4. The Hostage Taker

Dondra, 1410

The planning for what became the World’s Columbian Exhibition of 1893, popularly known as the Chicago World’s Fair, started in 1890 when the city began to lobby for support in Congress. The intention had been to celebrate what was then considered the ‘birth’ of the Americas, the first voyage of Columbus in 1492, though the fair did not open until the following year. The 24-foot Statue of the Republic that presided over the fair grounds expressed the optimistic mood of the era, though her gilded Augustan figure now looks quite lost in Jackson Park.

World’s fairs became hugely popular after the success of the Great Exhibition at London’s Crystal Palace in 1851. Naturally, when the plan to host one in Chicago was
announced, Great Britain contributed a pavilion, though its staid Victorian exterior lacked all the excitement of the Crystal Palace. Style apart, Queen Victoria played a role by suggesting that a British pavilion was not sufficient. The colonies should have their own—especially the Crown Colony of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), which the British Empire had absorbed in 1815. The Crown Colony Government agreed. The question was then how to present Ceylon to the modern world. World’s fairs were spectacles of industrial advancement and the fruit of modernity. Ceylon lacked any industry that could contribute to the modern world economy—though its pavilion ended up including a railway car just to show visitors that even Ceylon had trains. So a more cultural approach was taken. Ceylon would be given its due place in the kaleidoscope of world cultures that, under the umbrella of Western colonialism, were at last on the path toward civilization. Still, even that posed some problems. One was the profound division between the majority Sinhalese Buddhists and minority Tamil Hindus. Another was the question of design. Should the architect work up a colonial-style building, or should he imitate Ceylonese forms?

The man chosen to design the pavilion was Henry Tomalin, a young Englishman with engineering and architectural training whom the Public Works Department of Ceylon had recruited from London in 1886 at the age of twenty-four. The colonies gave men of modest middle-class backgrounds and no particular social station opportunities to build careers, and to do so in settings where they could afford the trappings of upper-middle-class life. Tomalin was one of those. His first job when he arrived in Colombo was to design the decorations for the front of the Galle Face Hotel to celebrate Queen
Victoria’s Golden Jubilee in 1887. The pavilion for the Chicago world’s fair was his first major architectural commission.

Tomalin decided that Ceylon should be represented in Ceylonese form, so he designed a large, elegant wooden building on the basis of his inspection of ancient ruins. He handled the deep ethnic division by transposing it into abstract religious terms and installing statues of both Buddha and Vishnu in the same hall. The Ceylon Courts, as the pavilion was called, was a hit with American visitors and awarded a medal. Most imagined they were entering a replica of a Ceylonese temple, but it was not really even a copy of one. It was a construction that imagined a harmonious vision for Ceylon’s future while selectively incorporating elements of its past.

Civil engineers were the maintenance staff of empire, building in the colonies in the infrastructural image of the West while, at least in the best cases, striving to incorporate elements of what they found locally. Most were also keen geologists and natural historians who searched out traces of the ancient civilizations that, so they believed, had disappeared long before the European colonial powers had come along to rescue the people from backwardness. Tomalin fit the profile perfectly. He constructed European-style public buildings, notably notably the General Post Office in Colombo, ran large drainage projects, improved harbours, modernized roads, and engaged in off-hours projects to record remnants of Ceylon’s ancient past. These interests converged while he was in the course of supervising road construction in Galle, in the southwest corner of the island, which is how he came to my attention. When his road workers lifted an impressive slab of stone five feet long and five inches thick lying over a culvert, they noticed that the underside of the stone was inscribed in three languages, none of which
was familiar to them. Tomalin was told, and immediately took charge of the stone, suspecting it might be a rare and important historical document. He was right. This stele, as such inscribed stones such were called, would prove rarer, more important, and more contentious than he could have guessed, for on its interpretation hangs the question of whether the 15th-century voyages of Zheng He into the Indian Ocean were acts of benign diplomacy or missions of imperial domination.

**Buddha, Vishnu, Allah**

The inscriptions were badly damaged and took time to decipher. Not until 1933 were they fully published. The most legible of the three is the Chinese text that fills the right-hand third of the face of the stele. It is a message from Emperor Yongle of the Ming dynasty, dated 15 February 1409, addressed to the Buddha.

The emperor begins his prayer to the Buddha by praising him for exerting a ‘mysterious efficacy’ that had been of the particular assistance to Ming foreign policy.

‘Of late’, he tells the Buddha, ‘We have dispatched missions to announce Our mandate to foreign nations, and on their previous voyages over the ocean, Our envoys escaped disaster and misfortune, journeying safely to and fro’. Realizing that this must have been due to the Buddha’s protection, ‘We therefore bestow offerings in recompense, and do now reverently present before Buddha, the Honoured One, oblations of gold and silver, gold-embroidered jewelled banners of variegated silk, incense burners and flower vases, silks of many colours, lamps, candles, and other gifts, in order to manifest the high honour of the Lord Buddha. May his light shine upon the donors’. There follows an itemized list of gifts in order of value, starting with 1,000 *qian* of gold (one *qian* weighed
roughly an eighth of an ounce, for a total of about 50 pounds of gold), 5,000 qian (250 pounds) of silver, 100 rolls of silk, eight pairs of banners, five antique brass incense burners, five pairs of antique brass flower vases, five yellow brass lamps, five incense vessels, six pairs of golden lotus flowers, 2,500 catties (3,300 pounds) of scented oil, ten pairs of wax candles, and ten sticks of sandalwood incense. It was a lavish donation. The precise figures were proof of just how lavish it was.

But who was it for? In the Indian Ocean, few Chinese would ever come by to read it, so we have to conclude that it was not there to be read. It was there to signal that this was a Chinese monument. If you weren’t Chinese but wanted to read it, you would have to turn to the texts that filled the space to the left of the Chinese text. You had two choices, Tamil at the top or Persian at the bottom.

The Tamil text employs a version of Tamil that, as the scholar who first deciphered it in 1933 observed, ‘can hardly be called grammatical’, using words attested in no other text. If you knew Tamil but not Chinese, you would likely assume you were reading a translation of the Chinese. You would be mistaken. The Tamil text is not so much a translation of what the Chinese text says as a transposition of its content into a different frame. Not a prayer to the Buddha, it is a prayer to Tenavarai-Nayanar, the Nayanar of Tenavaram, that is, the ‘Saint of the Southern Port’. Tenavaram, the Southern Port, now known as Dondra, is a town on the south coast of Ceylon. When Moroccan traveler Ibn Battuta passed through Tenavaram in 1345, he reports that it was famous for both a Sleeping Buddha temple and a massive complex devoted to ‘an idol that carries the same name as the city’, which is to say, Tenavarai-Nayanar. ‘In this temple there are about a thousand Brahmins and yogis, and about five hundred daughters of the idolaters,
who sing and dance before the statue every night’. (Ibn Battuta was no enthusiast of Hinduism.) Tenavarai-Nayanar was considered an emanation or saintly embodiment of the chief Hindu deity, known in his two modes of Shiva and Vishnu.

The Tamil text reveals something the Chinese text does not, that Dondra was the site for which the stele was intended. The only indirect confirmation we have that the stele was actually erected there comes from Portuguese who waged a war of conquest there in 1588. They destroyed the temple complex at Dondra, but they did note the existence of ‘stone pillars which the kings of China ordered to be set up there with letters of that nation as a token, it seems, of their devotion to those idols’.

Yongle was not a devotee of Vishnu, of course. His relationship with Tenavarai-Nayanar was something different. It is suggested by how he sets up his address, which is to hail the god and then introduce himself, thus: ‘The King of Great China, supreme overlord of kings, full-orbed moon in splendour, having heard of the fame of the Lord, presents the following offerings’. This is not the speech of a devotee looking upward and supplicating his god. It is the voice of the supreme monarch addressing a foreign deity who has come to his notice and whom he is willing to accept to the degree that he meets his obligations by caring for his devotees. The tone is different. At the end of the prayer, we learn that Vishnu gets exactly the same gifts as the Buddha, though with a subtle difference. He gets exactly the same gifts, but the precious metals are denominated in a local Tamil unit (kalañcu) rather than in the Chinese unit (qian). In real terms, this transposition has the effect of increasing the value of the gold and silver donations by a third. Was this intended? Surely not, as that would mean that Vishnu was to receive more than the Buddha. Or was the translator simply looking for rough equivalents, which is to
say, was there was only ever one set of gifts that was to go to the temple complex at Dondra?

There is a third text on the Galle Stele, a third donation to a third god, that extends this puzzle. The language of the third text is Persian, though written in Arabic script. This language-script combination made sense at the time, as Persian in Arabic was the lingua/scripta franca among traders in the Indian Ocean. The combination reached all the way to China during the Yuan period, for one of the authors of the three memoirs that survive from the Zheng He expeditions, a Muslim named Ma Huan, was trained to read and write Persian in this way. Perhaps Zheng He himself had been taught the script as a child. At any rate, Ceylonese were not the intended readers of this text. It was for the Muslim merchants whose role in the spice trade throughout the region, notably in Calicut, brought them to Ceylon.

The text opens by saying that the King of Great China had issued an imperial edict ordering envoys to present offerings to thank the deity for his ‘kind favours’. This part of the stone is heavily damaged, such that the only fragment that identifies the recipient is the phrase ‘the Light of Islam’. These were gifts were for Allah or his saints. The list of gifts is identical to the other two inscriptions, though again, the unit in which the gold and silver are measured has been transposed into a Persian unit (misqal), which was heavier than the Chinese unit but lighter than the Tamil unit. So the same question we had for the Tamil text comes up with the Persian. If there was only ever one set of gifts, which god was the beneficiary—or to put this more concretely, which community of worshippers would take receipt?
The way out of this puzzle is to think more about the donor than the donations. We don't know how Yongle understood Dondra. The map of Ceylon in the Zheng He charts reproduced in Mao Yuanyi’s compendium of 1621 marks Dondra as a cluster of buildings and hills bearing the name Fotang, Buddha Hall. Does this label make it a Buddhist site? Others have suggested that the term Fo could be used to designate any sort of supreme deity, not necessarily just the Buddha. Perhaps a better translation would be Divine Hall, and the understanding behind it, that the site at Dondra housed a body of priests who worshipped the Buddha, Vishnu, and Allah without discrimination. So the Galle Stele may have been less a take-your-pick set of options than a document representing the ultimate unity of all religions.

Possible support for this idea may be the decorative carving on the capital of the stele: two dragons facing a circle, commonly called the pearl of wisdom though originally an image of the sun, signifying the power of Heaven. This is certainly an imperial insignia. The dragon was the emperor’s avatar, particularly a dragon with all five toes. Its presence on the stone marked this as a monument bestowed by the emperor of China. But it has also been suggested that the image of the circle was just as this time understood as an image of the unity of the three teachings of Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism in China. Perhaps the same syncretic imagination was at work here, bringing Islam and Hinduism into line with Buddhism.

But consider now the languages that are not on the Galle Stele, languages that we might have expected to be there. One is Pali, the language in which the sacred texts of Ceylonese Buddhism were written. This was the wrong type of Buddhism, Theravada rather than Mahayana. A few Chinese monks had some knowledge of Sanskrit, the
language of Mahayana sutras, but no Chinese had gone to Ceylon to study since the Tang dynasty. Theravada texts were beyond their ken. A second absence is Sinhala, the language most Ceylonese spoke. Tamil is there, yet the script literate Ceylonese were more likely to understand is not. It is the case that some members of the Ceylonese aristocracy could read Tamil, but it was not the language of the majority. Yongle had set up a College of Translators in Nanjing. The choice of Tamil over Sinhala may indicate that there were Tamils in China who could translate. This is not hard to imagine, as Tamil envoys went back and forth with Zheng He on the First and Second Voyages. The lack of a Sinhala text could underscore the failure of Zheng He to make the sort of contacts on Ceylon that would have persuaded someone from the island to journey with him to China.

So rather than suppose, as the scholar who first deciphered the Tamil text did, that the stele’s trilinguality attests to ‘the eclecticism in religious matters characteristic of their race’, we would do better to see it as a move to assert Chinese dominance over the religious geography of the Indian Ocean. Having three languages simultaneously present on the stone—like the six languages inside the Gate of the Prime Meridian—asserted Yongle’s claim to be the highest speaker, the ultimate patron of the devotional field, regardless of national or religious community. Worship Buddha, Vishnu, or Allah as you like, but recognize the Son of Heaven—the King of Great China, as he called himself in both the Tamil and Persian texts—as superior to all other rulers and all other worshippers.

**Waiting for the Ambassadors**

Yongle was the third emperor of the Ming dynasty. The dynasty emerged from a welter of contenders who struggled as much against each other as against the Mongols. Its
founder, Zhu Yuanzhang, a peasant orphan who had fought his way to the throne, took the reign title of Hongwu, Surging Military Power, to celebrate his success in this struggle. In his propaganda statements to his own people, Emperor Hongwu stated that he deserved the throne on the strength of having driven the hated Mongols out of China. Nonetheless, he deeply admired Khubilai Khan—he called him ‘the True Man of the steppe’—and considered himself the Mongol leader’s ightful successor. Khubilai had given his regime the name of the Yuan Great State. Conscious of this precedent, the new emperor declared that his would be the Ming Great State. The Yuan had been a Great State; the Ming could be nothing less.

Having declared himself emperor, Hongwu needed ratification that Heaven had transferred the mandate to rule from Khubilai’s house to his own. Portents from Heaven would be good. In their absence, international diplomatic recognition would do. Having envoys arriving from foreign rulers to acknowledge his supremacy by submitting tribute with great respect would go a long way to showing his own people that the world recognized his legitimacy, and they should too. As Khubilai had done, Hongwu looked to the rulers of maritime Asia to confirm that he occupied the apex of the world.

During his first year, 1368, no foreign ambassadors arrived. The dynasty had just declared its founding, and rulers of lesser states thought it prudent to wait and see what would come of this bid. Early in the new year, Hongwu could wait no longer. He sent a proclamation to the king of Dai Viet, stating his expectation of recognition. ‘Recently the Yuan capital was overcome and pacified, and all within the borders united, thus constituting our legitimate succession. Now our relations with all, both near and far, are those of security and freedom from concerns, as we all enjoy the blessings of an era of
great peace’. Having launched a new age of global harmony, Hongwu had just one worry. ‘There is only the matter that you foreigners in the four directions, you chieftains and commanders, being far away, have not learned of this. I am thus issuing this proclamation so that you will be fully aware of the situation’. In other words: send your ambassadors, now. To make sure the message was received loud and clear, three weeks later the Ministry of Rites dispatched envoys to Japan, Champa, Java, and Coromandel. Ten days after that, envoys were sent to Yunnan (not yet conquered by the Ming—though it would be a conquest that netted the dynasty Zheng He) and again to Japan.

Gradually the desired responses trickled in. The first embassy was from Ada Azhe, king of Champa, bringing gifts of tigers and elephants. (The Ming would eventually acquire an entire stable of elephants, which would be led out on parade during court audiences.) An embassy from Dai Viet soon followed. Only later did Hongwu learn that Dai Viet and Champa were at war, and each side was jockeying against the other for support from the new dynasty: not quite the ‘era of great peace’ he had promised. His son, Emperor Yongle, would eventually be dragged into a full-scale invasion of Dai Viet, despite his father’s insistence that this was one of the fifteen countries the Ming should never invade. A third embassy arrived in 1369, from Korea, but that was it. No other country sent envoys to celebrate the new regime.

The following spring, Hongwu dispatched another round of officials to Japan, Coromandel, and Chola (southeastern India), pointing out that Korea, Dai Viet, and Champa had all sent tribute and that they should do the same. In July 1370, he enlarged the circle of summonses by inviting Java as well as the Uighurs and other polities further west to fall into line, as tributary rulers in Southeast Asia had done. ‘We wish only that
the people of China and abroad all be happy in their places’. The prompting achieved its purpose, and by 1371 all these states had dutifully responded. Year by year, Hongwu watched them arrive, to his immense satisfaction. But the submission of foreign rulers continued to be a great anxiety. When a delegation bringing more elephants from Champa arrived in October 1379 and Hongwu only found out about it because a eunuch saw the animals outside a palace gate, Hongwu’s fury at not being told about the visit knew no bounds. He accused his top official of plotting to overthrow him and let loose a purge that, by his own estimate, put 15,000 officials to death.

Before Hongwu died in 1398, he anointed a grandson to succeed him, which he did as Emperor Jianwen. The succession left many of Jianwen’s uncles disappointed, not least of whom Zhu Di. Hongwu had posted him to Beijing to secure the northern border against any possible threat from the Yuan Great State, which continued to exist beyond the Great Wall. The prince suspected that his nephew would eventually move to consolidate his power by confiscating the regional fiefs of his uncles, and decided to take the initiative to prevent that from happening by seizing the throne for himself. A hugely destructive rebellion ended four years later with the torching of the imperial palace, with his twenty-four-year-old nephew, Emperor Jianwen, inside. Zhu Di mounted the throne as Yongle, Perpetual Happiness. It was rumoured that Jianwen escaped the flames and fled overseas, and that Yongle sent the expeditions overseas to find him, but that only obscures what Yongle was really up to: establishing his legitimacy in terms that Khubilai Khan—and the world as it then was—would have understood.

There is a word for killing your nephew, nepoticide. That, and his flagrant defiance of his father’s instructions for a stable succession, left Yongle facing a
legitimacy deficit of mammoh proportions. He declared that he had marched from Beijing to Nanjing to pacify what he called ‘the disturbances in the south’, despite the fact that those disturbances were of his making. Officialdom was incredulous, the populace appalled. When officials who had served Emperor Jianwen spoke against his coup, he executed them in the tens of thousands. To make sure that history lined up behind his move, he had court records altered to create the impression that his father had lived until 1402, that his nephew had never existed, and that the succession had gone straight from Hongwu/father to Yongle/son. Jianwen was airbrushed from the record, and two hundred years would have to pass before the Ming could acknowledge that the record had been doctored and that Jianwen had indeed existed. Chinese autocracy has sometimes been laid at the feet of the Mongol emperors who ruled Yuan China, yet it was truly installed by the Chinese emperors who ruled in their mold, and in doing so hollowed out Confucianism’s core values of obligation and reciprocity and replaced them with nothing but serving power.

Yongle’s purge of the record means that all visits of foreign embassies have disappeared for the years 1398-1402. Presumably they came, and in significant numbers, to inaugurate relations with the new emperor, but their presence in Nanjing has disappeared into the incinerator of national history. To kick-start an entirely new round of foreign relations on his own terms, Yongle followed his father’s method of sending letters, prompting rulers of lesser states to come to Nanjing and pay their respects. If anyone needed the certification of diplomatic recognition, it was this usurper.

Yongle took the throne in July 1402. Two months later he instructed the Ministry of Rites to relax the tribute system to make sure that no delegation, no matter how badly
behaved, was turned away. Those who came to trade should be free to do so (and without having to pay any import duties, he later added). ‘Now that all within the four seas are one family’—a polite reference to the end of the civil war he had started—‘it is proper that we broadcast widely that there are no outsiders. Those countries wishing to demonstrate their sincerity by coming to offer tribute are so allowed’. ‘One family’: this is a term that Yongle used again and again in his diplomatic correspondence. He was not inviting foreign rulers to submit; he was merely welcoming them into the one family of which he was the head. There were—and could be—‘no outsiders’.

A few weeks later, he ordered the ministry to send envoys to Dai Viet, Ayutthaya (Siam), Java, Ryukyu (Okinawa), Japan, Coromandel (Tamil India), Samudra (northern Sumatra), and Champa. Every delegation should take a copy of his letter declaring that ‘there are no outsiders’. Chosŏn, Ayutthaya, and Sipsongpanna dutifully sent envoys in 1403, but the flood of foreign dignitaries that Yongle had hoped to welcome in Nanjing remained a trickle. Six separate missions to foreign rulers went out later in 1403, laden with ‘gold-spangled silk gauze fabrics and parasols, as well as patterned fine silks and coloured silks’, to entice compliance.

His first big foreign-relations breakthrough was Malacca. One of the envoys sent abroad in 1403 was the palace eunuch Yin Qing. He went to Malacca to open negotiations with King Parameswara. Parameswara had been the youthful ruler of Johor (today’s Singapore) when he was overthrown. Barely escaping with his life, he fled up the west side of the Malaysian Peninsula coast and set himself up in a fishing village with a decent habour, the spot that would become the port-state of Malacca. Yin Qing’s timing was impeccable. Yongle needed a secure location from which to project Ming power into
the Indian Ocean region, and Parameswara needed Great State backing to fend off his competitors, as well as Chinese merchants to build an economic base for his new regime. As a result, Malacca became the key trading enterpôt, not least because whoever controlled that port controlled all the trade moving up and down the Strait of Malacca. The port was able to retain its importance even after the Ming state withdrew from the Indian Ocean in the second quarter of the 15th century. That withdrawal left the port vulnerable to conquest by ambitious global competitors—the Portuguese in 1511, the Dutch in 1641, the British in 1824, the Japanese in 1942—yet despite every new occupier, Malacca continued to serve as the main commercial link between the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean economies.

Maritime diplomacy on this scale meant that the Ming needed the transportation infrastructure to send envoys abroad, bring foreign emissaries back, and then return them to their home countries on something like a regular basis. The ships involved had to be on a scale that could project an image of overwhelming power abroad. They had to persuade all who saw them that a new Great State had indeed emerged in China, and to convince wavering heads of state that compliance rather than resistance was in their best interest. And so, on 25 May 1403, the first shipbuilding order went out. The scant entry in the court diary reads simply: “It was ordered that the Fujian Regional Military Commission build 137 ocean-going ships.” Five weeks later, the emperor ordered the dredging of the holding basins at Longjiang, Nanjing’s shipyard on the Yangzi River, to revive operations there with the goal of enlarging shipbuilding capacity at the capital. A month after that, he ordered that the Maritime Customs Bureau be revived to process the goods he expected foreign tribute missions would bring to make the journey financially worth
their while. Step by step, Yongle was setting up the infrastructure that would provide the Ming with the capacity to dispatch armadas as far as the Indian Ocean and bring the known world within its reach.

**Imperial Slaves**

The man he put in charge of the operation was not a civil or military official employed by the Six Ministries, effectively the central government. He was slave in the Imperial Household. The choice of a slave over an official hearkened back to the Mongol practice of keeping sensitive operations, especially financial and diplomatic operations, out of Chinese hands. The key service posts in the Yuan dynasty were given to *semi*, the ‘various categories’ of people who weren’t Chinese, people like Marco Polo. Yongle did not have a service cadre of ethnic others, but he did have a group of attendants who were utterly dependent on him: the eunuchs of the Imperial Household.

The Imperial Household used eunuchs because of the age-old, Asia-wide practice of permitting only castrated males to work within the palace administrations of rulers. Castration ensured that no child born within the palace precincts had any father but the ruler. No son who ascended the throne could be anyone’s but his father’s. Giving rulers theological status as the Sons of Heaven only intensified the need to protect succession to the next generation, since Heaven’s mandate was given to one family at a time. Should a son who had been covertly conceived by a man outside the family come to the throne, the dynasty must collapse, since Heaven had not given its mandate to that bloodline. The bloodline of the women an emperor impregnated was of no account. Most of Yongle’s consorts were Koreans, for example.
Eunuchs were not just physically demeaned: they were demeaned in status. Their bodies were put entirely in the service of the imperial family. They worked for and at the pleasure of the emperor and his kinsmen. They lived and worked within the palace and had no work outside of it. They had no access to legal process and, to the best of my knowledge, could not bring a suit before a magistrate. They were socially dead, to use the language of historians of slavery. The convention among China historians is to focus attention on the genital mutilation of these men rather than their social deaths, but to put matters more plainly, they were slaves. Yes, some eunuchs, like some slaves in other societies, could become wealthy and powerful, yet they did so within a social framework that denied them statuts equal to other men in society. So I shall change the tone in this book and call them slaves.

Yongle used slaves almost exclusively for all his diplomatic operations. It was inconceivable that he do otherwise. Diplomacy in the 15th century was ruler-to-ruler, not head-of-state-to-head-of-state. No one could stand in for him on a diplomatic mission other than a slave who belonged to him and had no other point of reference for his authority. A slave did not serve the court; he served the emperor. And so Yongle’s overseas missions were all headed by slaves, and none was more important than Zheng He.

Zheng was not even a subject of the Ming. He was from a family in Yunnan, at that point an independent state, descended from a Muslim family from Khwarezrn, which governed Persia before it fell to the Mongols: a classic semu. It was said that his great-great-great-grandfather, a Muslim with a Persian name, surrendered to Chinggis Khan in Bokhara. Zheng would have been a semu under Khubilai, but that term disappeared with
the Mongols. His Chinese name at birth was Ma He, Ma being the generic surname that Muslims adopted in Chinese. Both his father and grandfather were known as Ma Hazhe. The name was in fact an honour signifying that both men were *haji*, people who had gone on the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca—a useful reminder that people in the 14th century were more mobile than we in our century realize. The younger Ma Hazhe died in the resistance against the Ming invasion of Yunnan, and his ten-year-old son was captured in 1381.

The standard fate for a juvenile captured in war was to enslave him, castrate him, and put him to work for life in the household of either the emperor or one of his sons. This was the ten-year-old Zheng He’s fate. By random administrative chance, he was assigned to the household of the Prince of Yan, the son of Emperor Hongwu who would become Emperor Yongle. He might have lived an anonymous life working in the women’s quarters, but that is not what happened. Somehow he came to the attention of the prince. He gained his trust while serving him on campaign in his battles to keep the Mongols north of the Great Wall, and afterward proved effective at running large projects, such as rebuilding the palace. Competence and trust were what qualified him to lead the maritime missions. He knew nothing about the sea, but he did know how to administer a complex project. That said, his family background as a Yunnan Muslim and Khwarezm descendant have been helped him to manage political negotiations with the foreign rulers he encountered throughout Southeast Asia and Indian Ocean, though nothing in the sources confirms this.

Zheng He makes no appearance in the court diary before 11 July 1405. His prior absence is not surprising: he worked for the emperor, not for the court. This entry brings him into the public story of the Ming voyages: ‘Eunuch Zheng He and others were
commissioned to take imperial instructions to the countries of the Western Ocean’—the name by which Chinese called the Indian Ocean—‘and to present the kings of those countries with fine patterned silks and coloured gauze silks as appropriate’. It is a scanty reference to an operation that may have involved 62 large ships, close to 200 smaller vessels, and over 27,000 men. Again, this is not surprising. The voyages were not operated by the Ministry of Rites. They were Imperial Household enterprises, and therefore outside the scrutiny of the court historiographers who compiled the court diary.

There were seven voyages, all under the command of Zheng He. The official sources of the dynasty reveal little, but three members of some of the voyages wrote memoirs that have been preserved, and these bring us closer to events than the brief summaries of voyage reports that appear in the court diary. Our focus of interest in this chapter is the Third Voyage, and from that voyage we have the memoir of Fei Xin, a soldier from Suzhou. Fei went on the Third Voyage at the age of twenty-four, and should have gone on the Fourth but was attached to a separate embassy to Bengal. He sailed again with Zheng He on the Fifth and Seventh. Ma Huan, a Muslim (note the surname) who could read the Arabic script in which the Persian text was written on the Galle Stele, sailed on the Fourth, Sixth, and Seventh voyages. There survives a third memoir, by a soldier from Nanjing named Gong Zhen wrote, but as he traveled on only the Seventh Voyage, his record lies outside our story.

**Sailing to Ceylon**

The First Voyage got off in December 1405, or January 1406 at the latest, while the winter winds blowing from the northeast were at the sailors’ backs. Not until the
following December did the fleet reach its final destination, Calicut, on the Kerala coast of India. The timing tells us that the winds had turned by the time the fleet got to the north end of the Malacca Strait. Hardly surprising, as marshalling a fleet on that scale must have been a logistical nightmare, with low prospects of getting anywhere rapidly. So just as Polo had to do on his journey to Calicut, Zheng waited out the summer monsoon at the north end of Sumatra before his fleet was able to cross the Bay of Bengal. Their first sight of land was the eastern mountain profile of Ceylon. Zheng steered a course down around the south end of the island and moored on the west side, out of the prevailing winds.

Zheng did not receive the welcome that he felt was his due as Emperor Yongle’s envoy on the First Voyage. According to the Chinese record, Alagakkonara (or Alakesvara) received him, but declined to accept Yongle as his overlord. Which Alagakkonara has been something of a puzzle. The king’s royal title was Vijayabahu VI, but his personal name was Vira Alagakkonara. He ruled from Gampola, a hundred miles in the interior near the foot of Adam’s Peak, the island’s central mountain. On the reprint of the charts of the Zheng He voyages in a 1621 encyclopedia, a large walled city is marked in the interior of Ceylon. Although without a place name, this is probably Gampola. But there was another Alagakkonara, Nissanka Alagakkonara, the king’s uncle on his mother’s side. Since the 1370s, this Alagakkonara had served several kings as viceroy and had distinguished himself by defending the kingdom against several incursions from Tamil states to the north. He operated from a moated fort, or kotte, on the western lowlands close to the cinnamon groves that gave the kingdom its wealth. The Zheng He charts do not mark Kotte, but they do mark the nearby coastal port of Colombo (kolamba is an early Sinhalese word for a harbour), of which Kotte is now a suburb.
Whichever Alagakkonara confronted the Ming embassy, he succeeded in turning it away. Zheng He led his fleet north to India and sailed up its western coast as far as Calicut, passing the winter of 1406 there. The following April, with a delegation from Calicut on board, the fleet caught the first breath of the summer monsoon to return to China. Zheng should have reached China that summer, but did not get back until October. He was delayed deployed by an operation to capture a Chinese adventurer out of Palembang who dominated and taxed sea lanes in the region, and whom Zheng regarded as interfering with the movements of his ships.

The First Voyage was not a one-off. Barely a week after it left China, Yongle started preparations for the Second by ordering the construction of another 1,180 ships. Eleven days after Zheng’s return, he issued an edict authorizing Zheng to take the delegation back to Calicut. Three months later, the Second Voyage, a fleet of 249 ships of all sizes set off. It followed roughly the same itinerary as the First, with the exception of Ceylon, where it did not call. Another strategy was being developed to force that king to obey the emperor, for which a Third Voyage was announced early in 1409, even before the Second had returned.

The Third Voyage

According to Fei Xin, Yongle’s instructions to Zheng regarding the Third Voyage was ‘to convey the imperial instructions and distribute presents... to award the king and chieftains of that country’. Knowing that the king had already refused to take instructions, Yongle inserted these additional instructions in the middle of the sentence just quoted: ‘Presents are to be distributed to the temples, and a stone stele is to be set up to attest to
their reverence toward the rule of the imperial plan’. Here was the new plan: not to beat Alagakkonara into submission, to bring his gods under Yongle’s care. Yongle was the son of Heaven, which meant that he enjoyed Heaven’s highest regard, and therefore the Buddha’s—and every other deity’s, for that matter. For the king now to submit to the Buddha confirmed, by extension, his submission to Yongle. Zheng He had other assignments on this voyage, including delivering envoys back to their home states and picking up more ambassadors to bring back to China, but his main assignment was to plant the stele and assert Yongle’s supremacy. And to ensure his success, he brought with him 48 large ships and an entourage approaching 30,000 officers, soldiers, and sailors.

It was an expeditious voyage, setting out from Fujian in January 1410 and returning to Nanjing in July 1411. His westward progress was stopped once again at Samudra, where he had to wait the change of monsoon. There was no point pushing on at the end of the winter season. Even if his ships could have struggled across the Bay of Bengal, the strong current around Ceylon would have defeated them. For as winter changes to summer, the current switches from clockwise, which is what the fleet needed to circle down around Dondra and up to Colombo, to counterclockwise. They would have made no headway against that current until the summer monsoon was over. So the fleet would have had to wait until October, once the winds had come around to the northeast and the westerly current across the bottom of the Bay of Bengal had set. Under those conditions, the crossing from the northern tip of Sumatra to the Nicobar Islands could be done in three days. From the Nicobars, if the sailing was good, it took another in seven days until the mountains of central Ceylon came into view over the horizon.
Assuming this was what Zheng did, what did he do when he was off the coast of Ceylon. No source tells us. The summary of Zheng’s report to Yongle in the court diary says nothing about delivering the stele, only that the king ‘enticed him into the country when he passed Ceylon on his return journey’. Did he go ashore at all on the voyage out, either at Dondra to deliver the stele, or at Colombo to open negotiations with the king? Or did he skip Ceylon entirely, as he had on the Second Voyage, and sailed straight on to the coast of India? We know that he stopped at at least three ports, Kayal, Cochin, and Calicut. During the winter season, sailing in these waters was easy. You could get to Cochin in seven days from Ceylon, and form Cochin to Calicut in just another three. My guess is that this is what he did, passing the winter in friendly waters and completing his lesser tasks before taking on the king of Ceylon.

Since the fleet had to leave Ceylon by April at the very latest to get back to China by July, Zheng must have disembarked at Colombo in February 1411. Fei Xin, the soldier-memoirist on this voyage, writes that Alagakkonara ‘was again steadfast in showing disrespect and plotted to damage the fleet’. This would seem to be the viceroy-uncle, Nissanka Alagakkonara. Unable to make headway there, Zheng led a large entourage of armed soldiers inland to the capital of Gampola to call on the king. After Zheng had gone inland, however, the viceroy set going his plan to loot the fleet while it was left unprotected. Mobilizing a force of 50,000 soldiers for the task, he had trees along Zheng’s route felled to impede his return, then turned his attack to the ships. Zheng got word of what was afoot and sent the main body of the soldiers who were with him back to the coast by another route, indicating that he had good local intelligence. Rather than lead them himself and scuttle his bid to deal with the king, he kept 3,000 men with him
and pressed on to Gampola to open a second front. After night had fallen, he had his soldiers gag themselves so as not to give themselves away to the guards, then moved them quietly into position around the capital. At the sound of one shot, the Chinese soldiers launched their assault on the palace, capturing the king and his family. Alagakkonara’s soldiers then rushed to the rescue, putting Gampola under siege for six days. But Zheng He was able to fight his way out, to considerable casualties, and to carry the king and his family to his ships. Fei Xin concludes his version of the tale by calling this ‘a great victory’.

Now that he had taken Alagakkonara, his family, and other chiefs of the island hostage, Zheng must then have gone down to Dondra to put up the stele as a sign that Yongle’s authority was no longer challenged. The fleet then set sail, taking the hostages back to Nanjing for the emperor to punish them for defying his authority. Yongle’s courtiers—a remarkably fawning group, even by Chinese court standards—duly clamoured for the emperor to execute the hostages for offending his imperial dignity. This clamour gave Yongle the opportunity to display the clemency of a benevolent ruler. In the language of the court diary, ‘the Emperor pitied the king for his stupidity and ignorance and allowed that he and the others be released and given food and clothing’.

Even so, he was not prepared to let Alagakkonara off without consequences. He declared the king deposed and ordered his Ministry of Rites to nominate someone within the royal family whom he could install as Alagakkonara’s successor. Once the choice was made, the hostages were sent back to Ceylon on Zheng’s next voyage, and Pakramabahu VI was installed as the Chinese puppet rule of Ceylon.
Zheng’s ‘great victory’ over these barbarians was inscribed into the official record of Ming military triumphs. Courtiers duly composed verses to congratulate the emperor on this triumph over the barely-human barbarians. Yongle’s senior advisor and chief fawner, Yang Rong, joined in this jingoistic tide. These lines are the high point:

Straightaway their dens and hideouts we ravaged
And made captive that entire country,
Bringing back to our august capital
Their women, children, families and retainers, leaving none,
Sweeping out those noxious pests as though winnowing chaff from grain.
Those lowly worms who deserved to die ten thousand deaths, trembling in fear,
Did not even merit the punishment of Heaven.
And thus the august emperor spared their lives,
And thus they humbly kowtowed, grunting crude sounds
In praise of the sagely virtue of the emperor of the Ming.

The celebrations continued. Two months after Zheng presented his hostages at court, the ministries of Rites and War petitioned the throne to approve military promotions and awards. Soldiers who were judged to have performed ‘outstanding achievements’ should receive a two-grade promotion. Soldiers who could claim ‘great achievements’ were promoted one grade. Lower-level officers should be moved up in rank, and if they had died in the battle, their sons should be awarded these posts. Ship’s officers should be made platoon commanders, or receive a double award in money and
cloth if they elected not to accept this appointment. Awards were not limited to the soldiers. Doctors from the Imperial Medical Academy as well as foreign pilots who made ‘outstanding’ contributions should receive 100 ding of paper money, a roll of patterned silk, and two bolts of cotton cloth, and even those of ordinary achievement should be given awards. As for those who ‘died of injuries, drowned, or fell into the hands of the enemy and were killed’, their heirs should receive discounted awards for their service. Yongle approved the entire schedule.

Five years later, Yongle was still handing out promotions to soldiers whose fathers had died in the battle of Ceylon. An even more striking sign of the legacy of the invasion is an entry in July 1426 in the court diary, ten years later. It reports the return from Ceylon of four members of the Embroidered Guard. This was the elite military corps of the Ming that, among other duties, provided the emperor with his bodyguard and a military agency that reported directly to him, not to the Ministry of War. The four members of the Embroidered Guard had been captured during the attack on Ceylon, probably in the six-day siege of Gampola. It had taken them fifteen years to repatriate. The entry gives no details beyond that they had managed to get to Samudra and found passage on a ship bringing tribute from Samudra to the Ming court. They were rewarded for their service in Ceylon and put back on active duty. But their return also signals that Zheng’s attack on Alagakkonara had not gone entirely in the Ming’s favour.

**Whose Story?**

The Ceylonese tell a different story. The first historian to reconstruct this story in detail was Edward Perera in a paper he read before the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic
Society in Colombo 1904. A Sinhalese journalist and barrister two years short of thirty, Perera would go on to earn the title of ‘Lion of Kotte’ for his role in convincing Britain in 1917 to repeal martial law in Ceylon. Perera was also an enthusiast of Sinhalese history. This paper was but one of several studies he published on aspects of Ceylon’s international past.

The Ceylonese version of the hostage-taking differs on two important points. The first is the identity of the chief hostage. According to Ceylonese telling, the key political actor in this event was not the king at all, but the viceroy. Nissanka Alagakkonara may have allowed his nephew, Vira Alagakkonara, to be captured as a means for him to become king in his stead. But this story of ambition came with a twist he did not anticipate. Vira Alagakkonara left behind Sunetra Devi—who was either his young queen or a widowed daughter—and a young son (one version claims there were two sons). They fled into hiding during the attack and were not taken prisoner to China, and were therefore not among the family members that Zheng seized. When he returned Vira Alagakkonara and his entourage to Ceylon in 1414, Nissanka Alagakkonara feigned pleasure at his return but had him murdered as soon as Zheng left. He then put in motion the steps to his own coronation.

That coronoation was not to be. Perera narrates the climax of this story with Shakespearian flair: ‘On the seventh day of the bright fortnight of the month Wesak [April-May], 1415, on the raised stone platform facing the palace in his own city of Kotte, overlooking the beautiful tank he had built, the old warrior’—Perera means Nissanka Alagakkonara—‘clad in all the insignia of royalty, sat to receive the crown for which he had his whole life struggled. The square was filled with nobles, troops, and people’.
Unbeknownst to the viceroy, the Great Priest Widagama Sami, who had connived in protecting the heir apparent, brought the son who had been in hiding with his mother, now sixteen, to the ceremony. ‘As Alagakkonara turned his face for the auspicious rite, the state sword, which Widagama Sami held in his hand to gird the new king, was handed to the young prince, and the head of Alagakkonara rolled into the tank below. The body of the aged hero made way for the son of Vijayabahu, and the lad of sixteen was hailed king as Sri Pakramabahu VI’. A less dramatic version of the Ceylonese story has Alagakkonara die a natural death, after which Widagama Sami brought forward the adolescent prince whom he had kept in hiding until it was possible for him to come safely to the throne. However the tale got told, the rightful heir from the Ceylonese perspective was at last on the throne as Pakramabahu VI, who would go on to be an effective ruler of the kingdom for the next half-century.

The second difference between teh Chinese and Ceylonese accounts is, who put Pakramabahu on the throne? The Veritable Records says that Emperor Yongle asked his Ministry of Rites to help make the selection from among the eligible young men among the hostages. Sri Lankan historians such as Perera insist that the real Pakramabahu never went to China, implying that the Chinese had simply made up a story they could live with, once Prakramabahu was on the throne. Ming sources indicate that the new king was attentive to Chinese demands. In Ma Huan’s account, ‘the king constantly sends offerings of gems and other such precious things with men who accompany the treasure ships returning from this ocean to bring tribute to China’. His readiness to send gems as tribute has been taken as a sign that Pakramabahu was indeed a puppet of the Ming. But the choice of gems was clever. Gems are concentrations of wealth, but Chinese theology
regarded gems as rare physical concentrations of Heaven’s power. Yongle was keen to
receive such tokens, which he distributed among his kinsmen as further evidence of his
legitimacy as their ruler. Archaeologists now come across them in considerable numbers
in the tombs of 15th-century Ming princes. The flow of gems was a way for
Pakramabahu to keep the Ming happy—and Ming troops off his island. It was a modest
price to pay for autonomy.

And now for a precious treasure of a different sort.

**The Buddha’s Tooth**

Zheng He’s embassies were not the first from China to reach the shores of Ceylon. Marco
Polo, who declared Ceylon to be ‘undoubtedly the finest island of its size in the world’,
reported that Khubilai Khan sent three envoys in 1281 to ask the king for what was then
considered the holiest religious relics in the world, a tooth of the Buddha. That tooth,
along with the Buddha’s begging bowl, had been in the possession of the Ceylonese
monarchy since the 6th century. Nothing was more material to the king’s legitimacy than
that adamantine object, which transcended the decay of the human world. Having
declared himself Heaven’s choice, Khubilai wanted to possess all signs of Heaven’s
favour, including this tooth; also the largest ruby in the world, which the king of Ceylon
also possessed. Khubilai was willing to pay ‘the value of a city’ for the ruby, writes Polo,
but the king declined the offer. It was not so easy to resist the request for the tooth,
however. The king managed the request by sending two other teeth of the Buddha,
though not the one Khubilai coveted, along with a begging bowl and a tuft of the
Buddha’s hair. Kubilai was realistic enough to know that he could control the gifts that
arrived, so to close off any doubt that these were genuine relics, he staging an enormous reception outside the walls of Beijing to greet their arrival. Who then dared say these were not genuine?

The history of Khubilai’s attempt to acquire the Buddha’s tooth a century and a half earlier was very much alive in the Ceylonese imagination. According to their version, Zheng He had been sent to Ceylon to seize the tooth relic. This was why Ceylonese drove him off the island the first time, and why he had to come back to try again. The argument that Yongle would want the tooth relic makes complete sense. Gaining the tooth relic would prove, to his subjects and to the world, that he had Buddha’s, and Heaven’s, blessing to be the universal ruler, putting him in a direct line of religious descent from Khubilai Khan.

The tooth relic is not mentioned in any of the sources directly connected with the Zheng He voyages, but it is mentioned twice in a Buddhist context. It is mentioned first of all in a long footnote in a 17th-century edition of the Tripitaka, the official compendium in Chinese of sutras and other Buddhist texts. The footnote has been attached to the section on Ceylon in the famous account by the Tang-dynasty monk Xuanzang of his travels in India. This footnote—which the eminent French sinologist Stanislas Julien seems to have been the first to notice when he translated the account in 1853—updates Xuanzang’s account of Ceylon by describing Zheng He’s adventures in Ceylon. This text repeats the account in the court diary of Zhang He’s hostage-taking, to which it then adds this passage:

‘Fighting their way back to the coast, Zheng He and his men reached the ships that evening, bringing the Buddha’s tooth relic on board with all due ceremony. The relic
emitted a bright light in a most unusual manner, and a peal of thunder rumbled so loudly that people even at a great distance when they saw the lightning took cover’. Once the fleet embarked, the tooth went to work, creating such perfect sailing conditions that ‘the fleet sailed on the great sea without encountering stormy winds, just as if they were walking at their ease on dry land’, the standard phrase for smooth sailing. ‘Fearsome dragons and dangerous sea creatures rose up before the ships but then turned back, causing no harm. Everyone on board was safe and happy’. The note ends by reporting that Zheng He delivered the relic to Yongle, who then ordered that a sandalwood reliquary be built to contain it so that it can be displayed and venerated.

The tone of the fantastic in this account could be the standard exaggeration of miraculous effects that often accompanies Buddhist narratives. But combine it with the fact that none of the other accounts of the voyages mentions it casts doubt on the very idea that the famed tooth relic ever went to China. One other text corroborates the tooth-relic story, and it comes from none other than Emperor Yongle himself. The text is a letter, dated 11 March 1413, that Yongle sent to Tsongkhapa. Then the most eminent Buddhist lama in Tibet, Tsongkhapa is remembered by Tibetans today for renewing Buddhism as the main cultural and political force in Tibet, and honoured as the spiritual ancestor of the present Dalai Lama. Yongle did not imagine entertain his regime incorporating Tibet as the Mongol Great State had. It was enough of a challenge to neutralize the Mongols as a threat on his northern border without trying to replicate their conquests. But he was keen to bring Tibetan lamas and warlords on side, ideally as tributaries, and if not that, at least as compliant allies who would resist a renewal of Mongol domination in Inner Asia after the death of Tamerlane in 1405.
Yongle accordingly continued his father’s tactic of cultivating nominal discipline relations with Tibetan lamas. One of nest known was the Fifth Karmapa Lama, whose visit to Nanjing in 1407 was a propaganda coup. Everyone who attended the rituals that Karmapa conducted reported seeing a spectacular aerial lightshow, proving that the Buddha approved of the regime. This ‘extended moment of consensual hallucination’, in the nice phrasing of art historian Patricia Berger, confirmed Yongle’s status as a ruler blessed by the Buddha, which nobody dared deny.

Six years later, the emperor wrote a letter to Tsongkhapa in another bid to build an alliance with sympathetic Tibetan leaders. This letter was only discovered in 1959 among documents preserved in the Potala, the palace in Lhasa that would later serve as the seat of the Dalai Lamas. To engage Tsongkhapa’s interest, Yongle tells him that Zheng He had brought back the tooth relic. But he starts the letter with a personal anecdote to put himself in the centre of the story: ‘Once in the still of the night We were sitting in contemplation when several balls of light appeared in the courtyard, like moons in an empty sky, like great bright mirrors langran dongsu. In the largest of these could be seen Bodhi treasure-trees of many sorts, and in the midst of their flowering branches there appeared thirty-two images of Sakyamuni Buddha’. After describing other aspects of the vision and declaring a flourishing Buddhism to be the best support for an emperor’s rule, he asserts that his vision was unquestionably an attestation of the Buddha’s support for his reign. He commissioned sculptors to carve and gild statues based on the Buddhas he saw in his vision, then ordered his senior Tibetan clerical official, Bandhan Tsangpo, to officiate rituals of celebration.
While this was going on, Yongle tells Tsongkhapa, his eunuch Zheng He had been in Ceylon. He then repeats the account in the Tripitaka footnote word for word. In fact, the dating of the two texts tells us that the relationship goes the other way, and that an editor was copying this portion of Yongle’s letter into the Buddhist text he was preparing for publication. At the end of his account, Yongle weaves his two stories together by stating that on careful examination, it was determined that the day on which Zheng He invited the Buddha’s tooth on board his ship was the very day on which he had seen the images of the Buddha in the ball of light in his courtyard. The Buddha was not only blessing Yongle’s succession. He was confirming that Zheng He had acted correctly when he confiscated his tooth from the evil Alagakkonara. Yongle had a reliquary of sandalwood and gold made so that the tooth could be installed within the palace and placed under constant veneration, such that ‘its unlimited karmic accumulation could be used to generate benefits for all living beings’. It was all good.

Or was it? Why does no source from the voyages corroborate this story? Why is the Buddha’s incisor never again mentioned in the Forbidden City? The least complicated answer, and therefore the best, is that it as never there to begin with: that the story of the seize of the relic was in fact manufactured for the diplomatic purpose of neutralizing Tibet as a base from which the Mongols might launch a renewed big for continental supremacy.

The best evidence that all of this was a complete fiction is the Ceylonese version of the story. Had Ceylon lost the tooth, that loss would have been decried as an outrage and featured in every account of Zheng’s attack. But not a word. Alagakkonara’s successor, Pakramabahu, was a patron of literature and had odes written to celebrate his
building of a new temple to house the relic in Kotte, where he moved his capital from Gampola. According to one of these odes,

> The king had built a three-storied palace delightful and beautiful to behold, and had made a golden casket finely set with the nine gems, encased in another golden casket shining with excellent coloured gems, encased in yet another golden casket.

Pakramabahu’s gem-studded reliquary quite outdid Yongle’s sandalwood reliquary, had Yongle ever had one made, as far as the descriptions go. But Yongle’s declaration that he had the tooth implies that Pakramabahu lost it, and if we want to credit the emperor, that puts us in the position of treating Pakramabahu’s installation of the tooth in a new reliquary as yet another ‘extended moment of consensual hallucination’.

There is no way out of this conundrum, other than to accept that the tooth in the reliquary in Kandy near the old capital of Gampola trumps any Chinese claim.

**Monuments**

The Buddha’s tooth was extraneous to the Chinese narrative of the Zheng He expeditions, and indeed it was to their purpose. In Fei Xi’s words, that purpose was to ensure that ‘all the barbarians are respectful’ of the Ming, of China, and of Emperor Yongle. From that perspective, the intervention on Ceylon was a success. It made clear to every ruler in the Indian Ocean that the Ming would impose regime change when its supremacy was defied. Better to take a hostage than a relic.
Ming supremacy was sustainable only so long as the regime was prepared to commit the vast resources needed to launch these expeditions. The consumption of wood was enormous, and has been credited with completing the deforestation of southeast China. The Fourth Voyage returned the hostages to Ceylon. After it there were two more during Yongle’s reign. On his death in 1424, the program was suspended for financial reasons. They had, after all, achieved what Yongle had intended: recognition of his legitimacy as ruler of the Ming Great State. His grandson, Emperor Xuande, authorized Zheng He to lead one more voyage in 1431. Prior to leaving, Zheng petitioned his new master for an edict of pacification against Ceylon, just in case the Ceylonese were no longer prepared ‘to show reverence for the rule of the imperial plan’, in the language of the Galle Stele, but all went smoothly. Pakramabahu kept sending embassies as late as 1459. He died three years later, and his successors saw no point to continue paying the costs of this ritual. The Ming state had clearly abandoned the Indian Ocean, and private Chinese merchants were withdrawing to Malacca. What had started with Khubilai Khan had come to an end. All that was left, in Dondra, Malacca, and a few other ports, were the stone inscriptions that Yongle had sent to mark his presence.

The monuments the Ming left behind were few. Over the next century they were replaced, and outnumbered, by strikingly similar Portuguese monuments. A pedra or padrão was a stone pillar that Portuguese erected to mark political claims, whether of jurisdiction or of treaty. Like a Chinese stele, they were decorated with national and religious symbols—the king’s crest, the Christian cross—and inscribed with texts stating their presence and their purpose. The earliest to survive, inscribed in 1482, was set up at the mouth of the Congo River, well before any Portuguese had seen a Chinese stele, so
we don’t need to look for influence. Still, the pattern is striking. The Portuguese set up a stone in Malacca after they seized the port in 1511. They erected another at Sunda at the western end of Java in 1522 to commemorate a treaty with that state. They attempted to raise one at the mouth of the Pearl River early in the 1520s, though the Ming did not tolerate the attempt. Given that Yongle in 1405 had composed a text for a stele to be raised at Bukit Cina (China Hill) in Malacca declaring that hill to be incorporated into the ritual geography of China, the sense of repetition is not just striking but uncanny.

But we need not be surprised that states expanding into territories beyond their own should want to mark that expansion with stone, the most permanent of markers. If not signs claiming sovereignty, they were signs at least of that a sovereign power was present and testing that presence against the claims of other powers. A ruler more powerful that yours has set this stone up. Take it down, if you can, at your peril, these monuments seem to declare. The Galle Stele praises the Buddha for removing ‘all obstacles to happiness’. Surely the battle of Ceylon had caused unhappinesses that were challenge even for the Buddha to remove.

In the end, the Galle Stele was taken down. Tomalin found it face down in the mud. We are left with a ast curious detail. The stone was never intended for Galle. Dondra was its destination. No one has been much bothered by the fact that it ended up where it did. What was it doing in Galle? It is a small port with a modest harbour lying thirty miles west of Dondra. True, it had served in earlier times as a stopping point for Arab traders sailing from India’s Malabar coast to the Bay of Bengal—just the sort who might have been able to read the Persian inscription—so it is not implausible that Zheng He might have called there. Yet none of the Chinese authors of the meagre texts from
which I have extracted this story makes any mention of Galle. They all describe Dondra, famous not just for its temple complex to Vishnu, but for a footprint of the Buddha in a rock near the shore, as well as a Sleeping Buddha statue. But there is not a word anywhere about Galle. Best guess is that Zheng He put it where he was told to put it, and then at some later point, some officer in charge of public works, Portuguese or British or otherwise, decided that a stone this size should be put to a better use that publicizing the presence of Yongle’s envoys on Ceylon. Galle no longer has got the stele. A replica has been installed in the Galle Maritime Museum and the original has been moved to the National Museum in Colombo. The Treasure Boat Museum at the old Longjiang Shipyard in Nanjing also possesses a replica, displayed as a monument to China’s Ming moment as a maritime superpower.

As for one of the other monuments encountered in this chapter, the Ceylon Courts was dismantled and sold to Chicago’s leading banker, who had it moved to Lake Geneva in Wisconsin to use as a summer house. Sadly, it burned in 1958 and had to be demolished, thereby ending the history of this curious strand in the circuit board tying Asia to the world. The General Post Office, though decommissioned, stands as the last vestige of Tomalin’s career as a colonial officer on Ceylon; that, and the Galle Stele.

Pavilion and stele recall different ages, to be sure, yet in terms of global history, these objects share a certain position in relation to the ages in which they were created. Tomalin regarded his as a great age in which modern science and scholarship were improving the human condition, and colonial powers were doing their bit by bringing backward peoples to a level of civilization that they had once known but had lost. This ideal might have resonated with Zheng. ‘When we arrived in foreign countries’, he wrote
for a stele he erected back in China before embarking on his final voyage, ‘barbarian kings who resisted transformation and did not show respect we captured alive, and the bandit soldiers who recklessly looted and plundered we exterminated. As a result, the sea routes became safe and peaceful, and foreigners could use them to pursue their occupations in safety’. Both men were proud of bringing order to a disorderly world and securing benefits for those who did not have the means to attain them on their own. One Chinese historian recently declared that the Ming voyages deserve to be regarded as ‘a major achievement in the history of Ming international relations, as well as a monumental feat in the maritime history of mankind’. Well, that depends entirely on what you think of colonialism. Which is why neither Tomalin’s pavilion nor Zheng He’s stele is sufficient to tell its own story and stand free of what really happened.
Notes


The Galle inscriptions were first translated and published in S. Paranavitana, ‘The Tamil Inscription on the Galle Trilingual Slab’, *Epigraphica Zeylanica* 3 (1933), pp. 331-341. For the Portuguese reference to ‘the kings of China’, see p. 334.


The role of legitimacy in driving Ming foreign relations is argued in Timothy Brook et al., *Sacred Mandates: Asian International Relations since Chinggis Khan* (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 2018), pp. 64-70.

‘Recently the Yuan capital has been overcome’: *Ming taizu shilu*, 37.23a.
Envoys sent abroad in 1369: *Ming taizu shilu*, 38.11a, 39.1b; Hongwu’s letter to Ada Azha: op. cit., 39.2b; Hongwu’s messages of March and July 1370: op. cit., 50.7a-b, 53.9b. Many of the passages cited from the Veritable Records may be found in ‘Southeast Asia in the Ming Shi-lu: An Open Access Resources, edited by Geoff Wade and published on-line by National University of Singapore Press at http://www.epress.nus.edu.sg/msl.

‘The envoys sent from foreign countries were uniformly treated with respect’:

*Ming taizong shilu*, 12a.7a.


The history of the Zheng He expeditions has been recounted many times, mostly incorrectly. For a sensible assessment of these expeditions, see Tan-sen Sen, ‘The Impact of Zheng He’s Expeditions on Indian Ocean History’.

Marco Polo on the Buddha tooth relic: *The Travels*, pp. 258-59, 284.

1866), pp. 44-45, 53, 107-110. The crossing of the Bay of Bengal in ten days comes from Ma Huan, p. *

For Zheng’s attack on Gambola, see Ming taizong shilu 116.2a-b; translated in Wade, Southeast Asia, Record 771.

‘Straightaway their dens and hideouts we ravaged’: translated in Levathes, When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1405-1433 (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1994), p. 115. Levathes cites this poem from the first chapter of Yang’s Yang Wenmin gong ji [Collected writings of Master Yang Wengong] (1515), though I have been unable to find the original.

Promotions and awards for survivors of the battle of Ceylon: Ming Taizong shilu, 118.3a-b, 120.1a-b, 180.1b.


‘Fighting their way back to the coast’: Su Bai, ‘Lasa Budala gong zhuyao diantang he kucang de bufen Mingdai wenshu’ [The main buildings and some Ming documents held in the Potala Palace in Lhasa], in his Zangchuan fojiao siyuan kaogu
Studies in the history of monasteries of Tibetan Buddhism] (Beijing: Wenwu chubanseh, 1996) Chen p. 213; translation adapted from Tansen Sen, ‘Diplomacy, Trade and the Quest for the Buddha’s Tooth’, in Craig Clunas et al., ed., Ming China: Courts and Contacts 1400-1450 (London: British Museum, 2016), p. 35. Sen accepts the argument that the footnote was inserted in the North Edition of the Tripitaka, produced shortly after Yongle’s death, though the passage has not actually been found in any copy prior to the Jiaxing edition of 1676. I was pleased to discover, after my own investigations, that Edward Dreyer also found the tooth relic story fictional; see his Zheng He, p. 69.

Stanislas Julien’s translation of Xuanzang’s memoir was published as Histoire de la vie de Hiouen-Thsang (Paris, 1853).

Gems in the tombs of 15th-century Ming princes: Crag Clunas and Jessica Harrison-Hall, *


‘When we arrived’: Changle stele, 1431.