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From Asian Maritime Cultural Routes to Peace: The View of Zheng He Cultural Route Heritage

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Abstract

Asian maritime networks linking East Asia to the Indian Ocean fostered centuries of commercial exchange, religious circulation, and cultural transmission. Archaeological remains, documentary traditions, ritual practices, and shared artistic forms demonstrate the vitality of these routes as dynamic cultural systems rather than mere trading corridors. Melaka and Semarang, cities long associated with Zheng He's voyages, provide compelling examples of how maritime heritage persists through both material traces and living traditions. Viewed through the framework of cultural route world heritage, these networks contributed significantly to processes of Islamization, inter-civilizational dialogue, and regional integration. Their historical patterns offer contemporary pathways for peacebuilding, cooperation, and heritage-based community development.

Keywords:

Asian Maritime, Cultural Routes, Malacca, Semarang, Zheng He (Cheng Ho)

Abstrak

Jaringan maritim Asia yang menghubungkan Asia Timur dan Samudra Hindia memfasilitasi pertukaran komersial, peredaran agama, dan transmisi budaya selama berabad-abad. Tinggalan arkeologis, tradisi dokumenter, praktik ritual, dan bentuk seni bersama menggambarkan vitalitas rute maritim sebagai sistem budaya dinamis. Melaka dan Semarang, yang terkait erat dengan pelayaran Cheng Ho, menunjukkan bagaimana warisan maritim bertahan melalui jejak material dan tradisi hidup. Dalam kerangka *cultural route world heritage*, jaringan ini berkontribusi pada proses Islamisasi, dialog antarperadaban, dan integrasi kawasan. Pola sejarahnya menawarkan relevansi kontemporer



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bagi pembangunan perdamaian, kerja sama, dan pengembangan komunitas berbasis warisan budaya.

Kata Kunci:

Jalur Budaya, Malaka, Maritim Asia, Semarang, Zheng He (Cheng Ho)

Introduction

By the early 16th century, before the arrival of Europeans in Southeast Asia, the maritime routes of the eastern Asian seas had already reached a high degree of development. Alongside commerce, the diffusion of religions and the processes of cultural interaction fostered a remarkable degree of regional integration.

The Asian seas east of the Malay Peninsula may be described, borrowing a term from G. Cœdès in 1944 (Cœdès 1975), as *Asian Mediterranean*, a connective space binding together the peoples along the sea route. Within this maritime world, the system of maritime trade link among multiple countries in East Asia was already very important during the Song Dynasty (960-1279 AD.) in China, as emphasized by John W. Chaffee. According to Timothy Brook (2016), the emergence of the South China Sea world-economy “that came into being in the second half of the 15th century, the Zheng He expeditions deserve some credit for enlarging Chinese participation in this zone (Brook, 2010). Asian Mediterranean also used by French scholar François Giprou to designate the East Asian maritime trade corridor, which applying the global-historical perspective and methodologies of Fernand Braudel focused on trade, religion, and maritime networks, while the first globalization occurred at the end of the 16th century after the Zheng He voyages. For Arnold Toynbee, the 15th century represented the century of “the Coalescence Of The Oikoumene” with Zheng He as a forerunner of this process (Toynbee, 1976).

Focusing on the trade, religion and culture routes of the region, the study should select a historical period. As the Eurocentric theories, exemplified by *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, argue that Southeast Asia entered a period of “interactions with the outside world and adaptation in Southeast Asian society after AD. 1500 (Tarling, 1992),” with the Portuguese occupation of Malacca in 1511 marking a significant watershed in Southeast Asian history. J. C. van Leur has challenged the notion that “but with the arrival of ships from western Europe, the point of view is turned a hundred eighty degrees and from then on the Indies are observed from the deck of the ship, the ramparts of the fortress, the high gallery of the trading-house (Leur, 1954).” Rather, he calls

attention to the indigenous dynamics of trade and society that had long predated European intervention.

Yet such a view neglects the fact that an advanced system of Asian navigation and maritime linkages had already been in place long before. The promulgation of the *Undang-Undang Laut Melaka* (Maritime Law of Melaka), compiled between 1424 and 1444, offers a striking illustration. Indeed, the very existence of this code might be regarded as a milestone, signifying the entry of the Asian maritime sphere into a process of early modernity.

Therefore, the studies of Southeast Asian trade history must push its chronological boundaries further back. Anthony Reid has argued that “the ‘age of commerce’ from the 15th to the 17th century, was one in which these maritime links were particularly active...the interconnected maritime cities of the region were more dominant in this period than either before or since (Reid, 1998).” Melaka being a paradigmatic case. “The fact that Chinese and Indian influences came to most of the region by maritime trade, not by conquest or colonization (Reid, 1998)”. Ge Zhao-guang has further noted that, “between the 14th and 15th centuries, the maritime world surrounding the East China Sea and the South China Sea developed into a relatively stable and self-contained international order, within which the “South Sea” under the Ming and Qing dynasties constituted a relatively autonomous historical and cultural sphere (葛兆光, 2022).” We can take the point of Immanuel Wallerstein’s concept of “*European World-economy*” (Wallerstein, 1974) in 16th century, one may plausibly argue that as early as the 14th century an “*Asian World-economy*” had already emerged in the eastern maritime sphere.

Therefore, Wang Gunwu argued, “the South China Sea was the main route of what may be called the Asian east-west trade in commodities and ideas. It was the second Silk Route. Its waters and its island straits were as the sands and mountain passes of Central Asia, its ports were like the caravanserais.” (Gungwu, 2003)

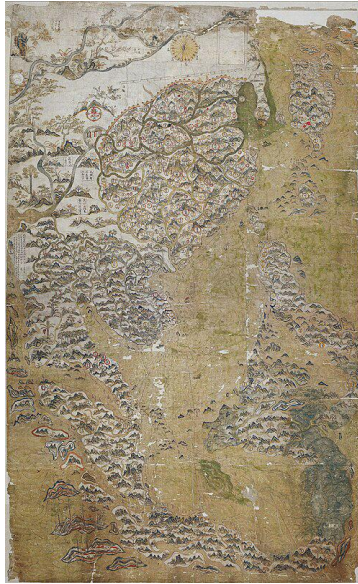


Figure 1. *Selden Map of China*, the early 17th century map of East Asia, is now in the Bodleian Library of University Oxford.

Note: Unless otherwise specified, all images are from online sources and the author.)

Maritime Trade Routes of Asia: Silk, Ceramics, and Spices

The maritime trade routes of Asia encompassed diverse networks that shifted over time and space, transported commodities such as beads, ceramics, and spices. As emphasized in a recent UNESCO heritage publication, “The most unexpected innovations and fusions of the world’s religions and material cultures have taken place along the trade and communication networks between Asia, Africa and Europe, known today as the *Silk Roads* (Paskaleva and Michael Turner, 2025).” The Asian maritime trade routes are known as the *Maritime Silk Road* by China, and the *Spice Road (Jalur Rempah)* by Indonesia.

Among the major commodity from China along the Maritime Silk Road, ceramics were the most representative commodity, the *Ceramic Route* was proposed by Mikami Tsugio in 1969 (三上次男, 2002). In 1998, an Oman merchant ship carrying nearly 60,000 pieces of China Chang-sha kiln porcelain was discovered near the Belitung sea area of Indonesia. It sank

around the first half of the 9th century, during the Tang Dynasty in China. The Cirebon shipwreck yielded 250,000 artifacts, including a large number of Yue kiln celadon porcelain dating from the mid-to-late 10th century (Five Dynasties and Northern Song Dynasty), a testament to the southward expansion of the *Celadon Route*. Also recovered were Buddhist, Hindu, and Islamic religious artifacts, as well as thousands of lead coins with the pattern *qian-heng tong-bao* (乾亨通宝) which minted by Nan-han Kingdom in Southern China dating back to the year of 917 AD (Liebner, 2014). All was the example of the diversity of commodities and the spread of diverse religions along the highly developed trade routes in the *Eastern Asian Maritime World-economy*.

The Spice Route originated from the Spice Islands, with the principal production areas concentrated in Maluku and Banda Islands in Indonesia today. Along the Strait of Malacca and the northern coast of Java, numerous ancient ports flourished as major trading centers. The spice trade between Southeast Asia and China has long history. In 1974, a large amount of spices were found on a wooden ship in Quanzhou, dating back to the late 13th century. During the time of Zheng He voyages, part of the salaries of officials in the capital of Ming Dynasty China were paid with pepper and sumac purchased through trade. The spice trade linked the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea westward. The demand for Southeast Asian spices and other tropical products provided the initial stimulus for the integration of the region into a world commercial system. The resulting boom was accompanied by rapid urbanization and commercialization during 16th to 17th centuries (Reid, 1993). According to C. R. Boxer, the major motive to establish Portuguese control of the Asian spice trade by force of arms (Boxer, 1967). When entered East Asia, the Portuguese first seized control of Malacca, the hub of spice distribution, and the original production centers in the Spice Islands. The Dutch subsequently carried out the massacre in the Banda Islands in order to control spices.

Muhibah Budaya Jalur Rempah (Cultural Friendship Voyage of the Spice Route) programme was launched by Indonesia in 2020, to promote the Spice Route on the World Heritage list. Malacca was invited to participate in joint nomination, thereby reaffirming the cultural identity as a “maritime axis nation” of Indonesia. On the website of UNESCO Silk Roads Programme, the Spice Route has also been included. In 2000, the “Land of Frankincense” of Oman was inscribed on the World Heritage List, and in 2005, “Incense Route” of Israel achieved the same recognition, both of which may be regarded as extensions and connections of the Spice Route.



Figure 2. Changsha kiln ware double-handled ewer, Tang dynasty, from the Belitung shipwreck.

Figure 3. Buddhist ritual object, Five Dynasties/Northern Song, from the Cirebon shipwreck.

Figure 4. Celadon ewer, Five Dynasties/Northern Song, from the Cirebon shipwreck.

Zheng He Voyage: Oriental Voyage in 15th Century

In 1405, Emperor Yongle Zhu Di of Ming dynasty (1368-1644 A.D.) ordered the eunuch Zheng He (alias Cheng Ho, 1371–1433 A.D.) to command a huge fleet on seven voyages to the India Oceans, conducting diplomacy and official trade. With more than one hundred giant ships and over 27,000 followers and sailors, it was the largest state-organized maritime enterprise in early 15th century, linked China and Southeast Asia, and even the eastern coast of Africa. It became one of the most important event in world maritime history and the history of Asian regional interaction. The historical significance of Zheng He voyages transcends any explanation, whether as the “tributary international order,” “diplomatic expeditions,” or a mission to “search for the missing former emperor.” Instead, it is a key point of reference within the perspective of “Asian Maritime Cultural Route Heritage” today.

The interactive structure of different civilizations in Asia can be interpreted through the reference of Zheng He voyages. As Wang Gungwu's research, he argues that the Asian maritime trade routes was the main route of what may be called the Asian east-west trade in commodities and ideas, it was second "Silk Route". In this sense, Zheng He expeditions served as a hub for multidimensional exchange. Departing from China ports such as Nanjing, Taicang, Fuzhou, and Quanzhou, the fleet entered the South China Sea, passed through the Strait of Malacca, reached Java, Sumatra, and Melaka, sailed further to Sri Lanka and the western coast of India, and extended as far as the coasts of Somalia and Kenya today. Voyage of Zheng He interactively connected East Asian political power, regional port network of Southeast Asia, and the international trade system across the Indian Ocean. Meanwhile, Arabs sailed eastward, forming the maritime interaction zone spanning Asia and Africa.

Religious transmission along the Asian maritime routes had distinctive regional characteristics. Muslim translators and sailors of Zheng He fleet left behind mosques and tombs in Java, indicating that, beyond diplomacy and trade, the voyages—intentionally or otherwise—facilitated deeper cultural penetration and social interaction within maritime Asia. *The Galle Trilingual Inscription* discovered in 1910, records the donation of Zheng He to local Buddhist temple which written in Chinese, Persian, and Tamil, it offers a glimpse into the splendor of Age of Great Asian Exploration.

If one moment must be singled out for the beginning of Southeast Asia's "age of commerce", the first state trading mission under the eunuch admiral Zheng He, in 1405, is the best candidate (Reid, 1988), Reid said. Wan Ming has emphasized that some Southeast Asian countries still commemorate Zheng He today. His voyages have become a symbolic signifier, providing valuable historical experience for harmonious coexistence among peoples, and offering precious inspiration for today's world where globalization faces profound crises (万明, 2025).

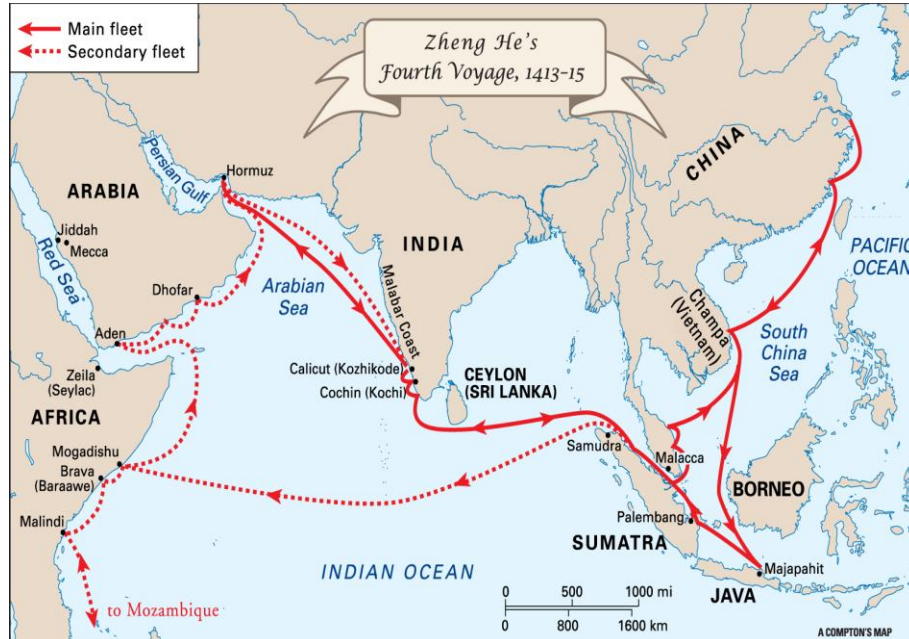


Figure 8. Map of Zheng He fourth voyage. Image from Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

Malacca: A Historical And Religious City of Zheng He

The influence of Zheng He voyages has left a profound impact in maritime Southeast Asia. There are three types of cities related to Zheng He, namely historical Zheng He cities, religious Zheng He cities and legendary Zheng He cities. Malacca of Malaysia and Semarang of Indonesia are two of the most renowned.

Situated at the midpoint of the Strait of Malacca, the Malacca city occupied the crucial chokepoint connecting East Asian with the Indian Ocean world. The strait itself was named after the Melaka Kingdom (1402–1511), which in Chinese sources was known as *Man-la-jia* (满喇加). According to Kenneth Pomeranz, “this Asia-centered world economy had been taking shape since the rise of Islam in the seventh century, when Asia was the World Economy, where major westbound trade routes could be blocked by Melaka (Pomeranz and Steven Topik, 2015). Barbara Watson Andaya argued that “Melaka’s rise from a quiet fishing village to a world-renowned emporium and centre of Malay culture which lay traditions of government and trade which had evolved over centuries” (Andaya, tt). To explain why Melaka rose to become a world trade center in the 15th and 16th centuries, we can not rely solely on the Chinese perspective, but must also examine it through the Southeast Asian lens.

Protected by the Ming Court, Melaka forged connections with Java seaport trading communities, thereby transforming itself into a redistribution hub for commodities from Sumatra and Java. Merchants could now purchase high-quality spices in Melaka without traveling to Java or the Spice Islands. Upholding traditions of commerce and management, the port appointed four *shahbandars* (harbor manager), each responsible for traders from different regions. During 1424 to 1444, the *Maritime laws of Melaka (Undang-Undang Laut Melaka)* (Hamid, 2011) was formulated. It represents the earliest and most systematic maritime law in Southeast Asia, and exerted profound influence on subsequent generations, earning it the designation of the “ancestor of Southeast Asian maritime law.” With rapid growth of seaport and trade, Melaka reclaimed for the Strait the commercial preeminence once held by Śrīvijaya. While Zheng He arrived at the western coast of the Indian Ocean, diplomatic missions of the Ming court reached the cities of present-day Iran (万明, 1990), thereby the linkage was wstablished between the *xi-yang* (India Ocean, 西洋) and the *xi-yu* (Central Asia, 西域). Understanding of the the Indian Ocean has matured for Chinese at that time (万明, 2015). By the time the Ming court ceased state-sponsored maritime voyage, the international status of Melaka had already become unshakable (王赓武, 1987), ushering in its golden age. the *Maritime laws of Melak* may be regarded as the point of departure for Southeast Asia toward modernity.

Even today, when the heads of state of China and Malaysia met, the topic of Zheng He remained an important topic of communication. Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and Melaka Governor Tun Mohd Ali Rustam have both paid homage at Zheng He tomb in Nanjing.

In 2008, Melaka was inscribed as a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage City d. Yet within Melaka itself, no confirmed Zheng He sites or relics exist. Only legend story of Sam Poh Hill (Bukit China) which has been included in the heritage buffer zone. From the perspective of cultural route heritage, several issues regarding Zheng He resources in Melaka remain unresolved: (1) Where is the Western Hill with stone tablet from Ming Court? (2) Where is the site of the Zheng He *Guan-chang* (official base and warehouse)? (3) Does Malacca possess religion of Sam Poo Kong.

Methods

This study adopts a multidisciplinary approach, integrating historical analysis, comparative cartography, and material culture studies to examine the Zheng He Cultural Route as a framework for understanding Asian maritime heritage. The research primarily employs qualitative methods, drawing upon critical analysis of primary historical sources, including Ming dynasty records (*Ming-*

shi-lu), travelogues (e.g., Ma Huan's *Ying-yai sheng-lan*), and early European maps and descriptions of Malacca from the 16th to 18th centuries. Archaeological evidence from key shipwrecks (Belitung, Cirebon) and material artifacts from museum collections (e.g., the Cheng Ho Cultural Museum, Melaka) are analyzed to trace the flow of commodities and cultural influences.

A case study methodology focuses on the nodes of Melaka (Malaysia) and Semarang (Indonesia), analyzing their tangible and intangible heritage. This involves examining the geographical and historical context of purported Zheng He sites, such as the *guan-chang* (official base) and ritual locations. The study also investigates living traditions through the lens of ethnographic literature and contemporary observations of practices like the Sam Poo Kong veneration and the Zheng He procession in Semarang. This triangulation of textual, cartographic, archaeological, and ethnographic data aims to reconstruct the historical significance and assess the contemporary cultural value of the Zheng He maritime network within the UNESCO cultural route heritage paradigm.

Result and Discussion

Where is the Western Hill with stone tablet from Ming Court?

According to the *Ming-shi-lu* (Ming Veritable Records 明实录), in 1409, Emperor Yongle ordered the chief envoy, the eunuch Zheng He, to carry the imperial edict, bestowing upon the ruler of Melaka the silver seal, ceremonial robes, and regalia; furthermore, an stone inscribed stele was erected to demarcate the domain, after which Siam (Thailand) no longer dared to harass Melaka. Wang Gungwu has observed that Melaka was the first overseas polity to receive an imperial stone stele inscription from the Ming court (王赓武, 1987). The Emperor Yongle inscribed a poem on the Stele of the *zhen-guo shan-bei* (Hill of Guarding the State, 镇国山碑), which read, “Western Hill of Melaka shall forever stand as a guardian of the realm.” The site of Western Hill has since disappeared in Melaka. In June 2025, the Chief of Institut Tun Perak (ITP) of Melaka tentatively proposed that the *she-jian-shan* (Archery Hill, 射箭山) recorded in the Zheng He’s Navigation Map (*Mao Kun map*) may in fact be this Western Hill, suggesting that the Ming stone stele inscription served as a witness to the founding of the Melaka Kingdom.

The Ming stone stele inscription of Yongle Emperor may be related to the Chinese tradition of the *wu-yue* (Five Sacred Peaks, 五岳) and protective mountains, yet the author argues that it may also have been shaped by Hindu cultural influences. As Georges Cœdès noted, “The communion between the

king and the god through the medium of a priest took place on the sacred mountain, which could be either natural or artificial. The Sailendras of Java exercised sovereignty as heirs of the old owners of the soil, a new ritual associated with a new mountain became necessary (Cœdès, 1975).” The Indianized Śailendra dynasty of Java exercised significant influence across maritime Southeast Asia in the 8th century, the name Śailendra literally means “Lord of the Mountain” in Sanskrit.

Where is the site of the Zheng He Guan-chang (official base and warehouse)?

In the Zheng He’s Navigation Map compiled in 1628 of Ming dynasty, the polity of Melaka was marked with the designation of *guan-chang* (official base and warehouse 官廠). Ma Huan, who served as interpreter on Zheng He voyages, authored the *Ying-yai sheng-lan* (瀛涯胜览) in 1451, and Gong Zhen composed the *Xi-yang fan-guo-zhi* (西洋番国志) in 1434. Although not directly mentioning the term *guan-chang*, yet both works provide eyewitness descriptions of the Zheng He treasure fleet and construction of palisaded enclosures, warehouses, and storage facilities in Melaka. Ma Huan records:

“Whenever the treasure-ships of the Central Country arrived there, they at once erected a line of stockading, like a city-wall, and set up towers for the watch-drums at four gates; at night they had patrols of police carrying bells; inside, again, they erected a second stockade, like a small city-wall, [within which] they constructed warehouses and granaries; [and] all the money and provisions were stored in them. The ships which had gone to various countries returned to this place and assembled; they marshalled the foreign goods and loaded them in the ships; [then] waited till the south wind was perfectly favourable. In the middle decade of the fifth moon they put to sea and returned home” (Huan, 1970).

Tan Ta Sen has examined the likely location of the *guan-chang*, proposing that it was situated within the old city of Melaka, in what is today the Chinese residential quarter (2006). This site lay on the north bank of the Melaka River, bounded by the river to the east and the Straits of Melaka to the west, with present-day Jalan Kubu (Fortress Road) to the north, covering an area of roughly 10 acres.

Based on the comparative study of European maps of Melaka during 16-18th centuries alongside Chinese historical sources, further corroboration can be found. The location of royal palace of Melaka Kingdom was marked by Emanuel Godinho de Eredia (Manoel Godinho de Eredia (1563-1623)) in his *Description of Malaca, Meridional India, and*

Cathay written in 1613 (MBRAS, 1930). The Melaka chapter of the Ming Dynasty resource *Hai-yu* records: “The house in front of the Melaka Palace was covered with tiles which left by the Zheng He. The remaining houses were all designed to imitate palaces, decorated with tinfoil.” Combining the Eredia and *Hai-yu* historical records, we can confirm the location of Zheng He official residence in Malacca (明] 黄衷). When combined the sources allow for a tentative identification of the site of Zheng He residence. The presence of palisaded walls (Portuguese *tranqueira*) and the so-called *Parit China* (Malay meaning Chinese drain) documented in both cartographic and textual sources lend further support to Ma Huan’s account, which offering valuable clues for archaeological investigation of the *guan-chang*.

There was a three-courtyard house facing south and close to the sea. Four rows of long ware-houses with five bays each inside the palisaded walls city on the Map of Melaka by Gaspar Correia (Correia, *Lendas da Índia* (1860-1866) (1520s). The author argues that is Zheng He office and warehouses.

A “Maison du Général des Chinois” appeared on a map of Melaka drawn by Frenchman Jacob Nicolas Bellin in 1750. Its Dutch name is “Huiz van t opperhoofd der Chineezen”. Such discovery in European historical cartography is significant, as even today, Zheng He is remembered in Malaysia and Indonesia as Laksamana Cheng Ho (Admiral Zheng He).

Coincidentally, the present-day Cheng Ho Cultural Museum of Melaka is located on the site of *Maison du Général des Chinois* (House of the General Chinese). An ancient well with Chinese-style granite curb, which named General Well by locals, is preserved in its original location in the Museum. Ming copper coins, porcelain fragments, and one copper incense burner with the Emperor *Xuan-de* reign mark have been recovered from the bottom of the General Well. After on-site identification by China cultural relic expert Luo Zhewen, it was confirmed that the well-lining stone was quarried in China, and the paired side-holes in the stone curb were designed to secure a cover with a lock.

On the basis of such textual, cartographic, and archaeological evidence, further field investigations and archaeological excavations may provide critical leads for identifying the remains of Zheng He *guan-chang* in Malacca.

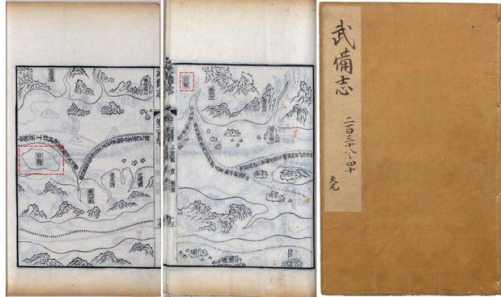


Figure 9. Guan-chang on Zheng He's Navigation



Figure 10. Map by Gaspar Correia

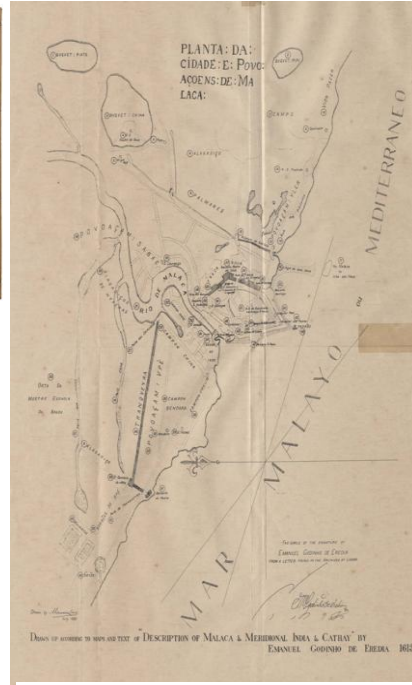


Figure 11. Map by Eredia

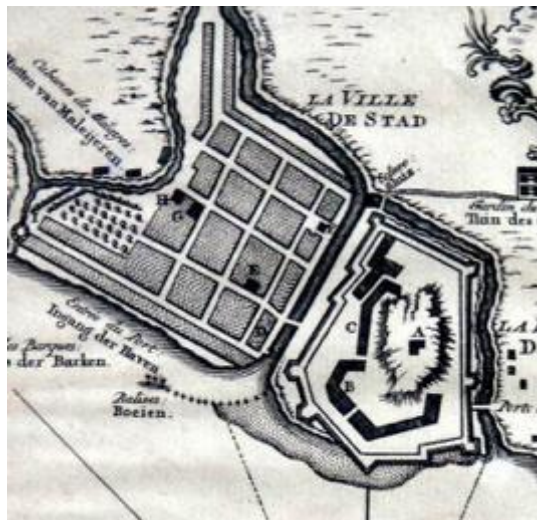


Figure 12. Map by Beilin

Does Malacca possess religion of Sam Poo Kong

A group of statues, representing *Mazu* (Godess of ocean, 妈祖), *Sam Po Kong* (三宝公), and *Tua Pek Kong* (大伯公), have been preserved in the ancient “House of the General Chinese” of Melaka, now the Cheng Ho Cultural Museum. According to radiocarbon (C14) analysis, median calibrated date of the *Mazu* statues is 1720 and the earliest date of 1660. Making it the oldest known image of *Mazu* thus far discovered in Malacca. There are two rare carved wooden door panels preserved in same house, one of which depicts the theme of “*Mazu Protect Zheng He Voyages.*” It is unique globally and corresponds precisely with the woodcut illustrations found in *Tian-fei-jing* (Scripture of the *Mazu*) published in the Ming-dynasty which preserved in the National Library of China today.

The ensemble of images vividly encapsulates the maritime religious tradition of the Chinese diaspora in Nanyang (South-east Asia): Seafarers worship *Mazu*, merchants prayed to *Sam Poo Kong* for success in overseas trade, and settlers invoked *Tua Pek Kong* when establishing new communities. It may be associated with the statue of *Zheng He* as Minister of Maritime Patrols discovered in the underground palace of the *Xian-ying-gong* (显应宫) in Changle, Fujian.

Feng Cheng Chun, a Republican-era historian of maritime Southeast Asia, once observed: “The legacy of *Zheng He* can be regarded in two aspects, one is the historical *Zheng He*, and the other is the legendary *Zheng He* of folklore (冯承钧, 1955). Religion *Zheng He* has been transmitted into the present, remaining vibrantly alive in Maritime South-east Asia. Bukit China (Malay Chinese Hill) locate in the center of Malacca, historically also called *Sam Poo Hill*. *Sam Poo Temple* (*Zheng He Temple*) locate at the foot of the hill. It is said that the *Sam Poh* statue was stolen in 1981. Yet bronze incense burner inscribed with the words “三宝公(*Sam Poo Kong*)” which was removed to *Cheng Hoon Teng Temple* in 2025. As one of the most important historical and cultural heritage cities of *Zheng He* in Southeast Asia, the recovery of the lost *Sam Poo Kong* statues, and the revival of its associated ritual traditions in Malacca would be a development of considerable significance.



Figure 13. Carved wooden door panels of Mazu Protect Zheng He Voyages in Cheng Ho Cultural Museum Melaka



Figure 14. Statue of Sam Po Kong in Cheng Ho Cultural Museum Melaka

Veneration of the Tombs of Zheng He's Companions

Two ancient tombs are located at Sam Poo Kong, one attributed to Wang Jing Hong, deputy of Zheng He, and another to his cook. The publication *Gedong Batu Semarang* published by Ministry of Education and Culture Indonesia recounts that Wang Jing Hong (known locally as *Kyai Juru Mudi* or *Dam Poawang*) (Soerya, 1981/1982), managed the shrine, married a noblewoman from Pamotan, and died at the age of 87, being buried according to Islamic rites in a *Kijing*-style grave on the northern side of the shrine. Chinese devotees venerated him as *Chuan-gang-ye* (Lord of Ship), while Javanese Muslims revered him as a local saint, reciting prayers and offering flowers and incense at the tomb. Notably, the modes of worship diverged, Chinese offered incense in front of the tomb, whereas Javanese Muslims sat on prayer carpets in the rear chamber, reciting Qur'anic verses and burning sandalwood.

Such dual worship practices illustrate a broader Javanese tradition of *ziarah* (saint-veneration), whereby sacred Chinese temples were also incorporated into local devotional networks, such as the Chinese Temple in Ancol of North Jakarta. Typically, Chinese devotees visited on the 1st and 15th days of the lunar month, while Javanese Muslims observed the *kliwon* market days of Tuesday and Friday. The coexistence of distinct ritual systems at a single site, perpetuated across generations, constitutes a classic example of religious and cultural syncretism in Asia.

An anchor (*mBah Kyai Jartgkar*) associated with Zheng He, and the tombs of Zheng He cooker (*mBah Kyai* and *Nyai Tumpeng*) were also preserved well at Sam Poo Kong. Here again, ritual implements reflect cultural duality, a round incense burner for Chinese offerings stands alongside a square censer for Muslim sandalwood burning and prayer carpets for Qur'anic recitation.

The local Javanese believed that Sam Po was the “God of Trade” and praying to him would bring rich rewards. For the Muslim visitors to Sam Poo Kong, Zheng He was not only an envoy of the Ming Dynasty but also a Muslim saint who offered divine assistance to those in need, argued by prof. M. Ikhsan Tanggok who is the anthropology at the State Islamic University (UIN). *Ceng Ho: Dewa Dagang* (Tanggok, 2020) (Cheng Ho: God of Trade) was published by him in 2005, to highlight this religious reinterpretation.



Figure 15. Tomb in Sam Poo Kong Temple of Semarang Indonesia



Figure 16. Local Muslim pray behind the tomb

Dampu Awang Cheng Ho: A Javanese Folk Representation of Zheng He

The story of Captain Dampu Awang is a folk tale that circulates along the northern coast of Java, however, it is integrated with the story of Zheng He. Dampu Awang Cheng Ho, an adventurous Muslim Chinese captain who owned several richly laden ships, was renowned for his generosity, and became famous figure. According to the tale, Zheng He visited Java in 1406 and 1416, residence in Semarang and even engaging in proselytizing activities until his return to China in 1435. During his sojourn, he was said to have built a mosque in Simongan village known as the “Stone House (Indonesian Gedong Batu).”

In this folk, Zheng He was depicted as a close friend of the king of Majapahit, endowed with a magical whip, which he once struck the insolent prince. An illustration in the schoolbook depicts this episode. The narrative further relates that Zheng He assisted the China emperor in suppressing rebellions. When Yongle Emperor proposed marrying his daughter to Zheng He, he declined, preferring instead to acquire knowledge and engage in trade. The emperor therefore granted him large ships, ample funds, appointed

captains and helmsmen to aid him, and bestowed upon him the titles Sam Po Kong or *Sam Po Toa Lang*.

According to Liem Thian Joe, author of *Riwajat Semarang (The History of Semarang)*, the Dampu Awang legend that circulated widely along the northern Javanese coast, especially in Central and East Java, was deeply influenced by the historical figure of Zheng He. In certain historical sources from Cirebon, the role of Dampu Awang was even conflated with Ma Huan (Bochari, Ora. Wiwi Kuswiah, 2001), a Chinese Muslim translator who accompanied Zheng He. Denys Lombard argued that the Dampu Awang myth crystallized during the height of Zheng He voyage, replacing the historical figure Zheng He and being adapted into a heroic story (Lombard, 1996). In Semarang, story of Dampu Awang eventually fused with the cult of Zheng He. Dampu Awang narratives as folk stories of “educational value, worthy of preservation, and essential for Indonesian citizens to know” by Indonesian Ministry of Education (Soet, 1985).

In the narratives of Dampu Awang, Zheng He emerges as a beneficent merchant, reflecting the peaceful and reciprocal character of the Ming voyages, which sought friendly diplomatic and commercial relations with Southeast Asia. Both Zheng He and his deputy Wang Jing Hong left impressions of moral integrity and benevolent diplomacy, sharply contrasting with the often violent and exploitative presence of European colonizers in the 16th and 17th centuries (林天佑).

Legends and relics of Zheng He are not confined to Semarang but are widespread throughout Indonesia and beyond. Numerous temples dedicated to Sam Po Kong exist across the maritime world. In Malacca, both the Sam Poo Temple and the famous Sam Poo Well are closely associated with Zheng He. In Java, another *Sam Poo Well* was record in Bogor (梁绍文, 1933). Sam Poo cave was preserved in Kota Kediri of East Java, Sam Poh Kong in Zamboanga of Philippines and Thailand were likewise dedicated to Zheng He (黄竞初, 1930). Folklore even attributes the name of a fish, *sampan jato* (jumping boat), to Zheng He, said to have leapt into his ship during a voyage, the fish bore five finger marks left when Zheng He released it, which remain visible on the body of fish (李长傅, 1929).

Sam Po Swie Soe (Zheng He’s sailor) and his wife Sitiwati are enshrined as the main deity in the temple in Nyai Ronggeng temple (Kelenteng Bahtera Bhakti) of Jakarta Ancol. Three Muslim graves identified as the sailor, his wife, and her father were preserved well in temple.

Within Java, therefore, the image of Zheng He has been refracted through multiple cultural lenses. Among Chinese communities, he is remembered as a historical figure and object of religious devotion. Among

Javanese Muslims, he has been transformed into a folk hero, woven into local narrative traditions, associated with sacred tombs, and even represented in performance traditions. This dual reception illustrates the dynamic localization of Zheng He's memory in Southeast Asia, where his figure simultaneously embodies maritime trade, cross-cultural diplomacy, and religious syncretism.

Zheng He Procession in Semarang: National Intangible Cultural Heritage of Indonesia

In November 2024, the Zheng He Procession (Indonesian *Arak-arakan Sam Poo Tay Djien*) was inscribed as national intangible cultural heritage of Indonesia. The annual celebration is jointly organized by Tay Kak Sie which is most the important Chinese temple, and the Sam Poo Kong Temple. Historically, the *Tjie Lam Tjay*, headquartered at Tay Kak Sie, was responsible for social functions such as funerary affairs, temple rituals, and charitable relief for the poor in Semarang Chinese Society.

The procession is held each year on the June 30th of the Chinese lunar calendar, believed to commemorate the anniversary when the arrival of Zheng He in Semarang. The precise origins of the procession are unrecorded, but Liem Thian Joe notes that "since ancient times people carried the statues of Sam Po Kong in procession." A valuable French account, *Letters De Java* (Schoor, 1829) in 1822, provides the earliest known eyewitness description of the Zheng He procession. The vivid account of the procession closely matches the practices observed today.

The tradition of *Potehi* (puppetry) performed in front of Tay Kak Sie as thanksgiving entertainment to Sam Poo Tay Djien since 1772 (林天佑).

The procession has since been incorporated into National Event Calendar of Indonesia, where it is popularly referred to as the "Cheng Ho Festival," now recognized as a key cultural tourism event. In 2019, Arief Yahy, Indonesia Minister of Tourism, remarked that the celebration "allows visitors to trace the footsteps of Admiral Zheng He, who wrote a chapter in the history of world navigation (<https://alif.id> Ditulis oleh Christian Saputro)."

As Jonathan Z. Smith has argued, "ritual is spatial, whereas myth is temporal." The Semarang Zheng He procession embodies precisely the interweaving of ritual and myth, through performance and commemoration, Zheng He is transfigured into Sam Poo Tay Djien, or Sam Po Kong, the deified protector of overseas Chinese. Both Sam Poo Kong Temple and Tay Kak Sie have functioned as custodians of this faith, continually adapting ritual practices to shifting historical contexts. The procession ceremony has also absorbed Javanese cultural elements, including gamelan ensembles, ritual exorcisms with tree branches, and prayers that interweave multiple languages and

religions. These features reflect the inclusivity, adaptability, and syncretic vitality of Chinese popular religion in maritime Southeast Asia.



Figure 17. Tay Kak Sie Temple of Semarang



Figure 18. Statue of Sam Poh Kong in Tay Kak Sie



Figure 19. Zheng He procession in Sam Poh Kong Temple



Figure 20. Zheng He procession in Sam Poh Kong Temple



Figure 21. Certificate of National Intangible Cultural Heritage of Indonesian

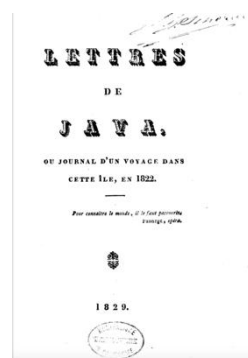


Figure 22. Book of Letters De Java

Conclusion

Before the Europeans entered Southeast Asia in the 16th century, an interconnected “Asian World-economy” had already flourished across the East China Sea, the South China Sea, the Java Sea, and the Strait of Malacca. Highly developed maritime routes facilitated the exchange of spices, ceramics, religions, technologies, and ideas—forming a trans-temporal and trans-spatial network whose influence endures today. Within this framework, multiple thematic cultural routes can be developed under UNESCO Cultural Route Heritage, most notably China’s transnational joint nomination of the Maritime Silk Road. Its scope, geopolitical complexity, and cultural diversity highlight both the ambition and responsibility of participating states.

Zheng He’s voyages stand as a powerful testimony to Asian maritime civilization. The historical sites and living traditions associated with him meet the foundational criteria for a transnational nomination of the Zheng He Sam Poo Cultural Route. Assessing their Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) is essential, not only for nomination but also for appreciating the cross-cultural integration embodied in the diplomatic ideals of *xuan-de-hua* and *rou-yuan-ren*. These traditions offer valuable models for regional cooperation and global heritage conservation.

For both the Maritime Silk Road and the Zheng He Sam Poo initiatives, heritage must be understood holistically—encompassing material remains as well as intangible and spiritual dimensions. As China leads the Maritime Silk Road nomination and Indonesia advances the Spice Route and Shared Maritime Heritage programmes, collaboration offers a chance to revisit shared histories and contribute exemplary heritage to the World Heritage system. Cultural route heritage ultimately represents a cooperative pathway toward peace. Through international collaboration, education, and trust-building, Asia can articulate its own maritime narratives and rediscover, within ancient routes, a renewed hope for global harmony.

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