

China's Boundless Main



BOOKS

Ying-hai Sheng-lan: The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores
by Ma Huan. White Lotus Press, GPO
Box 1141, Bangkok.

Despite its recent forays into the South China Sea, China has traditionally been a continental empire. Since the height of the Ming dynasty in the 15th century, the rulers in Beijing have paid only scant attention to maritime ventures. Even during its brief historical stint as a sea power, China's main seafarer was, somewhat incongruously, a Muslim from the landlocked province of Yunnan, the famous

Feng Ch'eng-chun, created a definitive compilation of Ma Huan's many accounts of Zheng's exploits. The British scholar J.V.G. Mills edited and translated this work into English in 1970. White Lotus—a Bangkok-based publisher—has now published a reprint of what must be the most important ocean survey the Chinese have ever undertaken. The book includes a fold-out map, identifying all the place names mentioned in the text.

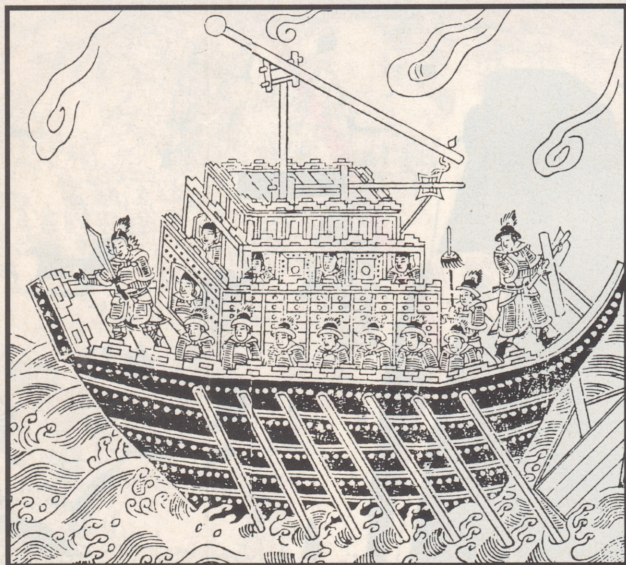
That map is what makes the reprint really interesting—along with the endless lists of ports, islands and other places the Ming dynasty fleets visited. The most astonishing observation is not that the Chinese sailed as far as they did; the map and the list are also potentially explosive in today's discussions about the ownership of the reefs and islands in the South China Sea.

More than 700 place names in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean were known to the Chinese, including remote islands in the Andamans, Nicobars, Maldives and Laccadives, as well as isolated ports on the coast of Oman. But not once does Ma Huan mention the Spratlys. Today, China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei claim all or some of the Spratlys, based on "historical records."

But the Chinese classic on maritime exploration shows that there

is no historical evidence to support China's claims. It mentions two of the Paracels—which are controlled by China but also claimed by Vietnam—but not a single reef or shoal in the Spratlys.

Andrew Forbes, a British scholar living in Thailand, has done extensive research into Zheng's expeditions and the history of the South China Sea. He points out that no one paid much attention to the Spratlys until World War II, when control over the sealanes between East and Southeast Asia became important strategically. Later, when geologists mentioned the possibility of finding oil and gas in the area, a



An ocean-going Ming-dynasty ship: China's sailors ranged as far as the Arabian peninsula.

Zheng He. Under his command, mighty fleets of more than 50 ships each sailed the seas as far as the Arabian peninsula and East Africa. But China's golden age of exploration ended in 1433.

In Zheng's heyday, Chinese prestige and influence extended further than ever before. His ships explored and mapped the coasts of the Indian peninsula and myriad islands in what are now the Philippines and Indonesia. Zheng's interpreter on three of his four expeditions, Ma Huan, meticulously recorded the findings.

In 1935, a modern-day Chinese scholar,

ARTS & SOCIETY

host of countries suddenly decided that they owned the reefs in the South China Sea.

According to Forbes, the reason Zheng—or any other Chinese explorer, for that matter—did not explore and map the Spratlys was quite simple: They are not islands, but treacherous underwater reefs, which ancient navies sailed around to avoid being shipwrecked. There was nothing of interest there in those days. Beijing's own historians often mention "historical documents that can be verified" to support their claims to the Spratlys. No such documents have ever been produced, however.

The Overall Survey should be compulsory reading for all military strategists, politicians, diplomats—and oil-exploration teams—now squabbling over the ownership of the Spratlys. ■ Bertil Lintner

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