam, recognizing the rebel leader Lê Lợi 黎李 (r. 1428-1433) as the new ruler of Đại Việt, who in turn established tributary relations with the Ming court. Based mostly on the *Ming Shilu*, Yang and Zhang (2014) argue that both the occupation of Annam and the Zheng He missions were part of the Yongle emperor’s “carrot and stick” grand strategy to establish his dominance in Southeast Asia along the logic of the tributary system. This meant maintaining relations with those engaging in tributary relations and thus recognizing the nominal authority of the Ming, and punishing those openly challenging the Ming-led order, by which an example was set for other potential dissidents. Yang and Zhang argue that the Xuande emperor’s decision to launch the last mission in 1431 was partly due to his intention to reestablish Ming prestige after the retreat from Annam. See Yang Yongkang 杨永康 and Zhang Jiawei 张佳玮, “Lun Yongle ‘junxian Annan’ dui Zheng He xia Xiyang zhi yingxiang 论永乐‘郡县安南’

- The Zheng He missions are altogether presented in a way that binds together ideology with pragmatism, normative world-making with realistic considerations of security and trade across the Indo-Pacific maritime space. In the *Ming Shilu*, all these pieces are carefully bound together in order to present a coherent, politically sensitive image of the missions for being promoted by the ruling Ming elite.

Highly representative passages include the ones from the *shilu* of the sixth year of the Xuande reign (1431), describing the emperor's ordering of Zheng He to warn the Siamese rulers against blocking the envoys of Malacca sent to present tribute at the Ming court,

He [the Xuande emperor] ordered [Zheng] He to convey the imperial decree to the king of Siam, declaring that "I am the ruler of all under Heaven, and I treat everyone equally. You have the possibility to be respectfully engaged with the imperial court and to send tributary envoys repeatedly. I treated you favorably, but I heard recently that when the king of Malacca wished to come to my court personally to present tribute, he was blocked by your kingdom from passing through. This is certainly not the kingly way of thought. All the ministers of the king could not think deeply and have foresight, obstructing roads and starting quarrels with neighboring countries, how could this be the way of preserving wealth and honor? Kings should obey my orders and have harmonious relations with their neighbors. They should order their subjects not to invade or insult others, this way the king is able to respect [the law of] Heaven, protect his country and pacify his people, be in harmony with his neighbors, and act as my companion in these intentions." At the Board of Rites it was said that bestowing gifts upon *Wubaochina* would be without precedent since he did not present any tribute. His Majesty said that "if a stranger comes from tens of thousands of *li* afar to report injustice, is it possible not to reward him?" Hence, he was rewarded with a silk dress, coinage, and silk-floss cloth, just like all the envoys of other countries.²⁴

对‘郑和下西洋’之影响 [The impact of the Yongle-era incorporation of Annam on the Zheng He missions],” *Wen-shi-zhe* 文史哲 [Journal of Literature, History and Philosophy], no. 05 (2014): 106-114+167.

²⁴ “令和赉敕谕暹罗国王曰朕主宰天下一视同仁尔能恭事朝廷屡遣使朝贡朕用尔嘉比闻满喇加国王欲躬来朝而阻于王国以朕度之必非王意皆王左右之人不能深思远虑阻绝道路与邻邦启衅斯岂长保富贵之道王宜恪遵朕命睦邻通好省谕下人勿肆侵侮则见王能敬天事大保国安民和睦邻境以副朕同仁之心礼部言诸番贡使例有赐予巫宝赤纳非有贡物给赏无例 上曰远人数万里外来诉不平岂可不赏遂赐紵丝袞衣彩币表里绵布

Concerning armed confrontation against those disrupting the regional order, passages dated to the Yongle reign's 9th year (1411) and the third Zheng He mission, are especially relevant. They describe one of the major armed confrontations during the missions, against the reigning king of Sri Lanka, Vīra Alakēśvara (*Yaliekunai'er* 亚烈苦奈儿). Disrupting the regional order, refusing to present tribute, and an armed attack against the Chinese envoys are all given as reasons behind the conflict. At the end of the *Ming Shilu* account of the conflict, the Yongle emperor paternalistically pities the defeated and captured Vīra Alakēśvara for his foolishness,

Vīra Alakēśvara remained troublesome, he raided the envoys of the neighboring countries repeatedly. All the foreign countries suffered because of this. When [Zheng] He returned to Sri Lanka and arrived in the middle of the country [to the capital], he ordered his [Vīra Alakēśvara's] son to present colored ropes, gold, silver, and other precious things. He refused and secretly sent more than five thousand foreign troops to plunder [Zheng] He's boats [...] After this [after defeating and capturing Vīra Alakēśvara, he] was returned [to the Chinese capital Nanjing] where the officials requested his execution. His Majesty [the Yongle emperor] had pity for his foolishness and his lack of understanding of the Decree of Heaven [*wu zhi ming* 无知命]. Therefore, he released him, offered him clothes and food, and ordered the Board of Rites [*Libu* 礼部] to choose the wisest of his family to ascend to the throne, to take charge of the kingdom.²⁵

悉如他国贡使例”, “Ming Xuanzongzhang Huangdi Shilu juan zhi qishiliu 明宣宗章皇帝实录卷之七十六 [The Veritable Records of the Emperor Xuanzongzhang of the Ming Dynasty, vol. 76],” 1431, para. 29, *Ming Shilu*, <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=434058&remap=gb>. (Accessed on 2023-02-10).

²⁵ “亚烈苦奈儿又不辑睦邻国屡邀劫其往来使臣诸番皆苦之及和归复经锡兰山遂诱和至国中令其子纳颜索金银宝物不与潜发番兵五万余劫和舟 [...] 大败之遂以归群臣请诛之上悯其愚无知命姑释之给与衣食命礼部议择其属之贤者立为王以承国祀”, “Taizong Wenhuangdi Shilu juan yibai shiliu 太宗文皇帝实录卷一百十六 [The Veritable Records of Taizong, Emperor of Civility vol. 116],” 1411, para. 7, *Ming Shilu*, <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=262886&remap=gb>. (Accessed on 2023-02-10).

5.1.1.3 Inscriptions related to the missions

The major extant inscriptions related to the history of the missions include the following:

- *Gu Ma Gong muzhiming* 故马公墓志铭 (Yongle 3rd year, 1405), the epitaph of Zheng He's father Ma Gong 马公 found in the Jinning 晋宁 district of Kunming, Yunnan. The epitaph testifies that Ma Gong was a native of the Kunyang 昆阳 subdistrict of Jinning and had a son named Ma He 马和, who later came to serve the imperial court and was given the honorary surname Zheng 郑.
- The Galle Trilingual Inscription (Yongle 7th year, 1409, the 3rd mission), discovered in 1911 in Galle, Sri Lanka. The inscription includes three separate texts in three languages (Chinese, Persian, Tamil). All of these texts deal with various donations made by the Yongle emperor through his envoys to the various religious communities of the island. The Chinese text refers to the donations made to the Buddhist community, the Persian text to donations made to Muslims, and the Tamil text to donations made to Hindus.
- The so-called *Zheng He xingxiang bei* 郑和行香碑 or "Zheng He incense offering tablet" (Yongle 15th year, 1417, 5th mission), found in the Muslim cemetery of Quanzhou, Fujian, describing Zheng He's incense offering for the Muslim saint associated with the cemetery for a safe journey during his fifth mission, erected by a man named Pu Rihe 浦日和.
- *Tianfei lingying zhi ji* 天妃灵应之记 ("Account of Tianfei's Efficacy", Xuande 6th year, 1431, the 7th mission): Stele inscription dedicated to sea goddess Mazu 妈祖 / Tianfei 天妃, erected during the last mission in Changle 长乐, Fujian province. The inscription recounts the six previous missions from a first-person plural ("we") perspective of Zheng He and his companions leading the missions, making it the only source potentially dictated by Zheng He himself. It praises Mazu's help during

the arduous journeys of the past six missions and asks for her help during the journey ahead.

Other non-extant inscriptions whose texts have been included in later sources include the *Taicang Liujiagang beiji* 太仓刘家港碑记 (“Taicang Liujiagang inscription”) once located in the port of Liujiagang, Taicang city, Jiangsu province (the starting point of the missions). It provides a general outline of the events taking place during the first six missions. Other such sources include the *Fei Huan An xianghuo shengxiang ji* 非幻庵香火圣像记 (“Record of the [Erection of the] Fei Huan Nunnery’s Incense-Burning Figure”) included as an appendix in some editions of the late Ming novel *Sanbao taijian Xiyang ji tongsu yanyi* 三宝太监西洋记通俗演义 (“Romance of the Three Jewel Eunuch’s Journeys to the Western Ocean”, see in 4.2.1 and 5.3.5.3) describing Zheng He’s role in reerecting the Bifeng (Buddhist) Temple 碧峰寺 in Nanjing; as well as the inscription related to the Wanli-era (1573-1620) restoration of the Xi’an mosque, commemorating Zheng He’s contribution to it.²⁶

From the perspective of the present-day discourse on the missions, these inscriptions in particular demonstrate that during his lifetime and especially as a leader of the missions, Zheng He became associated with a variety of religious traditions prevalent in China at the time (Buddhism, Islam, Mazu cult). On the one hand, it clarifies why his image has become appropriated by various religious communities inside and outside China, and on the other hand, also underscores that he was most likely not exclusively attached to any one of these.

5.1.1.4 The Zheng He Navigational Map

The so-called Zheng He Navigational Map (*Zheng He hanghaitu* 郑和航海图), is a series of maps found in the 17th-century military treatise *Wubei zhi* 武备志 (1621). The Zheng

²⁶ Zhou Yunzhong 周运中, *Zheng He xia Xiyang*, 31–39.

He Map was earlier widely known as the "Mao Kun Map" (*Mao Kun tu* 茅坤图), referring to the person from whose library it supposedly originated, the grandfather of Mao Yuanyi 茅元仪 (compiler of the *Wubei zhi*). Recent research has indicated that Mao Kun probably had no relation to the map, for which reason it was renamed to refer to the Zheng He missions in general.²⁷ The Zheng He Map is an elaborate navigational guide for the vast maritime littoral space extending from China's coastal areas to the East African coast. It proceeds along the Indo-Pacific littoral with instructions on directions and distances to reach the various port cities.

The Zheng He Map has been analyzed in detail by scholars both inside and outside of China.²⁸ It is generally accepted by scholars that it was produced by someone who participated in the missions or had personal contact with such persons. It has also been comparatively analyzed with European maps and itineraries from the subsequent period and has been described as having a considerable extent of accuracy in describing the main nodes and networks of the 15th-century Indo-Pacific littoral.²⁹

5.1.1.5 Other Chinese primary sources

Some other treatises with apparent primary sources include the *Qianwen ji* 前闻纪 collection of early Ming accounts by Zhu Yunming 祝允明 (1461-1527) and the early Ming navigational treatise *Shunfeng xiangsong* 顺风相送.³⁰ In his major monograph on the missions, Zhou Yunzhong also introduces a number of further Chinese primary sources which facilitate a better understanding of the impact of the missions on its ordinary participants, instead of the more elite-focused perspective provided by the travelogues and the *Ming Shilu*. These are types

²⁷ See Zhou Yunzhong 周运中, "Lun Wu Bei Zhi he Nan Shu Zhi zhong de Zheng He hanghaitu 论《武备志》和《南枢志》中的《郑和航海图》 [On the Zheng He nautical charts of Wu Bei Zhi and Nan Shu Zhi]," *Zhongguo Lishi Dili Congshu* 中国历史地理论丛 [China's History and Geography Series], no. 02 (2007): 145–52.

²⁸ See e.g. Ptak, *China und Asiens maritime Achse*, 10–16; Zhou Yunzhong 周运中, *Zheng He xia Xiyang*, 69–90.

²⁹ Ptak, *China und Asiens maritime Achse*, 10.

³⁰ Zhou Yunzhong 周运中, *Zheng He xia Xiyang*, 142–44.

of publications from the period which include biographies of the participants. As Zhou Yunzhong argues, these sources demonstrate that the missions demanded a high number of casualties from among its participants, and were apparently perceived as highly demanding by the general population in their own time. The relevant types of publications include:

- selected accounts of military service (*wuzhi xuan bu* 武职选簿)
- local annals (*difang zhi* 地方志)
- selected papers (*wenji* 文集), also including biographies of members of the missions³¹

5.1.1.6 Non-Chinese primary and early sources

The non-Chinese primary and early sources on the mission are small in number and length compared to their Chinese counterparts. They are mostly fragmentary passages found in larger works dealing with issues other than the Zheng He missions per se. Despite their small size, these sources are nevertheless highly relevant for gaining a glimpse into how the missions were perceived from the perspective of the other side, i.e. in those foreign polities which were visited by the Zheng He missions. Analyzing these sources is thus crucial for overcoming the Sinocentric view of the missions based on solely taking into account the Chinese sources.

Most of the extant non-Chinese sources come from Arabic and Persian-language chronicles, incl. the following works:

³¹ Zhou Yunzhong 周运中, 331–44.

Author	Work	Year of compilation	Reported place and time
Mo'īn ad-Dīn Naṭanzī (fl. 1410)	<i>Montaḥab at-tawārīḥ-e Mo'īnī</i> [Persian] ³²	1414	Hormuz 1413
?	<i>Tārīḥ al-Yaman fī 'd-Dawlati 'r-Rasūlīya</i> [Arabic] ³³	c. 1440	Aden 1419, 1423, 1432; Lahīj (Yemen) 1432
Al-Maqrīzī, Taqī al-Dīn [...] (1364-1442, Egypt)	<i>Kitāb as-sulūk li-ma'rifat duwal al-mulūk</i> [Arabic] ³⁴	1436-1442	Mecca / Jeddah 1432
Ibn Ḥajjar al-'Asqalānī (1372-1449, Egypt)	<i>Inbā' al-Ghumr bi 'nbā 'l-'umr</i> [Arabic] ³⁵	After 1435	Mecca 1432
Ja'far b. Moḥammad (fl. 1450)	<i>Tārīḥ-e kabīr</i> [Persian] ³⁶	After 1453	Hormuz (?)

³² Mo'īn ad-Dīn Natanzī, *Montaḥab at-tawārīḥ-e Mo'īnī* [Selection of chronicles by Mo'īn ad-Dīn Naṭanzī], ed. Jean Aubin (Tehran: Ketābforūshī-ye Khayyam, 1957); cited in Ralph Kauz and Roderich Ptak, "Hormuz in Yuan and Ming Sources," *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient* 88 (2001): 32.

³³ Yajima Hikoichi, ed., *A chronicle of the Rasulid dynasty of Yemen: from the unique Ms. Paris No. Arabe 4609* (Tokyo: Inst. for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, 1976), 105ff; cited in Jost, "He Did Not Kiss the Earth Between His Hands," 84.

³⁴ Al-Maqrīzī, *Histoire des Sultans Mamlouks de l'Égypte* [History of the Mamluk sultans of Egypt], trans. Etienne Quatremère, Reprint of Paris 1842 ed. (London, 2007); cited in Jost, "He Did Not Kiss the Earth Between His Hands," 84.

³⁵ Ibn Ḥajjar Al-'Asqalānī, *Inbā' al-Ghumr bi 'nbā 'l-'umr*, ed. Ḥ. Ḥabashī, vol. 3 (Cairo, 1969); cited in Jost, "He Did Not Kiss the Earth Between His Hands," 84.

³⁶ "This chronicle remains unedited and only exists in manuscript form in St. Petersburg. The Oriental Seminar of Freiburg University has a microfilm. We are extremely grateful to Professor Werner Ende for sending copies of the relevant sections.", Kauz and Ptak, "Hormuz in Yuan and Ming Sources," 32.

Abū ‘Abd Allāh b. ad-Dayba‘ (1461- 1537, Yemen)	<i>Qurrāt al-‘uyūn fī akhbār al-Yaman al-Maimūn</i> [Arabic] ³⁷	1461-1537	Aden 1420 (?)
Abū ‘Abd Allāh b. ad-Dayba‘ (1461- 1537, Yemen)	<i>Kitāb bujyāt al- mustafīd fī akhbār madīnāt Zabīd</i> [Arabic] ³⁸	1461-1537	Aden 1420 (?)

Table 1. Early sources on the Zheng He missions written in Arabic and Persian³⁹

The Arabic-language early sources found in the Bibliothèque National (Paris) manuscripts have been included in Yajima’s 1974 article, and part of them was translated into English by Jost (2019).⁴⁰ The Arabic-language passages are found in larger historical works from the 15th and 16th centuries and provide an important insight into the circumstances of the exchanges between the Ming envoys and local elites, as well as the perception of these exchanges outside of China. Some general observations can be summarized as follows:

- These works show that those receiving the Chinese envoys in Aden (Yemen, at the time ruled by the Rasulid dynasty) and Jeddah / Mecca (present-day Saudi Arabia, at the time ruled by the Mamluk Sultanate of Egypt) perceived Ming China as a distant empire of power and wealth, but did not share the Sinocentric worldview of

³⁷ Ibn ad-Dayba‘, *Qurrāt al-‘uyūn fī akhbār al-Yaman al-Maimūn*, MS Paris Bibliothèque National de France No. Arabe 5821, n.d.; cited in Jost, “He Did Not Kiss the Earth Between His Hands,” 84.

³⁸ Ibn ad-Dayba‘, *Kitāb bujyāt al-mustafīd fī akhbār madīnāt Zabīd*, MS Paris Bibliothèque National de France No. Arabe 6069, n.d.; cited in Jost, “He Did Not Kiss the Earth Between His Hands,” 84.

³⁹ Based on Jost, “He Did Not Kiss the Earth Between His Hands,” 83–84.

⁴⁰ Yajima Hikoichi 家島彦一, “Jūgo seiki ni okeru Indo-yō tsūshō shi no hitokoma - Tei Wa ensei buntai no Iemen hōmon ni tsuite 15 世紀におけるインド洋通商史の一齣 — 鄭和遠征分隊のイエメン訪問について [An episode of 15th century Indian Ocean trade history - On the visit of a subsidiary fleet of the Zheng He missions to Yemen],” *Afurika-Ajia Gengo Bunka Kenkyū* アフリカ・アジア言語文化研究 [*Journal of Asian and African Studies*], no. 8 (1974): 137–55; for English translations of some of the Arabic sources see Jost, “He Did Not Kiss the Earth Between His Hands.”

Chinese and some other East Asian elites⁴¹ based on the nominally superior status of the “Son of Heaven” vis-à-vis other rulers. These exchanges were seen as exchanges of gifts between nominal equals, and presenting “tribute” never appears in the Arabic sources, while presenting “gifts” (in Arabic *hadīyyah*) to the envoys appears frequently.

- The envoys who visited Aden, Jeddah, and Mecca were at most a small sub-fleet of the Zheng He missions. The Arabic sources report on two to three ships arriving.

In the Yemeni chronicle *Tārīḥ al-Yaman fī ‘d-Dawlati ‘r-Rasūlīya* [The History of Yemen Under the Rasulid Dynasty, c. 1440], lengthy lists of lavish gifts sent by the *Ṣāhib aṣ-Ṣīn* (The Lord of China) are included and are followed by similarly long lists of lavish gifts from the Rasulid sultans sent to the Ming court. The first of the three relevant passages from *Tārīḥ al-Yaman*, dated to the year 822 AH (1419 CE), suggests that the exchanged gifts included goods from European ports:

Our Lord, Sultan An-Nāṣir ordered the bestowal of various return gifts on the envoy of the Lord of China, such as various artifacts and coral trees seen in the Frankish ports, [... list of other gifts].⁴²

While most descriptions by the Arabic authors suggest positive attitudes towards each other between the two sides, it is the account of the Yemeni historian Ibn ad-Dayba‘ (1461-1534) in *Qurrāt al-‘uyūn fī akhbār al-Yaman al-Maimūn* [Delightful pieces in the news of the

⁴¹ Korea and Ryukyu are often described as “model tributary states” of Ming-Qing China. In tributary correspondences with the Ming and Qing courts, the rulers of these states positioned themselves as being subordinate to the Ming-Qing Chinese emperor (by using the appropriate format and wording while addressing him). The interests of other states engaging in tributary relations with China were apparently primarily economically motivated, sharing less of the ideological framing of a Sinocentric world order (more on this in Kang, *East Asia Before the West*.)

⁴² “أمر مولانا السلطان الملك الناصر بتجهيز رسل صاحب الصين بهدية عوض هدية فيها من أنواع التحف وشجر المرجان يجلى بالمينة” Yajima, “Jūgo seiki ni okeru Indo-yō tsūshō no hitokoma,” 152; citing Yajima, *A chronicle of the Rasulid dynasty of Yemen*, 105–6 referencing MS Paris, No. Arabe 4609, f.44a. The word *ifranjī* appears in the original text. The term originated from the ethnonym “Frank” and served as a reference to Europeans in general in Arabic texts of the time. The similar word *farangī* (Frank, European) also appears in Persian, and by the Late Ming its derivative *Folangji* 佛郎机 became frequently used in Chinese sources as well, referring to the Portuguese and other Europeans.

Abundant Yemen] which stands out for recounting the supposedly arrogant behavior of the Chinese envoys during their visits:

And in the year 823 [1420 CE] the envoy of China arrived with three huge ships, bringing in them precious gifts in the value of twenty *lakk* of gold⁴³, and he met the king An-Nāṣir, but did not kiss the earth between his hands [i.e., by this, did not show proper respect to the Rasulid ruler] but said: "Your lord, the Lord of China greets you and advises you to be just with your subjects", and [An-Nāṣir] said: "We welcome you, it is a pleasure that you came". And he treated him [the Chinese envoy] with respect and received him in the house of guests. And then, An-Nāṣir wrote a letter to the Lord of China, in which he told him: "The authority is yours, and the country is yours [i.e. you have authority in your country]! This letter brought to you, king of China, by your envoy to the king An-Nāṣir, is bare of pretension and full of meaning. The words were spoken earnestly from the mouths of those who acknowledge the claim of China's king, that all men would be his servants. It is clear, that they are foolish and ignorant of the situation in other countries, of their kings, and of the good manners which are necessary to achieve perfection. Do not talk to anyone but with politeness and respect!"⁴⁴

While Ibn ad-Dayba's account cannot be treated as a primary source since he was not a contemporary of Zheng He and the letter said to be written by the Rasulid ruler An-Nāṣir apparently never reached the Ming court (no such letter is mentioned in any of the Chinese sources), it suggests that those receiving the Ming Chinese envoys in Yemen were irritated enough by their behavior to recount this even decades later. It also shows how the Tianxia-worldview with its emphasis on the nominal superiority of the Son of Heaven had practical implications for the behavior of Chinese envoys abroad. These Arabic sources, providing an

⁴³ According to Jost, one *lakk* "possibly was the equivalent to 100,000 tiny copper coins called *ṭumnīya*." Jost, "He Did Not Kiss the Earth Between His Hands," 93; citing Yosef Tobi, *The Jews of Yemen: Studies in Their History and Culture* (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 1999), 126f.

⁴⁴ "وفي سنة ٨٢٣ قدم عليه قاصد الصين بثلاثة مراكب عظيمة فيها من الهدايا النفيسة ما قيمته عشرون لَكًا من الذهب واجتمع قاصده بالملك الناصر فلم يقبل الأرض بين يديه بل قال له سيدك صاحب الصين يسلم عليك ويوصيك بالعدل في رعيتك فقال له مرحباً بك ونعم المجيئ جئت فأكرمه وأسكنه بدار الضيافة ثم كتب الناصر إلى صاحب الصين كتاباً يقول فيه الأمر أمرك والبلد بلدك وهذا الخطاب من قاصدك ملك الصين للملك المناصر العارى عن اللطافة المتسريل بالكثافة يصدق الكلام للذين على السنة من قولهم ملك الصين يظن أن كل الناس عبيده والظاهر أن فيهم حقاً وجهلاً Yajima, "Jūgo seiki ni okeru Indo-yō tsūshō no hitokoma," 153–54; citing Ad-Dayba, *Qurrāt al-‘uyūn*, f43a; translation partly based on Jost, "He Did Not Kiss the Earth Between His Hands," 93–94.

alternative perspective on the Zheng He missions, while introduced by some recent Chinese-language publications⁴⁵, are still largely ignored in Chinese scholarship.

Other non-Chinese primary and early sources include a few passages from various Sri Lankan works dealing with the island's history in the early 15th century. The 15th-century work *Saddharmaratnākaraya* (The Precious Jewels of the Good Dharma) is probably the only work written by contemporaries of Zheng He. It is a collection of mostly Buddhist religious writings, also containing some accounts of the island's political history. Concerning Vīra Alakēśvara, it says,

Vīra Alakēśvara, after he was defeated in the war with Vīrabāhu, the younger brother, at Rayigampura, went abroad and came back and ruled for twelve years here and was caught in a Chinese stratagem as a result of a past karma (deed).⁴⁶

Several later (16-17th centuries) historical works from Sri Lanka retell the episode of Chinese intervention in Sri Lanka. According to various researchers familiar with the Sri Lankan accounts of the political history of the period, they contain various contradictions to the narrative found in *Ming Shilu* and even to the passage in *Saddharmaratnākaraya*. The contradictions concern the complex political situation and internal conflicts at the time of Zheng He's arrival, as well as the aftermath of the military conflict with the Chinese fleet. As introduced in 5.1.1.2, the *shilu* from the 9th year of the Yongle reign (1411) claims that after his capture, Vīra Alakēśvara was pardoned by the Yongle emperor, his family (also captured and taken to Nanjing) was allowed to choose the wisest member to take over the rule of the country, and following this, the new king became a proper tributary of the Ming dynasty. Perera argues

⁴⁵ Zhou Yunzhong 周运中, *Zheng He xia Xiyang*, 346–51.

⁴⁶ Translation from Tansen Sen, “Zheng He’s Military Interventions in South Asia, 1405–1433,” *China and Asia* 1 (2019): 171; citing S. B. Hettiaratchi, “Studies in Cheng-Ho in Sri Lanka,” in *Zheng He Xia Xiyang Guoji Xueshu Yantaohui Lunwenji 郑和下西洋国际学术研讨会论文集 [Papers from the International Symposium on the Zheng He Missions]*, ed. 陈信雄 Chen Xin-xiong and 陈玉女 Chen Yu-nü (Taipei: Daw Shiang Publishing 稻乡出版社, 2003), 92; Gintota Parana Vidanage Somaratna, *The Political History of the Kingdom of Kotte, 1400-1521* (Colombo, 1975), 53; see also the German translation in Herbert Günther, “Ceylon im 15. Jahrhundert [Ceylon in the 15th century],” *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 51 (1948): 140.

that it was in fact not the ruling king who was taken into captivity, but a high-ranking official also called Alagakkōnāra (the name of the dynasty).⁴⁷ According to Somaratna's analysis of the Sri Lankan accounts from the period, the new ruler approved by the Yongle emperor ([Parākramābahu] Apana, in Chinese sources *Yebanaina* 耶巴乃那) was murdered right after his return to Sri Lanka (around 1414). Somaratna argues that the reigning ruler after the 1411 conflict was also called Parākramābahu (r. 1411-1466), and established tributary relations with the Ming court, deceiving them as their appointed ruler. While experts of Sri Lankan history have long called the *Ming Shilu* narrative into question (see Perera's article published in 1904), in today's mainland Chinese historiography the *Ming Shilu* narrative remains uncritically reproduced, with hardly any knowledge of the alternative narratives found in the Sri Lankan sources.

Regarding other non-Chinese primary and early sources, there have been various research works published on how some knowledge of the Zheng He missions has reached Europe in the 15th and 16th centuries. In the late 15th century and throughout the 16th century, it was mostly through the expansion of Portuguese trade and colonialism into the Indo-Pacific region that Europeans were to some extent informed of the large-scale missions led by Zheng He. By the time the Portuguese travelers arrived at locations in South and Southeast Asia, the memory of the Zheng He missions was still alive among the locals. According to the research findings of dos Santos Alves, the earliest extant European reference to the Zheng He missions is found in a private letter written in 1499 by the Florentine merchant Girolamo Sernigi, a financial partner of the earliest Portuguese travelers to the Indian Ocean. In his letter, Sernigi describes local accounts in India of the arrival of “cristiani bianchi co' capelli lunghi simili alli allamani” (White Christians with long hair similar to Germans), who according to Sernigi might

⁴⁷ Sen, “Zheng He's Military Interventions in South Asia,” 172–73; citing Edward W. Perera, “Alakésvara: His Life and Times,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society (Ceylon)* 18, no. 55 (1904): 281–312.

have been Russians.⁴⁸ According to dos Santos Alves, several subsequent sources suggest that those who were mistakenly believed to be Russians by Sernigi, were in fact the Chinese members of Zheng He's fleet, remembered for their distinctively light skin among the local populations in the Indo-Pacific region. A couple of years later, the Portuguese traveler António de Saldanha (1503) recounts that the inhabitants of the island of Socotra (Yemen) remembered the great junks from China with crew members of "people, white just like us".⁴⁹

The accounts of 16th-century Portuguese travelers such as de Saldanha, as well as Gaspar Correia, Fernão Lopes de Castanheda, João de Barros, and Diogo do Couto, among others, with regard to the memories and traces of Zheng He's missions in the Indo-Pacific region, have been studied by various scholars inside and outside of China. The various sorts of continuity between the Zheng He missions and subsequent Portuguese expansionism have been pointed out by several authors. It has been argued that the main "nodes and networks" that both the Ming Chinese and Portuguese rulers wished to control have demonstrated a considerable degree of overlap. Malacca, the Malabar Coast of southwestern India, Hormuz, Yemen, and Socotra, and the trade networks linking these locations apparently all belonged to these.⁵⁰ As demonstrated in 5.3.3.2, the discourse on whether and how Ming China's approach during the Zheng He

⁴⁸"Copia di una lettera avuta da Lisbona delle nuove terre trovate colle spezierie l'anno 1499 a dì 10 di luglio" [Copy of a letter from Lisbon about the new lands discovered on the 10th July of the year 1499] in Carmen M. Radulet and Luís Filipe Thomaz, eds., *Viagens portuguesas à Índia (1497-1513): fontes italianas para o sua história: o Códice Riccardiano 1910 de Florença [Portuguese voyages to India (1497-1513): Italian sources on their history: the Ricardian Codex of Florence, 1910]* (Lisbon: Comissão Nacional para as Comemorações dos Descobrimentos Portugueses, 2002), 53–59, 80; cited in Jorge M. dos Santos Alves, "La voix de la prophétie: Informations portugaises de la 1^{re} moitié du XVI^e s. sur les voyages de Zheng He [The voice of prophecy: Portuguese sources from the first half of the 16th century on the travels of Zheng He]," in *Zheng He: Images & Perceptions / Bilder & Wahrnehmungen*, vol. 15, South China and Maritime Asia (Harrassowitz Verlag, 2005), 47.

⁴⁹ Avelino Teixeira da Mota, *A Viagem de António de Saldanha em 1503 e a Rota de Vasco da Gama [The voyage of António de Saldanha in 1503 and the route of Vasco da Gama]*, vol. 64, Série Separatas Verdes (Lisbon: Junta de Investigações do Ultramar, 1971), 40; cited in Alves, "La voix de la prophétie," 48; English translation based on French translation of dos Santos Alves, p. 48.

⁵⁰ Jin Guoping 金国平 and Wu Zhilang 吴志良, "Zheng He xia Xiyang Putaoya shiliao zhi fenxi 郑和下西洋葡萄牙史料之分析 [The analysis of Portuguese sources on the Zheng He missions]," *Shixue Lilun Yanjiu 史学理论* [Historiography Quarterly], no. 03 (2003); Alves, "La voix de la prophétie"; Ptak, *China und Asiens maritime Achse*.

missions was still distinct from subsequent European colonialism has become one of the major topics of the overall discourse on the Zheng He missions.

Concerning Southeast Asia, a continuity of the memory of the missions apparently existed from their time until the modern era. Members of the Zheng He missions have been venerated at religious sites of the Chinese diaspora in Thailand and Java (Indonesia), as described already in late Ming- and Qing-era sources.⁵¹ In Java, local legends around Ong Sam Po (the Hokkien pronunciation of Wang Sanbao 王三宝, most likely referring to Wang Jinghong 王景弘, a prominent member of the missions), and other members of the missions have existed before the modern-era rediscovery of the missions.⁵² The *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay Annals), a semi-mythical account of the history of the Malaccan Sultanate, which has existed at least since the early 17th century, describes some episodes of interaction with China, incl. Chinese fleets sent to the Malaccan rulers with gifts, without explicit references to Zheng He's figure.⁵³

There has been a large amount of frequently politicized debate around the veracity of the texts known as the “Malay Annals of Semarang and Cirebon” or *Kronik Tionghoa* (“Chinese Chronicles”). A number of individuals, especially in Indonesia, claim that these are primary sources from Zheng He's time with evidence of Islamic proselytization practiced by members of the Zheng He missions during their visits to Java. Several scholars, however, believe that they are forgeries written in the early 20th century. The two *Kronik Tionghoa* were published in 1964 as appendices of a book by the Indonesian historian Mangaradja Onggang Parlindungan

⁵¹ Li Daogang 黎道纲, “Xianluoguo si Zheng He Sanbao Miao - du ‘Dong-Xiyang kao’ 暹罗国祀郑和三宝庙考——读《东西洋考》 [Siam's Sanbao Temple dedicated to Zheng He - Reading the ‘Dong-Xiyang kao’],” *Dongnanya yanjiu* 东南亚研究 [Southeast Asian Studies], no. 03 (2001): 50–54, <https://doi.org/10.19561/j.cnki.sas.2001.03.010>; Claudine Salmon, “Sanbao taijian en Indonésie et les traductions malaises du Xiyang ji [Sanbao taijian in Indonesia and the Malay translations of Xiyang ji],” in *Zheng He: Images & Perceptions / Bilder & Wahrnehmungen*, vol. 15, South China and Maritime Asia (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2005), 113–36.

⁵² Salmon, “Sanbao taijian en Indonésie,” 2005, 113–18.

⁵³ John Leyden, trans., *Malay Annals Transl. from the Malay Language, by John Leyden. With an Introduction by Thomas Stamford Raffles* (Longman, Hurst, 1821).

on Tuanku Rao (a late-18th and early-19th-century radical Islamic cleric attempting to impose Shari'a law on the Batak tribes of northern Sumatra).⁵⁴ In his book, Parlindungan claims that the two manuscripts were handed over to him by a Dutch colonial official named Poortman, who found them in two Chinese temples in the cities of Semarang and Cirebon (both located in Java, present-day Indonesia) in 1928. Based on a detailed analysis of Parlindungan's claims, archival records on Poortman's life (who was apparently a real person named Cornelis Poortman, 1873-1951), and the contents of the two texts, Wain argues that there are many inconsistencies in Parlindungan's narrative, especially about Poortman's life. According to Wain, the contents of the two *Kronik Tionghoa* suggest a modern author with a knowledge of Dutch and modern concepts of historical analysis. This author was also clearly aware of various local legends about the Zheng He missions and their role in the Islamization of Java, such as the ones associated with the Sam Poo Kong temple in Semarang (where it is claimed that one of the texts was found by Poortman). In Wain's assessment, however, the narrative remains inconsistent with certain established primary sources on the missions (esp. the *Ming Shilu*).⁵⁵

The 1964 work of Parlindungan ignited a major debate on the Zheng He missions and the history of Islamization in Indonesia and beyond (esp. in Malaysia and Singapore). Due to the sensitivity of interethnic relations in Indonesia and the long-established narrative of Islam arriving to the archipelago from the West (via maritime trade with the Middle East and South Asia), the idea of a Chinese origin of Islam led to tensions in the country. By the 1970s, publications advocating the possible Chinese origins of Indonesian Islam were banned for disturbing public order, some prominent figures denouncing any "attempts at turning the *qibla*"⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Mangaradja Onggang Parlindungan, *Pongkinangolngolan Sinambela gelar Tuanku Rao: Terror agama Islam mazhab Hambali di Tanah Batak 1816–1833 [Tuanku Rao (Pongkinangolngolan Sinambela): Hanbali Islamic terror in the Batak lands 1816–1833]* (Jakarta: Tandjung Pengharapan, 1964).

⁵⁵ Alexander Wain, "The Two *Kronik Tionghua* of Semarang and Cirebon: A Note on Provenance and Reliability," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 48 (June 2017): 179–95; on the Sam Poo Kong temple see also Salmon, "Sanbao taijian en Indonésie," 2005.

⁵⁶ The direction of Mecca in Islamic contexts (e.g. the direction of prayer in mosques).

towards Beijing” as unacceptable.⁵⁷ In recent decades, as the possibly multiple origins of Islam in the Malaysian-Indonesian archipelago have gained wider acceptance, the discourse on Zheng He’s role in the Islamization of the region has gone through a revival. The English-language book of the Malaysian author Tan Ta Sen 陈达生, *Cheng Ho and Islam in Southeast Asia* (published in Singapore in 2009⁵⁸, also appearing in Chinese⁵⁹ and Indonesian⁶⁰) is a notable publication in this context. Tan regards the two “Malay Annals of Semarang and Cirebon” as valid historical documents and advocates a “third wave” theory of Java’s Islamization, namely that the two waves setting out from the Middle East and South Asia were followed by one ushered in by the Zheng He missions. Tan frames the missions as a sort of antithesis to Samuel P. Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” thesis popular throughout the 2000s, emphasizing their symbolic role in a tradition of peaceful cultural interaction among various Asian civilizations. While the historical veracity of the above-mentioned Indonesian sources remains contested, it is important to note that a parallel historiographical discourse on the missions exists in Southeast Asia, embedded in local social and political contexts, but also preoccupied with binding the discourse on the missions to larger discourses of global history and global order.

5.1.1.7 Archaeological evidence

In recent decades, a number of archaeological findings have provided further evidence of the missions as a historical event. In China, the construction sites of Zheng He’s ships have been recovered in Nanjing.⁶¹ Samples of pottery and ceramics have been excavated in locations

⁵⁷ Wain, “The Two Kronik Tionghua,” 181; citing Ann L. Kumar, “Islam, the Chinese, and Indonesian Historiography—A Review Article,” ed. Chen Dasheng et al., *The Journal of Asian Studies* 46, no. 3 (1987): 607–8.

⁵⁸ Tan Ta Sen, *Cheng Ho and Islam in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009).

⁵⁹ Tan Ta Sen (Chen Dasheng 陈达生), *Zheng He yu Dongnanya yisilanjiao 郑和与东南亚伊斯兰 [Zheng He and Islam in Southeast Asia]* (Beijing: Haiyang Chubanshe 海洋出版社 [Ocean Press], 2008).

⁶⁰ Tan Ta Sen, *Cheng Ho: penyebar Islam dari China ke Nusantara [Zheng He: carrier of Islam from China to Nusantara]* (Jakarta: Penerbit Buku Kompas, 2010).

⁶¹ Zhou Yunzhong 周运中, *Zheng He xia Xiyang*, 53–68.

visited by the missions as far as Hormuz (Iran) and the Kenyan coast.⁶² In both of the latter locations, ceramics with insignia dated to the Yongle and Xuande periods, produced in the imperial kilns of the time have been identified.⁶³

5.1.2 Subsequent sources on the missions (pre-2000)

For the further characterization of the discursive context behind recent historiography on the Zheng He missions it is important to briefly introduce the contents of certain influential accounts of the missions that do not qualify as primary or early sources, and also do not belong to the time period analyzed in the present dissertation (2000-present). Among them, Luo Maodeng's 1597 novel *Sanbao Taijian Xiyang ji tongsu yanyi* 三宝太监西洋记通俗演义 (shortly *Xiyang ji* 西洋记) can be described as a fantasy novel loosely based on historical events and figures surrounding the Zheng He missions.⁶⁴ Meanwhile, recent research has shown that it had a considerable impact on later knowledge production on the missions. Most notably, the *Mingshi* 明史 (History of the Ming), the authoritative source of Ming history during the Qing and later eras has apparently borrowed several elements from the *Xiyang ji*.⁶⁵

The *Mingshi* is the so-called "official history" (*zhengshi* 正史) of the Ming dynasty compiled by the court historians of the subsequent Qing dynasty (1644-1911). Its compilation took place during the early Qing period based on primary sources from the Ming period, incl. the *Ming Shilu*, and it was published during the 1730s. While most of the information on the missions found in the *Mingshi* is apparently based on primary sources such as the *Ming Shilu*

⁶² For a summary of archaeological findings of Ming-era porcelain see Pang Jianjun 庞建君, "Zheng He xia Xiyang dui woguo taoci waixiao de tuidong 郑和下西洋对我国陶瓷外销的推动 [The Zheng He missions as promotion for China's porcelain exports]," *Zhongguo Gangkou Bowuguan Guankan Zhuanji* 中国港口博物馆馆刊专辑 [*Journal of China Ports Museum, Anthology*], no. S1 (2017): 73–77.

⁶³ Meicun Lin and Ran Zhang, "Zheng He's Voyages to Hormuz: The Archaeological Evidence," *Antiquity* 89 (April 2015): 417–32; Qin Dashu 秦大树, "Kenniya chutu Zhongguo ciqi de chubu guancha 肯尼亚出土中国瓷器的初步观察 (Archaeological Investigations of Chinese Ceramics Excavated from Kenya)," in *Ancient Silk Trade Routes* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2014), 87–109.

⁶⁴ See Ptak, "Zheng He in Mekka."

⁶⁵ Church, "The Colossal Ships of Zheng He."

and the travelogues, recent research has shown certain inaccuracies and mythical elements as well in its narrative. In the *Mingshi*, passages related to the missions are mostly included in the *Liezhuan* 列传 (Biographies) category. Vol. 193 (*Huanguan yi* 宦官一 / Eunuchs 1.) includes a detailed biography of Zheng He, recounting the major events of the missions. The *Waiguo* 外国 (foreign countries) volumes within the *Liezhuan* category introduce the relations of a number of foreign polities with the Ming court, also including a number of passages referring to events taking place during the Zheng He missions. In Zheng He's biography in *Mingshi* Vol. 193, the opening and closing parts are especially remarkable for their influence on the subsequent perception of the missions:

[opening part] Zheng He was a native of Yunnan, and was commonly known as Eunuch *Sanbao* 三保太监 [meaning “Three Protections”, referring to the “Three Jewels” / *sanbao* 三宝 of Buddhism, i.e. Buddha, Dharma, Sangha]. He first served the Prince of Yan 燕王 [later becoming Chengzu / the Yongle emperor] and gained merit through military service. He was gradually promoted to become a eunuch. Chengzu suspected that [his predecessor] Huidi 惠帝 fled overseas and wanted to track him and also wanted to boast of his armies in foreign lands, displaying the wealth and power of China [*Zhongguo* 中国]. In the sixth month of the third year of Yongle, he ordered [Zheng] He and his companions Wang Jinghong 王景弘 et al. to sail the Western Ocean as envoys. They commanded more than twenty-seven thousand eight hundred soldiers and brought plenty of golden coinage with them. They built large ships, 44 *zhang* 丈 [ca. 138.4 meters] long, 18 *zhang* [ca. 56 meters] wide, 62 of them.

[... followed by the description of the routes of the missions and recounting the events taking place during them ...]

[closing part] After his return during the Xuande era, from time to time there were some who ventured into distant lands, but it was not like during the Yongle era, and [Zheng] He grew old and died. Following [Zheng] He, among all those ordered to sail the sea there was none who did not praise [Zheng] He and did not brag about him to foreigners, so the story of the

“Eunuch Sanbao Sailing the Western Ocean” [三保太监下西洋] was passed on among the people and came to be called an outstanding event of the early Ming dynasty.⁶⁶

The *Mingshi* biography of Zheng He starts with the common legend of the Zheng He missions being an effort of Zhu Di 朱棣 (the Yongle emperor) to find his predecessor, Zhu Yunwen 朱允炆 (the Jianwen 建文 emperor, r. 1398-1402) whom he dethroned through a civil war ending in 1402. According to this narrative, Zhu Yunwen disguised himself and escaped the imperial palace of Nanjing when it was captured by Zhu Di's troops. The legend was already extant in the late Ming period, as testified by Luo Maodeng's fantasy novel *Xiyang ji*, where it also appears as the main reason for dispatching the Zheng He missions. *Xiyang ji* was probably the source from which *Mingshi* took it over, and reinforced it to remain extant until contemporary times. According to most scholars, there is little historical evidence that Zhu Yunwen survived the violent capture of the Nanjing palace by Zhu Di's troops. This narrative clearly does not appear in the three travelogues on the missions, the *Ming Shilu*, or any other credible primary source on the missions and their era.⁶⁷

The other commonly reproduced myth around the missions, appearing in the *Mingshi*, is the size of the ships mentioned: 44 *zhang* 丈 [ca. 138.4 meters] in length, 18 *zhang* [ca. 56 meters] in width. As introduced by Jeng-Horng Chen and Sally K. Church, a number of nautical experts and scholars of navigational history have called into question the feasibility of such ship sizes, arguing that a ship of such sizes would never have been operable.⁶⁸ Church has examined various version of the primary sources on the missions and found that they only appear in

⁶⁶ “郑和，云南人，世所谓三保太监者也。初事燕王于藩邸，从起兵有功。累擢太监。成祖疑惠帝亡海外，欲踪迹之，且欲耀兵异域，示中国富强。永乐三年六月，命和及其侪王景弘等通使西洋。将士卒二万七千八百余人，多赍金币。造大舶，修四十四丈、广十八丈者六十二。[...] 自宣德以还，远方时有至者，要不如永乐时，而和亦老且死。自和后，凡将命海表者，莫不盛称和以夸外番，故俗传三保太监下西洋，为明初盛事云。” “*Mingshi Liezhuan di yibai jiushi er - Huanguan yi* 明史列传第一百九十二——宦官一 [History of the Ming, Biographies vol. 192 - Eunuchs 1.],” n.d., paras. 4–8, <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=724868&remap=gb>. (Accessed on 2023-02-11).

⁶⁷ On the motivations behind the missions see Zhou Yunzhong 周运中, *Zheng He xia Xiyang*, 6–30.

⁶⁸ Chen, Jeng-Horng 陈政宏, “Zheng He misi yu zhengming”; Church, “The Colossal Ships of Zheng He.”

editions of the *Yingya shenglan* dated to the early 17th century for the first time. Church concludes that the ship sizes mentioned in the *Mingshi* might have originated from the *Xiyang ji* as well, as the novel is apparently the earliest source where these unlikely sizes appear.⁶⁹

The closing part of Zheng He's biography in the *Mingshi* sets the celebratory tone for the missions which has often been uncritically taken over in modern-era discourses as well. Recent critical scholarship on the background and reception of the missions has suggested that their dispatchment had more to do with the Yongle emperor's domestic self-legitimization strategies than it had with China's foreign relations of the time. The missions and the lavish tributary ceremonies apparently served the interest of legitimizing the Yongle emperor's rule, the early years of which were otherwise characterized by the mass execution of Zhu Yunwen's supporters and their families.⁷⁰ There is evidence of the formation of a political clique around the minister Xia Yuanji 夏原吉 (1366-1430) during the Yongle reign, opposing the missions for their high costs. Eventually, Xia's line prevailed after the death of the Yongle emperor in 1424, and the subsequent Hongxi emperor (1424-1425) refrained from starting any new mission (one last mission was however dispatched by his successor, the Xuande emperor in 1431).⁷¹ A subsequent relaunch of large-scale maritime missions under the Chenghua 成化 reign (1464-1487) was apparently thwarted by the minister Liu Daxia 刘大夏 (1436-1516), also based on their high costs for the imperial treasury. According to the *Shuyu zhou zi lu* 殊域周咨录, a treatise on foreign countries compiled by the imperial official Yan Congjian 严从简 in the 1570s and 1580s, Liu organized the Chenghua-era (1465-1487) burning of official documents in order to destroy evidence of the missions and prevent the launch of any further missions.⁷² Apart from these, fragmentary evidence on the biographies of the ordinary members of the

⁶⁹ Church, "The Colossal Ships of Zheng He," 163–66.

⁷⁰ Zhou Yunzhong 周运中, *Zheng He xia Xiyang*, 6–30.

⁷¹ Church, "The Colossal Ships of Zheng He," 174–75 based on Ming Shilu (Yongle) on Xia Yuanji.

⁷² Church, 175; Chen, Jeng-Horng 陈政宏, "Zheng He misi yu zhengming," 73.

missions also suggests that they demanded a high number of casualties and were apparently perceived as highly demanding among the general population, as also pointed out in 5.1.1.5.⁷³ These events and perspectives are, however, absent from the *Mingshi* narrative, which contributed greatly to the overwhelmingly positive perception of the missions during the Qing and subsequent periods.

It is the influential reformist intellectual of the Late Qing and Republican eras Liang Qichao 梁启超 (1873-1929) who is often credited with rediscovering and recontextualizing the missions in the modern era. Liang's article *Zuguo da hanghaijia Zheng He zhuan* [Biography of the great navigator of the motherland Zheng He] appeared in a 1904 issue of the magazine *Xinmin Congbao* 新民丛报 (New Citizen) edited by him during his exile in Japan. Liang's work on the Zheng He missions was apparently not the very first modern-era study of the Zheng He missions written by a Chinese author, as he was possibly influenced by an anonymous article titled *Zhina hanghaijia Zheng He zhuan* 支那航海家郑和传 (Biography of the Chinese navigator Zheng He), published in 1903 in the Shanghai-based magazine *Dalu bao* 大陆报 (The Continent).⁷⁴ Liang's article nevertheless played an important discourse-initiating role by re-contextualizing the missions in the context of the anti-colonial reform movements of the Late Qing and Republican periods. In Liang's reinterpretation, the Zheng He missions stood for symbolizing China's past glory and maritime power, in contrast with weakness vis-à-vis Western colonialism in his time. *Zuguo da hanghaijia* is a work primarily based on comparisons between Zheng He and European travelers, esp. Columbus, examining why China's approach to maritime power failed in the long term in comparison with that of the West. Relying on the *Mingshi* account of the missions, Liang also emphasizes the supposed sizes of Zheng He's ships,

⁷³ Zhou Yunzhong 周运中, *Zheng He xia Xiyang*, 331–44.

⁷⁴ Zou Zhenhuan 邹振环, “‘Zhina hanghaijia Zheng He zhuan’: Jindai guoren yanjiu Zheng He di yi pian 《支那航海家郑和传》: 近代国人研究郑和第一篇 [‘Biography of the Chinese navigator Zheng He’: The first work of modern Chinese research on Zheng He],” *Shehui Kexue* 社会科学 [Social Sciences], no. 01 (2011): 146–53.

pointing out that they were even bigger than the US warships of his own time. While Liang describes Zheng He as an extraordinary navigator, he blames the attitudes of China's elites in subsequent centuries for the lack of achievements comparable to Zheng He's missions. He contrasts the Ming-Qing elites' egoistic and wasteful approach to that of Western elites primarily interested in benefitting the ordinary people of their countries via maritime expansion. Liang nevertheless also notes the large number of diaspora Chinese residing in Western colonies in Southeast Asia and suggests their importance in China's future maritime strategy.⁷⁵

Liang Qichao's article contributed to the popularization of many of the common tropes found in the discourse on the Zheng He missions throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries. These include the comparative perspective of China vs. the West, tributary foreign policy vs. profit-oriented colonialism, and the narrative of China's failure to keep pace with the West due to its egoistic and inward-looking elites during the Ming-Qing period. The most famous sentence of his article is arguably the rhetorical question

After Columbus, there were countless other Columbuses. After Vasco da Gama, there were countless other Vasco da Gamas. Meanwhile, after Zheng He, there was no second Zheng He. Alas, could this be the fault of Lord Zheng?⁷⁶

During the Late Qing and Republican eras, academic research on the Zheng He missions was mainly carried out by Western Sinologists, most notably Paul Pelliot and Jan J. L. Duyvendak.⁷⁷ Pelliot's "Les grands voyages maritimes" was translated into Chinese by the

⁷⁵ Liang Qichao 梁启超, "Zuguo da hanghaijia Zheng He zhuan 祖国大航海家郑和传 [The biography of Zheng He, great navigator of the motherland] (Xinmin Congbao 新民丛报 3:21, 1904)," in *Liang Qichao ping lishi renwu heji - Ming-Qing juan: Li Hongzhang zhuan, Kang Youwei zhuan, Yuan Chonghan zhuan* 梁启超评历史人物合集·明清卷: 李鸿章传 康有为传 袁崇焕传 [Collection of Liang Qichao's writings on historical figures - Volume on Ming and Qing eras - Biographies of Li Hongzhang, Kang Youwei, Yuan Chonghan], 1st ed. (Wuhan: Huazhong Keji Daxue Chubanshe 华中科技大学出版社 [Huazhong University of Science and Technology Press], 2018).

⁷⁶ "哥伦布以后,有无数之哥伦布, 维哥达嘉马以后,有无数之维哥达嘉马。而我则郑和以后,竟无第二之郑和,噫嘻,是岂郑君之罪也。" Liang Qichao 梁启超。

⁷⁷ Paul Pelliot, "Les grands voyages maritimes chinois au début du XVe siècle [The great Chinese maritime voyages at the beginning of the 15th century]," *T'oung Pao* 30, no. 3/5 (1933): 237–452; Jan J. L. Duyvendak, *Ma Huan Re-Examined*, Verhandlingen Der Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen Te Amsterdam, : Afdeeling Letterkunde : Nieuwe Reek / Deel XXXII / No. 3 (Amsterdam: Noord-Hollandsche Uitgeversmaatschappij, 1933).

historian Feng Chengjun 冯承钧 (1887-1946) in 1934, which contributed to the generation of interest towards the missions in Chinese academia.⁷⁸ In 1936, the renowned historian Wu Han 吴晗 (1909-1969) published an article titled *Shiliu shiji qian zhi Zhongguo yu Nanyang - Nanyang zhi kaituo* 十六世纪前之中国与南洋——南洋之开拓 discussing the missions.⁷⁹ During the Republican period, the Zheng He missions were to some extent discussed in the *Yugong* 禹贡 magazine (1934-1937) as well, as part of the *lishi-dili* 历史地理 (historical-geographical) studies of pre-modern China.⁸⁰

During the Mao era, a modest number of further historical research works were published on the missions (see Appendix 7.1). In terms of political instrumentalization, the missions were referenced in Zhou Enlai's speeches on his visits to Africa, in order to foster Third World solidarity and contrast China's supposedly pacifist approach to foreign policy with colonialism and imperialism.⁸¹ Following the inauguration of the "Reform and Opening-up" in the late 1970s, the Zheng He missions suddenly became a focal point of rethinking China's past. A large number of commemorative events were organized, especially around the 580th anniversary of the first missions in 1985, also accompanied by an increased amount of publications (see Figure 1. in 5.2.1). Deng Xiaoping himself praised the missions for their role as the last open era of China before what he regarded a centuries-long era of self-isolation leading to ignorance and backwardness,

⁷⁸ Paul / Bo Xihe 伯希和 Pelliot, *Zheng He xia Xiyang kao* 郑和下西洋考 [On Zheng He's voyages to the Western Ocean], trans. 冯承钧 Feng Chengjun (Taipei: Taiwan Shangwu Yinshuguan 台湾商务印书馆, 1970); cited in Ptak and Salmon, *Zheng He*, 23.

⁷⁹ Wu Han 吴晗, "Shiliu shiji qian zhi Zhongguo yu Nanyang - Nanyang zhi kaituo 十六世纪前之中国与南洋——南洋之开拓 [China and the South China Sea before the 16th century - Opening the South China Sea]," *Qinghua Daxue Xuebao (Ziran Kexue Ban)* 清华大学学报 (自然科学版) [Tsinghua Science and Technology], no. 01 (1936): 137–86.

⁸⁰ Ptak and Salmon, *Zheng He*, 23; citing Sabine Dabringhaus, "Territorialer Nationalismus, Geschichte und Geographie im China der Republikzeit [Territorial nationalism, history, and geography in Republican China]" (Habilitationsschrift, München, 2002).

⁸¹ Ptak and Salmon, *Zheng He*, 25; citing Zheng Zi 郑梓, "Zheng He xia Xiyang," 24.

Perhaps under the reign of Chengzu of the Ming dynasty [1402-1424], during the voyages of Zheng He, China could still be considered open. After the death of Chengzu, the Ming dynasty gradually declined. After that, the Kangxi [1662-1722] and Qianlong [1736-1795] eras of the Qing dynasty cannot be regarded as open. If we count it from the middle Ming period, until the Opium War [1839-1842], it was more than three hundred years of self-isolation. If we count it from the Kangxi period, it was almost two hundred. This long-time self-isolation made China poor, backward, and ignorant.⁸²

The 1980s also saw an increasing professionalization of Zheng He research, with a number of new academic publications appearing. Notable works included Zheng Hesheng 郑鹤声 and Zheng Yijun's 郑一钧 three-volume collection of primary sources on the missions titled *Zheng He xia xiyang ziliao huibian* 郑和下西洋资料汇编 (Vol. 1-3., 1980-1983)⁸³ and Zheng Yijun's major monograph *Lun Zheng He xia Xiyang* 论郑和下西洋 (1985). Zheng Yijun's monograph investigates thoroughly the primary sources about the missions, placing them into the broader political and social context of early Ming China. Unlike most later authors, Zheng Yijun strives to evaluate the major reforms initiated by the Yongle emperor from a Marxist perspective focusing on class relations in China. The research on the missions per se mostly focuses on detailed discussions of the routes taken by the missions and the various foreign polities visited.⁸⁴

⁸² “恐怕明朝明成祖时候，郑和下西洋还算是开放的。明成祖死后，明朝逐渐衰落。以后清朝康乾时代，不能说是开放。如果从明朝中叶算起，到鸦片战争，有三百多年的闭关自守，如果从康熙算起，也有近两百年。长期闭关自守，把中国搞得贫穷落后，愚昧无知。” Deng Xiaoping 邓小平, *Deng Xiaoping wenxuan* 邓小平文选 [Selected works of Deng Xiaoping], vol. 3. (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe 人民出版社 [People's Press], 1993); quoted in Zhuang Guotu 庄国土, “Lun Zheng He xia Xiyang dui Zhongguo haiwai kaituo shiye de pohuai - jian lun chaogong zhidu de xujiaying 论郑和下西洋对中国海外开拓事业的破坏 — 兼论朝贡制度的虚假性 [On the damage caused by the Zheng He missions to Chinese overseas expansion - also discussing the fictitiousness of the tributary system],” *Xiamen Daxue Xuebao (Zhhexue Shehui Kexue Ban)* 厦门大学学报 (哲学社会科学版) [Xiamen University Journal (Arts & Social Sciences)] 2005, no. 3 (2005): 70.

⁸³ Zheng Hesheng 郑鹤声 and Zheng Yijun 郑一钧, eds., *Zheng He xia Xiyang ziliao huibian* 郑和下西洋资料汇编 [Collection of sources on the Zheng He missions] Vol. 1-3. (Jinan: Qilu Shushe 齐鲁书社 [Qilu Press], 1980-1983).

⁸⁴ Zheng Yijun 郑一钧, *Lun Zheng He xia xiyang* 论郑和下西洋 [Zheng He's journeys to the Western Ocean] (Beijing: Haiyang Chubanshe [Ocean Press], 1985).

As will be demonstrated in sub-chapter 5.3, in the detailed analysis of the discourse since 2000, the 1980s rediscovery of the missions in many ways set the tone for the later discourse. In the context of resurging interest in culture and interaction with the outside world, as well as due to the CCP government's political agenda in the Reform and Opening-up period, the missions became widely discussed for their referential value for the present time. The discourse evolved further in a similar vein until ca. the late 2000s and early 2010s, when geopolitics, apart from outward openness, started to feature prominently in relevant publications. The inauguration of the Belt & Road Initiative (2013) and the related state-promoted discussions on *haiyang wenhua* 海洋文化 (maritime culture) and the referential value of the missions for past, present, and future global orders have become the features of a new era in the evolution of the Zheng He discourse, which is the main focus of the present dissertation.

5.2 Structural analysis

As has been pointed out in 3.3 of the chapter on methodology and operationalization, structural analysis of a larger number of digitized works available in the CNKI database is applied in order to identify the main tendencies in the discourse, as well as in order to form a smaller corpus of selected works for detailed analysis. The structural analysis introduced here is based on publication metadata on 3,466 items exported from CNKI in June 2020⁸⁵, with the search terms 郑和 OR 三宝太监 OR 三保太监⁸⁶, no time limits (meaning that everything published up to June 19th, 2020 was included), as well as no restrictions regarding language and publication type. In the following sections, the results of the structural analysis of various types of data will be introduced.

5.2.1 Basic publication data (type, year, author, author's affiliation, publisher, language, keywords)

In the analyzed corpus, journal articles constitute by far the largest group of publications with regard to the type of publication (2,450 items out of a total of 3,466). These are followed by “standards” (*biaozhun* 标准) (472 items). Based on both qualitative and quantitative analysis of the titles of the standards (for the latter see word cloud in 5.2.3), they are mainly related to the commemorative events surrounding the 600th anniversary of the launching of the first Zheng He mission in 2005, as well as to the construction and promotion of Zheng He-themed touristic sites. A relatively large amount of conference proceedings (286 items) are part of the corpus as well, followed by MA theses (120 items), newspaper articles (89 items), Ph.D. dissertations (26 items), patents (19 items), other (unidentified) publications (2 items), 1 unidentified degree publication of MA or Ph.D. degree (marked as “dissertation_thesis” in the dataset), and one item with no data on its type. It has to be noted that CNKI is a primarily academic database,

⁸⁵ The data for the general analysis was exported on June 19th, 2020. The data on the most cited / most downloaded subsets (see 5.2.3) was exported on June 28th, 2020.

⁸⁶ Items including “Zheng He” or any of his two common alternative names “Three Jewels Eunuch” and “Eunuch of the Three Protections”, used in some publications.

and therefore the number of newspaper articles (89 items) cannot be expected to represent a realistic number of newspaper publications in general on the topic up to June 19th, 2020. It can rather be seen as a sample of some more important newspaper publications on the Zheng He missions. The items categorized as “patent”, based on the qualitative analysis of their titles, mostly relate to replicas of Zheng He’s ships.

The changing number of publications by year reveals that 2005 was by far the most significant year, apparently due to the large number of commemorative events organized at the 600th anniversary of the launching of the first mission. Two other spikes in publication numbers can be seen, one around 2014 (apparently linked to the 2013 inauguration of the Belt & Road Initiative) and one in 1985 (due to the commemorative events at the 580th anniversary of the first mission). The declining number in the last year (2020) needs to be seen as related to the fact that the search query was made around the middle of the year (June).

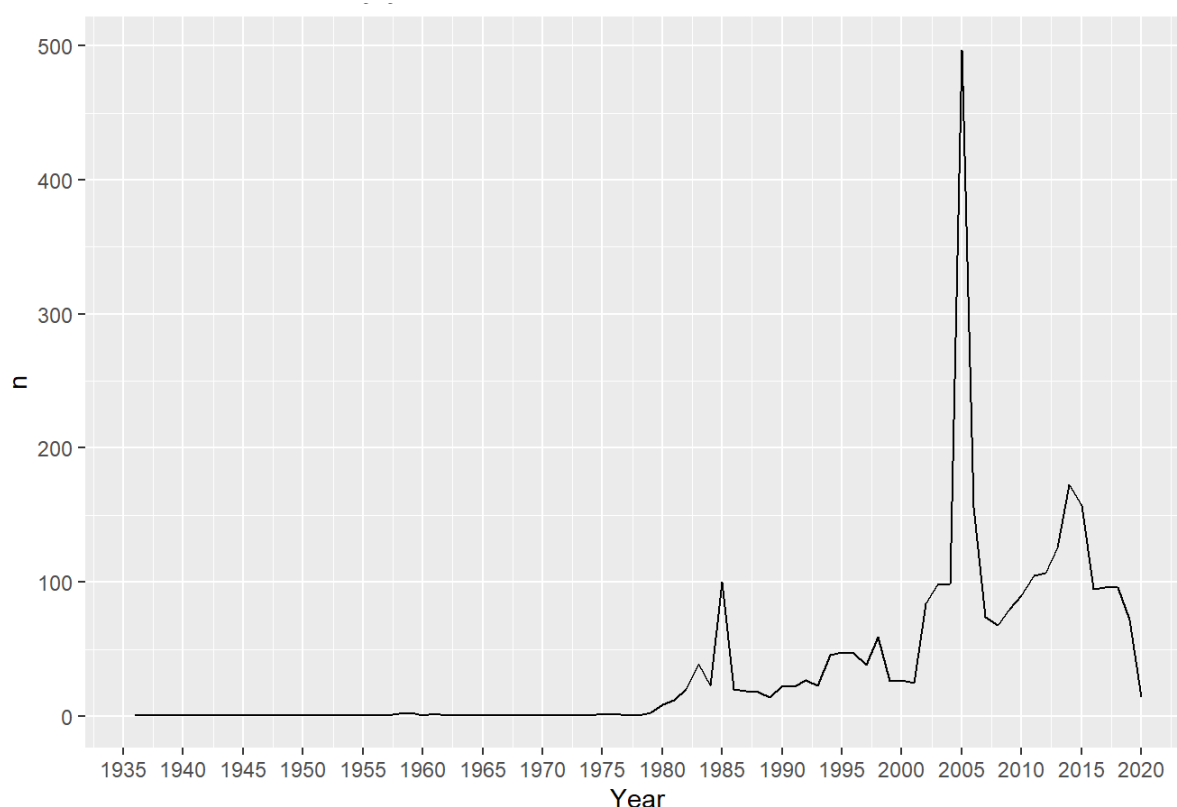


Figure 1. Number of publications by year

As seen above, the earliest item available on CNKI dates to the year 1936, while most of the publications have been published since the mid-1980s, with an especially high number of publications around 2005. Analyzing the dataset as a whole would make this analysis biased towards those certain periods from which most of the publications originate, and hence it would also not be conducive to the understanding of the historical evolution of the discourse, i.e. of the specificities of various periods. In order to avoid these, the dataset was divided into 5 subsets, demarcated by major political and social changes in mainland China, also distributing each of the major spikes in publication numbers into separate sub-sets. The five subsets are the follows⁸⁷:

- 1. Pre-Mao period (-1948: 1 item published in 1936)⁸⁸
- 2. Mao-era (1949-1976; 15 items)
- 3. Post-Mao period / “Reform and Opening-up period 1.” (1977-1989; 279 items)
- 4. “Reform and Opening-up period 2.” (1990-2012; 1,869 items)
- 5. “Belt and Road era” (2013-2020; 829 items)

Concerning authorship, it can generally be said that there are only a few authors who published a large number of relevant works, while most authors only appear with one authored item.⁸⁹ The top 5 authors in the two latest subsets are as follows:

⁸⁷ The CNKI record of publication date includes year numbers only, therefore no more detailed specification is possible.

⁸⁸ The only pre-1949 publication available in CNKI is a 1936 article of the renowned historian, politician, and playwright Wu Han 吴晗 (1909-1969), persecuted and imprisoned during the Cultural Revolution for his critical theater play *Hai Rui ba guan* 海瑞罢官 [Hai Rui Dismissed from Office]; see Wu Han 吴晗, “Shiliu shiji qian zhi Zhongguo yu Nanyang.”; “郑和下西洋” is included in the keywords in the CNKI record.

⁸⁹ Note that a number of items are co-authored, in which cases for each co-author the item counts as one publication to their account.

- 1990-2012 subset (1,869 items): Wan Ming 万明 20 items, Zheng Ming 郑明 17 items, Zhang Jian 张箭 16 items, Kong Yuanzhi 孔远志 15 items, Shi Ping 时平 14 items⁹⁰
- 2013-2020 subset (829 items): Wan Ming 万明 16 items, Shi Ping 时平 7 items, Cao Lin 曹凜 7 items, Chen Pingping 陈平平 7 items, Liu Wenqing 刘文庆⁹¹

In the sub-chapter on detailed analysis (5.3), the backgrounds of Wan Ming (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences) and Shi Ping (Shanghai Maritime University), as prolific authors on the Zheng He missions and influential figures in mainland China’s contemporary Zheng He research are introduced in more detail, along with a number of other authors.

Within the dataset as a whole, 1,551 items include information on the “author’s address” (the research institution with which the author of the item is affiliated), which enables us to have an assessment of which research institutions in China have been active in Zheng He research in recent decades. These 1,551 items include 1,308 journal articles, 186 conference proceedings, 36 newspaper articles, 19 patents, and 2 items of “other” category. The 1949-1976 subset only includes one article with information on the author’s affiliation, namely a 1976 article published by an author affiliated with the “Dalian Red Flag Ship Factory Research Institute of Shipping” (大连红旗造船厂船研究所). The 1977-1989 subset includes 32 items with information on the authors’ affiliations (28 journal articles, 4 conference proceedings). The three top institutions with more than 1 item (each with 2 items) are “Jiangsu Province Organizing Committee of Zheng He Commemorations” (江苏省纪念郑和筹委会), “Navigational History Research Room at Dalian Institute of Sea Transportation” (大连海运学院航海史研究室), “Shandong University Department of History” (山东大学历史系). The

⁹⁰ The subset includes 167 publications with no data on authorship, and altogether 1,316 rows of authors with an average of 1.407295 publications (median and modal values are both 1).

⁹¹ The subset includes 62 publications with no data on authorship, and altogether 622 rows of authors with an average of 1.231884 publications (median and modal values are both 1).

1990-2012 subset includes 1,001 articles with information on the authors' affiliations (874 journal articles, 112 conference proceedings, 9 patents, 5 newspaper articles, and 1 item of "other" category). Institutions with more than 3 items include the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Research Institute of History (中国社会科学院历史系, 14 items), Ningxia Academy of Social Sciences (宁夏社会科学院, 9 items), Nanjing City Museum (南京市博物院, 8 items), Yunnan University (云南大学, 7 items), Yunnan University of Nationalities (云南民族大学, 6 items), Ministry of Transport Guangzhou Salvage Bureau (交通部广州打捞局, 5 items), Fuzhou Vocational and Technical College (福州职业技术学院, 5 items). The 2013-2020 subset includes 517 items with information on the authors' affiliations (405 journal articles, 70 conference proceedings, 31 newspaper articles, 10 patents, 1 item of "other" category). The top three institutions are Jiangsu Province Zheng He Research Association (江苏省郑和研究会, 12 items), Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Research Institute of History (9 items), Shanghai Maritime University Research Institute of Maritime Culture (上海海事大学海洋文化研究所, 7 items). Institutions with 4 items each include "Shanghai Maritime University" (上海海事大学, no research institute defined), Ministry of Transport Research Institute of Water Transport (交通运输部水运科学研究所), Fudan University Department of History (复旦大学历史系), Fuzhou City Museum (福州市博物馆), Fujian Normal University Research Institute of Social Sciences and History (福建师范大学社会历史学院).

The data on the authors' affiliations show that authors writing on the Zheng He missions since the late 1970s mostly came from either a historical background, being affiliated with various institutes of historical research, or their main affiliation was related to institutes of the shipping industry and the Ministry of Transportation. This data also shows that apart from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (the country's central institution of social sciences research located in Beijing), most of the institutes with which historians were/are affiliated are

located in the main centers of Zheng He's historical activities (Yunnan, Jiangsu incl. Nanjing, Fujian). This is likely to be related to factors such as the necessity of local archives and archaeological excavations for the research project, as well as to the large number of commemorative events and public spaces in these regions. The locations of the institutions related to the shipping industry are not all connected to Zheng He's historical activities (Dalian, Guangzhou). A close reading of some of the titles published by authors affiliated with these institutions suggests that most of these articles deal with topics such as the technological achievements of the missions and their relevance for maritime interaction at the time of publishing (in the 2012-2020 period also often referring to the "21st-century Maritime Silk Roads" constituent of BRI). The affiliations of authors hint at a diverse background of those who have participated in the academic discourse on the Zheng He missions since the late 1970s, including historians as well as specialists in maritime transport among others. This also underlines the interconnected nature of the Zheng He missions as a historical episode and their perceived referential value for present-day framings of regional and global order in China.

Concerning the lists of publishers based on the number of publications, due to journal articles being the most common type of publications in the CNKI dataset, here the lists of journals based on their numbers of published items are discussed. Appendix 1 (7.1) includes the tables of the 10 (12) most prominent journals in all the 4 analyzed subsets dated between 1949 and 2020. Except for the 15 items included in the 1949-77 list, headed by the archaeological journal *Wenwu* 文物 (*Cultural Relics*) and *Lishi Jiaoxue* 历史教学 (*History Teaching*), among the top journals of the three later subsets dated between 1977 and 2020, nautical journals play a prominent role all along. A glimpse into the titles published by such journals suggests that they are primarily concerned with the technological details of Zheng He's ships, the navigational achievements of the missions, and their relevance for the 21st Century Maritime Silk Roads initiative. The maritime history journal *Haijiaoshi Yanjiu* appears prominently in both the 1977-89 and 1990-2012 subsets, and *Huizu Yanjiu* takes the top position

in the largest subset (1990-2012). This latter fact confirms the observations of various authors writing on Zheng He historiography around the 2005 anniversary celebrations, pointing out the importance of rediscovering Zheng He as a Hui identity figure among China's Hui minority.⁹² Among the titles occupying the lower parts of the top 10 lists, some journals concerned with history teaching and ideological issues are also noteworthy (*Sixiang Zhanxian* 思想战线 [Thinking] with 5 items in the 1977-89 subset; *Zhongxue Lishi Jiaoxue Cankao* 中学历史教学参考 [History Teaching Reference for Middle Schools] with 15 items in the 1990-2012 subset; *Shehuizhuyi Luntan* 社会主义论坛 [Socialist Forum] with 9 publications in the 2012-2020 subset).

Concerning language, due to the original search term being in Chinese, the overwhelming majority of the retrieved items are in Chinese (in 2,952 items out of 3,466, 中文 [Chinese] is given as the language of publication, while English is given for 2 items, Chinese-English for 1 item and 其他 [Other] for 1 item with a Japanese-language title and an English-language abstract). The dataset thus includes some items which are not written in Chinese but include at least Chinese-language titles, abstracts, or keywords, for which reason they were retrieved by the Chinese-language search query “郑和 OR 三宝太监 OR 三保太监” (see more in 3.2.3 on the search query). There are 510 items with no available data on language. A review of these latter items shows that they are mostly of “standard” or “patent” type, for which no data on language is provided by CNKI, but are apparently mostly written in Chinese. Based on a qualitative overview of the 510 items with no language data, there is a limited number of English-language items among them, and a couple of items in Japanese and Korean as well.

The keywords included in the items of the types “journal article”, “conference proceeding”, and “Ph.D. dissertation” provide succinct information on the topics of each

⁹² Aubin, “Zheng He, héros ethnique”; Kauz, “Zheng He und der Islam in Fujian.”

publication, for which reasons they were also quantitatively analyzed. The numeral value assigned to each keyword means that it appears in that number of publications within the subset. While the keyword lists are not surprisingly headed by “Zheng He” and “*Zheng He xia Xiyang*”, the ones following them in the top 20 list reveal some interesting tendencies in the observed periods. In the first two subsets (1949-76, 1977-89), most of the keywords suggest a historical focus (keywords such as *Ming Chengzu* 明成祖, *Xuande* 宣德, *baochuan* 宝船 [treasure ships] featuring prominently). Notable keywords in subset no. 4 (1990-2012, 1,790 items, see Figure 6 in 7.2 “Appendix 2”) include the following:

- *Zheng He jingshen* 郑和精神 [Zheng He spirit], appearing in 66 publications in subset no. 4: The term usually refers to the spirit of economic openness, win-win cooperation, and peaceful diplomacy officially advocated by the Chinese government, of which the Zheng He missions are supposed to serve as a historical reference point.
- *Gelunbu* 哥伦布 [Columbus], 60 instances, suggesting a resurging focus on comparisons with the European “Age of Discoveries”
- *Chaogong-maoyi* 朝贡贸易 [tribute-trade], 55 instances, suggesting an interest in situating the Zheng He missions within the broader historiographical discourse on the “tributary system” or “tribute-trade system” (more on this in 5.3.3.1).

Notable frequently occurring keywords in subset no. 5 (2013-2020, 677 items, see Figure 6 in Appendix 2) include:

- *Haishang sichou zhi lu* 海上丝绸之路 [Maritime Silk Roads], 25 instances, suggesting that a number of authors situate the Zheng He missions as part of (the often rather political than historiographical) Maritime Silk Roads framework

- *Yidai yilu* 一带一路 [Belt & Road Initiative], 22 instances, suggesting that a number of authors instrumentalize the Zheng He missions as a historical reference point for BRI.

Changes in top keywords suggest a gradual shift towards a broader global historical focus, as well as an increased focus on the relevance of the missions for contemporary geopolitics. The latter is especially apparent in the frequency of keywords related to BRI and the “21st Century Maritime Silk Roads” in the latest subset (2013-2020).

5.2.2 Text analysis of titles and abstracts (word/ngram frequencies, keyness)

The following step in the structural analysis is the text analysis of titles and abstracts, with regard to word frequencies, ngram (bi-/trigram frequencies), as well as the “keyness” of certain words and ngrams in one subset vis-à-vis the entire dataset. The subsets used here are the same five temporarily defined subsets as mentioned in the earlier section. Since Chinese texts, unlike texts in European languages, by default are not segmented into words, text analysis of Chinese texts needs to start with segmentation into words. For the text analysis of titles, I used the built-in Chinese segmentation tool of the `tidytext` R package.⁹³ In order to remove meaningless functional words such as 是 (to be), 的 (“of”), or 一种 (“a kind of”). I used the Chinese stopwords dictionary of the `stopwords-iso` collection via the `stopwords` R package.⁹⁴ For the visualization of word frequencies, I used the wordcloud function of the `wordcloud` R package.⁹⁵

The four wordclouds in Figures 7-10 in 7.3 “Appendix 3” are the visualizations of word frequencies in academic publications (journal articles, conference proceedings, MA theses, Ph.D. dissertations) in subsets 2 to 5 (1949-2020). The results suggest that during the Mao era

⁹³ <https://cran.r-project.org/web/packages/tidytext/vignettes/tidytext.html> (Accessed on 2022-05-04).

⁹⁴ <https://cran.r-project.org/web/packages/stopwords/readme/README.html> (Accessed on 2022-05-04); the Chinese ISO stopword dictionary is available at <https://github.com/stopwords-iso/stopwords-zh/blob/master/stopwords-zh.txt> (Last updated on 2020-03-05, accessed on 2022-05-05).

⁹⁵ <https://cran.r-project.org/web/packages/wordcloud/wordcloud.pdf> (Accessed on 2022-05-04).

(1949-76), among the small number of publications, there were several dealing with the role of the Zheng He missions in the historical relations with Indonesia (see *Yindu + nixiya* 印度尼西亚, taken as two separate words by the `tidytext` segmenting tool, also *jiaotong* 交通 [interaction] and *youyi* 友谊 [friendship]). During the 1977 to 1989 and 1990 to 2012 periods, articles related to the commemorations of anniversaries of the first mission (the 580th and 600th, respectively) played a major role. This is also testified by the frequency of words such as *jinian* 纪念 [commemoration] and *zhounian* 周年 [anniversary] (they appear 113 and 104 times, respectively). The wordcloud of academic titles in the latest subset shows the rise to prominence of *haishang sichou zhi lu* 海上丝绸之路 [maritime silk roads] and *wenhua* 文化 [culture].

The word frequency lists of other types of publications (newspaper articles, patents, standards) were also created and visualized through wordclouds. The limited number of newspaper articles included in the data set shows considerable overlap in relative word frequencies with those of academic publications. Standards (of all time periods) mainly deal with commemorative events and touristic sites related to the missions, with top words such as 600, *jinian* 纪念 [commemoration], *huodong* 活动 [activity], *Taicang* 太仓 [port in Jiangsu, starting point of the missions]. Patents (of all time periods) include top words such as *chuan* 船 [ship], *gongyi+pin* 工艺品 [handicraft], and *moxing* 模型 [model] (see Figure 11 in 7.3 “Appendix 3”).

The contents of the abstracts were primarily analyzed through bigram and trigram frequencies, as well as through the comparative method of “keyness” analysis. Since abstracts, unlike titles, are text fragments made up of several sentences repeating the same words or set of words, the focus here was on identifying *how many* abstracts a word or bi-/trigram appears at least once, instead of comparing sheer frequency sizes. The abstracts were first segmented

into words using the Jieba segmenting engine (结巴中文分词) via the SegmentAnt software.⁹⁶ Following this, each segment was written out into a separate file, and the AntConc software was used to set up lists of bigrams and trigrams (combinations of two/three words) sorted by “range” first (number of files, i.e. number of abstracts in which they appear at least once), and frequency (number of overall occurrences) second.⁹⁷ The lists were stopwords-filtered (removing entries containing at least one stopword, e.g. 郑和 + 的、是 + 郑和). As demonstrative examples, the top 20 bigrams of journal articles, conference proceedings, and Ph.D. dissertations from the three latter subsets (1977-1989, 1990-2012, 2013-2020) are presented in Figures 12-14 in 7.4 “Appendix 4”.

The tables above further confirm certain general tendencies in the recent development of Zheng He studies in China which have already been suggested based on other quantitative data. In the 1977 to 1989 period, research on the Zheng He missions was apparently focused on history research in the narrower sense (Zheng He’s origins in Kunyang, Yunnan, as well as the events during the missions), and the 580th anniversary of the first mission. In the 1990 to 2012 period, the 600th anniversary of the first mission, as well as global historical perspectives received an increasing amount of attention (see top 20 bigrams such as 纪念 + 郑和 [commemorating Zheng He], 西洋 + 周年 [anniversary of (Zheng He sailing the) Western Ocean], 世界 + 航海 [global navigation]).

The top 20 bigrams of the latest (2013-2020) subset are a striking example of the politicization of academic research on the missions, or at least a heavily politicized rhetoric of the abstracts of academic publications. The bigram *haishang + sichou zhi lu* 海上丝绸之路 [maritime silk roads] tops the list with an occurrence in 94 out of 675 abstract items, even ahead

⁹⁶ <https://www.laurenceanthony.net/software/segmentant/> (Accessed on 2022-05-05).

⁹⁷ <https://www.laurenceanthony.net/software/antconc/> (Accessed on 2022-05-05). Note that when a text fragment is segmented into ngrams, all possible combinations of *n* number of words is counted separately, thus for example the bigrams of the text fragment “郑和下西洋研究” includes the bigrams 郑和 + 下、下 + 西洋、西洋 + 研究.

of the two bigrams of “Zheng He’s seven missions to the Western Ocean” (郑和+七下+西洋). *Yidai + yilu* 一带一路 [Belt & Road (Initiative)] appears within the top 5 bigrams as well, with occurrences in 45 abstracts. Further notable bigrams include *haiyang + wenhua* 海洋文化 [maritime culture] (no. 10, occurring in 30 abstracts), a term frequently promoted in contemporary Chinese political and academic discourse to raise awareness of China’s supposed traditions as a maritime nation. As will be elaborated in more detail in 5.3.7 (“Political instrumentalization of the missions”), the “maritime culture” discourse can be seen as closely interlinked with the *haiquan* 海权 [maritime power] discourse, focusing on strengthening China’s maritime capabilities in order to secure maritime supply routes and assert its dominance over the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea. Further top 20 bigrams such as *Zheng He + jingshen* 郑和精神 [Zheng He spirit], *jingji + fazhan* 经济发展 [economic development], and *chuantong + wenhua* 传统文化 [traditional culture], all attesting to the complex connotations of the Zheng He missions in contemporary academic literature, interconnecting history with the political, economic, and cultural spheres. Quantitative evidence on such interconnectivities proves the theoretical assumption of the dissertation well – namely that the emergence of a new “Belt & Road Worldview” and its related “Belt & Road Historiography” is a defining feature of the latest trends in China’s global historiography.

5.2.3 Analysis of the top 50 most cited and most downloaded items

One further notable feature of CNKI is the information provided on the citation and download numbers of each available item. While the quantitative analysis introduced so far has demonstrated which were the most common words and word combinations used in the titles, abstracts, and keywords of recent publications on the Zheng He missions, it does not provide information on what sort of publications were well-received by the academic community and the general public in recent decades. In order to quantitatively analyze the data on the highly

cited and highly downloaded publications of the last 20 years (2000-2020), I passed the same search query into CNKI as for the general analysis, except for setting the time frame to 2000-2020. The results were then sorted based on citation numbers first, and download numbers second. In both cases, I exported the available data on the top 50 items. Following this, I analyzed the two data sets with similar tools and techniques as in the case of the general corpus earlier. Concerning the types of these items, in the case of the most cited publications journal articles clearly dominate in numbers, while in the case of the most downloaded publications they are only slightly ahead of Ph.D. dissertations and MA theses (more information on this in the captions under Figures 15 and 16). The wordclouds included in Figures 15 and 16 in 7.5 “Appendix 5” summarize the most common words in the titles of the top 50 most cited and top 50 most downloaded items published between 2000 and 2020.

In the case of the 50 most cited articles, the prominence of the word *zhanlüe* 战略 [strategy] is notable. Based also on qualitative analysis it can be said that among the highly cited and highly downloaded articles returned for the search term “Zheng He”, many come from the fields of international relations and economics, discussing BRI, the 21st Century Maritime Silk Roads, or China’s maritime foreign strategy in general, using the Zheng He missions as a historical reference point for contemporary strategy. “Strategy” features prominently in the wordcloud of the titles of the most downloaded items as well (7.5 “Appendix 5”, Figure 16), while in this case, other notable prominent words include *wenhua* 文化 [culture], *fazhan* 发展 [development], *maoyi* 贸易 [trade], and *jiaoliu* 交流 [interaction] as well.

5.2.4 Summary and formation of the data corpus

The structural analysis of the CNKI corpus contributed greatly to furthering my understanding of the evolution of the Zheng He discourse in recent decades. Some key takeaways from the structural analysis are as follows:

- Keyword numbers, text analysis of titles and abstracts -> Setting up a preliminary outline of the main topics of the discourse
- Identifying authors, institutions, and publishers with a large number of publications
- Identifying highly cited and downloaded publications.

These insights also played a major role in the formation of the selected corpus for detailed analysis (see methodology chapter 3.3). Table 2 in 7.6 “Appendix 6” summarizes the 30 Chinese-language publications published between 2000 and 2021 which were analyzed via close reading, i.e. were part of the selected corpus.

5.3 Detailed analysis of recent scholarly debates on the missions

The following sub-chapter includes the detailed analysis of the selected corpus based on the discourse analytical methodology introduced in 3.4 (in chapter 3 on methodology). As described in 3.4, the detailed analysis part is structured along what are called “discursive fields” (*Diskursfelder*) in Keller’s WDA methodology. A discursive field, based on Foucauldian discourse theory, is defined as an “arena in which various discourses compete in order to constitute or define a phenomenon”.⁹⁸ The current sub-chapter sets out with section 1 discussing the technological and navigational aspects of the missions. This section deals with the debate on the most tangible aspects of the missions: how big were Zheng He’s ships, and which locations were visited during the missions. As demonstrated in the section, these debates on the one hand have involved experts of nautical technology, while on the other hand have also been impacted by politicized accounts and pseudo-historiography (see esp. Gavin Menzies’ works, discussed in 4.2.1, 5.1.1.1). Section 2 focuses on the domestic political aspects of the missions, bringing together the historiography of the missions with research on Chinese politics, economy, and society during the early Ming period. This section strives to answer the frequently asked question of what the motivations were behind launching and halting the missions, i.e. how these were related to domestic developments within the Ming empire at the time. Section 3 takes a view on the missions as a major event of interstate relations, and brings together Zheng He historiography with the broader discourses on pre-modern China’s Tianxia-worldview, the tributary system, as well as notions and models of regional order in pre-modern China, East Asia, and the broader Indo-Pacific region.

The debates on the economic aspects of the missions are introduced in section 4, with a focus on the “tribute-trade system” model of Ming China’s economic engagement with the outside world proposed by various scholars. In section 5, the debates on the cultural aspects and

⁹⁸ Keller, *Diskursforschung*, 68.

impact of the missions are investigated. The focal points of this section are; 1. the question of how the history of the missions might be compatible with the “histories of Civilization” (*wenmingshi*) model advocated by various scholars; 2. how the discourse in mainland China is interlinked with the Southeast Asian discourse on Sino-Islamic interaction and the spread of Islam to the Indonesian archipelago; 3. how the impact of *Xiyang ji* and other subsequent literary works based on the missions should be interpreted.

Sections 6 and 7 are concerned with debates on the referential value of the missions from a present-day perspective. In section 7, the debates on the referential value of the missions for present-day attempts at writing de-centralized / “network-based” global or transregional histories are discussed. Section 7 focuses on the debates on the referential value of the missions for today’s discourses of cultural diplomacy and foreign policy in mainland China. This section draws on interdisciplinary debates involving scholars from the fields of political science and cultural studies, and intends to clarify how the missions are referenced in discourses of “maritime culture”, “maritime power”, and the “21st Century Maritime Silk Roads (of BRI)”.

At the end of each section (and subsection), the analytical insights are connected to the proposed theoretical framework of the dissertation (see “Belt & Road Worldview / Historiography” and “Silk Roads Power-Knowledge Complex” in 2.1).

5.3.1 Technological and navigational aspects of the missions: ship sizes and shipping routes

The supposedly extraordinary sizes of Zheng He’s ships have played a major role in the perception of the missions ever since the Ming era. These extraordinary sizes were noted in the *Mingshi* 明史 account of the missions (compiled during the 1730s) and were later retold in Liang Qichao’s influential article *Zuguo da hanghaijia Zheng He zhuan* (1904).⁹⁹ The fascination with the sizes of Zheng He’s ships, supposedly ca. 138.4 m by 56 m large, was a

⁹⁹ Liang Qichao 梁启超, “Zuguo da hanghaijia Zheng He zhuan,” 2018 [1904].

defining feature of the modern-era discourse on the missions. The idea that the ships of Columbus and other European colonizers were dwarfed in their size by those of Zheng He added to the perception of the missions as a symbol of China's past maritime power.¹⁰⁰ By the 2000s, the plausibility of such ship sizes has been called into question by various authors such as the U.S. American historian Sally K. Church and the Taiwanese nautical technology and navigational history expert Jeng-Horng Chen 陈政宏. According to Church, such sizes do not appear in the travelogues or other recognized primary sources and likely originated from the semi-fictional account of the *Xiyang ji*.¹⁰¹ According to Chen's research, based on usual ship sizes and historical records from the period, the real size of Zheng He's main ships was likely ca. 60 meters long, which was about twice (instead of 4 times) the length of Columbus' Santa María.¹⁰² In Peng Yong's (2020) review of China's Zheng He research trends since the Reform and Opening-up he argues that Chinese scholars are still divided on the issue of the sizes of Zheng He's ships. As noted by Peng, some historians such as Wan Ming 万明, a prominent author on the Zheng He missions (more on her background in 5.3.5), have called for a more thorough investigation of the various editions of Ma Huan's *Yingya shenglan*, as the earlier editions apparently do not include any reference to the sizes of Zheng He's ships.¹⁰³

The routes taken by Zheng He's missions have been one of the most frequently discussed topics within the broader discourse on the missions. There is practically a consensus among scholars inside and outside China that no sub-fleet of the Zheng He missions sailed further than the East African coast. This debate was especially reignited with the publications of Gavin Menzies' books *1421: The Year China Discovered the World* (2002)¹⁰⁴ and *1434: The*

¹⁰⁰ Chen, Jeng-Horng 陈政宏, "Zheng He misi yu zhengming," 61–62.

¹⁰¹ Church, "The Colossal Ships of Zheng He"; Chen, Jeng-Horng 陈政宏, "Zheng He misi yu zhengming."

¹⁰² Chen, Jeng-Horng 陈政宏, "Zheng He misi yu zhengming," 56–62.

¹⁰³ Peng Yong 彭勇, "Zhong shizheng, kuaxueke, quanqiu hua," 105–6; referencing Ma Huan 马欢, *Mingben "Yingya shenglan" jiaozhu* 明本《瀛涯胜览》校注 [Annotated edition of a Ming-era version of "Yingya shenglan"] (Guangzhou: Guangdong Renmin Chubanshe 广东人民出版社 [Guangdong People's Press], 2018).

¹⁰⁴ Menzies, *1421*.

Year a Chinese Fleet Sailed to Italy and Ignited the Renaissance (2009).¹⁰⁵ Menzies, a former UK Navy officer without any Chinese language knowledge and relevant academic degrees, claims in his books that Zheng He's fleet reached as far as the Americas, Australia, and Europe, basing these claims on his knowledge of sea currents and wind patterns. Such claims do not have a credible basis in the primary sources (see 5.1.1) and have been refuted by experts of nautical technology and navigational history as well (see 4.2.1). In most mainland Chinese academic works of the recent decades, such claims are treated as pseudo-historiography.

According to Peng Yong (2020), the hypothesis of Zheng He reaching the Americas and Australia has mostly been taken up and promoted by “amateur historians” in China.¹⁰⁶ Wu Yan and Cheng Zhongping argue that the “Chinese people ‘discovering’ America” (华人 ‘发现’ 美洲) hypothesis had existed long before Menzies’ publication on Zheng He’s supposed visit to the Americas. The idea of a Sino-American contact predating the Columbian contact had existed in various forms, incl. Kang Youwei’s idea that native Americans have Chinese ancestry (found in his writings from his trips to North America).¹⁰⁷ They also include the hypothesis that members of ancient China’s Shang-Yin dynasty “escaped” to the Americas after the fall of the dynasty and played a role in establishing the native American civilizations there (based primarily on supposed similarities in archaeological findings), as well as the hypothesis that some of the location names in the early sources on Buddhist pilgrims such as Fa Xian 法线 (4-5th c. CE) and Hui Shen 慧深 (6th c. CE) refer to locations in the Americas. While upholding the view that Menzies’ hypothesis is not tenable based on academic research on the routes taken by the missions, Wu and Chen also note some positive aspects of Menzies’ impact on Zheng

¹⁰⁵ Menzies, 1434.

¹⁰⁶ Peng Yong 彭勇, “Zhong shizheng, kuaxueke, quanqiu hua,” 104–5.

¹⁰⁷ Wu Yan 吴彦 and Chen Zhongping 陈忠平, “Huaren ‘faxian’ Meizhou,” 155; Kang Youwei 康有为, “Kang Nanhai xiansheng nianpu xubian 康南海先生年谱续编 [Sequel to the chronology of Mr. Kang Nanhai’s life],” in *Kang Nanhai zibian nianpu - Wai er zhong* 康南海自编年谱 - 外二种 [Kang Nanhai’s self-edited life chronology - Vol. 2], ed. Kang Tongbi 康同壁 and Lou Yulie 楼宇烈 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju 中华书局 (Zhonghua Book Company), 1992), 128.

He research. They especially argue that Menzies and the number of other non-professional historians motivated by his work have raised awareness of a number of primary sources (esp. maps) under-researched previously, which have since been analyzed by professional historians in more detail.¹⁰⁸

Zhou Yunzhong's major monograph *Zheng He xia Xiyang xinkao* (2013) focuses mostly on identifying the exact locations visited by the Zheng He missions. Based primarily on the Zheng He Navigational Map, as well as on a number of other primary sources, Zhou charts the route taken by the missions from Nanjing to the East African coast. In Zhou's view, the places visited by any sub-fleets of the missions included East African coastal locations beyond Mogadishu (Somalia) and Malindi (Kenya), which are mentioned in the travelogues and the *Ming Shilu*. Such locations included various port cities of the Kilwa Sultanate (centered at Kilwa Kisiwani, present-day Tanzania), with Sofala (Mozambique) being the furthestmost location visited by members of the missions in Zhou's view. According to Zhou's research into primary sources, cartography, and linguistic factors, the two "furthestmost locations from China" mentioned in the *Mingshi* (see 5.1.1.1), i.e. *Bila* 比剌 and *Sunla* 孙剌 refer to the Mozambique Island (in today's northern Mozambique) and to Nova Sofala (in today's southern Mozambique) respectively.¹⁰⁹ Zhou furthermore argues that based on the locations depicted on the Zheng He Navigational Map, a Southern Indian Ocean route connecting the East African coast, the Comoros, Madagascar, the Seychelles, the Chagos Islands (part of the present-day British Indian Ocean Territory), the Maldives, and Sumatra were traveled by the missions as well. As argued by Zhou, this Southern Indian Ocean route was in fact an important trade route since China's Song-Yuan era, and archaeological findings in Madagascar and on the Chagos Islands have also indicated trade links with China from that period.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Wu Yan 吴彦 and Chen Zhongping 陈忠平, "Huaren 'faxian' Meizhou."

¹⁰⁹ Zhou Yunzhong 周运中, *Zheng He xia Xiyang*, 305–17.

¹¹⁰ Zhou Yunzhong 周运中, 296–305.

While some authors are concerned with refuting the apparently unfounded idea that Zheng He's fleets visited places beyond East Africa, others are concerned with criticizing those who call into question that Zheng He even visited East Africa. Guo Yanguang 郭宴光 (postdoctoral researcher of history at University of Victoria, Canada) and Chen Zhongping argue that in recent Western global historiography there has been a tendency of "belittling" the significance of the missions, especially in contrast with the earlier Song-Yuan-era travelers' contribution to maritime geographical knowledge exchange. Guo and Chen refer to the works of Janet Abu-Lughod and others, as examples of considering the missions as a minor episode compared to the exchange facilitated by Song-Yuan-era travelers such as Wang Dayuan (author of the *Daoyi zhilüe* 岛夷志略, 14th century). Guo and Chen also criticize the works of Taiwanese historians incl. Chen Xinxiong 陈信雄, who call into question that Zheng He's fleets actually visited East Africa. Guo and Chen argue that while it is true that the visits to Africa are not described in the travelogues, the inscriptions (see 5.1.1.3) erected by members of the missions, the *Ming Shilu*, as well as archaeological evidence of Chinese porcelain from the Yongle and Xuande periods excavated in East Africa point to the fact that the region was visited by the missions.¹¹¹

In the recent mainland Chinese academic discourse on the Zheng He missions, the debates on the technicalities of the missions (shipping technology, navigational routes) revolve around critically analyzing the primary sources and other factors such as archaeological findings, wind patterns, sea currents, etc. in order to separate facts from fiction and pseudo-historiography. There is a critical stance towards earlier ways of writing historiography on the

¹¹¹ Guo Yanguang 郭宴光 and Chen Zhongping 陈忠平, "Zheng He chuandui yuanhang Feizhou de zhuangju ji qi zai Yinduyang shijie de yingxiang 郑和船队远航非洲的壮举及其在印度洋世界的影响 [The major feats of Zheng He's distant journeys to Africa and their influence on the Indian Ocean world]," in *Zouxiang duoyuan wenhua de quanqiushi: Zheng He xia Xiyang (1405-1433) ji Zhongguo yu Yinduyang shijie de guanxi*, ed. Chen Zhongping 陈忠平, 1st ed. (Beijing: Shenghuo-Dushu-Xinzhishi Sanlian Shudian 生活·读书·新知三联书店 [SDX Joint Publishing], 2017), 201–37; on archaeological findings in East Africa see also Qin Dashu 秦大树, "Kenniya chutu."

Zheng He missions, for what is seen as the Sinocentric focus and the interest in emphasizing “greatness” instead of critical historical inquiry in many earlier works. Unquestioningly accepting the extraordinary sizes of Zheng He’s ships or the hypotheses of Zheng He reaching faraway continents beyond what is clearly stated in the primary sources is thus often criticized, and sources-based, unbiased historical research is promoted instead, similarly to research on the missions outside of China. Instead of the sizes of Zheng He’s ships, the “greatness” of the missions was based on their impact with regard to establishing networks across the Indo-Pacific region, as pointed out by various authors in Chen Zhongping’s edited volume (2017)¹¹², and by non-Chinese authors as well.¹¹³

The new ways of perceiving the Zheng He missions, with more focus on trans-regional interconnectivity and less focus on ship and fleet sizes are also in line with the emergence of the “Silk Road Power-Knowledge Complex” introduced in the theory chapter. As argued in the theory chapter, this power-knowledge complex is focused on China’s role in the past order as a facilitator of win-win interaction along the collective of trans-Eurasian maritime and continental trade routes conventionally labeled as the “silk roads”. This power-knowledge complex postulates that China’s strength in the present and future order will not be based merely on the sizes of its fleets, but on its soft power capacities to become a major power promoting stability and win-win cooperation globally. The state-led appropriation of history for the construction of “Belt & Road Historiography”, as testified in publications such as *Zheng He yanjiu dongtai* [Trends in Zheng He research], is based on further strengthening the focus on trans-regional interconnectivity, with less focus on the traditional notions of “greatness by means of ship sizes” as found in Liang Qichao’s 1904 article.

¹¹² Chen Zhongping 陈忠平, *Zouxian duoyuan wenhua de quanqiushi*.

¹¹³ Sen, “The Impact of Zheng He’s Expeditions”; Ptak, *China und Asiens maritime Achse*.

5.3.2 Domestic political aspects of the missions: Motivations behind launching and halting them

While the Zheng He missions are widely known as an important episode in China's engagement with the outside world, the domestic social and political background is also frequently discussed in recent publications in China. The most frequently posed questions in this context are why the missions were first launched by the Yongle emperor, and why no comparable maritime missions were launched in China's history following the seventh mission ordered by the Xuande emperor. Historians with an interest in China's social and political history during the early Ming period tend to go deeper into investigating the domestic background of the missions and tend to argue that launching and halting the missions was deeply influenced by domestic developments in China at the time.

Zheng Yijun 郑一钧 (1945-), an expert in navigational technology and son of the historian Zheng Hesheng 郑鹤声 (1901-1989) with whom he co-authored several works on the Zheng He missions, starts his major monograph *Lun Zheng He xia Xiyang* [On the Zheng He missions, 1985] with the sub-chapter *Mingchu zhengzhi jingji xingshi* 明初政治经济形势 [Political and economic situation during the early Ming]. Zheng to some extent uses references to Marxist historical theory by focusing on class relations in early Ming China. He mostly praises the Yongle emperor (Zhu Di 朱棣) as a charismatic ruler continuing the policies of the founder of the Ming dynasty Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 (the Hongwu 洪武 emperor, r. 1368-1398). The anti-Yuan rebellion by Zhu Yuanzhang is described as a peasant war against the exploitative political and economic system of the late Yuan dynasty. Zhu Yuanzhang is portrayed as a reformer, whose coming to power to some extent eased China's class conflicts of the time, especially by improving the situation of the peasantry through land usage redistribution and the promotion of the *tuntian* 屯田 system (stationing soldiers in border regions to open up new land for cultivation). The Yongle emperor is framed as a ruler furthering

the centralization of imperial authority already started by Zhu Yuanzhang, and his role in safeguarding the continental and maritime borders of China is especially emphasized. The successful resistance against *wokou* 倭寇 pirate attacks is presented as his main achievement on the borders.¹¹⁴ The Yongle emperor is thus praised by Zheng as a guarantor of stability and prosperity inside China, and a ruler striving for friendly relations with the outside world.¹¹⁵

In his major monograph *Zheng He xia Xiyang xinkao* [Rethinking the Zheng He missions, 2013], Zhou Yunzhong paints a markedly different picture of Zhu Di, the Yongle emperor. In Zhou's view, Zhu Di was a despotic and extravagant ruler to the extent which is rarely seen in history. The main domestic political context behind the missions, in Zhou's view, was Zhu Di's coming to power via the violent dethronement of his predecessor Zhu Yunwen 朱允文, the Jianwen 建文 emperor (r. 1398-1402). In the early years of his reign, the Yongle emperor ordered the execution of vast numbers of the former allies of Zhu Yunwen. The most infamous was apparently the execution of the scholar Fang Xiaoru 方孝孺 (1357-1402) and the "ten familial exterminations" (*zhumie shizu* 诛灭十族) of his relatives and students (the latter one constituting the "tenth" familial group apart from the nine groups of relatives).¹¹⁶ The Yongle emperor became known for a number of extravagant projects apart from the Zheng He missions, incl. the compilation of the *Yongle dadian* 永乐大典 encyclopedia, the construction of the "Great Bell of Yongle" (*Yongle dazhong* 永乐大钟)¹¹⁷, as well as the costly relocation of the imperial capital from Nanjing to Beijing in 1421.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ The word *wokou* (Jap. *wakō* 倭寇) literally means "Japanese pirates", and refers to pirate groups active on the Chinese and Korean coasts between ca. the 13th and 16th centuries. In spite of the widespread notions of their Japanese background, many *wokou* had Chinese and Korean origins; more on this in Kang, *East Asia Before the West*, 118.

¹¹⁵ Zheng Yijun 郑一钧, *Lun Zheng He xia xiyang*, 1–9.

¹¹⁶ Zhou Yunzhong 周运中, *Zheng He xia Xiyang*, 18–19.

¹¹⁷ The 46.5 tons *Yongle dazhong*, currently kept at the *Dazhong Si* 大钟寺 [Great Bell Monastery] in Beijing, is China's largest extant bell structure, see Zhou Yunzhong 周运中, 18.

¹¹⁸ Zhou Yunzhong 周运中, 18–20.

In the sub-chapter on “The causes behind the Zheng He missions” (郑和下西洋的起因), Zhou evaluates several extant hypotheses on the reasons behind launching the missions. He considers the “finding the Jianwen emperor” thesis as the least likely among them, as there is hardly any evidence that the Jianwen emperor escaped the sacking of the Nanjing imperial palace by Zhu Di’s troops.¹¹⁹ In Zhou’s view, the main economic and social rationale behind the Zheng He missions was the Yongle emperor’s intention to maintain stability in China’s southeastern coastal regions. The missions provided a gateway to legal trade with the Indo-Pacific maritime world, which had existed in the Song and Yuan eras already, but was severely restricted by the “maritime bans” (*haijin* 海禁) of the early Ming. According to Zhou’s analysis, the time schedule of the missions, namely the long stays in a select number of port cities, evidence of profit-oriented private trade in the travelogues and other primary sources, as well as the presence of a large number of soldiers indicate that the missions were intended to facilitate long trade exchanges with imperial supervision and security guarantees. This is connected to Zhou’s argument concerning the question of military ambitions in the context of the missions. According to Zhou’s research into the *Wuzhi xuanbu* 武志选簿 [Selected accounts of military service] from the period, the missions likely involved more than three instances of military confrontation.¹²⁰ In the *Wuzhi xuanbu* there are several accounts of military exploits of members of the missions connected to the geographical locations *Mianhua* 棉花 (near the Perak river delta in today’s Perak state, Malaysia¹²¹) and *Alu* 阿鲁 (Aru Sultanate in northern Sumatra, present-day Indonesia). Meanwhile, Zhou argues that it is highly unlikely that military intimidation or conquest were the main intentions of the missions, given the high

¹¹⁹ Zhou Yunzhong 周运中, 13–14.

¹²⁰ These three widely-known conflicts, described in the travelogues and the *Ming Shilu*, included the armed conflicts with the overseas Chinese leader Chen Zuyi 陈祖义 (based in Palembang, Sumatra), the conflict with the throne-pretending member of the royal family of Sumatra named Sukanla 苏干剌, as well as the armed conflict with Vira Alakesvara (in the Chinese sources *Yaliekuna'er* 亚烈苦奈儿), king of Sri Lanka.

¹²¹ On locating *Mianhua* see Zhou Yunzhong 周运中, *Zheng He xia Xiyang*, 208–11.

military presence and maritime supremacy of the Zheng He fleet, in contrast to the relatively small number of armed conflicts.¹²² Zhou furthermore argues that based on the *Wuzhi xuanbu* one likely concern of the Ming court was emigration and control over the Southeast Asian Chinese diaspora, especially due to desertion and piracy among former members of the Ming army. Many ex-soldiers apparently ended up in the armed group led by Chen Zuyi 陈祖义.¹²³

Altogether, Zhou calls into question that the advancement of foreign relations played prominently in the Yongle emperor's decision to start the mission, and thereby criticizes Zheng Yijun and other earlier authors focusing mostly on foreign relations. In Zhou's view, establishing domestic political legitimacy and the stability of the southeastern coastal provinces of China were the Yongle emperor's main concerns. Interaction and interference in Southeast Asia were necessitated due to the trade and migrational links of China's southeastern provinces to the region. The relocation of the capital from Nanjing to Beijing shows that the southeastern provinces and their maritime links were only one part of the Yongle emperor's grand strategy, and he was at the same time also concerned with the defense of the continental borders against the Mongols, as Zhou also points out.¹²⁴

In the online magazine article "Zheng He jiujiing weihe xia Xiyang?" [Why did Zheng He actually sail the Western Ocean?, 2017], historical geographer Ge Jianxiong 葛剑雄 intends to bring together the domestic and foreign aspects of the Yongle emperor's decision to order the first six missions. Ge emphasizes the importance of tributary exchanges with foreign rulers

¹²² Zhou Yunzhong 周运中, 13.

¹²³ Based on the travelogues and the *Ming Shilu*, Chen was defeated and captured in Palembang, and executed in Nanjing in 1407. Following Chen's defeat, another overseas Chinese leader named Shi Jinqing 施进卿 was commissioned as the *xuanweishi* 宣慰使 ("superintendent") of *Jiugang* 旧港 (the port of Palembang). This episode shows the Ming court's interest in durable control over Palembang (a significant regional trade center with a large Chinese emigrant community), see also Zhou Yunzhong 周运中, 20–23.

¹²⁴ Zhou Yunzhong 周运中, 17–22.

for the domestic legitimacy of China's emperors, and the Yongle emperor's quest for ensuring his legitimacy after his violent coming to power.¹²⁵

Liang Zhiping 梁志平 (historian at Shanghai University of Engineering Science, Institute of Social Sciences 上海工程技术大学社会科学学院) takes a domestic political and environmental focus in his discussion of the background of the missions. Liang traces the life of the influential minister Xia Yuanji 夏原吉 (1366-1430), his contributions to water regulation in the Lower Yangtze region, and his evolving stances towards the missions. Prior to the missions, Xia played a major role in overseeing the water regulation works connecting Lake Tai to the Yangtze at Liujiagang 刘家港 (today part of Taicang 太仓, Jiangsu province). Liujiagang subsequently became the main launching and receiving port of Zheng He's missions, but due to the insufficient water supplies arriving from Lake Tai, it silted up by the end of the 6th mission (1424) and the Chongming Island 崇明岛 (today part of Shanghai) was used as an anchoring place instead. Xia originally supported the missions, which is evident in his appraisal of the *qilin* 麒麟 (giraffe) tributes from *Malin* 麻林国 (today's Malindi, in Kenya).¹²⁶ Xia's positive attitudes towards the missions in the early period were apparently also motivated by their initially positive impact. As research by Wan Ming has shown, the large amounts of pepper imported from Southeast Asia made it possible to pay officials in pepper, but in the long term also led to the devaluation of the Ming currency.¹²⁷ Due to the large costs of the six missions

¹²⁵ Ge Jianxiong 葛剑雄, "Zheng He jiujiing weihe xia Xiyang? 郑和究竟为何下西洋 [Why did Zheng He actually travel to the Western Ocean?]," *Ai Sixiang* 爱思想, October 2017, <http://www.aisixiang.com/data/106608.html>. (Accessed on 2023-02-11).

¹²⁶ Xia Yuanji 夏原吉, "Qilin fu 麒麟赋 [Essay on qilins]," in *Gu-jin tushu jicheng* 古今图书集成 [Complete collection of illustrations and writings from the earliest to present times], vol. Di wu yi ce qin-chong dian shang 第五册禽虫典上 [Vol. 51 on birds and insects / 1] (Taipei: Dingwen Shuju 鼎文书局, 1977), 563; referenced in Liang Zhiping 梁志平, "Mingdai Jiangnan shuixi de bianqian, Liujiagang de xing-shuai ji Zheng He xia Xiyang 明代江南水系的变迁、刘家港的兴衰及郑和下西洋 [The Ming-era transformation of the Jiangnan river system, the rise and decline of Liujiagang, and the Zheng He missions]," in *Zouxiang duoyuan wenhua de quanqiu shi: Zheng He xia Xiyang (1405-1433) ji Zhongguo yu Yinduyang shijie de guanxi*, ed. Chen Zhongping 陈忠平, 1st ed. (Beijing: Shenghuo-Dushu-Xinzhishi Sanlian Shudian 生活·读书·新知三联书店 [SDX Joint Publishing], 2017), 253-54.

¹²⁷ Liang Zhiping 梁志平, "Mingdai Jiangnan shuixi de bianqian," 253-54; also referencing Wan Ming 万明, "Zheng He xia Xiyang zhongzhi xiangguan shishi kaobian 郑和下西洋终止相关史实考辨 [Examination of

ordered by the Yongle emperor, combined with his costly campaigns against the Mongols in the North, Xia voiced opposition to his policies, for which reason he was imprisoned in 1421. After the death of the Yongle emperor in 1424, his successor Zhu Gaochi 朱高炽 (the Hongxi 洪熙 emperor, r. 1424-1425) ordered his release and, according to the *Mingshi*, heeded his advice of not launching any further missions.¹²⁸ It was not until the years after Xia Yuanji's death in 1430 that Zhu Zhanji 朱瞻基 (the Xuande 宣德 emperor, r. 1425-1435) decided to launch the seventh mission in 1431. In Liang Zhiping's assessment, the reason why no further missions were ordered following the death of the Xuande emperor is that officials formerly close to Xia Yuanji such as Zhang Shiqi 张士奇 and Yang Rong 杨荣 became influential in the Ming court.¹²⁹

In the Chinese academic discourse on the missions, the question of why the missions were stopped, i.e. why no maritime missions of similar scale were ever ordered under the subsequent Ming and Qing emperors is discussed with similar frequency to the question of why they were launched in the first place. It is widely accepted that stopping the launching of large-scale maritime missions was not solely a result of Zheng He's death during the seventh mission.¹³⁰ The financial burdens on the imperial treasury, the growing military threat posed by the Mongols along the northern continental borders, as well as the emerging political opposition from Xia Yuanji and others in the Ming court are usually seen as the main factors. This opposition of the officialdom to maritime missions of similar scale apparently continued into

historical facts related to the termination of the Zheng He missions],” *Jinan Xuebao* 暨南学报 (哲学社会科学版) [*Jinan Journal (Philosophy and Social Sciences)*], no. 06 (2005): 119–20.

¹²⁸ Liang Zhiping 梁志平, “Mingdai Jiangnan shuixi de bianqian,” 255.

¹²⁹ Liang Zhiping 梁志平, 255–56.

¹³⁰ Zheng He's death is not clearly indicated in the travelogues and the *Ming Shilu*. Based on the *Fei Huan An xianghuo shengxiang ji* (more on this source in 5.1.1.3) Zheng He died in *Guli* 古里国 (Kozhikode, S.W. India), most scholars assuming that he died in disease (no armed conflict is reported in any source from the period). More on this in “1405: Zheng He xia Xiyang 5. - Tianxia tongfu 1405: 郑和下西洋 (五) —— 天下同福 [1405: Zheng He sails the Western Ocean 5. - Shared fortune under the Heaven],” *1405: Zheng He xia Xiyang* (Zhongyang Dianshitai 中央电视台 [China Central Television] & Jiangsu Guangbo Dianshi Zongtai 江苏广播电视总台 [Jiangsu Broadcasting Corporation], 2005), <https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1rW411d7w1?p=5>. (Accessed on 2023-02-11).

the reigns of the subsequent Ming emperors. According to one thesis, most records of the missions were destroyed by the Minister of War Liu Daxia 刘大夏 (1436-1516) in an attempt to prevent the Chenghua 成化 emperor (r. 1464-1487) from relaunching the missions. This is based on an account found in the 1570s treatise *Shuyu zhou zi lu* 殊域周咨录 [Informative records on faraway lands] compiled by the official Yan Congjian 严从简.¹³¹ Senior scholars in China such as Wan Ming and Zheng Yijun are skeptical about this thesis, as they express in the first episode of the documentary series *1405: Zheng He xia Xiyang* (2005). As Wan Ming points out, it is unlikely that Liu Daxia as a minister had access to documents kept inside the imperial court.¹³²

The debates on the domestic political background of the missions show that in recent decades there has been more willingness in China to situate the Zheng He missions not only in a broader transregional context but also in the political and social context of early Ming China. Research on the domestic political background of the missions also sheds light on the relative autonomy of officialdom incl. the ministries vis-à-vis the court and the eunuchs during the time. It thus involves the critical investigation of contestation and conflicts among Ming China's elites over the missions and is in contrast with focusing on the missions only as a major win-win feat of interstate diplomacy, often found in media and cultural diplomacy discourses. Such debates are thus important in order to set out from a critical perspective while discussing the missions in a broader geographical context.

These debates also show the limits of incorporating the missions into the re-construction of Chinese and global history along the guidelines of the “Silk Roads Power-Knowledge

¹³¹ See Church, “The Colossal Ships of Zheng He,” 175; Chen, Jeng-Horng 陈政宏, “Zheng He misi yu zhengming,” 73.

¹³² “1405: Zheng He xia Xiyang 1. - Fengshi Xiyang 1405: 郑和下西洋（一）——奉使西洋 [1405: Zheng He sails the Western Ocean 1. - An envoy to the Western Ocean],” *1405: Zheng He xia Xiyang* (Zhongyang Dianshitai 中央电视台 [China Central Television] & Jiangsu Guangbo Dianshi Zongtai 江苏广播电视总台 [Jiangsu Broadcasting Corporation], 2005), 05:30-05:48, <https://www.bilibili.com/video/av31274235/> (Accessed on 2022-08-05).

Complex” and the state-promoted “Belt & Road Historiography”, emphasizing the significance of the missions for present-day openness and “win-win” interaction. More properly, it shows that certain historians in mainland China focusing on domestic history dare to question these meta-narratives promoted by the party-state and widely reproduced in the academic discourse as well (see 5.2.2 and related figures in Appendices on text analysis of titles and abstracts). The insights gained through research on the domestic political aspects of the missions demonstrate that the missions were contested in their own time, with conflicts emerging among the ruling dynasty and the literati class. What most critical authors imply is that widely-held assumptions and official narratives should not be taken for granted, even if they revolve around positive values such as pacifism and “win-win” cooperation. History, instead, needs to be understood in its complexity, in order to promote independent and intuitive judgment of present actions.

5.3.3 Interstate politics and the missions

5.3.3.1 *Tianxia worldview, tributary system, and regional order*

The discursive field bringing together the Zheng He missions and interstate politics revolves around the notion that the missions facilitated a particular (trans)regional order dominated by the Ming empire in the Indo-Pacific maritime space. Central to these debates are the theoretical frameworks of the *Tianxia* worldview (*Tianxia shijieguan* 天下世界观 or *Tianxia guan* 天下观) and that of the tributary system.¹³³ As introduced in 2.3.1, the advocates of “*Tianxia* worldview” emphasize the universalistic aspects of pre-modern Chinese thought. In their view, pre-modern Chinese elites saw the world as a community of humankind based on the universalistic values of Confucian moral philosophy. The *Tianzi* 天子 (“Son of Heaven”) was thus seen as a possessor of *de* 德 (“virtue”) and *ren* 仁 (“benevolence”), and as a guarantor

¹³³ The Chinese translations of “tributary system” include *chaogong tixi* 朝贡体系, *chaogong zhidu* 朝贡制度, as well as *chaogong tizhi* 朝贡体制.

of peace and stability all over the *Tianxia* (“under the Heaven”). Other rulers were expected to display virtues such as *xiao* 孝 (“filial piety”) and *zhong* 忠 (“loyalty”) towards the *Tianzi* in exchange for his benevolent protection.

The “tributary system” of Ming-Qing China and East Asia (and to some extent of Southeast Asia, and other neighboring regions as well) is seen by a number of scholars as a model of interstate relations based on hierarchical and reciprocal relationships.¹³⁴ A number of authors in China and some in other countries have argued that a Sinocentric “tributary order” existed in East Asia which prevented military conflicts among the East Asian states of the Ming and Qing eras.¹³⁵ Others have criticized this narrative describing it as a present-day myth-making for advancing the geopolitical interests of the Chinese party-state or called into question its referential value for today’s international relations theory. Among them, the U.S. American historian Peter C. Perdue compares David C. Kang’s and like-minded authors’ ideas of the tributary system to the politicized historical narratives of Chiang Kai-shek, describing them as promoting national domination in the disguise of cultural universalism.¹³⁶ The Chinese scholar Xu Bo calls into question the supposed referential value of the tributary system for China’s present-day foreign policy. Referring to the armed conflicts taking place during the Zheng He missions, Xu argues that pre-modern Chinese elites had no notions of national sovereignty and

¹³⁴ For more detailed introductions of the recent “tributary system discourse” of mainland China see Sebestyén Hompot, “Interpretations and Evaluations of China’s Imperial Tradition in Recent Global Historiography. A Discourse Analysis of Historiography on the Sinocentric Tributary System of the Ming and Qing Dynasties (1368-1912 CE)” (M.A., Vienna, University of Vienna, 2019); Hompot, “A Discourse Analysis of Recent Mainland Chinese Historiography on the Sinocentric Tributary System of the Ming and Qing Dynasties (1368–1912)”; Hompot and Weigelin-Schwardzik, “Mainland Chinese Historiography in Search of New National and Global Narratives.”

¹³⁵ The East Asian states in this context are defined as the sedentary polities of Eastern Asia with bureaucracies influenced by China’s “Neo-Confucian” (*lixue* 理学) school of thought; in the Ming and Qing eras, such states included China, Japan, Korea, Ryukyu, and Vietnam. Kang points to the low number of military conflicts among these states in the period between the establishment of the Ming dynasty (1368) and the late 19th-century emergence of Japanese imperialism, especially when compared to the large number of interstate armed conflicts in Europe throughout the same time. As exceptions, Kang mentions the Sino-Vietnamese (Ming- Hồ) war of 1406-1407 (followed by the Ming Chinese occupation of northern Vietnam, 1407-1427) and the Imjin war (1592-1598) waged by Japan against Korea and China; see Kang, *East Asia Before the West*.

¹³⁶ Perdue, “The Tenacious Tributary System.”

non-interference comparable to today's norms.¹³⁷ The analytical usefulness of the term “tributary system” from a historical perspective has been questioned as well by certain historians. These authors argue that the tributary exchanges among China and other states were not the main avenue of their diplomatic relations, and they did not constitute a *system*.¹³⁸

Among mainland Chinese authors, the international relations scholar Li Baojun and sociologist Liu Bo (2011) argue for re-conceptualizing the tributary system as *chaogong-cefeng zhixu* 朝贡——册封秩序 [tribute-investiture order]. Li & Liu argue that the Ming-Qing tributary order was based on nominal hierarchy and reciprocity, the investiture (*cefeng*) of ritual titles of nobility bestowed by the Ming and Qing emperors on foreign rulers, being of equal importance to tribute (*chaogong*). Regional stability was achieved through the establishment of such nominal hierarchies and reciprocal relations, so Li & Liu argue, framing the Zheng He missions as a *shengkuang kongqian* 盛况空前 [unprecedented grand occasion] in the history of the tribute-investiture order. Li & Liu criticize the West-centrism of international relations theory and call for the creation of Sinocentric theoretical frameworks, based on Sinocentric historical experience, in this case focusing on the positive aspects of the tribute-investiture order for the facilitation of regional stability.¹³⁹ The Peking University-based international relations scholar Shang Huipeng (2009) criticizes the attempts to describe the tributary system based on “Hobbesian, Lockean, and Kantian cultures” of international relations theory (referencing Alexander Wendt, 1958-, for this classification). He argues instead that the tributary system can best be described based on the anthropological concepts of “role” and “status” (referring to the works of Ralph Linton, 1893-1953), as well as based on the *chaxu* 差序 [“order based on

¹³⁷ Xu Bo 徐波, “Dui gudai Dongya chaogong tixi de zaisikao 对古代东亚朝贡体制的再思考 [Rethinking the pre-modern East Asian tributary system],” *Guoji Zhengzhi Yanjiu* 国际政治研究 [Journal of International Studies] 2017, no. 03 (2017): 85–102.

¹³⁸ Zhang Feng, “Rethinking the ‘Tribute System’: Broadening the Conceptual Horizon of Historical East Asian Politics,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 2009, no. 2 (2009): 545–74; Zhuang Guotu 庄国土, “Lüelun chaogong zhidu de xuhuan.”

¹³⁹ Li Baojun 李宝俊 and Liu Bo 刘波, “‘Chaogong - cefeng’ zhixu lunxi ‘朝贡——册封’秩序论析 [Analysis of the ‘tributary-feudal’ order],” *Waijiao Pinglun* 外交评论 [Foreign Affairs Review] 2011, no. 2 (2011): 109–21.

difference”] anthropological theory of pre-modern Chinese social relations formulated by the Chinese anthropologist Fei Xiaotong 费孝通, 1910-2005). Fei divides traditional Chinese social relations into the three categories of *qinren* 亲人 [relatives and close acquaintances], *shuren* 熟人 [acquaintances], and *shengren* 生人 [strangers]. Shang references Fei’s *chaxu* model to describe the tributary system, which in his view was based on the Chinese imperial dynasties’ self-perception as guarantors of stability and wealth for *qinren* (i.e., the close tributaries such as Korea and Vietnam), and to a smaller extent to *shuren* as well.¹⁴⁰ The Fudan-based international relations scholar Su Changhe (2016) is in favor of using Sinocentric theoretical frameworks but argues against too much focus on “tribute” in the pre-modern East Asian interstate order and proposes *gongsheng* 共生 [symbiosis, i.e. of various states with different power capabilities] as a key term instead. Su criticizes what he perceives as the *xi-yi zhi bian* 西夷之辨 [Western-Barbarian distinction]¹⁴¹ attitude of Western international relations theory, arguing that the universalistic claims of a “liberal” international order as promoted by the United States do not lead to global stability.¹⁴²

As can be seen, in recent decades there have been a number of scholars of international relations in mainland China who have made attempts at theorizing the tributary system as a model of pre-modern interstate relations in East Asia and to some extent in its adjacent regions.

¹⁴⁰ Shang Huipeng 尚会鹏, “Lunren yu Tianxia - Jiedu yi chaogong tixi wei hexin de gudai Dongya guoji zhixu ‘伦人’与‘天下’——解读以朝贡体系为核心的古代东亚国际秩序 [Human relationships and ‘All Under Heaven’ - Interpreting the pre-modern East Asian international order under the tributary system],” *Guoji Zhengzhi Yanjiu* 国际政治研究 [Journal of International Studies] 30, no. 02 (2009): 29-43+191-192.

¹⁴¹ The term is a reference to *hua-yi zhi bian* 华夷之辨 [Sino-Barbarian distinction] often used for describing the Sinocentrism of pre-modern Chinese thought. In Su’s proposed term *Hua* (“China, civilization”) is replaced by *xi* (West), in order to criticize what he perceives as exclusively prioritizing the West as a source of civilization and knowledge, etc. On *hua-yi zhi bian* see e.g. Wang Hui, *China from Empire to Nation-State*, 101–45; Li Baojun 李宝俊 and Liu Bo 刘波, “Chaogong - cefeng”; Yu Changsen 喻常森, “Shilun chaogong zhidu de yanbian 试论朝贡制度的演变 [On the evolution of the tributary system],” *Nanyang Wenti Yanjiu* 南洋问题研究 [Southeast Asian Affairs] 2000, no. 1 (2000): 55–65.

¹⁴² Su Changhe 苏长和, “Cong guanxi dao gongsheng - Zhongguo daguo waijiao lilun de wenhua he zhidu chanshi 从关系到共生——中国大国外交理论的文化和制度阐释 [From relations to symbiosis - A cultural and institutional interpretation of China’s great power foreign policy theory],” *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* 世界经济与政治 [World Economics and Politics], no. 01 (2016): 5-25+156.

These authors typically emphasize Chinese and East Asian particularity to problematize the supposed universal applicability of West-centric theoretical frameworks in discussions of Chinese/East Asian history. They also argue for the referential value of Sinocentric historical frameworks for present-day international relations theory and regard the tributary system as a key point in this regard. Some authors explicitly refer to the Zheng He missions as a sort of “peak point” in the history of the tributary system.

The tributary system framework is frequently referenced by authors writing on the Zheng He missions. Chen Zhongping advocates a network-based historiographical approach to researching the missions. In his view, the main achievement of the missions was the combination of the already extant networks of trade and tribute into one “tribute-trade network” spanning across the Indo-Pacific maritime space. Chen endorses the Japanese economic historian Hamashita Takeshi’s *chōkō-bōeki shisutemu* 朝貢貿易システム [tribute-trade system] framework emphasizing the interconnection between tribute and trade¹⁴³, as well as David C. Kang’s framing of the tributary system as a regional political order characterized both by ritualized hierarchies and pragmatism in terms of maintaining regional stability.¹⁴⁴ However, Chen also points to the spatial limitations of Hamashita’s and Kang’s conceptualizations of the tribute-trade or tributary system and advocates a more globalized view of China’s tribute and trade relations encompassing the broader Indo-Pacific region instead of East Asia only. In Chen’s view, during the Zheng He missions, a “network revolution” (*wangluo geming* 网络革命) of the 15th century was initiated which ultimately had an impact on subsequent colonization. Referencing Roderich Ptak’s approach to 15th-century Indo-Pacific history¹⁴⁵, Chen argues that

¹⁴³ See Takeshi Hamashita, *China, East Asia and the Global Economy*, 1 edition (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2008); Hamashita Takeshi 浜下武志, *Kindai Chūgoku no kokusai-teki keiki – Chōkō bōeki shisutemu to kindai Ajia* 近代中国の国際的契機—朝貢貿易システムと近代アジア [The international moment of early modern China - the tribute-trade system and early modern Asia] (Tokyo: Tōkyō Daigaku Shuppankai 東京大学出版会 [Tokyo University Press], 1990).

¹⁴⁴ See Kang, *East Asia Before the West*.

¹⁴⁵ See in Ptak, *China und Asiens maritime Achse*.

the Zheng He missions played a major role in the solidification of “nodes and networks” of Indo-Pacific trade and politics which were subsequently utilized by the Portuguese to build their colonial empire.¹⁴⁶

Shi Ping 时平, a prolific author on the Zheng He missions based on CNKI data (see 5.2.1), professor at Shanghai Maritime University and director of its Maritime Culture Research Institute (上海海事大学海洋文化研究所), former instructor of military theory at Nanjing Naval Command College (南京海军指挥学院), as well as the current director of the Shanghai Zheng He Research Center (上海郑和研究中心) and main editor of the journal *Zheng He yanjiu dongtai* 郑和研究动态 [Trends in Zheng He research] focuses on the development of Malacca during the Zheng He missions as a case study in his contribution to Chen Zhongping’s 2017 edited volume. Referring to Lu Xiang (1993), Shi argues that on the one hand, the interventions in Malacca and Sumatra qualified as interventions in the domestic affairs of a foreign state by today’s standards, but on the other hand, Malacca practically developed from a tribal-level society into a major seaport of the region due to the political support received from the Ming dynasty.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ Chen Zhongping 陈忠平, “Zouxian quanqiu xing wangluo geming: Zheng He xia Xiyang ji Zhongguo yu Yinduyang shijie de chaogong-maoyi guanxi 走向全球性网络革命: 郑和下西洋及中国与印度洋世界的朝贡-贸易关系 [Towards a global network revolution: The Zheng He missions and tribute-trade relations between China and the Indian Ocean world],” in *Zouxian duoyuan wenhua de quanqiushi: Zheng He xia Xiyang (1405-1433) ji Zhongguo yu Yinduyang shijie de guanxi*, ed. Chen Zhongping 陈忠平, 1st ed. (Beijing: Shenghuo-Dushu-Xinzhi Sanlian Shudian 生活·读书·新知三联书店 [SDX Joint Publishing], 2017), 22–75.

¹⁴⁷ Shi Ping 时平, “Zheng He fangwen Manlajia cishu kaozheng ji pingjia - lishi yu huanjing fenxi de ge’an 郑和访问满刺加次数考证及评价——历史与环境分析的个案 [The number of Zheng He’s visits to Malacca and their evaluation - A case study of historical and environmental analysis],” in *Zouxian duoyuan wenhua de quanqiushi: Zheng He xia Xiyang (1405-1433) ji Zhongguo yu Yinduyang shijie de guanxi*, ed. Chen Zhongping 陈忠平, 1st ed. (Beijing: Shenghuo-Dushu-Xinzhi Sanlian Shudian 生活·读书·新知三联书店 [SDX Joint Publishing], 2017), 285; citing Lu Wei 卢苇, “Lun Zheng He xia Xiyang yu Dongnanya jiaowang ji Dongnanya diqu de fanrong wending 论郑和下西洋与东西交往及东南亚地区的繁荣稳定 [On the Zheng He missions’ contacts with Southeast Asia and the prosperity and stability of the Southeast Asian region],” *Zheng He yanjiu lunwenji* 郑和研究论文集 [Collected papers on Zheng He] 1 (Dalian: Dalian Haiyun Xueyuan Chubanshe 大连海运学院出版社 [Dalian Shipping Academy Publishing], 1993), 69.

5.3.3.2 Comparative analyses - the missions vis-a-vis European colonialism

Ever since the publication of Liang Qichao's *Zuguo da hanghaijia Zheng He zhuan* (1904), the missions have frequently been discussed in a comparative manner with subsequent European colonialism in the Indo-Pacific region. A number of authors have contemplated why China did not follow the path of building its maritime empire despite its maritime military capabilities during the Zheng He missions, and hence whether there was an essential difference between Ming China's approach to foreign relations and that of the European colonial powers in the subsequent centuries. A major discourse-initiating work on the missions and colonialism was published by the Australian historian Geoff Wade in 2005 under the title *The Zheng He Voyages: A Reassessment*. In his article Wade frames the Zheng He missions as one of the "three prongs" of the Yongle emperor's southward expansion. The first one among these "three prongs" refers to the armed occupation and incorporation of Yunnan into the Ming empire, described by Wade as an example of "successful Ming land-based colonialism". The second one refers to the occupation of Đại Việt by the Ming empire for the period between 1407 and 1427, described by Wade as an example of "unsuccessful Ming land-based colonialism". The Zheng He missions are described by Wade as "Ming maritime proto-colonialism", referring to the ways in which the Ming court intended to secure political and economic control over the Indo-Pacific region. As cases in point for maritime proto-colonialism, Wade points out the establishment of the "factory" (*guanchang* 官厂) in Malacca serving as trade entrepôt and military garrison, as well as the establishment of the Palembang superintendency (*xuanweisi* 宣慰司) after the defeat of Chen Zuyi, along with the other military conflicts in Sri Lanka and Sumatra and threats of using military force against others challenging Ming China's regional dominance.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ See Wade, "The Zheng He Voyages," 2005.

A number of historians inside and outside of mainland China have criticized Wade's comparison of the missions to colonialism. In his editorial to the edited volume *Zouxiang duoyuan wenhua de quanqiushi* (2017), Chen Zhongping criticizes Wade's framing of the missions as proto-colonialism, arguing that the internal dynamics of the tribute-trade-based order were entirely different from the direct exploitations of colonialism. Chen at the same time also criticizes the Malaysian author Tan Ta Sen's notions of the inherent pacifism of Asian civilizations and regards Tan's "Asian pacifism" vis-à-vis Wade's "proto-colonialism" approaches as two opposite ends within the discourse on the Zheng He missions. In Chen's view, while the missions were not free from armed conflicts, these episodes did not constitute the substance of early Ming China's foreign policy. Contrary to European colonialism, the tribute-trade order promoted by Ming China rested on nominal hierarchies, the maintenance of trade relations, and a limited number of armed conflicts against those intending to disrupt the regional order, so Chen argues.¹⁴⁹ In Zhou Yunzhong's assessment, the high number of military personnel participating in the missions was mostly related to the Ming court's wish to provide security for trade exchanges. In Zhou's view, the missions constituted a peculiarity for being the biggest armed fleet in history whose purpose was trade instead of expansion.¹⁵⁰ Among scholars outside mainland China, Schottenhammer argues that during the Zheng He missions China was the dominant maritime power of the Indo-Pacific region, its "retreat from the seas" not being forced by any rival power. In Ptak's view, no primary source suggests that the Ming court was interested in the conquest of large-scale overseas territories.¹⁵¹

Meanwhile, returning to Wade's "proto-colonialism" thesis, it is also clear that many of those opposing his views ignore the "proto-" component of his concept. It is thus usually well explained why the primary sources of the missions make a clear case for the Zheng He missions

¹⁴⁹ Chen Zhongping 陈忠平, *Zouxiang duoyuan wenhua de quanqiushi*, 11–12.

¹⁵⁰ Zhou Yunzhong 周运中, *Zheng He xia Xiyang*, 30.

¹⁵¹ Ptak, *China und Asiens maritime Achse*, 28; referencing Angela Schottenhammer, "China's Rise and Retreat as a Maritime Power," in *Beyond the Silk Roads: New Discourses on China's Role in East Asian Maritime History*, ed. Robert J. Antony and Angela Schottenhammer (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2018), 189–212.

being different from the European colonialism of the subsequent centuries, but it is largely ignored that Wade does not intend to equate the missions with European colonialism. By “proto-” he rather means that the Zheng He missions involved certain elements of foreign policy comparable to that of subsequent colonialism in the region.

5.3.3.3 *The missions and the parallel Ming occupation of northern Vietnam (1407-1427) – An inconvenient topic?*

In the contemporary mainland Chinese discourse on Ming China’s interstate politics during the missions, there is rarely any discussion of the parallel occupation of Annam (today’s northern Vietnam) during the Yongle reign. Annam (*Annan-guo* 安南国) was part of the fifteen “foreign countries not to be invaded” (*bu zheng zhu yiguo* 不征诸夷国) listed in the document known as *Huang Ming zuxun* 皇明祖训 [Instructions of the ancestor of the August Ming, 1395], attributed to the founder of the Ming dynasty Zhu Yuanzhang (r. 1368-1398). The fifteen countries include Korea, Japan, Ryukyu (“Great Ryukyu”, *Da Liuqiu* 琉球), Taiwan (“Little Ryukyu”, *Xiao Liuqiu* 小琉球), and 11 Southeast Asian states, among them Annam. The list does not include any country to the north, northwest, or west of the Ming empire (Korea is described as being located to the northeast, while the Southeast Asian states are described as being located to the southwest).¹⁵²

As already pointed out in 5.1.1.2, The Ming–Đại Việt war was a result of the usurpation of the Đại Việt throne by the newly-established Hồ 胡 dynasty, and its armed aggression against Ming envoys escorting members of the dethroned Trần 陈 dynasty in their attempts to restore their rule. Following the defeat of Hồ forces in 1407, Annam was incorporated into the Ming empire as its Jiaozhi 交趾 province. Numerous anti-Ming rebellions emerged in the next two

¹⁵² *Huang Ming zuxun* 皇明祖训 [Instructions of the ancestor of the August Ming], Based on Siku Quanshu Cunmu Congshu 四库全书存目丛书 version., 1395, <https://zh.m.wikisource.org/zh/%E7%9A%87%E6%98%8E%E7%A5%96%E8%A8%93>. (Accessed on 2023-02-13).

decades, and by 1427 the Ming retreated from Annam, recognizing the rebel leader Lê Lợi 黎李 (r. 1428-1433) as the new ruler of Đại Việt 大越, who in turn established tributary relations with the Ming court.¹⁵³

Among those arguing for the pacifism of Ming China under the Yongle emperor's reign, it is rarely discussed how the Tianxia worldview and the tributary system framework are compatible with the armed invasion and forced incorporation of a foreign state with a comparable political system to that of Ming China. It is also rarely discussed how the Zheng He missions were related to the parallel events in Vietnam, and why they should be seen separately from the conquest of Annam when discussing the interstate politics of the time. The journal article of Yang Yongkang and Zhang Jiawei (2014), two historians based at Shanxi University, is notable for its critical perspectives on the relation between the missions and the occupation of Annam, and by extension also on the mainstream narratives of the missions. Based primarily on the *Ming Shilu* volumes between Taizong 太宗 (Yongle 永乐, 1402-1424) and Wuzong 武宗 (Zhengde 正德, 1505-1521), Yang and Zhang argue that the missions and the occupation of Annam both served the grand strategy of establishing the “tributary system of the Western Ocean” (西洋朝贡体系), combining maritime and continental domination to achieve this. According to Yang and Zhang's assessment, the missions primarily served the Yongle emperor's personal quest to legitimize his unlawful succession to the throne. Meanwhile, the provocations of the Hồ rulers against the Ming created a need for setting a precedence for other possible rogue actors, by putting down the rebellion and attempting the incorporation of Annam into the Ming realm.

The “Annam case” (安南之事) became a frequently repeated phrase in the *Ming Shilu* of the time, often in an intimidating matter, as Yang and Zhang point out. The retreat from

¹⁵³ Yang Yongkang 杨永康 and Zhang Jiawei 张佳玮, “Lun Yongle ‘junxian Annan,’” 106–9.

Annam in 1427 created a major loss of prestige for the Ming court, which in Yang and Zhang's assessment was likely among the motivating factors behind the Xuande emperor's decision to start the last (7th) Zheng He mission, which was thus a bid to restore Ming prestige across the Indo-Pacific region. Yang and Zhang also criticize the overtly positive (*“jinjin ledao 津津乐道”*) narratives of the missions focusing on economic and cultural exchange only, but neglecting the “carrot and stick” approach of the Ming dynasty's foreign policy. They also argue that the show of military force (in the *Mingshi* biography of Zheng He described as *yao bing yi yu* 耀兵异域, “boasting with armies across foreign lands”) was a major motivation behind the launching of the missions.¹⁵⁴

5.3.4 Economic and migrational aspects of the missions

The main topics within the discussions on the economic aspects of the missions can be summarized as follows:

1. The burden of the missions on the Ming imperial treasury (already covered in 5.3.2)
2. The missions and the principles of *huairou yuanren* 怀柔远人 [appeasing people from faraway lands] and *hou wang bao lai* 厚往薄来 [giving generously, receiving little].
3. The relationship between tribute and trade (partly covered in 5.3.3)
4. The relationship between the missions and the early Ming maritime bans (*haijin* 海禁).

In the broader mainland Chinese discourse on the pre-modern tributary system, there has been a long-running debate on whether it was economically beneficial or detrimental to China. A popular view, also found in a number of academic publications, is that pre-modern China's tributary exchanges with foreigners were based on the principles of *huairou yuanren*

¹⁵⁴ Yang Yongkang 杨永康 and Zhang Jiawei 张佳玮, “Lun Yongle ‘junxian Annan.’”

怀柔远人 [appeasing people from faraway lands] and *hou wang bao lai* 厚往薄来 [giving generously, receiving little].¹⁵⁵ It is thus frequently argued that the tributary exchanges with the outside world were economically detrimental to China, and this is often contrasted with the profit-oriented nature of Western colonialism.¹⁵⁶

Meanwhile, some scholars with a focus on early Ming economic history have called into question the widespread assumption that the Zheng He missions and the broader early Ming tributary system were characterized by the principles of *huairou yuanren* and *hou wang bao lai*. Based primarily on the *Ming Shilu* (the editions from Taizu 太祖 / Hongwu 洪武, 1368-1398 to Xianzong 宪宗 / Chenghua 成化, 1464-1487), Li Jinming 李金明 (1944-), a scholar based at Xiamen University South China Sea Research Institute, argues that tributes and return gifts only represented a small portion of the goods brought to China by foreign merchants, the bulk of goods exchange being made up by so-called “tribute-trade” (profit-oriented trade conducted as part of tributary exchanges). According to Li in his highly cited article published in 2006¹⁵⁷, the Ming officials waged high tariffs on the products traded by foreign merchants, which constituted an important source of income for the Ming treasury. The Zheng He missions attracted a large number of foreign traders who joined Zheng He’s fleet on its return journeys. In Li’s assessment, the missions were detrimental to China’s economy not because the Ming

¹⁵⁵ The two expressions appear in certain parts of the *Ming Taizu Shilu* 明太祖实录 and *Ming Taizong Shilu* 明太宗实录, describing the Hongwu and Yongle emperors’ engagement with foreigners.

¹⁵⁶ Yu Changsen 喻常森, “Shilun chaogong zhidu”; He Aiguo 何爱国, “Lüelun shiliu-shiqi shiji Zhongguo yu Ouzhou lieqiang guanyu Dongnanya shiwu de chongtu 略论十六-十七中国与欧洲列强关于东南亚事务的冲突 [Brief discussion of the conflicts between China and European powers on Southeast Asian affairs during the 16th and 17th centuries],” *Kunming Ligong Daxue Xuebao (She Ke Ban)* 昆明理工大学学报 (社科版) [Journal of the Kunming University of Science and Technology (Social Sciences and Humanities)] 1, no. 4 (2001): 35–42; Ren Nianwen 任念文, “Mingchu Nanhai chaogong zhidu yu fengjian guojia haiyang zhanlüe shulun 明初南海朝贡制度与封建国家海洋战略述论 [On the early Ming South China Sea tributary system and maritime strategy of feudal states],” *Taipingyang Xuebao* 太平洋学报 [Pacific Journal] 22, no. 8 (2014): 94–105; Song Xiaoqin 宋晓芹, “Shilun Zhongguo zai Dongya chaogong tixi zhong de diwei he zuoyong 试论中国在东亚朝贡体系中的地位和作用 [Analyzing China’s position and function in the East Asian tributary system],” *Dalian Daxue Xuebao* 大连大学学报 [Journal of Dalian University] 38, no. 04 (2017): 9–13.

¹⁵⁷ 47 citations as of 2022-10-31; 7th most cited CNKI item returned for the search query “郑和 OR 三宝太监 OR 三保太监” with no time limits and no restrictions on language and publication type (see also in 5.2).

court spent too much on return gifts, but because of their burden on local economies. This burden was caused by the lengthy stays of foreign merchants, as well as the transport costs and labor required during their visits. According to Li's research, the Zheng He missions put an especially high burden on local authorities due to the large amount of labor required for the transportation of tributary missions between the southern port cities and the imperial court. This, in Li's assessment, led to a "contradiction between the court and locals" (*chaoting yu difang zhi jian de maodun* 朝廷与地方之间的矛盾), and resulted in a number of petitions to the court from local officials.¹⁵⁸

Discussions on the economic impact of the Zheng He missions are closely interconnected with discussions on the so-called "maritime ban" (*haijin* 海禁) of the early Ming era. The term "maritime ban" refers to the major restrictions on private trade ordered first by the founder of the Ming dynasty Zhu Yuanzhang (Taizu / Hongwu emperor, 1368-1398), and maintained by his successors until its relaxation during the late Longqing era (1560s). Under the early to middle Ming maritime ban, legal trade was mostly limited to officially recognized "tribute-trade" (*chaogong maoyi* 朝贡贸易, trade legitimized via tributary exchanges and documents issued during these exchanges). Meanwhile, based on trade data from foreign ports, unofficial trade (smuggling) remained widespread throughout the era.¹⁵⁹ Against this background, the Zheng He missions constituted a major, state-legitimized channel of trade during the period. Traders accompanying the Zheng He missions enjoyed the privilege of being able to engage in legal trade activities along the "tribute-trade" scheme of political and economic interaction with the outside world.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ Li Jinming 李金明, "Lun Mingchu de haijin yu chaogong maoyi 论明初的海禁与朝贡贸易 [On the Early Ming maritime ban and tribute-trade]," *Fujian Luntan (Renwen Shehui Kexue Ban)* 福建论坛(人文社会科学版) [*Fujian Forum (Humanities and Social Sciences Edition)*], no. 07 (2006): 73–77.

¹⁵⁹ See Gakusho Nakajima, "The Structure and Transformation of the Ming Tribute Trade System," in *Global History and New Polycentric Approaches: Europe, Asia and the Americas in a World Network System*, ed. Manuel Perez Garcia and Lucio De Sousa, Palgrave Studies in Comparative Global History (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2018), 137–62, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-4053-5_7.

¹⁶⁰ Sen, "The Impact of Zheng He's Expeditions."

In the Chinese discourse on the economic aspects of the Zheng He missions, certain authors criticize the popular notion that the Zheng He missions were an episode of outward openness in Chinese history. They point to the parallel maritime ban in effect at the time, putting severe restrictions on private trade in China's coastal regions. For this reason, in his highly cited and downloaded 2005 article¹⁶¹ on the “damages caused by the Zheng He missions to overseas Chinese expansion”, historian and current director of Xiamen University's South China Sea Research Institute Zhuang Guotu 庄国土 (1952-) describes the missions as a major blow to the development of China's coastal economy. Zhuang also calls into question the referential value of the missions for China's opening-up in the 2000s, by criticizing the common modern-era perception of the missions as a symbol of outward openness, quoting Liang Qichao's comparison of Zheng He to Columbus and Vasco da Gama (see also in section 5.1.2), as well as Deng Xiaoping's notions of the missions being China's last period of openness (see 5.1.2).¹⁶²

He Hongyong 和洪勇 (1968-), a historian based at Yunnan University, also emphasizes the detrimental impact of the Ming court's monopoly (*longduan* 垄断) on trade via the maritime ban in his article published in 2003. Meanwhile, according to his analysis mostly based on the *Ming Taizu Shilu*, *Ming Taizong Shilu*, *Ming Huidian* 明会典 [Collected statutes of the Ming], and the Qing-era *Mingshi* 明史 [History of the Ming], He argues that the main motivation behind the maritime ban was the securing of coastal stability in the face of frequent *wokou* pirate attacks up until the early Ming era.¹⁶³ In He's view, the rationale behind the Zheng He missions was determined by the general doctrines of early Ming domestic policy and foreign policy towards Southeast Asia, incl. the monopolization of legal trade and promotion

¹⁶¹ 32 citations, 3,740 downloads as of 2022-10-31; 13th most cited, 7th most downloaded CNKI item returned for the search query “郑和 OR 三宝太监 OR 三保太监” with no time limits and no restrictions on language and publication type (see also in 5.2).

¹⁶² Zhuang Guotu 庄国土, “Lun Zheng He xia Xiyang,” 70.

¹⁶³ He Hongyong 和洪勇, “Ming qianqi Zhongguo yu Dongnanya guojia de chaogong maoyi 明前期中国与东南亚国家的朝贡贸易 [Early Ming tribute trade between China and Southeast Asia],” *Yunnan Shehui Kexue* 云南社会科学 [Social Sciences in Yunnan], no. 01 (2003): 86; Li Jinming 李金明, “Lun Mingchu de haijin,” 73.

of "tribute-trade", as well as the clearing of sea routes from piracy, and maintaining security along them.¹⁶⁴

The migrational aspects of the Zheng He missions, although less frequently discussed than their political and economic aspects, have been researched by some scholars. The main topic in this context is the impact of the missions on overseas Chinese migration during the era, as well as on the relations between China and the already extant Chinese diaspora. As mentioned in 5.3.2, according to Zhou Yunzhong's analysis (2013) of the *Wuzhi xuanbu* [Selected accounts of military service] and other primary sources, curbing irregular mass emigration and preventing the formation of armed groups by overseas Chinese ex-soldiers was apparently one of the main motivations behind launching the Zheng He missions. The missions furthered this aims in several ways; by creating an employment opportunity for a large number of soldiers to dissuade them from joining overseas armed groups, as well as by confronting already extant antagonistic armed groups such as the one headed by Chen Zuyi in Palembang.¹⁶⁵

According to Lin Cuiru 林翠茹 from Xiamen's Overseas Chinese Museum (*Huaqiao Bowuyuan* 华侨博物院), tributary exchanges and the Zheng He missions in particular had an overall positive impact on China's relations with the Chinese diaspora. In an article published in 2005, Lin Cuiru lists 45 Chinese names appearing in the various volumes of the *Ming Shilu* between the period of 1368 and 1508 as referring to envoys and interpreters of tributary missions from foreign countries. These foreign countries include Java (24 names), Siam (9), Champa (6), Bengal (2), Sumatra (3), and Malacca (1). Concerning the period of the Zheng He missions (1405-1433), the list of these countries includes Java (11 names), Siam (4), and Sumatra (1). Lin Cuiru argues that during the maritime ban and the ordering of the Chinese

¹⁶⁴ He Hongyong 和洪勇, "Ming qianqi Zhongguo," 87–90; Zhou Yunzhong 周运中, *Zheng He xia Xiyang*, 17–22.

¹⁶⁵ Zhou Yunzhong 周运中, *Zheng He xia Xiyang*, 20–23.

diaspora to return to China, a number of Chinese emigrants served in tributary missions as envoys and interpreters, using this as an opportunity to legally visit China.¹⁶⁶

Historian Zhuang Guotu has an overall negative view of the early Ming dynasty's policy towards the Chinese diaspora and contrasts this with the openness of the preceding Song and Yuan eras. As pointed out by Zhuang, Song-Yuan-era coastal China was both a destination for foreign merchants residing in its principal port cities such as Guangzhou and Quanzhou, as well as a place of origin for emigration into Southeast Asia. In Zhuang's assessment, the early Ming maritime ban and the Zheng He missions not only put severe restrictions on the so far flourishing private trade but also disrupted migrational links between China and Southeast Asia. Zhuang argues that based on passages from the *Ming Shilu* and *Mingshi*, hostility towards the overseas Chinese diaspora was a characteristic of the early Ming elite's worldview and the Zheng He missions mostly served the purpose of punishing those overseas emigrants resisting the control of the Ming dynasty. An edict from the Yongle emperor's reign included in the *Ming Taizong Shilu*, quoted by Zhuang, calls for the return of Chinese emigrants to China, threatening those who resist with military action:

All those residing in foreign countries have to return to the native land. Those who wish to come to the court will be rewarded before being sent home. Those Chinese people escaping and hiding there should all repent and return to their businesses and remain decent people for all their life. For those who still stay afar and stick to their wrong course, we will send our troops to eliminate all of them and it will be too late for them to regret it.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ Lin Cuiru 林翠茹, "Zhidu yu tiaoshi - Zheng He xia Xiyang he chaogong tixi xia de Dongnanya huaqiao 制度与调适 - 郑和下西洋和朝贡体系下的东南亚华侨 [System and adaptation - Southeast Asia's overseas Chinese under the Zheng He journeys and the tributary system]," *Nanfang Wenwu* 南方文物 [Cultural Relics from Southern China] 2005, no. 4 (2005): 85-88.

¹⁶⁷ "凡蕃国之人, 即各还本土, 欲来朝者, 当加赐资遣还。中国之人逃匿在彼者, 咸赦前过, 稗复本业, 永为良民, 若仍恃险远, 执迷不俊, 则命将发兵, 悉行剿戮, 悔将无及。"; "Ming Taizong Wenhuangdi Shilu juan zhi shi'er shang 明太宗文皇帝实录卷之十二上 [Veritable Records of Ming Taizong, Emperor of Civility, vol. 12/1]", para. 22, accessed December 29, 2019, <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=736589&remap=gb#p23> (Accessed on 2023-02-13); quoted in Zhuang Guotu 庄国土, "Lun Zheng He xia Xiyang," 73.

As demonstrated in this section, the debates on the economic and migrational aspects of the Zheng He missions are embedded in broader discourses on early Ming economic policy and geopolitical strategy, esp. in those on the maritime ban of the period and the tributary (or tribute-trade) system. There is a general consensus that the early Ming maritime ban was a major repressive act against free trade and freedom of movement in the period. In some authors' assessment, it was necessitated for the defense against *wokou* pirate attacks. The Zheng He missions are variously framed either in a rather positive way for being a legal avenue of trade and migration within a period of severe restrictions or in a rather negative way as a symbol of the Ming court's monopolistic way of controlling these. The common narrative of the missions symbolizing outward openness is thus at least relativized by scholarship on their economic and migrational aspects and even discredited by some authors.

5.3.5 Cultural exchange and knowledge transfer related to the missions

There are various topics that can be grouped together as related to cultural exchange and knowledge transfer during the missions. The most significant ones include the debates on the significance of the missions for religious interaction, their significance for knowledge transfer (esp. geographical knowledge), as well as their impact on subsequent literary works.

5.3.5.1 Religious exchange during the missions

As emphasized at several points in sub-chapter 5.1 on the primary sources of the missions, and especially in sub-section 5.1.1.3 on the inscriptions related to the missions, Zheng He's figure can be associated with several different religious traditions, and hence he has often been framed as a connecting figure among various religions. The relations between Zheng He and Buddhism, Islam, as well as Mazu cult, have been analyzed by various Chinese and non-

Chinese scholars.¹⁶⁸ Zheng He's historical connections to Mazu in particular have been analyzed as well, also discussing the historical and present-day instrumentalization of Mazu and Zheng He by China's ruling dynasties and regimes to reach out to the Chinese diaspora abroad.¹⁶⁹

On a global level, Zheng He's relationship with Islam has been more widely researched than his relationship with other religions. The topic has attracted an especially large amount of attention among China's Hui minority.¹⁷⁰ The Chinese-language discourse on the Zheng He missions and the spread of Islam in Southeast Asia is interlinked with the discourse on the topic in Southeast Asian countries, as several relevant authors are publishing in both Malay-Indonesian and Chinese (and often also in English). As already discussed in 5.1.1.6, the hypothesis that the Zheng He missions initiated a third wave of the spread of Islam to the Indonesian archipelago has been advocated by various authors such as the Malaysian author Tan Ta Sen in his *Cheng Ho and Islam in Southeast Asia* (2009)¹⁷¹, as well as by various scholars from Southeast Asia, China, and other countries in the edited volume *Zheng He and the Afro-Asian World* (2012).¹⁷² Meanwhile, the historicity of the primary sources on which this hypothesis is supposedly based is disputed by various scholars.¹⁷³

In mainland China, a notable scholar of the recent decades on Zheng He and Southeast Asian Islam was Kong Yuanzhi 孔远志 (1937-2020), a former professor at the Department of

¹⁶⁸ Zheng Yijun 郑一钧, *Lun Zheng He xia xiyang*, 41–47; Kauz, “Zheng He und der Islam in Fujian.”

¹⁶⁹ Shi Xueqin 施雪琴, “Zheng He xingxiang”; Roderich Ptak, “Zheng He und Mazu: Geschichte, Wahrnehmung, Kult [Zheng He and Mazu: History, perception, cult],” *Saeculum* 67 (December 2017): 225–57, <https://doi.org/10.7788/saeculum-2017-670205>.

¹⁷⁰ For more on this see Aubin, “Zheng He, héros ethnique.”

¹⁷¹ See Tan Ta Sen's works in English, Chinese, and Malay: Tan Ta Sen, *Cheng Ho and Islam in Southeast Asia*; Tan Ta Sen (Chen Dasheng 陈达生), *Zheng He yu Dongnanya yisilanjiao 郑和与东南亚伊斯兰 [Zheng He and Islam in Southeast Asia]*; Tan Ta Sen, *Cheng Ho: penyebar Islam*.

¹⁷² Lin Sien Chia and Sally K. Church, eds., *Zheng He and the Afro-Asian World*, English edition (International Conference on Zheng He and the Afro-Asian world, Melaka, Malaysia: Melaka Museums Corporation (PERZIM) and International Zheng He Society, 2012).

¹⁷³ Wain, “The Two Kronik Tionghua”; Syuan-yuan Chio, “Building Traditions for Bridging Differences: Islamic Imaginary Homelands of Chinese-Indonesian Muslims in East Java,” in *East-West Identities. Globalization, Localization and Hybridization*, vol. 15, International Comparative Social Studies (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 265–78.

Southeast Asia at the Peking University Institute of Foreign Languages (北京大学外国语学院东南亚系). Kong's list of publications includes titles in Indonesian as well, such as *Muslim Tionghoa Cheng Ho* [The Chinese Muslim Zheng He, 2005].¹⁷⁴ In his 2006 Chinese-language article *Lun Zheng He yu Dongnanya de Yisilanjiao* [On Zheng He and Islam in Southeast Asia], Kong provides a thorough analysis of the "third wave" hypothesis and concludes that it is reasonably possible that members of Zheng He's fleet played some role in the spread of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago, nevertheless, in his assessment it remains speculative to attribute a too big role to them. Kong references Indonesian folklore and written sources in Indonesian languages and Chinese. As pointed out by Kong, Zheng He and some of his companions such as the eunuch Wang Jinghong 王景弘 clearly have a presence in Javanese folklore. Meanwhile, there is no evidence of their role in Islamic proselytization in Chinese records (possibly due to their authors' refusal to deal with other issues than the official diplomatic and trade-related purposes of the missions). In Indonesia, there is a hypothesis that some of the *wali songo* (a group of nine saints credited with introducing Islam to Java) had Chinese ancestry. One of the *wali songo*, Sunan Ampel is widely known in Javanese folklore as the adopted son of Nyai Gede Pinatih (a.k.a. the Great Lady of Gresik), an important figure in early Islam on Java. Nyai Gede Pinatih is in turn believed to be the same person as Shi Daniang 施大娘, daughter of the Palembang-based Chinese diaspora leader Shi Jinqing 施进卿, who was commissioned as superintendent (*xuanweishi* 宣慰使) of the Palembang port by the Ming court after the defeat of Chen Zuyi 陈祖义 by the Zheng He fleet in 1407. According to the research work of the Singaporean historian Tan Yeok Song 陈育崧 (1903-1984), also referenced by Kong Yuanzhi, the Ryukyu Kingdom's official records of foreign relations collectively known as the *Rekidai Hōan* 歴代寶案 [Precious Documents of Successive Generations] provide evidence on Nyai

¹⁷⁴ Kong Yuanzhi, *Muslim Tionghoa Cheng Ho: misteri perjalanan muhibah di Nusantara* [The Chinese Muslim Zheng He: mysteries of a goodwill journey to the Indonesian archipelago] (Pustaka Populer Obor, 2005).

Gede Pinatih and Shi Daniang being the same person.¹⁷⁵ As also discussed in Kong Yuanzhi's article, the publication of the so-called "Malay Annals of Semarang and Cirebon" (a.k.a. the two *Kronik Tionghoa*) further contributed to the widespread assumption that Zheng He's fleet played a major role in early Islamic proselytization on Java (see also in sub-section 5.1.1.6).¹⁷⁶

Zheng He's connections to various religious traditions have greatly contributed to his image as a bridging figure among various civilizations. Already in his 2004 article on the Zheng He missions from a civilizational (*wenming* 文明) perspective, the Peking University historian He Fangchuan 何芳川 (1939-2006) emphasized the importance of Zheng He's multi-religious background and his bridging role based on this.¹⁷⁷ In the foreword of the edited volume *Zouxian duoyuan wenhua de quanqiushi* (2017), Chen Zhongping similarly frames the Zheng He missions as an important episode of inter-religious and inter-civilizational exchange. Chen furthermore emphasizes the importance of research on the Zheng He missions as an anti-thesis to Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis. In his foreword, Chen shares his views on the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the 2010s, as well as on what he considers to be the defects of Western multiculturalism. In Chen's view, the ideology of multiculturalism in the West was in fact never truly multicultural, since it was not capable of incorporating the positive aspects of the value systems of non-Western cultures. According to Chen, due to Zheng He's multi-religious identity and the role of the missions in creating de-centralized networks

¹⁷⁵ The *Rekidai Hōan* includes ca. 250 volumes of official records on the Ryukyu Kingdom's foreign relations with China, Korea, and a number of Southeast Asian countries, dated between 1424 and 1867 (see more at <https://kotobank.jp/word/%E6%AD%B4%E4%BB%A3%E5%AE%9D%E6%A1%88-412472>, accessed on 2022-09-10). According to the *Rekidai Hōan*, "Shi Daniang Zi Binazhi 施大娘子俾那智" (the name Binazhi apparently a phonetical transcription of Pinatih) was a member of the family of "Shi Jinqing, pacifier of Guigang (Jiugang 旧港 / Palembang)" (施进卿归港宣慰使), see Tan Yeok Seong, "Chinese Element in the Islamization of Southeast Asia: A Study of the Story of Njai Gede Pinatih, the Great Lady of Gresik," in *Admiral Zheng He and Southeast Asia*, ed. Leo Suryadinata (Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2005), 58–71.

¹⁷⁶ Kong Yuanzhi 孔远志, "Lun Zheng He yu Dongnanya de Yisilanjiao 论郑和与东南亚的伊斯兰教 [On Zheng He and Islam in Southeast Asia]," *Dongnanya yanjiu 东南亚研究 [Southeast Asian Studies]*, no. 01 (2006): 70–79.

¹⁷⁷ He Fangchuan 何芳川, "Wenming shiye xia de Zheng He yuanshang 文明视角下的郑和远航 [The journeys of Zheng He from a civilizational perspective]," *Beijing Daxue Xuebao (Zhhexue Shehui Kexue Ban) 北京大学学报(哲学社会科学版) [Journal of Peking University - Philosophy and Social Sciences]*, no. 05 (2004): 50–56.

throughout the Indo-Pacific space, research on the Zheng He missions can be conducive to a truly multicultural and decentralized view of global history. In Chen's view, this in turn can help non-Western civilizations to regain their self-confidence, counter the hegemony of West-centrism, and withstand radical tendencies within their societies such as religious fundamentalism.¹⁷⁸

In summary, it has to be pointed out, that Zheng He's connections to various religious traditions, and especially his Hui Muslim ancestry and supposed role in Sino-Islamic interaction has become an important factor in his image globally. In this context, the mainland Chinese discourse is highly interlinked with the discourse in other countries, especially in Southeast Asia, as has been demonstrated in this sub-section. It is important to understand that the efforts of the Chinese state to popularize Zheng He as a symbolic figure of the current Belt & Road Initiative are based on the broader popularity of his figure among scholars and the general population, both in China and other countries, especially in Southeast Asia. The general discourse on the Zheng He missions in fact contributes to the emergence of what I define as the "Silk Roads Power-Knowledge Complex". It contributes to reframing global historiography along the "silk roads" paradigm of pacifist and win-win cooperation as the essence of China's historical engagement with the outside world. For these reasons, it is also ideal for being appropriated and further promoted by the Chinese state as part of what I define as the "Belt & Road Historiography", i.e. a type of global historiography produced along the conceptual frameworks and value systems of the "Belt & Road Worldview".

5.3.5.2 The missions and geographical knowledge exchange

While religious interaction has long been widely discussed in the context of the Zheng He missions, and it is also an aspect of the missions which can easily be instrumentalized for identity-building and cultural diplomacy, in recent decades there has also been a growing

¹⁷⁸ Chen Zhongping 陈忠平, *Zouxiang duoyuan wenhua de quanqiuishi*, 1–21.

academic discourse on the significance of the missions in terms of knowledge exchange. Geographical knowledge transfer has been at the center of these discussions, as a number of recent publications demonstrate. Most historians today agree that the missions had a limited impact in terms of acquiring new geographical knowledge since during the Song and Yuan eras several important treatises on the geography of the Indo-Pacific maritime space have already been published (see 4.2.1 on Zhao Rukuo and Wang Dayuan). Today's historians tend to discard the idea of deeper parallels between the missions and the journeys of Columbus and other European travelers of the 15th century, emphasizing that the missions did not lead to a Chinese "Age of Discoveries". Instead, geographical knowledge exchange with other regions of the Indo-Pacific space (esp. the Islamic world) is emphasized. Several authors argue that the missions had a significant impact on the evolution of spatialization processes in China, by redefining and popularizing the concept of *Xiyang* 西洋 [Western Ocean] and thereby reinforcing pre-modern China's "Occidentalist" view of the world.¹⁷⁹

In Chen Zhongping's edited volume (2017), professor of history at Nanjing University and director of its Yuan History Research Division (元史研究室) Liu Yingsheng 刘迎胜 (1947-) discusses the "open navigational knowledge system" (*kaifang de hanghai zhishi tixi*) of the Indo-Pacific space since ancient times, situating the Zheng He missions as an episode in its history. In Liu's account, the Yuan era and the Mongol rule over much of Eurasia was an important precedent to the Zheng He missions in terms of knowledge exchange, especially between the Islamic world and China. According to Liu's assessment, based on the early Qing Hui scholar Liu Zhi's 刘智 (c. 1660 – c. 1739) *Tianfang xingli* 天方性理 (a syncretic work

¹⁷⁹ Apparently contrasting it with Edward Said's "Orientalism", Treter discusses pre-modern China's "occidentalism" as an interest towards the "exotic Other" of the Western Seas (*Xiyang* 西洋), as seen in the travelogues of Zheng He's companions, see Clemens Treter, "Über den Suez-Kanal nach Turfan: Zum Bild Zheng Hes in Peng Helings Roman Sanbao taijian xia Xiyang (1910) [Through the Suez Canal to Turfan: On the image of Zheng He in Peng Heling's novel Sanbao taijian xia Xiyang (1910)," in *Zheng He: Images & Perceptions / Bilder & Wahrnehmungen*, vol. 15, South China and Maritime Asia (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2005), 146–47.

combining Confucianism and Islamic thought), geographical knowledge of the West and the knowledge of Arabic and Persian was a likely factor behind choosing Hui Muslims as major figures of the missions.¹⁸⁰

Wan Ming 万明 (1953-), a member of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Research Institute of History (中国社会科学历史研究所), the director of the Institute's Ming History Research Department (明史研究室), and the most prolific author on the Zheng He missions in the period between 2000 and 2020 according to CNKI data (see 5.2.1) analyzes the meaning of *Xiyang* 西洋 [Western Ocean] in the primary sources on the Zheng He missions and concludes that the term *Xiyang* in these sources referred to the Indian Ocean in particular. In the three travelogues written by Fei Xin, Gong Zhen, and Ma Huan (see 5.1.1.1), *Xiyang* is alternatively referenced with what is given as its foreign name: *Namoliyang* 那没黎洋 or *Nanwuliyang* 南巫里洋, described as the ocean to the west of Namoli / Nanwuli. According to Wan, the two names apparently derive from Lambri / Lamuri, the names of a kingdom in northwestern Sumatra, located around the exit point of the Strait of Malacca into the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean. As Wan furthermore argues, the framing of the missions as *xia Xiyang* [descending to the Western Ocean, i.e. to the Indian Ocean] made sense in the discourses of the time, since the ultimate destination of all the Zheng He missions was located in the Indian Ocean, all missions reaching at least as far west as Kozhikode (*Guli* 古里国) in southwestern India, and some as far as the Middle East and East Africa. Wan points out that while in the primary sources on the Zheng He missions, *Xiyang* stood for the Indian Ocean in particular, the

¹⁸⁰ Liu Yingsheng 刘迎胜, “Kaifang de hanghai kexue zhishi tixi - Zheng He xia Xiyang yu zhong-wai haishang jiaoliu 开放的航海科学知识体系——郑和下西洋与中外海上交流 [The openness of nautical knowledge systems - The Zheng He missions and Sino-foreign maritime interaction],” in *Zouxian duoyuan wenhua de quanqiushi: Zheng He xia Xiyang (1405-1433) ji Zhongguo yu Yinduyang shijie de guanxi*, ed. Chen Zhongping 陈忠平, 1st ed. (Beijing: Shenghuo-Dushu-Xinzhishi Sanlian Shudian 生活·读书·新知三联书店 [SDX Joint Publishing], 2017), 101–2.

Zheng He missions contributed to the popularity of *Xiyang* as a generic term frequently used in subsequent eras for the Indo-Pacific maritime world to the south and west of China.¹⁸¹

Anthropologist and associate research fellow at the Overseas Chinese History Research Institute in Beijing (华侨华人历史研究所), Luo Yang 罗杨 (1984-) charts the evolution of Chinese geographical knowledge and spatialization between the journey of the Buddhist monk Fa Xian 法显 to Central, South, and Southeast Asia (399-412 CE) and the Zheng He missions. Luo provides a comparative analysis of several travelogues written within this time period. She argues that the early travelogues on countries to the west of China were compiled mostly by Buddhist pilgrims, and hence represented an Indocentric worldview. By the Song-Yuan-era, however, the interaction with the Islamic world became China's main source of new geographical knowledge, and China's world spatializations showed an increasing influence coming from the Islamic world.¹⁸²

In the conclusions of the above-cited articles, the authors mostly bind the analysis of geographical knowledge exchange into the broader meta-narrative of friendly and win-win exchanges characterizing China's relations with the Indo-Pacific maritime world in pre-modern times. As it is implied, rediscovering the interconnected past and striving towards a decentralized, global view of history are congruent with the present-day aims of building a stable and prosperous global community. The focus on knowledge exchange, similarly to religious interaction, is a way to emphasize peaceful win-win relations throughout the *longue*

¹⁸¹ Wan Ming 万明, "Zheng He qi xia 'Namoliyang' - Yinduyang 郑和七下'那没黎洋' —— 印度洋 [Zheng He's seven journeys to the 'Namoli Ocean', or the Indian Ocean]," in *Zouxiang duoyuan wenhua de quanqiushi: Zheng He xia Xiyang (1405-1433) ji Zhongguo yu Yinduyang shijie de guanxi*, ed. Chen Zhongping 陈忠平, 1st ed. (Beijing: Shenghuo-Dushu-Xinzhi Sanlian Shudian 生活·读书·新知三联书店 [SDX Joint Publishing], 2017), 119–53.

¹⁸² Luo Yang 罗杨, "Cong Fa Xian dao Zheng He shidai Zhongguoren bixia de Yinduyang shijie 从法显到郑和时代中国人笔下的印度洋世界 [The Indian Ocean world in the accounts of Chinese authors: from Fa Xian to the era of Zheng He]," in *Zouxiang duoyuan wenhua de quanqiushi: Zheng He xia Xiyang (1405-1433) ji Zhongguo yu Yinduyang shijie de guanxi*, ed. Chen Zhongping 陈忠平 (Beijing: Shenghuo-Dushu-Xinzhi Sanlian Shudian 生活·读书·新知三联书店 [SDX Joint Publishing], 2017), 292–329.

durée, and hence is an important way to construct and maintain the “Silk Roads Power-Knowledge Complex”.

5.3.5.3 *The missions in literary fiction since the Ming dynasty*

The literary impact of the Zheng He missions has been studied by various authors inside and outside China in recent decades. The earliest extant literary work influenced by the Zheng He missions is a *zaju* 杂剧 theater play titled *Feng Tianming Sanbao xia Xiyang* 奉天命三保下西洋 [The Three Protections descending to the Western Ocean with reverence of the Mandate of Heaven], introduced in 1475 at the Ming court. In Ptak’s summary, the play revolves around the *Sanbao* [Three Protections] eunuch, i.e. Zheng He’s role as imperial envoy searching for treasures and informing the “barbarians” about the greatness of China. The foreign lands are divided into good ones impressed by the *de* 德 [virtue] of the Ming emperor, introducing proper tribute to his envoy, as well as evil ones refusing to do so. Such “good” lands include the country of *Guli* 古里国 (today’s Kozhikode in southwest India), while their opposites, the “evil” ones included the Sulu Kingdom (in today’s southwestern Philippines) among others.¹⁸³

More than a hundred years later, in 1597, Luo Maodeng’s 罗懋登 *Sanbao Taijian Xiyang ji tongsu yanyi* 三宝太监西洋记通俗演义 (shortly *Xiyang ji* 西洋记, see 5.1.2), a fantasy novel influenced by the Zheng He missions was published. In German-language scholarship, Ptak has analyzed the contents of Luo Maodeng’s major work in detail.¹⁸⁴ In an article on the representation of various religions in *Xiyang ji*, Ptak points out that while the triad of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism dominates its worldview, both Islam and Mazu faith are present to a smaller degree. As an example of the conflation of various religions in *Xiyang*

¹⁸³ Ptak and Salmon, *Zheng He*, 18–19.

¹⁸⁴ Roderich Ptak, *Cheng Hos Abenteuer im Drama und Roman der Ming-Zeit: Hsia hsi-yang, eine Übersetzung und Untersuchung; Hsi-yang chi, ein Deutungsversuch [Zheng He’s adventures in the drama and novel of the Ming era: Xia Xiyang, a translation and investigation; Xiyang ji, an interpretive essay]*, Münchner Ostasiatische Studien [Munich East Asian Studies] 41 (Stuttgart: F. Steiner, 1986).

ji, Ptak introduces the episode of the Sanbao eunuch's visit to *Tiantang jile guo* 天堂极乐国 ["the heavenly country of supreme happiness"], apparently based on the accounts of *Tianfangguo* 天方国 ["country towards the direction of Heaven, or God"], i.e. Mecca, in the travelogues of the historical Zheng He's companions. Upon their arrival to Mecca, the main protagonists of Luo's novel, i.e. the Sanbao eunuch and his companions seem to be oblivious of the proper Islamic rites and perform a mixture of Islamic, Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist rites and recitations.¹⁸⁵

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a revival of interest in the Zheng He missions among the Chinese diaspora of the Dutch East Indies led to several translations of *Xiyang ji* into the Malay language, which have been comparatively analyzed by Salmon.¹⁸⁶ In 1910, another novel based on the Zheng He missions was published by the Chinese author Peng Heling 彭鹤龄, titled *Sanbao Taijian xia Xiyang* 三宝太监下西洋 [The Three Protections Eunuch descends to the Western Ocean]. As introduced by Treter, the 1910 novel *Sanbao Taijian xia Xiyang* shows influences both from the historical records on the missions, as well as from the *wuxia* 武侠 (martial artist) novels popular during the Late Qing. The Sanbao eunuch's character is a mixture of the sophisticated, self-restrained envoy of the Ming court and the adventurous *xia* 侠 character of Late Qing popular literature. As noted by Treter, the Sanbao eunuch's Muslim background is not mentioned in the work and seems to be more affiliated with Buddhism based on his visits to Sri Lanka's Buddhist pilgrimage sites. While loosely based on the historical Zheng He's journeys, the novel also includes purely fictional elements such as the missions' crossing through the Suez Canal on their way to Turfan (present-day Xinjiang, China).¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁵ Ptak, "Zheng He in Mekka," 107.

¹⁸⁶ Salmon, "Sanbao taijian en Indonésie," 2005.

¹⁸⁷ Treter, "Über den Suez-Kanal nach Turfan."

Throughout the last decades, there have been a number of further literary and audiovisual works published on the Zheng He missions, in China, Southeast Asia, and other countries as well. Most of these can be described as bio-fictional works, which to various extents combine the historical Zheng He missions as known from the primary sources with the *Xiyang ji* and the authors' imagination.¹⁸⁸ As summarized by Ptak, between the 1980s and early 2000s several such works were published in China, such as Zhu Sujin 朱苏进 and Chen Minli's 陈敏莉 *Zheng He* published in 2003.¹⁸⁹ In English language, the 1994 bio-fictional work *When China Ruled the Seas* has popularized Zheng He's missions to a global audience. The book is based on substantial historical research, combined with dialogues created by its author.¹⁹⁰ Ptak also briefly introduces the 2004 Indonesian novel *Sam Po Kong: perjalanan pertama* [Sam Po Kong: the first journey], partly based on the first Zheng He mission.¹⁹¹ The novel combines historical sources on the first mission, with influences from Javanese legends (see also in 5.1.1.6, and Salmon's article).¹⁹² Zheng He, in Indonesia widely known as Sam Po (based on the Hokkien pronunciation of *Sanbao* 三保, "Three Protections") is introduced as a symbol of religious tolerance and promoter of trade and stability in general.¹⁹³ Apart from literary works, the 59-episode CCTV historical drama series *Zheng He xia Xiyang* (2009) further contributed to the popularization of the missions among the general public in mainland China.¹⁹⁴

As can be seen, the Zheng He missions have had a significant literary impact in the subsequent centuries, being repeatedly reproduced in literary and audiovisual works of fiction and bio-fiction in various languages. In recent Chinese scholarship on the missions, the literary

¹⁸⁸ Bio-fiction, in general, is used here as a genre which revolves around the biography of a certain historical figure or figures, combining historical sources with contents produced by the author(s) for dramatizing purposes.

¹⁸⁹ Zhu Sujin 朱苏进 and Chen Minli 陈敏莉, *Zheng He 郑和 [Zheng He]*, 2 vols. (Nanjing: Jiangsu Wenyi Chubanshe 江苏文艺出版社 [Jiangsu Literature and Art Publishing], 2003).

¹⁹⁰ Louise Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1405-1433*, Revised ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹⁹¹ Remy Sylado, *Sam Po Kong: perjalanan pertama [Sam Po Kong: the first journey]* (Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2004).

¹⁹² Salmon, "Sanbao taijian en Indonésie," 2005.

¹⁹³ Ptak and Salmon, *Zheng He*, 29–33.

¹⁹⁴ <https://tv.cctv.com/2012/12/17/VIDA1355691924921319.shtml> (Accessed on 2022-09-15).

impact of the Zheng He missions is increasingly discussed as another important facet of Zheng He's legacy. Meanwhile, most attention remains focused on the *Xiyang ji* as the most significant literary work in this context. The four issues of the *Zheng He yanjiu dongtai* 郑和研究动态 [Trends of Zheng He research] journal published between 2019 and 2021 all include a “special column on *Xiyang ji* research” (《西洋记》研究专栏). The *Xiyang ji* has been analyzed by various Chinese authors and due to its geographical scope and religious inclusivity has been praised as a “maritime equivalent” of the more well-known *Xiyou ji* 西游记 [Journey to the West].¹⁹⁵ According to literary scholar and associate professor at Jinan University Cai Yaping 蔡亚平, *Xiyang ji* has so far received a small amount of attention in comparison to *Xiyou ji*, due to the significance of “maritime culture” (*haiyang wenhua* 海洋文化) being generally considered minor in China until recently. Cai advocates the importance of research on *Xiyang ji*, in order to produce interdisciplinary research on the Zheng He missions connecting the fields of literary studies, history, and linguistics.¹⁹⁶ The growing academic interest in the literary impact of the missions and its connections to the “maritime culture” discourse shows that this is yet another perspective on the missions which fits into the framing of history based on peaceful “win-win” interaction described in the section on the “Silk Roads Power-Knowledge Complex” (see 2.1.3).

¹⁹⁵ Shi Ping 时平, “*Xiyang ji* zhong de ‘xianjia’ juese 《西洋记》中的‘仙家’角色 [The ‘immortal’ role in *Xiyang ji*],” *Zheng He Yanjiu Dongtai* [Trends of Zheng He Research], no. 44 (September 30, 2021): 27.

¹⁹⁶ Cai Yaping 蔡亚平, “Zheng He xia Xiyang yu Mingdai xiaoshuo ‘Sanbao taijian Xiyang ji tongsu yanyi’ - kuayue wenxue, lishi he yuyan xueke de yanjiu chengguo zongshu 郑和下西洋与明代小说《三宝太监西洋记通俗演义》——跨越文学、历史和语言学科的研究成果综述 [The Zheng He missions and the Ming-era novel ‘Sanbao taijian Xiyang ji tongsu yanyi’ - A summary of research results transcending the boundaries of the literary, historical, and linguistic disciplines],” in *Zouxiang duoyuan wenhua de quanqiushi: Zheng He xia Xiyang (1405-1433) ji Zhongguo yu Yinduyang shijie de guanxi*, ed. Chen Zhongping 陈忠平 (Beijing: Shenghuo-Dushu-Xinzhishi Sanlian Shudian 生活·读书·新知三联书店 [SDX Joint Publishing], 2017), 330–56.

5.3.6 Global historiography in China and the missions

A further significant topic in the recent mainland Chinese discourse on the Zheng He missions revolves around the question of how the missions can contribute to the advancement of global historiography in China today. As also suggested by a CNKI search query for the term “*quanqiushi* 全球史” (global history), global history as a distinct analytical concept was not widely known in Chinese academia until the late 2000s.¹⁹⁷ Accordingly, the articles discussed here were published in the later part of the analyzed period since 2000. The referential value of the missions for establishing a de-Eurocentralized narrative of global history is frequently emphasized by Chinese authors. The major edited volume of Chen Zhongping *Zouxiang duoyuan wenhua de quanqiushi* [Towards a multicultural global history, 2017] includes Chen’s editorial introduction and a chapter by him discussing this question in detail. In his editorial, Chen frames the purpose of the volume as the facilitation of the progress toward a truly multicultural, de-centralized, and interdisciplinary global historiography, by taking the Zheng He missions as its main subject. He lists the following methodological approaches being used in the volume:

- network theory-based analysis (网络理论分析)
- research on maritime culture (海洋文化研究)
- investigation of documents and historical data (文献史料考察)
- research on environmental history (环境史研究)
- analysis of diplomatic relations (外交关系分析)

¹⁹⁷ The search query was carried out on 2022-11-02 on all types of Chinese-language publications from all time periods, in the category of “document search” (文献检索, a category excluding “knowledge element search” 知识元检索 of online databases and “citation search” 引文检索). The query retrieved 1,938 results, among them 1,649 journal articles, 184 M.A. and Ph.D. theses, 44 conference proceedings, 40 newspaper articles, 17 yearbooks (年鉴), and 4 books (图书). The highest yearly publication numbers in various periods changed as follows: 4 (prior to 2000), 8 (2000-2005), 88 (2006-2010), 145 (2011-2015), 155 (2016-2022). (Source: <https://www.cnki.net/>, accessed on 2022-11-02).

- research at the intersection of literature and history (文史交叉研究)¹⁹⁸

In his chapter in the volume, Chen proposes his concept of the “network revolution” (*wangluo geming* 网络革命) of the 15th century. Chen thereby wishes to dissolve what he sees as a duality of centrisms, i.e. the Eurocentrism of traditional world historiography in general and the Sinocentrism of traditional Zheng He historiography in particular. In Chen’s view, the Eurocentrism of traditional world historiography led to an overemphasis on the significance of Europe’s “Age of Discoveries” in world historiography. This has also led to many comparisons between the “Age of Discoveries” and the Zheng He missions even among Chinese scholars. Meanwhile, the Sinocentrism of traditional Zheng He research was a result of solely relying on Chinese written sources when discussing the missions. Chen argues that the Zheng He missions and the subsequent European expansion into the Indo-Pacific region were both parts of a larger “network revolution” of maritime interaction throughout the 15th century, which in turn played a major role in facilitating globalization in the period. In Chen’s view, the network revolution of the 15th century should be the starting point of writing a decentralized global history of what is known as the “early modern era” in Western historiography, and the Zheng He missions need to be seen as a highly significant episode in this regard.¹⁹⁹

Wan Ming 万明 also discusses the significance of the missions for global historiography. In a 2019 article on the Zheng He missions from a global historical perspective, Wan argues that the Zheng He missions constituted a significant shift from China’s so-far continentally oriented foreign policy towards more emphasis on maritime interaction. In Wan’s view, they also led to a shift away from the centrality of the continental “silk roads” towards the centrality of maritime links in Eurasian trade. In Wan’s evaluation, the missions created an interstate order based on win-win cooperation and relative peace and prosperity in the Indian Ocean region,

¹⁹⁸ Chen Zhongping 陈忠平, *Zouxiang duoyuan wenhua de quanqiushi*, 3.

¹⁹⁹ Chen Zhongping 陈忠平, “Zouxiang quanqiuxing wangluo geming,” 22–34.

and they had a major impact on the subsequent European colonialism in the region, due to their influence on the development of the main nodes and networks of Indo-Pacific interaction.²⁰⁰

It is evident that in the discourse field on the significance of the missions for global historiography today, many of the topoi from other discourse fields related to missions appear, and they form mutually reinforcing relations with each other. Research on the political, economic, and cultural aspects of the missions, as introduced in the earlier sections, is referenced in the arguments for framing the missions as a major episode in global history. Interaction, cultural diversity, and the impact on subsequent periods are especially often emphasized as characteristics of the missions. This also contributes to the instrumentalization of the missions for politicized purposes such as identity-building and cultural diplomacy (see next section) and as part of what I define as “Belt & Road Historiography”, or the state-promoted view of global history in China today.

5.3.7 Political instrumentalization of the missions

5.3.7.1 Identity-building and cultural diplomacy

In recent years, the media discourse on a “Zheng He spirit” (*Zheng He jingshen* 郑和精
神) of international relations has continued, as seen e.g. in the 2020 People’s Daily Online (*Renminwang* 人民网) article titled *Chuancheng "Zheng He jingshen", jianghao Zhongguo gushi* 传承“郑和精
神” 讲好中国故事 [Passing on the "Zheng He spirit", telling the China story well]. The article belongs to a group of other articles labeled with the *Jianghao Zhongguo gushi* 讲好中国故事 [Telling the China Story Well] slogan of state media discourses, aimed at improving the global image of China.²⁰¹ In the People’s Daily Online article, Zheng He is

²⁰⁰ Wan Ming 万明, “Quanqiushi shiye xia de Zheng He xia Xiyang 全球史视野下的郑和下西洋 [The Zheng He missions from a global historical perspective],” *Zhongguo Shiyanjie Dongtai* 中国史研究动态 [Trends of Recent Researches on the History of China] 2019, no. 2 (2019): 46–51.

²⁰¹ See the Baidu article on *Jianghao Zhongguo gushi* <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E8%AE%B2%E5%A5%BD%E4%B8%AD%E5%9B%BD%E6%95%85%E4%BA%8B/13834702?fr=aladdin> (Accessed on 2022-09-21).

praised for being the "envoy of peaceful interaction" (和平交往的使者), the "bonding link of cultural blending" (文化交融的纽带), as well as the "bridge to good-neighborliness and friendship" (睦邻友好的桥梁). The article emphasizes the referential value of Zheng He's missions for the present-day relations between China and Southeast Asia, with an emphasis on their importance for the Chinese diaspora (*huaqiao* 华侨) in particular, also pointing out the significance of maintaining the "Zheng He spirit" in the context of constructing the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Roads (21 世纪海上丝绸之路).²⁰²

State propaganda and academic research on the missions are brought together in the journal *Zheng He yanjiu dongtai* 郑和研究动态 [Trends in Zheng He research], published by the Shanghai Zheng He Research Center (上海郑和研究中心). The journal features a mixture of editorials aimed at the political instrumentalization of the missions, as well as academic research articles and reports on events related to the missions. An analysis of the table of contents and editorials of issues 37. (2018), 39. (2019), 40. (2019), 43. (2021), 44. (2021), and 45-46. (2022) shows how academic research is carefully woven into the overarching politicized narrative on the referential value of the missions for constructing "maritime culture" and the "21st Century Maritime Silk Roads" in the present time. In the editorial article of issue no. 39, the main editor of the journal, Shi Ping 时平 (more on his background in 5.3.3) praises the Zheng He missions for their significant referential value today,

In recent years, for the rise of the nation, the Chinese people have advanced steadily and with great struggle, the major accomplishments of the Zheng He missions becoming a spiritual motivational force for the self-confidence and self-strengthening of the Chinese nation. In the historical process of saving, building, and strengthening our country, we have discovered

²⁰² "Chuancheng 'Zheng He jingshen', jianghao Zhongguo gushi 传承‘郑和精神’讲好中国故事 [Passing on the 'Zheng He spirit', telling the China story well]," *Renminwang* 人民网 [*People's Daily Online*], July 2020, <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1672865846400785482&wfr=spider&for=pc> (Accessed on 2023-02-13).; also see 5.2.1 and 5.2.2 for the high frequency of the term "Zheng He spirit" in keywords and abstracts of the CNKI dataset.

their inspirational and motivational role, and steadily keeping pace with the era, we are advancing on the shared developmental path of Zheng He's spirit: the path of patriotism, openness, and peace. This way, we are continuously recreating and enriching the spiritual value of Chinese culture, and also advancing the continuous development of Zheng He research.²⁰³

The editorial in issue no. 39. is followed by a report on various political leaders' remarks on the significance of the missions for the Belt & Road Initiative and today's international relations in general, including quotes from President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang.²⁰⁴ A report on a November 2018 symposium titled "Zheng He Spirit and 40 Years of Reform and Opening-up" (郑和精神与改革开放 40 周年) follows this, emphasizing the referential value of the missions for openness, pacifism, and anti-hegemonism.²⁰⁵ The first lengthier report in the issue is a report on an international conference held in Sri Lanka in December 2018 titled "International Seminar on the Historical Facts of the Zheng He Missions and Contacts with Sri Lanka" (郑和下西洋与斯里兰卡交往史实国际研讨会). The armed conflict between the Zheng He fleet and the Sri Lankan royal house is mentioned once in the topics of the seminar, while the positive aspects of historical and present-day interaction are discussed in length.²⁰⁶ Issue no. 40 starts with a special note quoting President Xi Jinping's reference to the missions at a public speech given in 2019, noting their referential value for the Belt & Road Initiative

²⁰³ “近代以来，为了民族的崛起，中国人前仆后继、艰苦奋斗，郑和下西洋的壮举成为激励中国人民族自信自强的一个精神动力，在救国、建国、强国的历史进程中，发扬它振奋和激励后人的作用，与时代步伐俱进，形成一条爱国—开放—和平—共享的郑和精神发展道路，不断创新和丰富中华文化精神价值，也推动郑和研究事业持续发展。” “Zheng He yanjiu dongtai 39. 郑和研究动态——第 39 期 [Trends in Zheng He research 39.]” (Shanghai Zheng He Yanjiu Zhongxin 上海郑和研究中心 [Shanghai Zheng He Research Center], 2019), II.

²⁰⁴ “Zheng He yanjiu dongtai 39.,” 1–2.

²⁰⁵ “Zheng He yanjiu dongtai 39.,” 2.

²⁰⁶ Su Yueqiu 苏月秋, “Zheng He xia Xiyang yu Sililanka jiaowang shishi guoji yantaohui ji 2018 Shanghai Zheng He Yanjiu Zhongxin xueshu nianhui zongshu 郑和下西洋与斯里兰卡交往史实国际研讨会暨 2018·上海郑和研究中心学术年会综述 [Accounts of the international symposium on the Zheng He missions and historical facts of relations with Sri Lanka; 2018 Shanghai Zheng He Research Center annual scholarly meeting],” *Zheng He Yanjiu Dongtai 39. [Trends of Zheng He Research 39.]*, 2019, 3–8.

and for the “shared destiny of humankind” (*renlei mingyun gongtongti* 人类命运共同体).²⁰⁷

All issues between no. 37. and no. 45-46. feature the “China Navigation Day Special Column” (中国航海日专栏) as their first section. The articles included in this section discuss the referential value of the missions for the annual Navigation Day (November 11th), which itself is mostly framed as an event for the advancement of “maritime culture” in Chinese society.

There is also evidence that the popularization of the Zheng He missions has been part of the “cultural strategy” (*wenhua zhanlüe* 文化战略) of the Communist Party of China since 2000. In a highly cited and downloaded²⁰⁸ Ph.D. dissertation titled *Zhongguo duiwai wenhua zhanlüe yanjiu (2000-2015)* 中国对外文化战略研究（2000-2015）[Research on China’s foreign cultural strategy, 2000-2015], submitted to the Party School of the Central Committee of the CCP (中共中央党校) in 2015, Zhou Luming includes a separate section on Zheng He. The section, titled “Zheng He’s seven missions: the pinnacle of pre-modern China’s maritime culture” (郑和七下西洋：中国古代海洋文化的顶峰) is included in the sub-chapter “Selection of outstanding figures of pre-modern China’s outward cultural interaction” (中国古代对外文化交流撷英) within the chapter “China’s pre-modern cultural traditions and their strategic value” (中国的文化传统及其战略价值). The two other sections deal with the Han-dynasty officer and envoy to Inner Asia Zhang Qian 张骞 (d. ca. 114 BCE), and the Japanese “envoys to Tang China” (Chin. *qian-Tang-shi* / Jap. *ken-Tō-shi* 遣唐使) engaged in the exchange of political and cultural knowledge transfer. The chapter furthermore also covers the

²⁰⁷ “Zheng He yanjiu dongtai 40. 郑和研究动态——第 40 期 [Trends in Zheng He research 40.]” (Shanghai Zheng He Yanjiu Zhongxin 上海郑和研究中心 [Shanghai Zheng He Research Center], 2019), 1.

²⁰⁸ 56 citations, 10,118 downloads as of 2022-10-31; most downloaded and 5th most cited CNKI item returned for the search query “郑和 OR 三宝太监 OR 三保太监” with no time limits and no restrictions on language and publication type (see also in 5.2).

strategic value of reintroducing pre-modern concepts such as *dao-de* ideology (道德主义) and Tianxia thought (天下思想).²⁰⁹

The section on Zheng He is mostly based on the clichés of mainstream historiography of the missions, which have been criticized by various more critical authors. Such clichés include the narrative that the Zheng He missions were the peak of Chinese openness towards the maritime world, which has been criticized especially by those focusing on the impact of the parallel maritime bans on China's coastal economy (see 5.3.4). They also include the supposed dichotomy between “agricultural culture” (*nonggeng wenhua* 农耕文化) and “maritime culture” (*haiyang wenhua* 海洋文化). Pre-modern Chinese culture is described in generalizing terms as being based on agriculture, and hence being inward-looking, ignoring the opportunities in maritime contacts. Maritime culture is defined by Zhou as

Maritime culture refers to the summary of mentalities, values, and beliefs which emerge in the process of opening-up, utilizing, and managing the seas and oceans by a certain country, region, or ethnicity. In concrete terms, it is realized in humanity's understanding, concepts, thoughts, ideologies, and attitudes towards the seas and oceans, as well as in the lifestyle resulting from these.²¹⁰

In the conclusion of the section on Zheng He, Zhou Luming emphasizes the referential value of the Zheng He missions for constructing China's maritime strategy in a way that combines hard and soft power in an appropriate way:

²⁰⁹ Zhou Luming 周璐铭, “Zhongguo duiwai wenhua zhanlüe yanjiu (2000-2015) 中国对外文化战略研究 (2000-2015)” [Research on China's foreign cultural strategy (2000-2015)] (Ph.D. Dissertation, Beijing, Central Party School of the Communist Party of China (中共中央党校), 2016), 40–63.

²¹⁰ “海洋文化是指一个国家、地区或民族在开发、利用和管理海洋过程中所体现的精神、价值、理念的总和。具体表现为人类对海洋的认识、观念、思想、意识、心态，以及由此而产生的生活方式。” Zhou Luming 周璐铭, 48; referencing Ma Zhirong 马志荣 and Xue Sanrang 薛三让, “Hou Zheng He shidai: Zhongguo haiyang wenhua you kaifang zouxiang neilian de xiandai sikao 后郑和时代: 中国海洋文化由开放走向内敛的现代思考 [The post-Zheng He era: contemporary thought on China's maritime culture from openness towards restraint],” *Xibei Shida Xuebao (Shehui Kexue Ban)* [西北师大学报(社会科学版)] *Journal of Northwest Normal University (Social Sciences Edition)*, no. 05 (2007): 121–25.

There are some foreign scholars who believe that in order to understand the delicate relationship between hard power and soft power one has to understand the early Ming navigator Zheng He.²¹¹ Hard power is the basis for protecting our homes and defending our country, while soft power is the key to becoming a great power. For this reason, while setting up our maritime strategy, on the one hand, we have to continue strengthening our army, in order to show serious determination and ability to protect our national sovereignty. On the other hand, we have to unwaveringly strive for protecting peace and for sharing the benefits of the maritime space, as well as for upholding the developmental concepts of win-win cooperation, good-neighborliness, and friendship. With an open and self-confident attitude, we shall progress toward becoming a great maritime power.²¹²

It is evident from such passages that in the CCP's view of global affairs, the construction of "maritime culture" (*haiyang wenhua* 海洋文化) is closely interlinked with the achievement and maintenance of "maritime power" (*haiquan* 海权), which in turn is seen as a key to achieving and maintaining global power status. Historiography is seen as a constituent tool within the broader endeavor of constructing "maritime culture", its main aim being conceived as finding past precedents for supporting the political strategies of the present-day. Such passages also resonate well with what various scholars see as the enduring influence of U.S. American naval officer and historian Alfred Thayer Mahan (Ch. *Mahan* 马汉, 1840-1914) in Chinese strategic thought. Mahan was an early theoretician of "sea power", framing it as the cornerstone of global influence, and also advocating the development of what can be summarized as "maritime consciousness within the population" in the quest for its achievement.

²¹¹ Zhou Luming 周璐铭, "Zhongguo duiwai wenhua zhanlüe yanjiu (2000-2015)," 53; referencing Barr, Michael T. / Maik'e'er Ba'er 迈克尔·巴尔, *Zhongguo ruan shili: Shei zai haipa Zhongguo?* 中国软实力: 谁在害怕中国? [*China's soft power: Who is afraid of China?*], trans. Shi Zhufang 石竹芳 (Beijing: Zhong Xin Chubanshe 中信出版社 (Citic Press), 2013), 89.

²¹² "有国外学者认为, 要理解中国硬实力和软实力的微妙关系, 其中一个关键就是要了解明朝早期的航海家郑和。① 硬实力是我们保家卫国的基础, 而软实力则是成为大国的关键。因此我们在构建海洋战略之时, 一方面应继续加强海军建设, 以雄厚的实力彰显我们捍卫国家主权和尊严的决心与能力; 另一方面要坚定不移地致力于海上和平的维护和海洋利益的共同开发, 继续坚持合作共赢、睦邻友好的发展理念, 以开放和自信的心态向海洋大国的方向迈进。" Zhou Luming 周璐铭, "Zhongguo duiwai wenhua zhanlüe yanjiu (2000-2015)," 53.

Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783* has been translated into Chinese under the title *Haiquan lun* 海权论 ("The theory of sea power") and has been widely discussed in China in recent decades.²¹³

5.3.7.2 Maritime strategy and the referential value of the missions

In recent decades, there have been a number of publications appearing in China on the referential value of the early Ming tributary system for China's present-day maritime strategy. These works, written by political scientists, as well as economists, have attracted a relatively large amount of attention in terms of citations and downloads (based on CNKI data) in comparison with the articles written by historians. This testifies to both the interdisciplinarity of the Zheng He discourse in present-day China, as well as the popularity of the topic regarding the referential value of the Zheng He missions today. Similarly to the "maritime culture" discourse introduced in the previous sub-section, the "maritime strategy" discourse also sets out from the view that for most of its history, China was a continental power with little interest in maritime affairs, and that this needs to change in order to meet the challenges of the present era.

In a highly cited and downloaded article published in 2005²¹⁴, Ye Zicheng 叶自成 and Mu Xinhai 慕新海 from the Peking University's Faculty of International Relations discuss the referential value of the mission for China's maritime strategy. Ye and Mu argue that military

²¹³ Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783*, Revised ed (New York: Dover Publications, 1987); Mahan, Alfred Thayer / 阿尔弗雷德·塞耶·马汉, *Haiquan lun* 海权论 (*The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783*), trans. Ouyang Jin 欧阳瑾 (Beijing: Zhongguo Yanshi Chubanshe 中国言实出版社 [China Yanshi Press], 2015); see also in Ptak, "Zheng He und Mazu," 242; Chen Ruiying 沈瑞英, "Zheng He xia Xiyang lishi jingyan zaisikao 郑和下西洋历史经验再思考 [Rethinking the historical experiences of the Zheng He missions]," *Zheng He yanjiu dongtai* [Trends of Zheng He research], no. 44 (September 30, 2021): 5, 10.

²¹⁴ 122 citations, 4,611 downloads as of 2022-10-31; most cited and 3rd most downloaded CNKI item returned for the search query "郑和 OR 三宝太监 OR 三保太监" with no time limits and no restrictions on language and publication type (see also in 5.2).

might alone cannot lead to comprehensive and durable maritime power. They consider the Zheng He missions as a short episode of openness towards the maritime world among China's ruling elite, while their main strategic concern remained the continental border of their empire. In Ye and Mu's view, the success of European powers' expansion into the maritime world was based on the sustained political power of their maritime merchant class, something that in their view was lacking in China, as also made evident by the sudden stop of the mission at the Ming court's order. Ye and Mu argue that the referential value of the Zheng He missions is that big ships are not enough for maintaining long-term maritime power: a country needs to develop its comprehensive maritime power, based on the advancement of research into maritime economics, politics, and military at the same time. Ye and Mu's article is the only article published before the 2013 inauguration of BRI among those introduced in this section. It demonstrates the already existing interest in discussing the Zheng He missions for their potential "referential value" for China's maritime strategy.²¹⁵

In an especially highly cited and downloaded article published in 2015²¹⁶, two professors from the Jilin University's Department of Economics, Li Xiao and Li Junjiu include one chapter on the historical background of the Belt & Road Initiative, focusing mostly on the interpretation of the "tributary system" framework of interstate relations. Li and Li also propose an analytical framework of the evolution of Chinese strategical thought, arguing that *saifang* 塞防 (fortress, i.e. continental defense) played a dominant role over *haifang* 海防 (maritime defense). Similarly to Ye and Mu's views, Li and Li also see the Zheng He missions as on the one hand constituting a major show of force by the Ming dynasty, while on the other hand failing to make China a long-term maritime power. Their main point is to emphasize China's

²¹⁵ Ye Zicheng 叶自成 and Mu Xinhai 慕新海, "Dui Zhongguo haiquan fazhan zhanlue de jidian sikao 对中国海权发展战略的几点思考 [Some thoughts on the development strategy of Chinese sea power]," *Guoji Zhengzhi Yanjiu* 国际政治研究 [*Journal of International Studies*], no. 03 (2005): 5–17.

²¹⁶ 497 citations, 55,872 downloads in CNKI (www.cnki.net) as of 2022-10-31.

need to become a “country combining continental and maritime power” (陆海权复合型国家).²¹⁷

In a highly cited 2014 article ²¹⁸ on the historical experiences and strategic contemplations for the establishment of the “21st-Century Maritime Silk Roads”, Zheng Hailin 郑海麟 (1957-), historian and political scientist with a research focus on Sino-Japanese relations and former director of the Hong Kong Research Center for Asia-Pacific Studies (香港亚太研究中心) focuses on the value systems underpinning the maritime strategy of various past and present great powers. The article sets out with quotes from President Xi Jinping’s speeches inaugurating the Belt & Road Initiative and its maritime constituency the “21st Century Maritime Silk Roads”. Subsequently, Zheng compares the maritime strategy of various powers in the past, incl. that of early Ming China, the Japanese empire during its 19-20th-century era of expansionism, British colonialism, and the global maritime strategy of the United States since the 20th century. Zheng argues that the rise and failure of Japanese imperialism testify that force alone cannot be a durable way of maintaining influence. He also calls on Japan’s leaders to learn from the past and refrain from the re-militarization of their country, comparing the former Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzō’s foreign policy approach to that of Toyotomi Hideyoshi (the leader of the Japanese invading forces during the Imjin War, 1592-98). The rise of U.S. maritime hegemony in the post-WWII period, in Zheng’s view, was based on the ability of the U.S. leadership to formulate and promote an attractive set of values underpinning their global expansionism. Learning from the failures of European colonialism based on direct political control, the United States has successfully built its network of satellite states instead without directly controlling them, and promoted the universal values of democracy and human rights. In Zheng’s views, similarly to the United States in the present-day, during the Zheng He

²¹⁷ Li Xiao 李晓 and Li Junjiu 李俊久, “Yidai yilu,” 34–38.

²¹⁸ 41 citations, 3,161 downloads in CNKI (www.cnki.net) as of 2022-10-31.

missions Ming China formulated and promoted a universal set of values, based on the Confucian concepts of *wangdao* 王道 (the “kingly way” of righteous rule, as opposite to *badao* 霸道 or the “way of the tyrant”) and *renzheng* 仁政 (“benevolent governance”). In Zheng’s view, in the 21st century, China should similarly design a universally attractive “system of core values” (*hexin jiazhi tixi* 核心价值体系) for its maritime strategy, hinting at the values proclaimed in the Belt & Road discourses as being the key to the success of this undertaking.²¹⁹

5.3.8 Summary of the detailed analysis

The sub-chapter on detailed analysis has demonstrated that there is a diversity of views on the historical facts of the Zheng He missions, as well as on their interpretation from a present-day perspective. The interest in the missions is not confined to mainland China itself and is especially significant in Southeast Asian countries with large ethnic Chinese populations and historical connections to the missions. The sub-chapter has demonstrated that the Zheng He discourse is a constituent part of the broader Silk Roads Power-Knowledge Complex, based on a broadly shared interest in China’s interconnected past and its referential value for the increasingly globalized world of the present-day. At the same time, the so-called Belt & Road Historiography is present as a significant factor in the discourse, denoting the party-state’s attempts to render the past into a view of history corresponding to the officially promoted “Belt & Road Worldview”. The Chinese party-state’s interest in the construction of a Chinese “maritime culture”, which in turn is expected to contribute to the increase of the country’s “maritime power”, is particularly evident in the analyzed discourse. As will be contextualized and discussed in more detail in the concluding chapter of the dissertation, the “maritime turn” in Chinese strategic thinking and the push for constructing “maritime culture” is likely to become even stronger in the coming decades. In my assessment, this is due to the fact that the

²¹⁹ Zheng Hailin 郑海麟, “Jiangou ‘haishang sichou zhi lu.’”

increasingly globalized ambitions of the CCP leadership see the United States as China's long-term rival at the global level, while the historical and current continental rivalries with Russia, India, and other states are losing their relative significance. The ongoing global maritime dominance of the United States and the location of its East Asian allies and partners (Taiwan, Japan, South Korea) at China's maritime frontier make the need for the "maritime turn" all the more obvious.

6. Interpretation and conclusion

6.1 Theoretical and methodological considerations

The interpretation of the results is primarily based on the methodology of Jäger's *Kritische Diskursanalyse* (KDA), which conceives interpretation as a concluding step of the discourse analytical process. Interpretation, in KDA methodology, has several functions, such as the identification of the main features of the discourse and discourse fields (e.g. their main formative rules and common discursive strategies), the contextualization of the results in the broader historical and socio-political context, as well as reflection on the results with reference to the original research question(s) and the results of similar studies.¹

In the theory chapter of the dissertation I proposed the terms “Silk Roads Power-Knowledge Complex”, “Belt & Road Worldview”, and “Belt & Road Historiography”. Silk Roads PKC is defined as the broader interactive process of China's domestic and global power relations with knowledge production in and about China. Silk Roads PKC refers to the trends of perceiving global history and China's role in the past and present global order among a broader segment of Chinese society. The term refers to “silk roads” as a popular, and also often idealized and selective re-imagining of China's global past, emphasizing interconnectivity and peaceful “win-win” co-operation. Silk Roads PKC describes a broader tendency of perceiving the global past than the particularly state-led formulation of global historical narratives covered by the term “Belt & Road Historiography”. The two are, however, interlinked with each other, in a way that B&R Historiography builds on various pre-existing aspects of Silk Roads PKC, and also intends to reinforce those which fit its narrative. In order to understand what are the epistemological foundations and value systems of B&R Historiography, I also proposed the term “Belt & Road Worldview”. B&R Worldview, as introduced in the theory chapter (2.1.1),

¹ Summarized in Keller, *Diskursforschung*, 34.

refers to the ideal global order in the narrative of the Chinese party-state, focusing on values such as state-sovereignty, non-interference, and “win-win” economic interaction.

The detailed analysis sub-chapter (5.3) was structured along the “discursive fields” of recent Zheng He historiography. As introduced in the “detailed analysis” sub-chapter (3.4) of the methodology chapter, Keller’s WDA (*Wissenssoziologische Diskursanalyse*) methodology defines “discursive fields” (*Diskursfelder*) as arenas in which various discourses “compete” with each other in order to define a certain phenomenon. The analytical framework of “discursive fields” thus emphasized interdiscursivity, i.e. that one discourse fragment can rarely be connected solely to one certain discourse. As has been demonstrated throughout sub-chapter 5.3, historiography on Zheng He is a discourse with a high amount of interdiscursive links to other discourses in present-day Chinese historiography and international relations theory. The discussions on interstate relations during the Zheng He missions are hardly understandable without referring to the “tributary system” discourse of international relations theory. The debates on how to interpret the role of the missions from a global historical perspective can hardly be separated from the discourse on what “global history” (*quanqiuoshi* 全球史) should mean in the Chinese context, and how it relates to pre-modern Chinese world-making concepts such as *Tianxia* 天下 or notions of human progress such as *wenming* 文明. These considerations justified the structuring of the detailed analysis sub-chapter (5.3) along the analytical framework of “discursive fields”, incl. sections such as “interstate politics and the missions” and “global historiography in China and the missions”.

The detailed analysis sub-chapter thus brought together a number of different discourse fragments, pointing out their main contents, and relating them to other discourses via the framework of “discursive fields”. The closing sub-chapters also included remarks on how I believe the features of such discursive fields supported the usefulness of my proposed theoretical frameworks. In the present interpretative chapter, the emphasis is on identifying the

main threads of the analyzed historiographical discourse and the narratives underlying these threads, as well as on relating them to the broader discourses within mainland Chinese society and to the state-promoted image of the missions. In his *Kritische Diskursanalyse* (2015), Jäger defines “discourse strands” (*Diskursstränge*) in relation to the “overall societal guidelines of the discourse” (*Leitlinien des gesamtgesellschaftlichen Diskurses*),

Since the guidelines of the overall societal discourse also influence and shape the individual discourse strands, the analysis of the individual strands can already make attempts to draw cautious conclusions about these “guidelines”.²

In the context of the present dissertation, such “overall societal guidelines” are primarily connected to the proposed “Silk Roads Power-Knowledge Complex” of broader world-making discourses in present-day China. Since the focus of the dissertation is the recent academic historiography about the Zheng He missions, the question of how academicians participating in the discourse reproduce or question the broader societal guidelines is of central importance. Another, partly overlapping set of guidelines for thinking about the missions is set by the authoritarian party-state, whose main interest is the appropriation of global historiography for the production of historical narratives underlying its global strategy and political objectives. This phenomenon is described by the proposed terms “Belt & Road Worldview” and “Belt & Road Historiography”. As has also been pointed out in section 2.2.2 on “dispositive analysis” in the chapter on theory, Foucault’s broader concept of “dispositifs”, also including non-discursive factors of power relations, is of special relevance here as well, esp. with regard to the state-managed factors in upholding the discursive hegemony of the authoritarian party-state. Such non-discursive factors in this context most notably involve the institutional organization of academic research on the topic, as well as related publishing practices.

² “Da die Leitlinien des gesamtgesellschaftlichen Diskurses jedoch auch in den einzelnen Diskurssträngen wirken und diesen prägen, kann bei der Analyse einzelnen Diskursstränge immer bereits der Versuch gemacht werden, vorsichtige Rückschlüsse auf diese »Leitlinien« vorzunehmen.“, Jäger, *Kritische Diskursanalyse*, 88.

While outright criticism of state-promoted projects or political objectives is not detectable in the analyzed discourse, which is likely to be also an outcome of (self-)censorship, various ways of “evading” the state narrative can still be observed. These include the questioning of widely-held and/or promoted assumptions about certain aspects of the missions which underline the state-promoted narrative. They also involve the superficiality of referencing state-promoted projects and slogans such as the “21st-Century Maritime Silk Roads” in the abstracts of research papers, without substantially engaging with them throughout the same paper. Altogether, the interpretative chapter on the missions strives to emphasize the diversity of various authors’ views on the mission, the conflicts between various discourse strands, as well as the critical attitudes toward broadly held assumptions about the missions within Chinese society, also with questioning attitudes towards the state-promoted narratives (even when no explicit criticism of state policies is detectable).

6.2 Interpretation

6.2.1 The “overall guidelines” of the broader societal discourse

With reference to discourse analytical theory and methodology, as well as to the theoretical framework proposed in the dissertation, in the recent mainland Chinese discourse on the Zheng He missions, I identify a mainstream discourse thread of the missions formulated along the epistemological guidelines of the Silk Roads PKC. This mainstream can be summarized as a “consensus” based on widely shared narratives, assumptions, and myths concerning the mission. These in turn are influenced by a number of non-academic sources of knowledge production, such as the traditional legends related to the missions, (semi-)fictional literature and television series based on the missions, as well as public spaces and events commemorating the missions. They revolve around the “greatness” of the mission in terms of ship and fleet sizes, their geographical extent, and referential value for the present-time. While some academicians reproduce the socially mainstream view of the missions, a number of

authors present critical views of the widely-held assumptions and myths related to the missions, as will be elaborated in section 6.2.3 (“The scholarly discourse”) in this chapter.

In order to clarify what in my view can be conceptualized as the “overall guidelines” of thinking about the Zheng He missions in China today, and hence how the “Silk Roads Power-Knowledge Complex” manifests itself in recent Zheng He historiography, it has to be first pointed out that there are a number of non-historical and non-academic sources on the Zheng He missions, which have played a major role throughout the centuries since the time of the mission in influencing the widely shared images and perceptions of the mission in China. In sub-section 5.3.5.3 (“The missions in literary fiction since the Ming dynasty”), it has been summarized how fictional or semi-fictional works based on the historical Zheng He missions have greatly influenced their perception in subsequent centuries. As has been demonstrated by various researchers in recent decades, the Late Ming novel *Sanbao taijian Xiyang ji tongshu yanyi* (The Romance of the Three Jewels Eunuch Sailing the Western Ocean) was behind the creation of various long-held myths surrounding the missions. These include the popular notion that they were launched by the Yongle emperor to find his predecessor and opponent, the Jianwen emperor, who supposedly fled China by ship. It was also apparently the origin of the myth of the legendary sizes of Zheng He’s ships, and hence it popularized the “treasure ships” (*baochuan* 宝船) image of the Zheng He fleet, as involving extraordinarily-sized ships carrying extraordinary wealth. In more recent times, a number of bio-fictional works partly based on historical sources on Zheng He’s life and the missions appeared as well. Especially popular among them was the 2009 CCTV historical drama series *Zheng He xia Xiyang* (Zheng He Sails the Western Ocean). The 59-episode series sets out with narrating the tragic events of Zheng He’s childhood marked by the loss of his family and his forced transfer to the Ming court, as well as his subsequent befriending of the Yongle emperor and rise to the top ranks of his court eunuchs. The missions are introduced as a grandiose set of events, with Zheng He’s figure being

characterized by heroism and self-sacrifice for serving the Ming dynasty, China, and the common prosperity of “All Under Heaven”.

I argue that the widely shared assumptions and thus the “overall guidelines” of the narratives of Zheng He’s missions in recent decades were shaped by the historical sources on his missions, as well as by the semi-fictional and dramatized works on the missions. The general perception of the missions has been influenced by the broader interest in the “silk roads” as a conventional term for pre-modern China’s interconnectivity with the outside world. The Zheng He missions in turn played a major role in constructing the maritime equivalent of the continental “silk roads” in contemporary Chinese narrativizations of historical entanglements with the outside world. This is especially relevant, as “silk roads” since their emergence in late-19th-century travelogues of European travelers in Inner and Central Asia, were for long understood as referring to linkages along continental routes exclusively. As also suggested by CNKI data on keywords in relevant publications, and the text analysis of their titles and abstracts (see sub-chapter 5.2, and chapter 7., appendices) the recent discourse on the Zheng He missions apparently played an important role in the popularization of “maritime silk roads” (*haishang sichou zhi lu* 海上丝绸之路) as an equally important narrativization of the entangled past. The “overall guidelines” of the broader Zheng He discourse can thus be summarized as being characterized by the mythicized accounts of the extraordinary sizes and wealth of Zheng He’s “treasure fleet”, as well as by the perception of the missions as a symbol of openness and “win-win” interaction with the outside world due to their geographical extent, supposedly pacifist and trade-oriented nature, as well as Zheng He’s role as a bridging figure between various religions and cultures. The criticism of the mythicized accounts of the missions based on widely-held yet unfounded assumptions is a main objective of a number of historians writing on the missions, as will be demonstrated in section 6.2.3 (“The scholarly discourse”).

6.2.2 The state-led appropriation of Zheng He historiography

The state-promoted narrative of the missions intends to integrate them into the B&R Historiography, i.e. the re-imagining of the global past in order to reinforce the state-promoted narratives of the global present along the value system of B&R Worldview. The state-led appropriation of the missions as part of what I define as “Belt & Road Historiography” is based on the selective appropriation of various aspects of the broader discourse on the missions. The logic of this selection is based on finding elements in the broader discourse that can be instrumentalized to reinforce what I define as the “Belt & Road Worldview”, i.e. the value system promoted in state discourses on global order incl. values such as national sovereignty, non-interference, and “win-win” economic co-operation. From a dispositive-analytical point of view, the state also uses a number of instruments at its disposal, beyond discursive power. Such instruments include the establishment of public spaces commemorating the Zheng He missions, which are bound through textual elements into the overarching narrative of national rejuvenation, “win-win” co-operation, and other state-promoted narratives (on this see the anthropological study of Matsumoto, 2017).³ Organizing commemorative events of the missions, and linking these to contemporary political objectives and projects, such as the Reform and Opening-up or the Belt & Road Initiative, are another significant way of the state-led instrumentalization of the missions (see 5.2.1 on the correlation of publication numbers with major anniversaries of the first mission).

For the present dissertation, which is primarily focused on the recent academic discourse on the missions, the influence of the state on the institutional factors behind Zheng He research are of special significance. As indicated by CNKI data introduced in 5.2.1, these influences include the establishment and operation of special research centers focusing on Zheng He research, such as the Shanghai Zheng He Research Center affiliated with Shanghai Maritime

³ Matsumoto, “Ittai ichiro.”

University, headed by Shi Ping (one of the most prolific authors on the missions in recent decades) and the unaffiliated Jiangsu Province Zheng He Research Association (with high numbers of authors related to this research institute in the 2013-2020 period). The publication of *Zheng He yanjiu dongtai* (Trends in Zheng He Research) edited by Shi Ping, bringing together academic research articles with reports on Zheng He-related events and editorials promoting “navigation day” (航海日), “maritime culture”, and other state-promoted events and slogans, is a salient example of the state-led instrumentalization of historiography for the realization of political objectives in the present-day. In summary, the state-led appropriation of Zheng He historiography and its instrumentalization for the construction of “Belt & Road Historiography” cannot be solely explained by the analysis of discursive factors. Instead, non-discursive instruments at the disposal of the state, and in the academic context especially institutional factors influencing the research on the missions, as well as publishing practices are of special significance.

In the subsequent section (6.2.3), ways of “evading” the state-promoted narrative will be introduced as well. Direct criticism of this state-led appropriation of Zheng He historiography is hardly visible in discourse fragments from the BRI period (2013-), although there are some examples from the earlier years (2000s). The most common way of implicitly criticizing the state-promoted view of the missions is to challenge its underlying assumptions (of the supposed “outward openness” facilitated by the missions, their pacifism, etc.). In certain cases, the alignment with state-promoted narratives is rather superficial, involving references to state-led projects such as the “21st-Century Maritime Silk Roads” in the abstract of the article, as well as certain quotes from Xi Jinping’s speeches in the introductory chapter. In such cases, the authors express opinions that do not necessarily follow the official lines closely, and it is likely that the superficial references to state-led projects or political figures are basic requirements for publication.

6.2.3 The scholarly discourse

In the mainland Chinese historiography on the Zheng He missions since 2000, several major scholarly discourse threads have emerged, which in various ways reacted to the broader societal discourse, to state-promoted narratives, as well as to the other scholarly discourse threads. The years 2005 and 2013 marked important changes for the scholarly, as well as general discourse. In 2005, the year of the 600th anniversary of the first mission, an especially large amount of academic publications appeared (see CNKI data-based charts in 5.2), together with a large number of commemorative events as suggested in the titles of CNKI items from the year. The public awareness of the Zheng He missions was thus elevated to a new level, to a large extent via state-promoted discourses and other dispositifs (theme parks, replicas of Zheng He's ships), and also due to the general interest surrounding Zheng He's perceived multicultural background and the perceived grandiosity of the missions. Since the 2013 inauguration of the Belt & Road Initiative, the state-led appropriation of Zheng He historiography increasingly departed from merely emphasizing Zheng He's bridging figure among different civilizational spheres and religions and his symbolic value for "opening-up" in general terms. Since 2013, as the CCP took an increasingly assertive stance on maritime affairs (incl. the disputes over the East and South China seas and Taiwan), the referential value of the missions for China's "maritime power" and global maritime strategy has gained increasing prominence in the state-promoted narrative of the missions. At the same time, the tightening of control over academia has also apparently resulted in an increased reproduction of state-promoted slogans in publications (see Appendices on CNKI keywords, bigrams in titles and abstracts, esp. the prominence of "Maritime Silk Roads", "Belt and Road"). The major strands of the scholarly discourse on Zheng He emerged/are emerging to a considerable extent in reaction to broader societal discourses and state-promoted narratives on the missions.

6.2.3.1 Critical scholarship on historical truth and the missions, and its purposes

In recent mainland Chinese academic historiography on the Zheng He missions, the motivation of a number of authors is apparently the debunking of popular myths surrounding the missions. The major monograph of Zhou Yunzhong (former assistant professor at the Department of History at Xiamen University) *Zheng He xia Xiyang xinkao* [Rethinking the Zheng He missions] is an example of systematic criticism of what Zhou considers various popular myths surrounding the missions. Referencing primary sources from the period, Zhou provides evidence of the infeasibility of widespread assumptions such as the “finding the Jianwen emperor” thesis regarding the motivations behind the launching of the missions, as well as of the unlikelihood of Zheng He’s extraordinary ship sizes as stated in the *Mingshi*. Zhou’s *xinkao* 新考 (re-examining/rethinking) is thus oriented towards criticizing the earlier “common knowledge” on the missions, which were to a considerable extent influenced by non-historical sources such as the *Xiyang ji*, or later accounts such as the *Mingshi* and Liang Qichao’s *Zuguo da hanghaijia Zheng He zhuan*. Zhou’s work, published by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Press in 2013, and most likely written during the preceding years when the Belt & Road Initiative was not yet announced, can also be read as an implicit criticism of the state-promoted narratives of the missions in the 2000s and early 2010s.⁴ Zhou’s work is characterized by critical attitudes towards the “envoy of peace” and “win-win co-operation” narratives promoted in the cultural diplomacy of the time, intending to provide a realistic picture of the motivations behind missions, emphasizing that they were not entirely pacifistic and were heavily militarized.⁵ In 2018, Zhou was dismissed from his position at Xiamen University for controversial Weibo posts on the perceived backwardness of Chinese people in general (see

⁴ See the introduction of Ptak and Salmon, *Zheng He*; see also the critical remarks of Wade from the same year on the mythicization of Zheng He in the period: Wade, “The Zheng He Voyages,” 2005.

⁵ Zhou Yunzhong 周运中, *Zheng He xia Xiyang*.

4.2.1). The sequel to his book, *Zheng He xia Xiyang xukao* 郑和下西洋续考 [Continuation of the examinations of the Zheng He missions] was published in Taipei in 2019.⁶

In the major edited volume *Zouxiang duoyuan wenhua de quanqiushi* [Towards a multicultural global history], edited by the mainland Chinese-born historian Chen Zhongping (University of Victoria, Canada), and published by the Beijing-based SDX Joint Publishing Company in 2017, there is a similarly critical attitude towards what is seen as popular myths and pseudo-historiography around the missions. The volume includes one chapter criticizing the works of Gavin Menzies and puts it into a broader context of various unfounded hypotheses on Chinese travelers “discovering” America prior to the Columbian exchange.⁷ In his chapter in the volume and the editorial of the volume written by him, Chen argues for a more interdisciplinary and globalized view of the missions, criticizing earlier scholarship for its more narrow-minded approach focusing on historical methodology and Chinese-language sources only.⁸

It is also notable that in his editorial article, Chen expresses his dislike of many Western authors’ views on the Zheng He missions as an episode of Chinese domination and a blueprint from present-day expansionism. Putting this into a broader perspective, he criticizes Western “multiculturalism” as a discursive strategy to establish Western epistemological hegemony in historical knowledge production around the world. The relevance of the Zheng He missions in Chen’s framing is based on their “truly” multicultural nature, embodying a pattern of interstate and inter-civilizational exchange markedly different from Western colonialism and other forms of Western domination. Like many other authors writing in the BRI period, Chen intends to overcome narrow-minded nationalistic ways of Chinese historiography in order to establish a

⁶ Zhou Yunzhong 周运中, *Zheng He xia Xiyang xukao* 郑和下西洋续考 [Continuation of the examinations of the Zheng He missions], Gudai Lishi Wenhua Jikan (Taipei: Hua Mulan Wenhua Chubanshe 花木兰文化出版社 [Hua Mulan Culture Publishing], 2019).

⁷ Wu Yan 吴彦 and Chen Zhongping 陈忠平, “Huaren ‘faxian’ Meizhou.”

⁸ Chen Zhongping 陈忠平, “Zouxiang quanqiuxing wangluo geming.”

non-West-centric view of global history, promoting an alternative set of value systems underpinning global historiography, which in his (and others') views are conducive to a truly "global view" of history. This alternative view of global history is framed as being focused on the "network revolution" (*wangluo geming* 网络革命) of interaction across the Indo-Pacific maritime region, creating a non-hegemonic order based on trade and knowledge exchange.⁹ Chen's views on historiography put forward in the editorial to the volume on the Zheng He missions and global history are much in line with the more recent works on "histories of Civilization" (*wenmingshi* 文明史), discarding both nationalistic/narrow-minded historiographies, as well as what is seen as the hegemonic force of West-centric value systems in "global history" as promoted in the West.¹⁰

The differences between Zhou Yunzhong's and Chen Zhongping et al.'s motivations for debunking the widely held false assumptions and myths of the Zheng He missions shows that this endeavor in fact can have different purposes. In Zhou's case, an apparent critical attitude towards the mainstream narratives of "greatness", underpinning state-promoted narratives is implicitly detectable. Meanwhile, in Chen's editorial, it is also evident that a correct global view of history overcoming nationalistic narrow-mindedness and mythmaking is also seen as a proper instrument for advancing toward a brighter global future based on "win-win" co-operation among like-minded nation-states (corresponding to what I conceptualize as the "Belt & Road Worldview").

⁹ Chen Zhongping 陈忠平, *Zouxiang duoyuan wenhua de quanqiushi*, 1–21.

¹⁰ Zhang Xupeng 张旭鹏, "Quanqiushi yu minzu xushi"; Wei Xiaoji 魏孝稷, "Xifang hanxue 'diguo shi' fanshi"; Zhu Xiaoyuan 朱孝远, "Wenmingshi yanjiu."

6.2.3.2 The domestic background of the missions – Critical perspectives on economic damage and political motivations

In the 2000s, one important strand of critical discourse on the Zheng He missions in the 2000s was concerned with domestic economic and regional/local perspectives within China. At Xiamen University, a major center of research on maritime and overseas Chinese history in mainland China, the two researchers Li Jinming 李金明 (South China Sea Research Institute) and Zhuang Guotu 庄国土 (Southeast Asia Research Center / current director of South China Sea Research Institute) were active in publishing critical articles on the economic impact of the Zheng He missions and related economic policies, esp. the early Ming “maritime ban” (*haijin* 海禁). Their efforts can be interpreted as a form of regionally-oriented historiography criticizing the perspectives of the center imposed on regions and localities. While Li mostly focused on the high burdens in terms of labor imposed on the localities visited by the tributary missions returning to China with the Zheng He missions, Zhuang, more broadly, intended to criticize the analytical usefulness of the “tributary system” framework of Early Ming China’s interstate relations. Zhuang pointed instead to the centrality of the maritime bans, and the role of the Zheng He missions as the only legalized way to overcome the destructive restrictions imposed by the maritime bans. As mentioned in 5.3.4, in his 2005 article Zhuang also criticized Deng Xiaoping’s positive views of the Zheng He missions, as the “last period of openness” (before the later Ming and Qing self-isolation). Open criticism of the views of CCP leaders is hardly detectable otherwise in the discourse, and would probably be even riskier in the present day. Already in the 2005 article, Zhuang was also a promoter of the idea that in contrast to the Ming-Qing elites’ self-isolation, Song and Yuan China was significantly more open to the outside world, both in terms of economic and migrational policies. Quite distinctly from the mainstream and state-promoted narrative of seeing the Zheng He missions as a symbol of historical openness, Zhuang rather saw it as a symbol of self-isolation, or more precisely as a

loophole in a system characterized by self-isolation, in contrast with the openness of the preceding periods.¹¹

As demonstrated above, in the 2000s there was a major scholarly discourse strand critically pointing out the economic damages caused by the missions. This strand of scholarship did not simply refer to the high cost of the missions, but also considered them as part and parcel of the “maritime ban” approach of the Ming dynasty towards its coastal provinces, causing major economic destruction to local populations. A counter-strand to this was produced by those focusing on the long history of *wokou* 倭寇 pirate attacks in pre-Ming coastal China, and argue that the “maritime ban” of the Early Ming era was primarily intended to prevent further *wokou* raids by controlling the movement of goods and humans in coastal China. As introduced in section 5.3.4, the historian He Hongyong 和洪勇 (Yunnan University) advocated this position in his 2003 article. Concerning the Zheng He missions, He argues that they were primarily intended to establish security on the trade routes connecting coastal China with Southeast Asia.¹²

In his major 2013 monograph, former Xiamen University assistant professor of history Zhou Yunzhong engages with both lines of argument and provides a sort of syncretizing overview of both. In Zhou’s assessment, the protection of coastal China from *wokou* pirate attacks was not the main motivation behind launching the missions. The evidence for this, according to Zhou’s findings, is provided by primary sources mentioning several other military commanders commissioned by the Ming court with the task of bringing down *wokou* bands on the Chinese coast, at the same time when the Zheng He missions were operating. The presence of large numbers of soldiers as members of the mission likely indicated that the Ming court was concerned with potential pirate attacks on the missions, as Zhou argues. However, in Zhou’s

¹¹ Zhuang Guotu 庄国土, “Lun Zheng He xia Xiyang”; Zhuang Guotu 庄国土, “Lüelun chaogong zhidu de xuhuan.”

¹² He Hongyong 和洪勇, “Ming qianqi Zhongguo,” 87.

assessment, this did not mean that the missions of extraordinary volumes and geographical extent were a necessity for bringing order to the empire's coastal regions. They were much more related to the Yongle emperor's extravagancy, and desire to establish his legitimacy among foreign rulers after his violent rise to the throne.¹³

Zhou is also among the few authors who engage in a detailed and critical way with the domestic political background of the Zheng He missions. While most authors prefer to focus on the missions as a matter of concern for foreign relations, or they direct their critical attitudes towards the economic policy of the Ming court as introduced above, Zhou provides a detailed analysis of the missions being a domestic political tool for the legitimization of the Yongle emperor's rule. Based on primary sources from the period, Zhou argues that the Yongle emperor was an extravagant tyrant rarely seen in China's history, providing textual evidence of his brutality against anyone associated with his predecessor, the Jianwen emperor, and of several other costly and extravagant projects initiated by him apart from the missions (see more on these in 5.3.2).¹⁴ Such critical attitudes towards the domestic political background of the missions as published in Zhou's 2013 work are rarely seen in other publications, as most of the publications especially since 2013 discuss the Zheng He missions in terms of their role in China's foreign relations of the time, with critical notes mostly related to the high financial costs of the missions.

6.2.3.3 Referential value for present-day maritime strategy – Skepticism about the missions as a model

As has been introduced in the sub-chapter on detailed analysis (5.3), especially in the sections on the discourse fields “interstate politics and the missions” (5.3.3) and “political instrumentalization of the missions” (5.3.7), a discussion of the mission has developed among

¹³ Zhou Yunzhong 周运中, *Zheng He xia Xiyang*, 14.

¹⁴ Zhou Yunzhong 周运中, 18–20.

political scientists with an interest in the history of China's foreign relations, concerning the referential value of the missions for China's present-day role in the global order. Especially since 2013, this discussion has apparently been influenced by the heavy state-led promotion of the Zheng He missions in outward cultural diplomacy and in domestic discourses on maritime strategy as well. A number of scholars are skeptical about the degree to which the missions should be seen as having referential value for the present-day foreign policy of China. They tend to criticize the notion that the Zheng He missions brought any sort of durable maritime power for China, and changed the general trend of China being a primarily continental empire, with its main strategic interests lying in the security of its northern continental borders. The Zheng He missions are thus seen as a short-lived attempt to construct maritime influence, rather than a successful establishment of China as a long-term maritime power. At the same time, the criticism of the mainstream perception of the Zheng He missions as establishing China as a maritime power in many cases serves the purpose of strengthening the state-promoted narrative on the significance of the "21st-Century Maritime Silk Roads", by arguing that durable sea power was never achieved in pre-modern history despite the attempts during the Zheng He missions.

In their highly cited and downloaded paper written in the pre-BRI period (2005), the two scholars of international relations (at the time based at the Peking University's Faculty of International Relations), Ye Zicheng 叶自成 and Mu Xinhai 慕新海 presented a rather skeptical evaluation of the supposed referential value of the Zheng He missions for China's maritime strategy in the 21st century. In Ye & Mu's assessment, China had never been a maritime power in previous eras, and the Zheng He missions in their view can primarily be evaluated as a short-lived attempt of gaining influence in the maritime world by an empire whose most important strategic interests were related to its continental borders. Ye & Mu thus advise against assigning too much referential value to the missions and point to the importance of comprehensive perspectives on China's maritime strategy instead of merely relying on the

size of battle ships.¹⁵ Ye & Mu are thus looking at the potential referential value of the missions with a primary focus on political, economic, and military influence, and with less consideration for their potential value in cultural diplomacy, despite mentioning “culture” among the various aspects of gaining comprehensive maritime power. Their critical attitudes with less consideration for the referential value of the missions for cultural diplomacy and soft power should also be seen in the discursive context of the 2000s, when these aspects were broadly discussed and emphasized by many authors.

In publications with a similar focus published since 2013, such as those of Li Xiao 李晓 & Li Junjiu 李俊 (2015) and Zheng Hailin 郑海麟 (2014), there is less overt questioning of the referential value of the missions for the recently established Belt & Road Initiative. In their especially highly cited and downloaded article, the two authors Li & Li (at the time based at Jilin University’s Department of Economics) criticize the notion that the Zheng He missions led to durable sea power for China, as its ruling dynasties’ main strategic interest remained the continental border in the subsequent centuries. Thereby they mostly emphasize the need for China to become a continental and maritime power at the same time, thereby also supporting the strategic rationale behind the Belt & Road Initiative.¹⁶

Zheng Hailin, at the time of publishing director of a Hong Kong-based research institute called the Hong Kong Asia-Pacific Research Center (香港亚太研究中心), published a highly-cited article in the Beijing-based *Taipingyang xuebao* 太平洋学报 (Pacific Journal) in 2014. The article is an interesting example of paying superficial service to the official narratives by referring to the recently inaugurated Belt & Road Initiative in the abstract of the article, as well as quoting from Xi Jinping’s BRI-related speeches in the introduction of the article, while at the same time formulating largely independent thoughts throughout the article. As pointed out

¹⁵ Ye Zicheng 叶自成 and Mu Xinhai 慕新海, “Dui Zhongguo haiquan.”

¹⁶ Li Xiao 李晓 and Li Junjiu 李俊久, “Yidai yilu.”

in 5.3.7, Zheng's article is based on arguing for a "system of core values" (*hexin jiazhi tixi* 核心价值观体系) in foreign relations, comparing the value system of various past and present maritime powers (early Ming China, Japan during its expansionist period, the United States since the end of WWII). In the part analyzing the origins of U.S. maritime power, Zheng emphasizes the importance of democracy and human rights as the core values of the U.S. in the present time. At the same time, he does not describe explicitly what are China's "core values" in the present time, which can also be read as an implicit way of criticism (of the existing values, or the lack of any value system).¹⁷

6.2.4 Summary

In the sub-chapter on Interpretation (6.2), the main discourse strands of the scholarly discourse were introduced in relation to the broader societal discourses on the missions, the state-promoted narrative of the missions and its relevance for China's present-day global strategy, as well as in relation to each other, emphasizing the conflict of views on certain major issues concerning the evaluation and interpretation of the missions. In this sub-chapter, I emphasized certain major discourse threads which conflict with the mainstream societal view of the missions, and in certain cases the state-promoted narrative as well.

The most obvious way of critical scholarship on the Zheng He missions, as introduced in sub-section 6.2.3.1 (Debunking widely held myths) is based on countering the broadly shared and often semi-mythical accounts of the missions, based on scholarly research on primary sources. In this case, there is less conflict among the views of various scholars regarding what constitutes historical truth. Some scholars such as Zhou Yunzhong emphasize this in order to criticize narrow-minded and nationalistic interpretations of the missions focusing on ship sizes and other aspects of national "greatness". Others, such as Chen Zhongping focus on

¹⁷ Zheng Hailin 郑海麟, "Jiangou 'haishang sichou zhi lu.'" 208

reconfiguring the referential value of the Zheng He missions for creating a “truly multicultural” globalized view of history, which will introduce more Chinese and Asian-originated value systems in the conceptual frameworks of global historiography, and thus will counter the West-centrism of the value systems underpinning global historiography at the present day.

The domestic economic and political background of the missions is a more contested issue. A major discourse strand based on the research work of economic historians and historians with a focus on the regional history of the southeastern Chinese coast has emerged since the early 2000s, criticizing the overall positive perception of the missions, pointing to the major damages caused by the parallel “maritime ban” ordered by the Ming court. The missions, along with the maritime ban are seen as two elements of the overall Ming politics of the time. Contrary to popular and state-promoted narratives, the missions are not seen as an act of opening up but rather as a loophole for some legalized trade in a system otherwise characterized by self-isolationism. The focus of these researchers is on the negative impact of the maritime bans on the ordinary people of China’s southeastern coastal region, while the missions are seen as only profiting a selected few participating in the official tribute-trade exchanges. This discourse strand thus presents a critique of the popular mythicization and state-promoted narrative of the missions as acts of opening-up and win-win interaction, focusing especially on the lack of “winning” from the perspective of the ordinary population of coastal China. This scholarly discourse strand also differs from the discussions among various scholars on the historical evidence for the depletion of the Ming imperial treasury due to the high costs of the missions, and the resistance among high-ranking officials such as Xia Yuanji 夏原吉. It is because this discourse strand takes a class-based perspective, even if Marxist terms are rarely used, reflecting on the difficulties faced by lower-class populations in coastal China, instead of merely reproducing elite discourses on the high costs of the missions.

Apart from critical research on the economic damages caused by the early Ming foreign policy, in his 2013 monograph, *Zheng He xia Xiyang xinkao* Zhou Yunzhong presents an overall

negative picture of China's political environment under the Yongle reign. The brutal persecution of anyone associated with the dethroned Jianwen emperor, and extravagant projects to legitimize the Yongle emperor's rule inside and outside China were the main features of his rule, in Zhou's interpretation of primary sources from the period. It merits the question of why the domestic economic and political aspects of the Zheng He missions are nearly non-existent in the state-promoted narrative of the missions, and why the missions are much more lengthily discussed as acts of interaction with the outside world. The answer is apparently that critical scholarship on the domestic background of the missions is less in line with the value systems along which "Belt & Road Historiography" is ideally produced and calls into question the "win-win" narrative, especially from a Chinese perspective.

The scholarly discussions on the missions from the perspective of interstate relations generally set out from the notion of "continental strength, maritime weakness" (*lu qiang, hai ruo* 陆强海弱) as a general characteristic of China throughout history and tend to see the missions as a short-lived attempt to establish maritime influence by an otherwise continentally-focused dynasty. Historians writing on the topic on the topic tend to emphasize the importance of a Braudelian *longue durée* of China's maritime interactions, placing the Zheng He missions within the long-term process of forming and maintaining trade routes throughout the Indo-Pacific maritime region. Historians also see the missions as a particularity in Chinese history, for being the only major attempt by a Chinese ruling dynasty to gain control over the main "nodes and networks" of the Indo-Pacific region. Scholars of international relations emphasize that the Zheng He missions did not durably change China's course of remaining a continental power with limited capabilities of projecting maritime influence and hence gradually falling behind the West in terms of global influence in the subsequent centuries. The underlying motivation of many IR scholars for discussing the Zheng He missions is thus to emphasize the novelty of the challenge of building maritime power since no precedents of China being a durable maritime power exist in the country's past in their assessment.

6.4 Concluding remarks

The present dissertation deals with the discourse analysis of recent mainland Chinese historiography on a major episode in pre-modern Chinese and Afro-Eurasian history, which has also been widely discussed and re-interpreted in recent discourses on global history and global order. The dissertation provides substantial evidence for the analytical usefulness of the proposed theoretical frameworks “Silk Roads Power-Knowledge Complex” and “Belt & Road Worldview / Historiography”. It also provides an assessment of how the interest in re-imagining global history along the “silk roads” paradigm of “win-win” interaction finds broader resonance in Chinese society, how it is appropriated by the state-promoted “Belt & Road Worldview”, and how it is also reproduced by a number of scholars as well. The primary focus of the present dissertation, the analysis of academic historiography on the Zheng He missions has also demonstrated that the views on the missions are not uniform among Chinese authors, and conflicting views among various authors’ interpretations and evaluations are part of the recent discourse on the missions. Critical views on unfunded mythicization of the missions in the broader societal discourse and the implicit criticism of assumptions underlying the state-promoted narrative demonstrate the creativity of many scholars despite social and political pressures.

Due to China’s increasingly significant and also arguably contentious role in the global order, understanding the complexities of how global historical knowledge is produced in the country is a major issue of interdisciplinary relevance in my opinion. Only by grasping the complexities of such broader tendencies will it be possible to effectively engage with China in the coming decades.

7. Appendices

7.1 Appendix 1: Lists of journals by number of articles (1949-2020, source: CNKI)

Concerning the lists of journals based on the number of published articles, the following tables show the 10 (12) most prominent journals in all the 4 analyzed subsets dated between 1949 and 2020:

	Publisher	n
1	文物	3
2	历史教学	2
3	世界知识	1
4	中国穆斯林	1
5	历史教学问题	1
6	历史研究	1
7	厦门大学学报(社会科学版)	1
8	大连工学院学报	1
9	科学通报	1
10	读书月报	1
11	Kommissionsverlag Otto Harrassowitz	1
12	Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society	1

Figure 1. Number of journal articles by publishing journals, 1949-1976 (15 items)

	Publisher	n
1	航海	34
2	上海大学学报(社会科学版)	32
3	海交史研究	21
4	大连海运学院学报	9
5	中国航海	7
6	历史教学	7
7	文史哲	6
8	武汉水运工程学院学报	6
9	瞭望周刊	6
10	思想战线	5

Figure 2. Top 10 journals by number of publications, 1977-1989 (279 items)

	Publisher	n
1	回族研究	60
2	航海	56
3	珠江水运	52
4	海交史研究	51
5	海洋世界	36
6	中国远洋航务公告	25
7	中国水运	20
8	中国经贸	18
9	中国穆斯林	16
10	中学历史教学参考	15

Figure 3. Top 10 journals by number of publications, 1990-2012 (1,869 items)

	Publisher	n
1	南通航运职业技术学院学报	23
2	珠江水运	19
3	中国船检	13
4	回族研究	12
5	海交史研究	11
6	国家航海	10
7	太平洋学报	10
8	海洋世界	9
9	社会主义论坛	9
10	中国远洋航务	8

Figure 4. Top 10 journals by number of publications, 2013-2020 (829 items)

Journals with a notably high number of publications relative to the size of each subset include the following:

- 1949-76 subset (15 items): *Wenwu* 文物 [Cultural Relics] 3 items, *Lishi Jiaoxue* 历史教学 [History Teaching] 2 items.
- 1977-89 subset (279 items): *Hanghai* 航海 [Navigation] 34 items, *Shanghai Daxue Xuebao (Shehuikexue Ban)* 上海大学学报（社会科学版）[Journal of Shanghai University – Social Sciences Edition] 32 items, *Haijiaoshi Yanjiu* 海交史研究 [Maritime History Studies] 21 items.
- 1990-2012 subset (1,896 items): *Huizu Yanjiu* 回族研究 [Hui Studies] 60 items, *Hanghai* 航海 [Navigation] 56 items, *Zhujiang Shuiyun* 珠江水运 [Pearl River Water Transport] 54 items, *Haijiaoshi yanjiu* 海交史研究 [Maritime History Studies] 51 items, *Haiyang Shijie* 海洋世界 [Ocean World] 36 items

- 2013-2020 subset (829 items): *Nantong Hangyun Zhiye Jishu Xuexiao Xuebao* 南通航运职业技术学院学报 [Journal of Nantong Shipping College] 23 items, *Zhujiang Shuiyun* 珠江水运 [Pearl River Water Transport] 19 items, *Zhongguo Chuanjian* 中国船检 [China Ship Survey] 13 items

7.2 Appendix 2: Keyword frequencies (1990-2020, source: CNKI)

	V1	n
1	郑和	707
2	郑和下西洋	593
3	明代历史事件	452
4	三保太监下西洋	451
5	下西洋	232
6	船队	220
7	中华人民共和国	151
8	明成祖	121
9	宝船	82
10	郑和精神	66
11	朱棣	65
12	东南亚	62
13	明成祖(1360-1424)	62
14	哥伦布	60
15	朝贡贸易	55
16	太监	50
17	江苏	49
18	南京	45
19	航海图	44
20	船舶	44

	V1	n
1	郑和	167
2	郑和下西洋	136
3	三保太监下西洋	55
4	明代历史事件	55
5	下西洋	52
6	船队	38
7	Zheng He	31
8	中华人民共和国	29
9	海上丝绸之路	25
10	宝船	24
11	一带一路	22
12	中国航海日	21
13	南京	17
14	明代	16
15	明成祖	15
16	东南亚	14
17	江苏省郑和研究会	13
18	郑和精神	12
19	云南	11
20	江苏	11

Figure 5. Keywords in journals, conference proceedings, and Ph.D. dissertations, left: subset no. 4 (1990-2012, 1,790 items), right: subset no. 5 (2013-2020, 677 items).

7.3 Appendix 3: Wordclouds of titles (1949-2020, source: CNKI)

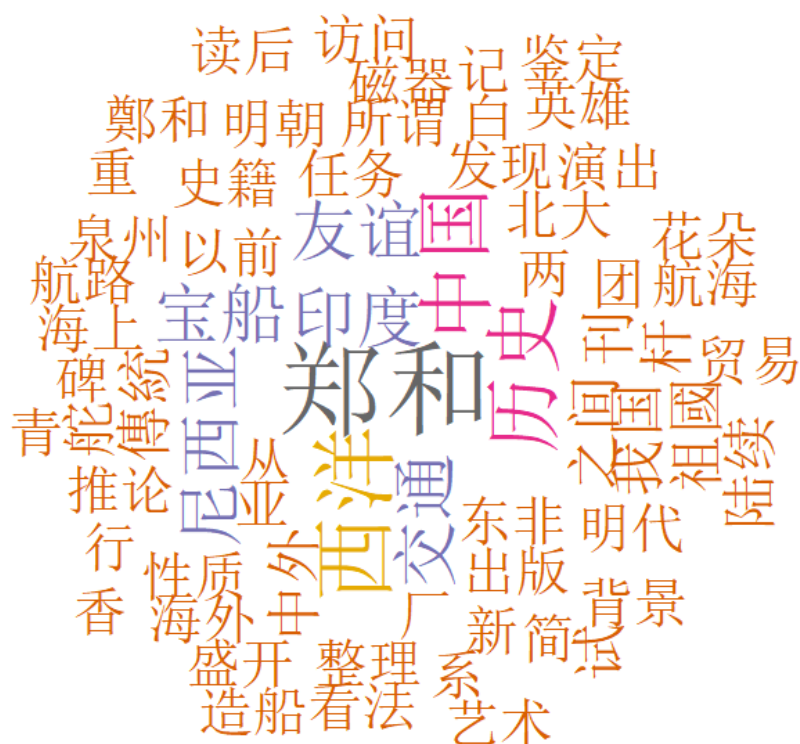


Figure 6. Wordcloud of academic titles in subset no. 2 (1949-76, 13 titles)



Figure 7. Wordcloud of academic titles in subset no. 3 (1977-89, 279 titles)



Figure 8. Wordcloud of academic titles in subset no. 4 (1990-2012, 1,842 titles)

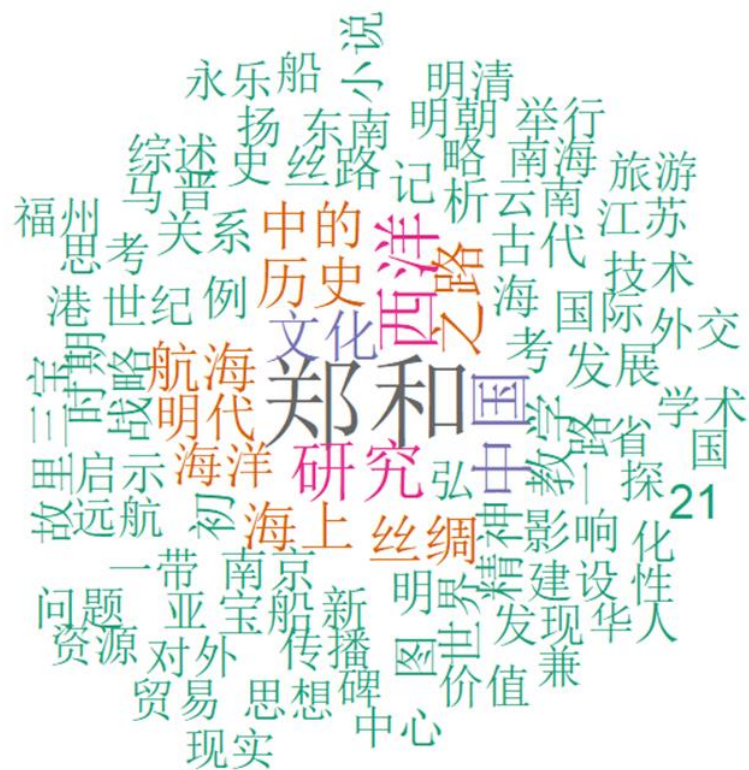


Figure 9. Wordcloud of academic titles in subset no. 5 (2013-2020, 745 titles)



7.4 Appendix 4: Top 20 bigrams of academic abstracts (1977-2020, source: CNKI)

	Range	Frequency	word1	word2
1	61	64	航海家	郑和
2	36	41	七下	西洋
3	35	37	伟大	航海家
4	33	40	航海	史上
5	33	35	世界	航海
6	26	26	永乐	三年
7	23	23	宣德	八年
8	21	25	航海	史
9	20	22	出使	西洋
10	20	21	郑和	率领
11	17	24	中国	航海
12	17	17	五百	八十周年
13	16	18	三宝	太监
14	16	16	云南	昆阳
15	16	16	我国	明代
16	16	16	明永乐	三年
17	15	16	研究	郑和
18	15	15	三十多个	国家
19	14	15	郑和	传
20	14	14	我国	伟大

Figure 11. Top 20 bigrams of abstracts of journal articles, conference proceedings, and Ph.D. dissertations from subset no. 3 (1977-1989; 275 items)

	Range	Frequency	word1	word2
1	204	232	七下	西洋
2	115	126	郑和	七下
3	107	108	航海家	郑和
4	101	109	航海	史上
5	100	111	世界	航海
6	99	111	西洋	周年
7	80	106	郑和	船队
8	76	88	纪念	郑和
9	71	89	郑和	航海
10	61	79	中国	航海
11	61	61	郑和	率领
12	47	56	航海	事业
13	46	46	多个	国家
14	42	47	中国	历史
15	42	43	伟大	航海家
16	41	46	中国	古代
17	39	41	明	初
18	39	40	率领	庞大
19	38	54	郑和	研究
20	36	37	郑和	七次

Figure 12. Top 20 bigrams of abstracts of journal articles, conference proceedings, and Ph.D. dissertations from subset no. 4 (1990-2012; 1,466 items)

	Range	Frequency	word1	word2
1	94	163	海上	丝绸之路
2	90	98	七下	西洋
3	66	72	郑和	七下
4	45	64	一带	一路
5	39	64	中国	航海
6	35	44	郑和	船队
7	34	44	中国	古代
8	33	36	世纪	海上
9	31	33	航海家	郑和
10	30	59	海洋	文化
11	28	43	郑和	研究
12	21	44	郑和	研究会
13	21	30	郑和	航海
14	20	21	世界	航海
15	19	34	郑和	精神
16	18	19	经济	发展
17	17	17	航海	史上
18	16	29	传统	文化
19	16	20	三宝	太监
20	16	18	明	初

Figure 13. Top 20 bigrams of abstracts of journal articles, conference proceedings, and Ph.D. dissertations from subset no. 5 (2013-2020; 675 items)

7.5 Appendix 5: Wordclouds of the titles of the most cited and most downloaded items (2000-2020, source: CNKI)



Figure 14. Wordcloud of the titles of the 50 most cited publications (2000-2020) as of 2020-06-28.

The subset includes 31 journal articles, 10 MA theses, 8 Ph.D. dissertations, 1 Ph.D. dissertation or MA thesis (unidentified)



Figure 15. Wordcloud of the titles of the 50 most downloaded publications (2000-2020) as of 2020-06-28.

The subset includes 21 journal articles, 15 Ph.D. dissertations, 13 M. thesis, 1 Ph.D. dissertation or MA thesis (unidentified)

7.6 Appendix 6: List of items included in the selected corpus for detailed analysis

Table 2 (below). List of items included in the selected corpus for detailed analysis

No.	Item ¹	Year	Type	Reason for including ²
1.	1405 Zheng He xia Xiyang documentary series ³	2011	documentary series (5 episodes)	- diversity in the type of media
2.	Cai Yaping ⁴	2017	chapter in edited volume	- part of Chen Zhongping (ed.) (2017) - common topic -> minimal contrasting
3.	Chen Zhongping ⁵	2017	editorial introduction in edited volume	- editorial introduction in Chen Zhongping (ed.) (2017)
4.	Chen Zhongping ⁶	2017	chapter in edited volume written by its editor	- incl. new theoretical approach proposed in Chen Zhongping (ed.) (2017)

¹ Sorted alphabetically.

² Citation / download numbers and ranks refer to the results returned for the search query described in 3.2.3 and 5.2.1.

³ 1405 Zheng He xia Xiyang 1405 郑和下西洋 [1405 - Zheng He sails the Western Ocean], 5 vols. (China Central Television (CCTV, 中央电视台) & Jiangsu Broadcasting Corporation 江苏广播电视总台, 2011).

⁴ Cai Yaping 蔡亚平, “Zheng He xia Xiyang yu Mingdai xiaoshuo.”

⁵ This recent major edited volume is based on the 2014 conference “Zheng He's Maritime Voyages (1405-1433) and China's Relations with the Indian Ocean World from Antiquity” (University of Victoria, Canada), bringing together a number of Chinese experts of Ming history and the Zheng He missions (partly, incl. the editor based in foreign countries). Chen's edited volume was frequently returned for searches on the Zheng He topic in Chinese databases such as CNKI, CSSCI (China Social Sciences Citation Index), and the Peking University OPAC; Chen Zhongping 陈忠平, *Zouxiang duoyuan wenhua de quanqiushi*.

⁶ Chen Zhongping 陈忠平, “Zouxiang quanqiuxing wangluo geming.”

5.	Ge Jianxiong ⁷	2017	magazine article (by expert)	- common topic -> minimal contrasting (discusses the motivations behind launching the missions)
6.	Guo Yanguang & Chen Zhongping ⁸	2017	chapter in edited volume	- part of Chen Zhongping (ed.) (2017) - common topic -> minimal contrasting
7.	He Fangchuan ⁹	2004	journal article	- common topic -> minimal contrasting (discussing the missions from the perspective of <i>wenming</i> / civilizations)
8.	Jin Guoping & Wu Zhilang ¹⁰	2006	journal article	- topical diversity: focus on Portuguese sources
9.	Kong Yuanzhi ¹¹	2006	journal article	- common topic -> minimal contrasting (discussing the relation between Islam and the Zheng He missions)
10.	Li Jinming ¹²	2006	journal article	- topical diversity: focus on economic history - 7th most cited item (CNKI, 44 citations as of 2022-05-09)

⁷ Ge Jianxiong 葛剑雄, “Zheng He jiujiang weihe xia Xiyang?”

⁸ Guo Yanguang 郭晏光 and Chen Zhongping 陈忠平, “Zheng He chuandui yuanhang Feizhou.”

⁹ He Fangchuan 何芳川, “Wenming shiye xia de Zheng He yuanhang.”

¹⁰ Jin Guoping 金国平 and Wu Zhilang 吴志良, “Zheng He xia Xiyang Putaoya shiliao.”

¹¹ Kong Yuanzhi 孔远志, “Lun Zheng He yu Dongnanya de Yisilanjiao.”

¹² Li Jinming 李金明, “Lun Mingchu de haijin.”

11.	Liang Zhiping ¹³	2017	chapter in edited volume	- part of Chen Zhongping (ed.) (2017) - uncommon topic -> maximal contrasting (the Zheng He missions & environmental history)
12.	Lin Cuiru ¹⁴	2005	journal article	- less common topic (discussing the relation between the Zheng He missions and the Chinese diaspora)
13.	Liu Yingsheng ¹⁵	2017	chapter in edited volume	- part of Chen Zhongping (ed.) (2017) - common topic -> minimal contrasting
14.	Luo Yang ¹⁶	2017	chapter in edited volume	- part of Chen Zhongping (ed.) (2017) - common topic -> minimal contrasting
15.	<i>Renminwang</i> (People's	2020	newspaper article	- diversity with regard to the types of publications (inclusion of a non-academic source)

¹³ Liang Zhiping 梁志平, "Mingdai Jiangnan shuixi de bianqian."

¹⁴ Lin Cuiru 林翠茹, "Zhidu yu tiaoshi."

¹⁵ Liu Yingsheng 刘迎胜, "Kaifang de hanghai kexue zhishi tixi."

¹⁶ Luo Yang 罗杨, "Cong Fa Xian dao Zheng He."

	Daily Online) ¹⁷			
16.	Shi Ping ¹⁸	2017	chapter in edited volume	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - part of Chen Zhongping (ed.) (2017) - common topic -> minimal contrasting - author with a high number of publications (CNKI, see 5.2.1)
17.	Wan Ming ¹⁹	2019	journal article	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - author with the most publications on the topic, based on CNKI data (see 5.2.1) - topic with high relevance (the Zheng He missions in global history) - temporal diversity (recent publication)
18.	Wan Ming ²⁰	2017	chapter in edited volume	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - part of Chen Zhongping (ed.) (2017) - author with the highest number of publications (CNKI, see 5.2.1)

¹⁷ “Chuancheng ‘Zheng He jingshen.’”

¹⁸ Shi Ping 时平, “Zheng He fangwen Manlajia.”

¹⁹ Wan Ming 万明, “Quanqiushi shiye xia de Zheng He xia Xiyang.”

²⁰ Wan Ming 万明, “Zheng He qi xia ‘Namoliyang.’”

19.	Wu Yan & Chen Zhongping ²¹	2017	chapter in edited volume	- less common topic
20.	Yang Yongkang & Zhang Jiawei ²²	2014	journal article	- uncommon topic -> maximal contrasting (discussing the relations between the Zheng He missions and the Ming occupation of Vietnam during the same time period / 1407-1427)
21.	Ye Zicheng & Mu Xinhai ²³	2005	journal article	- most cited item (CNKI, 118 citations as of 2022-05-08), - 3 rd most downloaded item / most downloaded journal article (CNKI, 4512 downloads as of 2022-05-08) - disciplinary diversity: political science
22.	Zheng Hailin ²⁴	2014	journal article	- high citation numbers (CNKI, 40 citations as of 2022-05-08) - disciplinary diversity: political science (discussing the referential value of the early

²¹ Wu Yan 吴彦 and Chen Zhongping 陈忠平, “Huaren ‘faxian’ Meizhou.”

²² Yang Yongkang 杨永康 and Zhang Jiawei 张佳玮, “Lun Yongle ‘junxian Annan.’”

²³ Ye Zicheng 叶自成 and Mu Xinhai 慕新海, “Dui Zhongguo haiquan.”

²⁴ Zheng Hailin 郑海麟, “Jiangou ‘haishang sichou zhi lu.’”

				Ming foreign policy for China's present-day foreign policy)
23.	Zheng He yanjiu dongtai no. 37. ²⁵	2018	journal volume (analysis of editorial note and table of contents)	- minimal contrasting - examination of global historical and political master narratives in relation to the missions - temporal diversity (recent publication)
24.	Zheng He yanjiu dongtai no. 39. ²⁶	2019	journal volume (analysis of editorial note and table of contents)	<i>same as above</i>
25.	Zheng He yanjiu dongtai no. 40. ²⁷	2019	journal volume (analysis of editorial note and table of contents)	<i>same as above</i>
26.	Zheng He yanjiu dongtai no. 43. ²⁸	2021	journal volume (analysis of editorial note	<i>same as above</i>

²⁵ “Zheng He yanjiu dongtai 37. 郑和研究动态——第 37 期 [Trends in Zheng He research 37.]” (Shanghai Zheng He Yanjiu Zhongxin 上海郑和研究中心 [Shanghai Zheng He Research Center], 2018).

²⁶ “Zheng He yanjiu dongtai 39.”

²⁷ “Zheng He yanjiu dongtai 40.”

²⁸ “Zheng He yanjiu dongtai 43. 郑和研究动态——第 43 期 [Trends in Zheng He research 43.]” (Shanghai Zheng He Yanjiu Zhongxin 上海郑和研究中心 [Shanghai Zheng He Research Center], 2021).

			and table of contents)	
27.	Zheng He yanjiu dongtai no. 44. ²⁹	2021	journal volume (analysis of editorial note and table of contents)	<i>same as above</i>
28.	Zhou Luming ³⁰	2016	Ph.D. dissertation (introduction & sub-chapter on Zheng He ³¹)	- most downloaded item (CNKI, 9,790 downloads as of 2022-05- 09) - 5 th most cited item (CNKI, 54 citations as of 2022-05-09) - submitted at Central Party School of the Communist Party of China (-> relevance to policy- making)
29.	Zhou Yunzhong ³²	2013	monograph	- major monograph (431 pages) on the history of the missions incl. recent findings
30.	Zhuang Guotu ³³	2005	journal article	- maximal contrasting / uncommon topic (discussing the

²⁹ “Zheng He yanjiu dongtai 44. 郑和研究动态——第 44 期 [Trends in Zheng He research 44.]” (Shanghai Zheng He Yanjiu Zhongxin 上海郑和研究中心 [Shanghai Zheng He Research Center], 2021).

³⁰ Zhou Luming 周璐铭, “Zhongguo duiwai wenhua zhanlue yanjiu (2000-2015).”

³¹ “Zheng He qi xia Xiyang: Zhongguo gudai haiyang wenhua de dianfeng 郑和七下西洋：中国古代海洋文化的巅峰 [Zheng He’s seven journeys to the Western Ocean: The peak of pre-modern China’s maritime culture” in Zhou Luming 周璐铭, 48–52.

³² Zhou Yunzhong 周运中, *Zheng He xia Xiyang*.

³³ Zhuang Guotu 庄国土, “Lun Zheng He xia Xiyang.”

				destructive impact of the Zheng He missions & the adjacent “maritime ban” on the coastal economy in China and emigration; also a critique of the “tributary system” concept)
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Table 1. List of items included in the selected corpus for detailed analysis

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