The Giraffe of Bengal: A Medieval Encounter in Ming China

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This paper chronicles the development of diplomatic relations between China and Bengal in the early-fifteenth century, culminating in the presentation of a giraffe by Bengal to the court of China in 1414. It examines Chinese sources that recorded the visits of envoys from Bengal to China and from China to Bengal during the period of the Chinese maritime expeditions from 1405 to 1433. Discussion centres on the historical context for these exchanges in the two countries, the relationship between the Chinese maritime expeditions and these diplomatic missions, and the reliability of Chinese sources in recording the events and rulers of Bengal. An effort is made to elucidate the many complexities that surrounded this seemingly straightforward event.

The fine-looking animal shown in the illustration (Figure 1) was presented by envoys from Bengal to the Yong-le 永樂 emperor (r. 1403–24) on 20 September 1414, at the height of his reign. The event is recorded in the *Ming Shi-lu* 明實錄, or 'Veritable Records of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644)',[1] as: King Sai-fu-ding of Bang-ge-la sent envoys to present a

[1] The *Ming shi-lu* constitutes an almost day-by-day record of the words and actions of the Ming emperors in their court and private life. Because each entry is dated to the year, month and day, the *Shi-lu* has a high degree of chronological precision. The compilers drew on court diaries, audience records and government documents, and arranged each emperor's reign into a separate *Shi-lu*. This work was done for each emperor during

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Figure 1
'Tribute Giraffe with Attendant' by Shen Du (1357–1434)

Watercolour: ink on silk
Philadelphia Museum of Art

memorial, a *qi-lin*, and tributary gifts of famous breeds of horses and local products.[2] Despite the rather matter-of-fact way the event is recorded here, as if the giraffe were just one of the hundreds of tribute items and gifts that arrived from foreign countries during Yong-le's reign, the emperor obviously thought this particular gift was rather special. He was in the habit of receiving exotic animals, including birds, as gifts from foreign countries—elephants and rhinoceroses from Champa, bears from Siam, parrots and peacocks from Java and ostriches from Aden—and there was even a special part of the imperial grounds in Nanjing, the *jin-yuan* 禁苑 or forbidden gardens, where they were kept and cared for. However, this is the animal that Yong-le asked the calligrapher and painter Shen Du 沈度 (1357–1434) to paint—the giraffe of Bengal.[3]

More will be said about the painting later, but first I would like to speak of the historical event and what lies behind it. As is true of many seemingly simple events in history, the circumstances that brought about the presentation of a giraffe to China are highly complex, as are the developments that followed from it. Before unravelling these circumstances, I shall begin by explaining a few of the cryptic elements in the passage.

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the reign of the subsequent emperor. It is thus also close in time to the events it recorded. Emperor Yong-le's *Shi-lu* was put together in 1430, for example, only six years after Yong-le's death. This stands in marked contrast to the official Ming history or *Ming shi* 明史, which, like all dynastic histories, was not compiled until the subsequent dynasty. The Ming history was completed in 1769, several hundred years after the events of the early Ming. Geoff Wade has shown that *Shi-lu* is a reasonably reliable source for the history of foreign countries with which China had diplomatic relations. See, for example, his 'The *Ming shi-lu* as a Source for Thai History—Fourteenth to Seventeenth Centuries', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 31(2), 2000: 249–94; and my article, 'Melaka in Ming Dynasty Texts', *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 70(1), 1997: 31–69. In this article I use a modified form of *pin-yin* romanisation, inserting hyphens between syllables within words, in an attempt to prevent such unfortunate mispronunciations as 'Changle' (rhyming with 'tangle') for Chang-le.

[2] *Ming Tai-zong shi-lu* 明太宗實錄 (Veritable Records of the Ming: Tai-zong [Yong-le] Reign), Zhong-yang yan-jiu-yuan series, Taibei, 1962–67: 1787 (155: 1a–1b).

[3] There are different versions of this painting, some with one man holding the giraffe and some with two. There are other differences as well, in the man's or men's clothing and the shape of the giraffe. Some of the paintings are discussed in J.J.L. Duyvendak, 'The True Dates of the Chinese Maritime Expeditions in the Early Fifteenth Century', *T'oung Pao*, 34, 1938: 341–412, esp. 400–401. Copies of the painting are currently held in the collections of the National Palace Museum in Taiwan and in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. It also features in a recent article by Kathlyn Liscomb, 'Foregrounding the Symbiosis of Power: A Rhetorical Strategy in Some Chinese Commemorative Art', *Art History*, vol. 25(2), 2002: 135–61.

Bang-ge-la is the Chinese transliteration of Bangala, the name used for Bengal in medieval times. King Sai-fu-ding can be identified by the similarity in sound and the proximity in date with the fourth of the independent sultans of Bengal who ruled under the Ilyas Shahi dynasty (1342–1415 and 1433–86). His name was Saif al-Din Hamzah Shah (r. 1410–12).[4] The *qi-lin* 麒麟 is an ancient Chinese mythical beast with auspicious associations. It is invoked here to refer to the giraffe that was presented by the envoys who came from Bengal in 1414. The envoys were, in name if not in fact, official diplomatic representatives sent by the government of Bengal to the emperor of China. They presented a 'memorial' (a formal, official letter to the emperor), delivered gifts and paid tribute consisting of local products. Upon their departure they received gifts from the court. The ritual of presenting tribute and giving gifts was part of an idealised system of foreign relations called the 'tribute system' which has its roots far back in Chinese history. When foreigners came to pay tribute, Chinese officials interpreted this as acknowledging China's suzerainty over them in a vassal–subject relationship. In reality they were sometimes foreign merchants on trading missions posing as official envoys, going through the motions of performing obeisance to China in order to gain the economic and political benefits that followed from a tributary relationship. These benefits included permission to trade with China, official recognition and legitimacy, and sometimes military support and protection.

This brief elucidation of the various elements in the *Shi-lu* passage raises a number of questions. These include questions about the giraffe, as well as about the painting of the giraffe, the envoys, the circumstances in Bengal and in China that led to this extraordinary event, the relations between the two countries, and the Chinese sources that have provided this information. With regard to the giraffe, we can ask how it came to be associated with the *qi-lin*, and what this association meant. As giraffes are not native to Bengal, how did a giraffe come to Bengal, and where did it come from originally? Why did the sultan give it to China? How was it transported to China? How did the Chinese people react to it? As

[4] For the history of Bengal, I have relied primarily on Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204–1760*, Berkeley, 1993, and Haraprasad Ray, *Trade and Diplomacy in India-China Relations: A Study of Bengal during the Fifteenth Century*, New Delhi, 1993. Eaton gives the dates of Saif al-Din's reign as 1410–11, but Ray gives 1410–12, and C.E. Bosworth also cites the latter. Therefore I have adopted 1412 as the terminus for this reign. Ray gives the precise date as 13 April 1412, in his *Trade and Diplomacy*: 65. See C.E. Bosworth, *The New Islamic Dynasties*, Edinburgh, 1996: 307.

for the painting, how did this giraffe come to be the subject of a famous Chinese painting? How is it treated in the painting, and what impression does it convey? What did the painting mean to people at the time and what has it come to symbolise more recently? What about the envoys? Who were they and how did they travel to and from China? How many of them were there and how long did they stay in China? Concerning Bengal and China, what is the historical background in each country that led to this event, and how does this event fit into the context of their separate histories? How did a relationship between the rulers of the two countries come about? What was the nature of this relationship and how did it come to be symbolised by a giraffe? How are the embassies that travelled to and from Bengal related to Zheng He's maritime expeditions? With regard to the sources, which Chinese sources are most valuable for the study of relations with foreign countries and how reliable are they as sources for the history of foreign countries?

It would be impossible to answer all these questions here. In what follows, I intend to focus on a handful of them, and touch on as many of the others as possible. I shall work within a chronological framework, presenting the passages from the *Shi-lu* and other sources that reveal the progressive development of a relationship between China and Bengal. Each of these passages will be examined with a focus on the diplomatic relations between the two countries, the historical context of each, the reliability of the Chinese sources, and the relationship of these visits to Zheng He's maritime expeditions. Most of this interaction occurred during the period of these expeditions. Therefore, I shall limit this discussion to the years 1405–33.

There do not seem to have been regular foreign relations between Bengal and China before the Ming. Bengal is mentioned occasionally in Chinese documents before this, but not many diplomatic exchanges are recorded. The short section on Bengal in the official Ming history (*Ming shi*) gives a brief but incomplete account of earlier contacts; for the most part the author seems to be speaking of India as a whole rather than Bengal in particular. It begins by saying that it was called 'Shen-du' 身毒 (probably a transliteration of 'Hindu') in the Western Han, and 'Tian-zhu' 天竺 in the Eastern Han—both of these are names for India in general. It continues by saying that Central India sent tribute to the Liang (502–57), and Southern India to the Northern Wei (386–534). In the Tang (618–906) Chinese view, India was divided into the Five Indias or Five Tian-zhu, and it was still called Tian-zhu in the Song (960–1279). Only in the final sentence does the author speak of Bengal, saying that it

is in eastern India, and that it can be reached by sailing for 20 days from Samudra-Pasai. In other sources we find that a handful of traders and diplomats who travelled to and from Bengal are mentioned in the early dynastic histories,[5] and that Chinese Buddhist monks beginning with Fa-xian 法顯 travelled to the port of Tamralipti (modern Tamluk) at the mouth of the Ganges.[6] Some pre-Ming texts provide short descriptions of Bengal, although one is not always sure that the identification of the place is correct.[7] There were no diplomatic exchanges between China and Bengal during the Hong-wu period. Thus we can safely say that diplomatic relations between the two countries began during Yong-le's reign.

China launched the seven enormous maritime expeditions in the early fifteenth century, with the eunuch Zheng He 鄭和 (1371–ca. 1435) in command. Conducted at intervals between the years 1405 and 1433, they consisted of large fleets (approximately 250 ships for each fleet) that left Nanjing and sailed down the Yangzi river to Tai-cang (near present-day Shanghai), then southward along the South China coast, skirting the shores of Southeast Asia, through the straits of Melaka (Malacca) and into the Indian Ocean. The early expeditions sailed only as far as Calicut on the west coast of India. Beginning with the fourth expedition the subsequent fleets travelled further, reaching the Arabian peninsula and the east coast of Africa. The first six expeditions sailed during Yong-le's reign. After his death in 1424 there was a hiatus during the reign of Hong-xi 洪熙 (r. 1424–25), who stopped them because he thought they were wasteful and distracted attention away from domestic concerns. The seventh and last expedition was carried out between 1431 and 1433 in the reign of Xuan-de 宣德 (r. 1425–35). Each voyage took about two years to return to China. The seven expeditions, with their dates of departure and return, as well as the dates of the imperial orders commissioning them, are listed in Table 1.

[5] For instance, in the Han period people went to sea to a place called Huang-zhi 黃支, which can perhaps be identified with Bengal. See *Han shu* 漢書, chapter 28B, 'Di-li zhi' 地理志, Beijing, 1962: 1671. This and other early possible references to Bengal are summarised in Ray, *Trade and Diplomacy*: 58–59.

[6] Fa-xian was there from the years 408 to 409. Xuan-zang 玄奘 visited Tamluk during his travels between 629 and 645, and Yi-jing 義淨 between 671 and 695.

[7] Zhao Ru-gua 趙汝适 describes a country called Peng-jia-luo 鵬茄囉 where Buddhism originated. See his *Zhu-fan zhi* 諸番志, 1225, Friedrich Hirth and W.W. Rockhill (tr.), *Chau Ju-Kua: On the Chinese and Arab Trade*, St. Petersburg, 1911 (rpt.), Amsterdam, 1966: 97. He does not mention any diplomatic contact with China here, but only the visit of Tang Buddhist pilgrim Xuan-zang to study and collect Buddhist scriptures. Wang Dayuan 汪大淵 also mentions Peng-jia-la 朋加剌 in his *Dao-yi zhi-lue* 島夷誌略 of 1350.

Table 1
***Dates of the Seven Voyages of the Ming Maritime Expeditions*[8]**

Voyage (Dates from Inscriptions[9]*)*	*Imperial Order*	*Departure*	*Return*
1) 1405–07	11 July 1405 (6th month, 15th day)	Winter 1406	2 Oct 1407 (9th month, 2nd day)
2) 1407–09	13(?) Oct 1407 (9th month)	Jan–Feb 1408[10] (winter)	1409, summer
3) 1409–11	16 Jan–14 Feb 1409 (1st month)	9 Oct–6 Nov, 1409 (9th month)	6 July 1411 (6th month, 16th day)
4) 1413–15	18 Dec. 1412 (11th month, 15th day)	1413–14, winter	12 August 1415 (7th month, 8th day)
5) 1417–19	28 Dec. 1416 (12th month, 10th day)	31 May 1417 winter, fleet in Quanzhou	8 August 1419 (7th month, 17th day)
6) 1421–22	3 March 1421 (1st month, 30th day)	4 March–2 April 1421 (2nd month)	3 Sept. 1422 (8th month, 18th day)
7) 1431–33	29 June 1430 (6th month, 9th day)	12 Jan 1432 (12th month, 9th day) left the Fujian coast	22 July 1433 (7th month, 6th day)

I shall now attempt to interweave two other sets of chronologies with this one: the sequence of diplomatic and tribute missions that travelled to and from Bengal during Yong-le's reign, and the dates of Bengal's

See his *Dao-yi zhi-lue jiao-shi* 校釋, Zhong-wai jiao-tong-shi cong-kan series, Beijing, 1981: 330–34.

[8] This information is summarised in Zheng He-sheng 鄭鶴聲 and Zheng Yi-jun 鄭一鈞 (eds), *Zheng He xia Xi-yang zi-liao hui-bian* 鄭和下西洋資料匯編, vol. 2, Shandong, 1989: 929–30.

[9] The dates given in this column are considered reliable because they are mentioned on the two stone inscriptions discussed in J.J.L. Duyvendak, 'The True Dates of the Chinese Maritime Expeditions in the Early Fifteenth Century', *T'oung Pao*, 34, 1938: 341–412. One was set up at Liu-jia-jiang near Tai-cang, and the other at Chang-le on the coast of Fujian province.

[10] Duyvendak discusses the confusion surrounding the dates for this voyage. He argues that an entry for Yong-le 6 (1408) in both the *Shi-lu* and the *Ming shi*, dated to the twenty-eighth day (*gui-you*) of the ninth month in the *Shi-lu* and differently in the *Ming shi*, must be mistaken because, according to the Liu-jia-jiang and Chang-le inscriptions the second voyage was sent out in 1407. However, only the *Ming shi* says it was sent out in 1408. See Zhang Ting-yu 張廷玉, et al. (ed.), *Ming shi*, Beijing, 1974: 85. The *Shi-lu* says that Zheng He and others presented gifts to the foreign countries they were visiting at that time. See *Ming Tai-zong shi-lu*, 1114 (83:3b). Thus, the *Shi-lu* may not be in error as Duyvendak suggests. The *Shi-lu* was one of the main sources used to compile the *Ming shi*.

rulers. But first, I would like to explain what I call the 'taxi service' provided by these expeditions for foreign envoys. Not only did they transport Chinese sailors, military officers, diplomats, doctors and service personnel, they also brought back to China on their return voyages numerous foreign envoys who came to pay tribute to the emperor and to trade. The *Shi-lu* entries that report the returns of expeditions are often followed by notices of the arrival of foreign envoys and their presentation of tribute to the emperor. The usual practice seems to have been for the envoys to stay in China until the next expedition departed, when they would be transported back home.

While some foreign envoys came and went on Zheng He's voyages, China's foreign relations with the maritime countries were not entirely dependent on this taxi service. Envoys from certain countries had been coming to China on their own ships long before the maritime voyages began, and continued to do so long after they stopped. Even during the heyday of the expeditions, some emissaries travelled independently of the expeditions. These were primarily countries in close proximity to China with long-standing trade and tribute relations, such as Annam, Champa, Siam, Java, Korea, Japan and the Ryukyu islands. Some more distant countries had sent envoys before the maritime expeditions began. As early as 1403, two years before the departure of the first expedition, envoys reportedly came from Calicut and Suo-li.[11] They might have come in response to the announcement of Yong-le's accession, which he sent out to many countries soon after ascending the throne in 1402.[12] Some envoys travelled to China on their own ships, and the rest on ships from other countries, which they boarded in Melaka or at other major emporia on the Indian Ocean.[13]

[11] Yan Cong-jian, *Shu-yu zhou-zi lu*, Zhong-wai jiao-tong shi-ji cong-kan series, vol. 13, Beijing, 1993: 306. Scholars are not completely sure as to the identity of Suo-li.

[12] Yong-le announced his accession as early as 3 October 1402. See Hong-wu 35 (Jian-wen 4), ninth month, seventh day, *ding-hai, Ming Tai-zong shi-lu*: 205 (12A:7a).

[13] It seems likely that some of the early envoys from Calicut and Bengal came on voyages from Melaka and Samudra-Pasai, as they arrived at approximately the same times as the envoys from those countries. This may have been the case with the envoys from Calicut, Samudra-Pasai and Melaka who all arrived together on 3 October 1405. See *Ming Tai-zong shi-lu*: 711–12 (46.2a–2b). Melaka was becoming a great international trade emporium at the time. There were envoys from Samudra-Pasai and Java in China as early as the ninth month of 1402, and from Suo-li and Calicut in 1403. The earliest visits during the Yong-le period from such countries as Cambodia, Siam and even Burma were in the tenth month of 1403. Melaka and Palembang first sent envoys arriving in 1405.

Opinion seems to be divided as to when the first embassy from Bengal arrived in China. Most sources record a tributary mission in 1408. However, at least two earlier visits are mentioned in other sources. The first occurs in *Huang-ming xiang-xu lu* 皇明象胥錄, by Mao Rui-zheng 茅瑞徵 (*jinshi* 1601),[14] who dates the earliest Bengali embassy to 1404: 'In Yong-le 2 (1404), the king Ai-ya-si-ding sent envoys to present tribute'.[15] Bengal's historical sources largely agree that the ruler in Bengal at the time was Sultan Ghiyath al-Din A'zam Shah (r. 1389–1410),[16] whom we can identify as the Ai-ya-si-ding in Chinese records.[17] The second pre-1408 reference occurs in Yan Cong-jian's 嚴從簡 *Shu-yu zhou-zi lu* 殊域周咨錄 (1574). Yan mentions this ruler in Bengal and lists the gifts that the Chinese emperor presented to the Bengali envoys for their royal family:

> In the third year of Yong-le (1405), King Ghiyath al-Din sent envoys to court. An edict was issued to present gifts to the king of four bolts each of linen and gauze and eight bolts of stiff silk; and to the queen three bolts each of linen and gauze and six bolts of stiff silk.[18]

The arrivals of Bengali envoys in 1404 and 1405 are not mentioned in the *Shi-lu*; thus they cannot be corroborated or dated precisely. If they

[14] This means that he passed the imperial examinations and became a *jin-shi* 進士 or 'presented scholar' in that year. For information about the traditional civil service examination system, see Ichisada Miyazaki, *China's Examination Hell: The Civil Service Examinations of Imperial China*, Conrad Schirokauer (tr.), New York, 1976.

[15] Photo reprint of the Ming Chong-zhen (1628–44) edition, in *Zhong-hua wen-shi cong-shu* 中華文史叢書, vol. 3, Taibei, 1969: 430. This is the first of a list of visits, but the list is not complete, and sometimes details seem to be added that are not corroborated in other sources. For instance, Mao Rin-Zheng says that on the 1408 and 1412 visits gold-leaf memorials were presented, but this detail is not recorded elsewhere.

[16] See Eaton's table of Bengal's rulers in *Rise of Islam*: 318.

[17] The Chinese records contradict the dates given in Sir Wolseley Haig (ed.), *Cambridge History of India*, vol. 3 (Turks and Arabs) Cambridge, 1928: 264–67, where Ghiyath al-Din's reign dates are given as 1370–96, and Saif al-Din's as 1396–1406. P.C. Bagchi notes that the Chinese records 'throw light from an unexpected quarter on the political, social, and economic conditions of Bengal in the 15th century', in 'Political Relations between Bengal and China in the Pathan Period', *Visva-Bharati Annals*, vol. 1, 1945: 96–134, esp. 96. Since this article was published, scholars of this period in Bengal's history have started referring to the Chinese records.

[18] Yan Cong-jian, *Shu-yu zhou-zi lu*: 386. Yan Cong-jian served in the official messenger service (*xing-ren si* 行人司) which was engaged in diplomatic activity during 1522–66. Because of his own personal experience in this service, his work is thought to be a reliable source on diplomatic affairs.

indeed came, they must have sailed on private ships, as the first of Zheng He's expeditions did not sail back to China until the ninth month of 1407. It is possible that they came on a ship belonging to one of the other major trading countries, such as Melaka. A tribute mission arrived from Melaka and other countries on 3 October 1405.[19] Almost all the sources mention the 1408 embassy from Bengal. The *Shi-lu* account reads: King Ghiyath al-Din of Bengal sent the envoy Sai-yi-ma-ha-ma and others [to China] bringing local products as tribute. They were given paper money according to rank.[20]

Although the maritime expeditions had begun sailing to and from China on a regular basis by this time, none of them arrived back in China during the year 1408. Therefore, these envoys from Bengal could not have come on any of Zheng He's expeditions. The notice of this mission is typical of the way in which the *Shi-lu* records the arrivals of foreign envoys: The *Shi-lu* usually mentions the country, the king of that country and the name of the chief envoy. Then it often, though not always, lists the items that the foreign envoys presented as tribute (though they are not listed in this passage) and the gifts they received from China. Here the chief envoy is named Sai-yi-ma-ha-ma, probably a transliteration of Sa'id Muhammad; we know nothing more about him. Because envoys from Bengal are mentioned among the dignitaries who attended banquets in China on 28 October and 2 December of this year,[21] and no other Bengali envoys seem to have arrived during this period, it seems likely that this group stayed in China for at least two months.

In the *Shi-lu* of a few months later, there is another notice of envoys from Bengal having arrived. The date is in the second month of the following year (17 February 1409). This diplomatic mission is particularly striking because of its size, with over 230 members:

> King Ghiyath al Din of Bengal sent the envoy Sa'id Muhammad and others, totalling 234 people, to present local products as tribute. They were given paper currency and robes, and flowered silk according to rank. For the king

[19] *Ming Tai-zong shi-lu*: 711–12 (46:21–2b). The other countries were Samudra-Pasai and Calicut. It seems unlikely that the Bengali envoys came on this voyage, however, because they are not mentioned in the record of either their arrival or their banquet. See *Ming Tai-zong shi-lu*: 721 (47.3a), for the banquet.

[20] *Ming Tai-zong shi-lu*: 1112 (83:2b).

[21] *Ming Tai-zong shi-lu*: 1120 (84:2b), and 1131 (85:3a).

there were gifts of fine silk, gauze, gilt umbrellas, porcelain, and other such items.[22]

The *Shi-lu* only occasionally mentions the number of envoys who arrived on diplomatic missions, and this was probably when the number was unusually large. It is rare for it to mention over 100 envoys from one country—such large embassies are recorded only six times in the 24 years of Yong-le's reign.[23] Given the amount of provisions supplied to them as a rule, we can say that the embassies from Bengal were normally small or at least average, compared to those of other countries.[24] Notice that the same chief envoy is mentioned as in the previous passage. Nothing more is said of this embassy in the *Shi-lu*, but the official Ming history states that after the 1409 mission envoys from Bengal began to come annually.[25]

Late in the same year (3 December 1409), another embassy from Bengal arrived. They presented tribute together with envoys from Samudra-Pasai (also known as Semudera, and Lho Seumnawe). The number of envoys given in this passage was far fewer, with a figure of 59 including emissaries from both Bengal and Samudra-Pasai:

[22] *Ming Tai-zong shi-lu*: 1168 (88.4b).

[23] These six are 540 from Melaka in 1411, 165 from Melaka in 1413, 100 from Siam and 340 from Sulu (the Philippines) in 1417, 565 from Siam in 1421, and 250 from Java in 1422.

[24] Information about such matters as the provision of food for the foreigners from different countries is recorded in some detail in the *Da Ming hui-dian* 大明會典 (Collected Statutes of the Ming Dynasty), Xu Pu 徐溥 (comp.), Shen Shi-xing 申时行 (ed. of revised edition), (first completed 1503, rev. 1506, 1587 ed.), Sir Thomas Wade collection, Cambridge University Library, Cambridge, England. For instance, we are told that the regular number of envoys from Calicut was 18, there was a delivery of supplies to them once every three days of two sheep, four geese, eight chickens, 20 bottles of wine, one *dan* (71 kgs) of rice, 30 *jin* (approx. 18 kgs) of noodles, four types of fruit, and vegetables in season. For every five envoys from Bengal, there was one sheep, one goose, one chicken, 10 bottles of wine, 5 *dou* (approx. 36 kgs) of rice, 10 *jin* (approx. 6 kgs) of noodles, four kinds of fruit, and vegetables in season. This source does not indicate any fluctuation in provisions over time, although they must have occurred. Melaka and Ceylon were allowed to attend two banquets during their stay, but Bengal, Calicut and Samudra-Pasai were only allowed to attend one. This information is found in *Da Ming Hui-dian*, chapter 115 (Ritual 73: Provisions, Shan-xiu 膳羞), 'Xia-cheng' 下程, 'Qin ci xia-cheng' 欽賜下程.

[25] Zhang Ting-yu, *Ming shi*, 326: 8446.

> King Ghiyath al-Din of Bengal and King Zai-nu-li-a-bi-ding of Samudra-Pasai sent envoys including Xia-er-zhi, the inner secretary, and others, totalling 59, to present tribute of horses and local products. The envoys were given paper money and gold-embroidered robes.[26]

The name Zai-nu-li-a-bi-ding corresponds to Zain Al-'Abidin, ruler of Samudra-Pasai during this period.[27] Nothing is known about the 'inner secretary' Xia-er-zhi. Although the second maritime expedition returned to China around this time, the envoys from Bengal probably did not sail on it. First, the Bengalis came too late: the second expedition docked in the ninth month of 1409, while the Bengali envoys are not reported until late in the tenth month. Second, since the Samudra-Pasai envoys are mentioned together with the Bengali envoys, it is possible that they came on the same ship. Although the list of representatives on the 1409 expedition is not comprehensive, neither country is on the list of countries that sent envoys arriving with the second expedition. Moreover, their isolated treatment in this passage suggests a separate arrival.

On 10 January 1411, slightly more than a year later, the *Shi-lu* reports the arrival of another group of envoys from Bengal, again accompanied by representatives from Samudra-Pasai: 'King Zain Al-'Abidin of Samudra-Pasai, and King Ghiyath al-Din of Bengal sent envoys including Ma-mo-xi-zhi and others to present local products as tribute. They were given gifts according to rank'.[28]

Nothing is known about the envoy Ma-mo-xi-zhi, who may have been from either Samudra-Pasai or Bengal. These envoys could not have arrived on Zheng He's ships, as there were no arrivals of expeditions at the time. Moreover, none of the major expeditions returned to China in the month of January or in any of the winter months. The ships had to travel on the favourable winds afforded by the monsoon, and could sail to China only in the late summer or early autumn.

The next set of envoys from Bengal came later in the same year. It is possible that they arrived with the returning third expedition, which docked only 11 days after the Bengalis landed on Chinese soil (24 June 1411). However, this seems unlikely for two reasons. First, they are not mentioned in the *Shi-lu* entries that report the arrival of that expedition

[26] *Ming Tai-zong shi-lu*, 97.4a: 1285.

[27] The identification of Zain Al-'Abidin was made by J.V.G. Mills, *Ma Huan: Ying-yai Sheng-lan. 'The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores' [1433]*, Cambridge, 1970: 117, n. 5.

[28] *Ming Tai-zong shi-lu*: 1420 (111.3b).

and its passengers' presentation of tribute.[29] Second, these envoys are said to have arrived in Tai-cang, the port at the mouth of the Yangzi river where Zheng He's ships assembled before going out to sea: 'Officials of the Board of Rites announced that envoys from Bengal coming to bring tribute had on this day arrived at Tai-cang. The Emperor ordered messengers sent to banquet and entertain them.'[30]

No other envoys are mentioned as arriving in Tai-cang.[31] If the Bengali envoys had come with one of the major expeditions, it is difficult to see why they alone would have stayed and been entertained at Tai-cang rather than proceeding to Nanjing with the others. In a previous article I have suggested that this embassy's arrival at Tai-cang might have been part of a trend developing during the middle of the Yong-le period of distributing the hospitality extended toward foreigners to outlying regions because of the heavy burden that was being placed on Nanjing.[32] This instance, and the next to be discussed, are the only ones I have found in the *Shi-lu* concerning this period where we are told that the foreigners moored at ports along the Yangzi river before arriving in Nanjing.

These envoys seem to have stayed in China until at least 5 October. Emissaries from both Bengal and Calicut attended banquets on 18 September 1411 and 5 October, and no other envoys from either place are mentioned as arriving in the interim. At both banquets, the main guest was the foreign dignitary King Bai-li-mu-su-la (Parameswara) of Melaka, but there is no suggestion that they arrived together. The October record provides the names of the venues for two final banquets: the Long-jiang and Long-tan hostels. These were located in a part of the city close to the shipyard, perhaps near the dock where the envoys would board ship for their return journey. They were probably being treated to official send-off banquets on their way home. Because foreigners were not free to come and go in China as they wished, they must have been escorted there deliberately.[33] As these envoys had already been in China for nearly

[29] The arrival is noted in the entry for 6 July 1411 in *Ming Tai-zong shi-lu*: 1477–78 (116.2a–b), and the tribute presentation is described in the entry for 5 August 1411: 1487–88 (117.2a–b).

[30] *Ming Tai-zong shi-lu*: 1475 (116.1a).

[31] This was the port at which treasure ships congregated and from which the maritime expeditions set sail.

[32] Sally K. Church, 'Changing Attitudes Toward Foreigners from Overseas: An Investigation into the Policy of the Ming Emperor Yongle, 1403–24', *Nan-yang xue-bao* (Journal of the South Seas Society), vol. 56, Dec. 2002: 45–73, esp. 57–58.

[33] There seems to have been a rather tight control over the movements of foreigners in China as strict rules were articulated in some of the sources, although it is difficult to

four months, could the Chinese officials have been politely nudging them on their way home? There was no outgoing expedition in 1411, so they must have sailed on a small foreign or unofficial ship. This is the first time that the king of Bengal is not named. Sometimes the names of rulers are omitted in these records, but it is most common to include them. One wonders if there is any significance to the omission; perhaps there is a connection with the events related in the next entry.

The report of the next diplomatic mission from Bengal is significant not only as the second one to dock at a port along the Yangzi before travelling to Nanjing, but also, and more importantly, because it provides evidence of a change of ruler in Bengal. The mission's arrival is recorded in two stages. First, for the date 12 July 1412, we have the report that the envoys were welcomed and entertained at Zhen-jiang, about 40 miles downstream from Nanjing, again having arrived together with envoys from Samudra-Pasai: 'Officials of the Board of Rites announced that envoys from Samudra-Pasai and Bengal, who were coming to bring tribute, were about to arrive. The Emperor ordered messengers to be sent to Zhen-jiang prefecture to banquet and entertain them.'[34]

The second entry occurs about two weeks later (30 July 1412), after the envoys arrived in Nanjing. It is a record of the audience of the Bengali envoys with the emperor at which they announced the death of their king:

> Saif al-Din, son of King Ghiyath al-Din of Bengal, sent his official Ba-yi-ji and others to present tribute and local products, and to announce that his father had died. The emperor ordered that a ceremonial document for the official deputation of envoys be prepared, and ordered that Saif al-Din inherit the title of King of Bengal. He gave them brocade and fine silk, gauze, coloured silk and suits of clothes, bed-curtains, umbrellas or parasols, porcelain and other such items.[35]

The Bengali ambassadors did not report the death of the king until they arrived in Nanjing and were in the presence of the emperor. The official Ming history says that the envoys announced the sad news 'just as they

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tell how stringently these rules were followed. The ritual for the reception and handling of foreigners during Ming rule was set out in great detail by emperor Hong-wu and recorded in *Ming Tai-zu shi-lu*, Zhong-yang yan-jiu-yuan series, Taibei, 1962–67: 884–905 (45:4a–15a).

[34] *Ming Tai-zong shi-lu*: 1597 (129.1a).

[35] *Ibid.*: 1603–1604 (129.4a–4b).

were about to perform their duties' [既將事*ji jiang shi*], which probably means just before they began performing whatever rituals were required for the audience.[36] Ba-yi-ji is probably Bayazid. The historian Haraprasad Ray claims that the Chinese text is in error here, and that the name Saif al-Din in this passage is a mistake for Shihab al-Din Bayazid Shah (r. ca. 1412–14), Saif al-Din's successor.[37] However, there is no indication of corruption in the Chinese record here, and the *Shi-lu* correctly expresses the relationship between Saif al-Din and Ghiyath al-Din as one of son to father, which is confirmed in Bengal's historical sources. It is natural that Saif al-Din, as the son of someone who had an ongoing relationship with China, would send an envoy to announce his father's death. Shihab al-Din was indeed on the throne at the time of this embassy's arrival in China. However, the theory that the Chinese record-keepers made an error of this magnitude is difficult to accept, given the general reliability of the *Shi-lu* in recording the names of foreign rulers.[38] When Ray blames 'Chinese ears unaccustomed to foreign names' and 'imperial recorders . . . far removed from the political scene of these foreign lands', one wonders why the *Shi-lu* would make such blatant errors in the case of Bengal while recording information so reliably in the records of other countries that are equally distant, and linguistically and culturally different. It seems that the entry should be read straightforwardly, with the envoy's name as Bayazid, and Saif al-Din on the throne, or at least thought to be on the throne. I shall return to the discrepancy in the dates later.

Upon the death of a foreign ruler, it was routine for the emperor to send a special envoy to the country in question to pay condolences. Either together or separately he would also send an envoy to enfeoff [*feng* 封]

[36] Zhang Ting-yu, *Ming shi*, chapter 326: 8446.

[37] Ray, *Trade and Diplomacy*: 62. If we construe the name Bayazid as referring to the sultan in this passage, which is a forced reading, it is just possible that the envoy identified himself to the Chinese authorities as the *pei-chen* 陪臣 or minister of the Sultan Bayazid, and that the Chinese officials misinterpreted Bayazid as the envoy's own name and title by mistake. However, this leaves us with the problem that there are now two rulers designated as kings in this passage: Shihab al-Din Bayazid Shah and Saif al-Din. Interestingly, Bosworth identifies Bayazid Shah as the second son of Ghiyath al-Din (the first being Hamza Shah or Sayf al-Din, using his spellings), and indicates that Bayazid's name was also as Sayf al-Din. Having two successive rulers with the same name is another possible solution to the problem. See Bosworth, *The New Islamic Dynasties*: 307. As yet I have found no evidence from the Bengal side to corroborate this but would be grateful to know if it exists. I would like to express my thanks to Geoff Wade for helping me with the interpretation of *pei-chen*.

[38] This is one of the main points made in Wade's writings on the Ming *shi-lu*, including those mentioned in note 1 above.

the successor as the new king. There are many passages that record such instances in the *Shi-lu*. The use of the word *feng*, or an equivalent such as *ming* 命 in this context, meaning 'order' or 'appoint', shows the extent to which China modelled its foreign relations on feudal relations between vassal and subjects. The Chinese record-keepers were fastidious in their use of the terms 'king' [wang 王], 'chieftain' [*tou-mu* 頭目, *qiu* 酋, or *qiuzhang* 酋長] for the rulers of countries. The authorities would not enfeoff a man as king unless they were convinced that he was the legitimate king. (This is ironic at the time of Yong-le's reign because he himself was a usurper.) A ruler might be called a 'chieftain' if there is some doubt about his legitimacy, or before he is properly enfeoffed as a true king or *wang*. The Sultan Ghiyath al-Din seems always to have been called a king in the Ming records—this is true for other foreign rulers as well, who were already in power when tributary relations with them began. However, their heirs, like Saif al-Din, needed to be properly installed and provided with all the appropriate documents, robes and seals of office. The gifts presented to the envoys this time were particularly lavish because of the solemnity of the occasion.

Saif al-Din probably placed a high value on establishing relations with China. By all accounts his power at home was under threat. A complex political situation was brewing in Bengal during this period, and because the historical records are sparse and contradictory, even down to the dates of the sultans' reigns, it is difficult to know exactly what happened. The archaeological record, in the form of coins issued during the reigns of the various sultans, provides evidence to establish who was on the throne at any given time, but not necessarily who wielded the power. In cases where sultans were weak and used as puppets by local magnates, the numismatic evidence leaves us in the dark as to what was really going on. This seems to have been the case during the years following Ghiyath al-Din's death. A Hindu noble and landowner (*zamindar*) named Raja Ganesh began to gain power around 1410 or earlier, and became the *de facto* ruler of Bengal during the reigns of Saif al-Din and his successors. Richard Eaton calls this a separate dynasty—the Raja Ganesh dynasty (1415–33), which splits the Ilyas Shahi dynasty into two.[39]

The coins tell us that Saif al-Din reigned only about a year, from 1410, when his father died, until 1412, and that Shihab al-Din Bayazid Shah reigned from 1412 to 14. What about the discrepancy between the numismatic evidence which says that Saif al-Din stopped ruling in 1412

[39] See Eaton's table of dynasties, *Rise of Islam*: 324.

and the Chinese record, which names him as king in the middle of 1412? To explain this we need to remember that the information included in the Chinese records about foreign countries came for the most part from the envoys. They supplied information about where they were from and who was king in their home country to Chinese officials on their arrival in China. Chinese authorities did not know these details about events or rulers in foreign countries, nor did they particularly care, except in a few cases. They evidently cared about the accuracy of their records—given the overall accuracy of the *Shi-lu* in recording information about foreign countries as demonstrated in the writings of Geoff Wade. Given this situation, why would envoys from Bengal have provided the Chinese officials with the incorrect name of their king? The easiest explanation is that the envoys had left Bengal while Saif al-Din was still on the throne and did not know that his reign had been cut short. It is more difficult to explain the reference to Saif al-Din as king in 1414, and I shall return to that later.

There is a discrepancy in the Chinese records concerning the identity of the envoy who was sent from China to pay condolences and enfeoff the new king. Fei Xin 費信, an attaché on some of the voyages, contradicts himself on this matter in his work, *Xing-cha sheng-lan* 星槎勝覽. In the list of the various maritime journeys he made during his career, included in his introduction to the first part of the work, Fei Xin describes his second trip as follows (quoting from the translation of Mills and Ptak, hence the different romanisation):

> In the 10th year of Yung-lo (1412), in the suite of the assistant envoy, the Vice Director Yang Ch'ih, and others, I went to Bengal and other countries to publish the imperial edicts and confer rewards. In the twelfth year of Yung-lo (1414), I returned to the capital.[40]

[40] Fei Xin 費信, *Xingcha shenglan* 星槎勝覽, Feng Cheng-jun 馮承鈞 (ed.), Taibei, 1938; J.V.G. Mills and Roderich Ptak (tr.), *Fei Hsin: Hsing-ch'a sheng-lan. The Overall Survey of the Star Raft*, Wiesbaden, 1996: 31. Fei Xin sailed on four voyages. His first was Zheng He's third, from 1409 to 1411. The second was this one to Bengal. His third was on Hou Xian's next mission to Bengal, from 1415 to 1418. However, Fei Xin probably went only as far as Bengal and then returned, reaching the capital in 1416. His trip home may have coincided with a large group of envoys from Hormuz and other countries who are reported as presenting tribute on 19 November 1416. See *Ming Tai-zong shi-lu*, 1963 (182.1a); Yong-le 14, eleventh month, first day, *mou-zi*. His fourth journey was on the seventh of Zheng He's expeditions, 1431–33. Mills and Ptak, *Fei Hsin*: 31–32.

Whereas in this part of his text Fei Xin says that Yang Chi (Ch'ih) 楊敕, also known as Yang Min 敏, was the voyage's commander, later, in his chapter on Bengal, he says that the eunuch Hou Xian 侯顯 commanded both the 1412 and the 1415 voyages to Bengal:

> In the 10th year of Yung-lo (1412) and in the 13th year of Yung-lo (1415)—on both these occasions—the emperor ordered the Grand Eunuch Hou Hsien and others to lead an [imperial] fleet to [that country], with [imperial] instructions and gifts to be bestowed upon the king, his wife, and the local chieftains.[41]

It is difficult to explain why Fei Xin contradicts himself on the matter of which envoy was sent in 1412. Perhaps it was a simple error in one of the passages, or some other mistake occurred in the transcription or printing process. As Roderich Ptak conjectures, the error is probably in the Bengal chapter because Hou Xian was sent in 1413 on a mission to Nepal, and he is unlikely to have had time to go to both countries in so short a time.[42] The eunuch who commanded the 1412 voyage was therefore probably Yang Chi.

Who was on the throne of Bengal when Fei Xin went there in 1412? Unfortunately, he does not give the name of the ruler. Moreover, his account of Bengal could be a description of any one of his several visits to Bengal and cannot be taken as a description of any particular date. He refers first to the 'principal chief' (*qiu-zhang*) and then, when describing the palace and the banquet, to the king (*wang*). One might perhaps deduce that he used these separate terms because there was more than one political leader in evidence, but one cannot be certain. Despite the care usually taken with these terms in the *Shi-lu*, Fei Xin could have been using them synonymously; he does not clarify what he means by them. Eaton cites Fei Xin's description of the ceremonial welcome given to the Chinese envoys, which he dates to 1415, to show that during the Ilyas Shahi dynasty, a period when the Muslim sultans of Bengal had achieved political independence from Delhi, the rulers looked beyond their Indo-Turkic

[41] *Ibid.*: 73.

[42] *Ibid.*: 73, n. 208. Nepal was usually reached by land via Tibet and Bengal by sea during Ming rule. One wonders if Hou Xian could have travelled onland between the two countries in the same mission, but history does not relate. One also wonders if Chinese officials knew how close the two places were.

conquerors in Delhi to Persia for their rituals and symbols of authority.[43] It struck Eaton, as an accomplished scholar of Bengal, that he was reading a description of activities in a Muslim court rather than a Hindu court. This is corroborated by the mention of roast beef being served at the banquet.[44] Thus, despite the power of Raja Ganesh, it was probably still the Muslim court that received the Chinese ambassadors and probably the Muslim sultan who had been enfeoffed by China as the new king. Unfortunately, we do not know which ruler he is describing. It is interesting that he mentions the Hindus very much as an afterthought. Near the end of the article he says: 'They have a class of people called "Hindu"; they do not eat beef, and whenever they drink and eat, men and women [are in] separate places.'[45]

The 1412–14 voyage to Bengal is probably the same one on which envoys were sent to Bengal's neighbours Delhi and Jaunpur.[46] The *Shi-lu* does not name these envoys, but it does provide the precise day of 16 November 1412 for the departure of the voyage: 'An envoy was sent to present an edict giving instructions to the king of Di-li (Delhi), Ma-ha-mu (Mahmud), and the king of [Shao]-na-pu-er (Jaunpur), Yi-bu-la-jin (Ibrahim). They were given velvet brocade, gold-embroidered flowered silk, coloured stiff silk and other such items.'[47]

Another entry in the *Shi-lu* dates Hou Xian's departure for Nepal to the second lunar month of 1413 (11 March 1413), making it even less likely that he could have gone to both Bengal and Nepal, as the two journeys were only a few months apart: 'Grand Eunuch Hou Xian was sent to present gifts and imperial edicts and to give to the King Sha-di-xin-ge (Saktisimha) of Ni-ba-la (Nepal), and King Di-yong-ta (Khopva), brocade silk and the like.'[48]

[43] Eaton says that Fei Xin's description of the welcoming ritual contains elements of Persian court ceremony. See his *Rise of Islam*: 47–49. Eaton uses W.W. Rockhill's translation, 'Notes on the Relations and Trade of China with the Eastern Archipelago and the Coasts of the Indian Ocean during the Fourteenth Century', *T'oung Pao*, vol. 15, 1914: 419–47, and 16, 1915: 61–159, 236–71, 374–92, 435–67 and 604–26. A modern translation can be found in Mills and Ptak, *Fei Hsin*: 74–76.

[44] Mills and Ptak, *Fei Hsin*: 74–75. Bagchi misinterprets the text and thinks it says beef was prohibited from the banquet. He concludes that the banquet was hosted by Hindus instead of Muslims. Bagchi, 'Political Relations': 108.

[45] Mills and Ptak, *Fei Hsin*: 76.

[46] Ray also comes to this conclusion. See his *Trade and Diplomacy*: 78.

[47] *Ming Tai-zong shi-lu*: 1631–32 (133:2a–b).

[48] *Ibid.*: 1665 (137.3a). Khopva is another name for Bhatgaon. See L. Carrington Goodrich and Chaoying Fang (eds), *Dictionary of Ming Biography*, New York, 1976: 522–23.

The November 1412 journey to Bengal could not have coincided with any of the seven major maritime expeditions, as it left between the return of the third expedition (July 1411) and the departure of the fourth (the end of 1413). Similarly, the return of the Bengal voyage in 1414 was not in conjunction with any of Zheng He's expeditions. When it returned to China, the fourth expedition had just left, not to see Chinese shores again until August 1415.

Now we come to the high-point of the story—the arrival of the giraffe of Bengal. It probably came to China on the return voyage of Fei Xin's 1412–14 journey. Again we are immediately confronted with the question of why the Chinese records still refer to Saif al-Din as 'king' at a time when the numismatic evidence indicates that Shihab al-Din Bayazid Shah had been on the throne for three years. We can no longer claim that the envoys did not know about the change in power because of the long journey—the envoys who brought the giraffe must have come straight from Bengal in late 1413 or 1414. The confused situation in Bengal is still our main obstacle to a clear explanation. Most historians agree that Raja Ganesh rose to power after Ghiyath al-Din's death, and suggest that he ruled through official Muslim rulers like Saif-al-Din and his successors who acted as his puppets. They do not agree on what happened next. Modern historians who take the Chinese records into consideration adopt different attitudes toward them. P.C. Bagchi trusts the Chinese records thoroughly and invents a theory of dual government in an attempt to reconcile Bengal's history with them. The dual government, he says, consisted of a Muslim regime (made up of Ghiyath al-Din and Saif al-Din) and a Hindu regime (led by Raja Ganesh and his son Jadu) operating simultaneously.[49] This theory allows Saif al-Din to survive in the background during the ascendency of Raja Ganesh and to reappear in the Chinese records of 1414 and 1421. Ray, on the other hand, relying primarily on the numismatic evidence, dismisses the Chinese records as mistaken, arguing that Saif al-Din could not have been part of a dual government because he issued no coins after 1412. The two authors' viewpoints seem to hinge on their impression of the reliability of the Chinese records, and whether they prefer to mould Bengal's history to fit these records, or dismiss the records because they do not fit what they take as facts.

[49] Bagchi, 'Political Relations': 108; The *Encyclopedia of Islam* calls it the 'Islamised Hindu line of Radja Ganesa'.

Probably the answer lies somewhere between the two; I do not claim to know what actually happened. The Chinese records have been shown to be reliable in so many cases, but like all products of humanity they are probably not infallible. By the same token I feel that we should continue to search for a better explanation before dismissing the details given in the *Shi-lu* as mistakes. I still entertain the possibility that it was Saif al-Din who presented the giraffe. He would have had several good reasons to send such a special gift to the emperor at this time. First, he would have wished to thank the emperor for sending condolences on the death of his father. Second, he was grateful to have China's official recognition and sanction of his power—it probably conferred some legitimacy on him at a time when his legitimacy had been called into question. Third, he probably wished to secure China as an ally in case of threats from his enemies. There were plenty of domestic enemies and there was soon to be a foreign enemy as well.

There is one final question concerning the 1414 presentation of the giraffe. This is the use of the word *qi-lin* in the Chinese records to designate this animal. A *qi-lin* is somewhat like the 'unicorn' of the West—a mythical animal that from ancient times has been seen as an auspicious sign. Perhaps the best summary of the cultural significance of the *qi-lin* in China is found in James Legge's footnote to the poem 'Lin zhi zhi' 麟之趾 [The Feet of the Lin] in the 'Zhou-nan' 周南 section of the *Shi-jing* 詩經 or *Book of Poetry*:

> The *lin* is the female of the *qi*, a fabulous animal, the symbol of all goodness and benevolence; having the body of a deer, the tail of an ox, the hoofs of horse, one horn, the scales of a fish, etc. Its feet are mentioned [in the poem] because it does not tread on any living thing, not even on live grass; its forehead because it does not butt with it; and its horn because the end of it is covered with flesh, to show that the creature, while able for war, wills to have peace. The *lin* was supposed to appear, inaugurating a golden age . . . .[50]

According to legend, because the Yellow Emperor followed the Way and practiced virtue, a *qi-lin* appeared during his reign. The *qi-lin* is associated with the key Confucian virtue of benevolence (ren 仁), and is both *ren* or benevolent itself and responsive to the manifestation of *ren*

[50] James Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, vol. 4: *The Shih Ching*, 1st edn, 1898 (rpt), Taibei, 1972: 19.

in humans.[51] Ma Huan notes that it also 'eats unhusked rice, beans, and flour-cakes'.[52]

It is odd that the Chinese officials would describe the giraffe of Bengal as a *qi-lin*. Traditional representations of a *qi-lin* look like a cross between a deer or horse and a lion or dragon; it looks nothing like a giraffe (see Figure 2).

Unfortunately, we do not know how the word *qi-lin* came to be used for the giraffe. J.J.L. Duyvendak speculates that the Chinese envoys suggested to the Bengal ruler that a *qi-lin* 'would be a welcome gift' in an 'attempt to flatter the Emperor'.[53] However, he has no evidence on which to base this speculation. It seems odd that Fei Xin, who probably travelled on the expedition that brought the giraffe to China, does not use the word *qi-lin* at all in his account of the countries he visited. Instead, he used the term *zu-la-fa* 祖剌法, a transliteration of the Arabic word *zurafa*,[54] to describe giraffes he saw in Dhufar and Makkah (Mecca). He also does not speak of giraffes in his chapter on Bengal.[55] Given that there was a perfectly good word that could have been used instead of *qi-lin*, the choice of the latter seems to have been deliberate. However, we simply do not know the circumstances behind the identification. Both words—*qi-lin* and *zu-la-fa*—are used in the 1431 inscriptions that were found on the Chinese coast (the Liu-jia-jiang and Chang-le inscriptions) in reference to a tribute gift from Aden on the fifth expedition (1417–19): 'The country of A-dan (Aden) presented a *ch'i-lin* of which the

[51] Many of these associations are mentioned in a poem by the scholar Jin You-zi 金幼孜 (1368–1431) entitled 'Rui-ying zan' 瑞應贊 concerning the three *qi-lin* that appeared during the Yong-le period, the first from Bengal, the second from Malindi (Melinde) in 1415, and the third from Aden in 1419, at the time when he was writing. The poem is quoted in Yan Cong-jian's *Shu-yu zhou-zi lu*, chapter 9: 317. Mills says that Malindi could possibly be identified as present-day Mozambique. See his *Ma Huan*: 205.

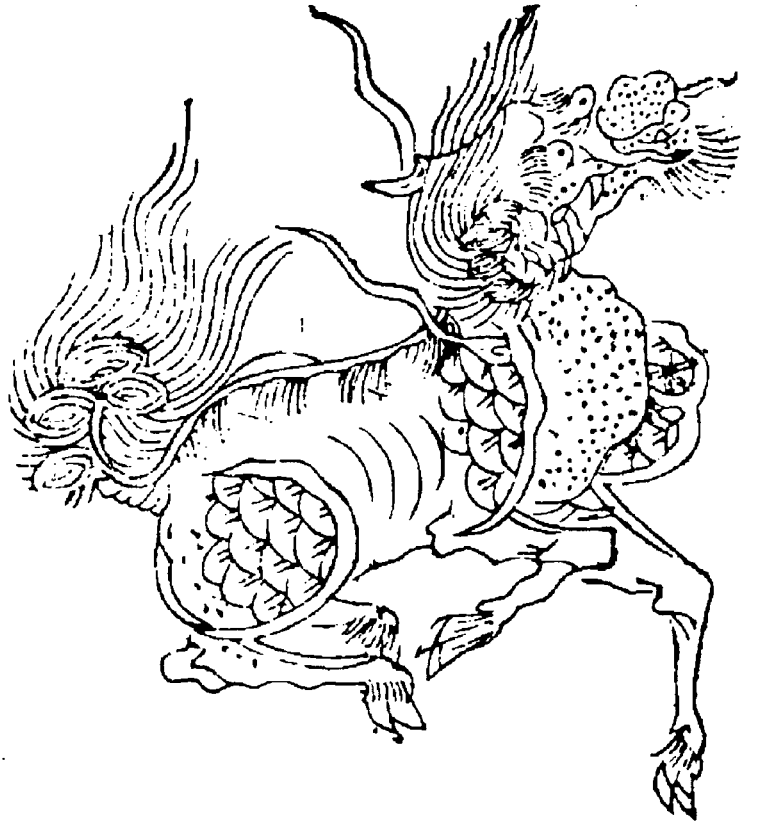
[52] Mills, *Ma Huan*: 158.

[53] Duyvendak, 'True Dates': 380, 405. There is also a theory proposed by G. Ferrand that the word *qi-lin* was chosen because it sounded like the Somali word for giraffe, *giri* or *geri*. See his 'Le nom de la giraffe dans le *Ying yai cheng lan*', *Journal Asiatique*, vol. 12, 1918: 155–58.

[54] The use of a transliterated Arabic word goes back even earlier. Zhao Ru-gua uses the word *zu-la* 徂蠟 for giraffe in his *Zhu-fan zhi*: 128.

[55] Some sources mention it in their discussions of Malindi but not in those of Bengal. Fei Xin's visit in 1414 was not his last; therefore he may have forgotten about the presentation of the giraffe by the time he wrote his account, which was probably in 1436. Or he may have omitted mentioning it because he knew the giraffe of Bengal was not native to Bengal, but to Malindi.

Figure 2
***Traditional image of a* qui-lin *in the* Sancai tuhui 三才圖會**



native name is *zu-la-fa*.'[56] We also do not know how, when, or why the giraffe travelled to Bengal from east Africa, where it must have originated. Therefore, for the time being, I cannot improve on Duyvendak's suggestion that the giraffe was probably an accession present to Saif al-Din from a country on the east coast of Africa. This country was probably Malindi, because envoys from Malindi presented a giraffe to China the following year.[57]

Whatever the circumstances, it is clear that the giraffe was presented to the emperor as a *qi-lin*. The emperor, however, was probably not fooled to think it was really a *qi-lin*. When asked if he wanted his officials to send congratulatory memorials on the auspicious appearance of this animal during his reign, he refused. Playing down the association between the giraffe and the *qi-lin*, he articulated the orthodox Confucian view that it is more important to maintain good government than to be concerned with supernatural signs: 'If my ministers devote themselves to their work day and night, and exhaust all efforts to govern the empire and bring benefit to it, the empire will be at peace. Even without a *qi-lin* there is nothing that hinders us from governing well.'[58]

We should probably remain sceptical as to whether Yong-le actually said these words, as the editors of the *Shi-lu* may have added them to boost his image as a good Confucian ruler who spurns supernatural signs and concerns himself only with benevolent government for the people.[59] It is probably true that he refused to receive any congratulatory memorials, because none of these have been found. This passage and a similar one that occurs in the *Shi-lu* after the presentation of Malindi's giraffe the following year, are quoted or paraphrased in many different Chinese sources. It is difficult to know whether to see their repetition in the sources as corroboration of their authenticity, as an indication of various editors' thoroughness in whitewashing Yong-le's image, or simply as a repetition of a good story. Despite the emperor's dismissive attitude toward

[56] Duyvendak, 'True Dates': 348 and 354.

[57] *Ibid.*: 380.

[58] Yong-le 12, ninth month, *mou-yin* (eighth day), 21 September 1414, in *Ming Tai-zong shi-lu*: 1787–88 (155.1a–b).

[59] We know that the editors of the *Shi-lu* made some changes in the text to construe history a certain way. Why do we then emphasise its reliability? The reason is that while Chinese editors were extremely concerned about the way in which emperor was portrayed regarding domestic matters, they were less concerned about events in foreign countries. Wade says 'these prejudices [of the *Shi-lu* compilers] more frequently affected writing on domestic, rather than foreign affairs'. See his 'Melaka in Ming Dynasty Texts': 34.

receiving congratulatory memorials, he must have been impressed and flattered enough by the gift to commission the painting. Moreover, the collected works of several high officials of the time, many of whom did not agree with the emperor's ambitious foreign policies, contain poems in praise of the giraffe.[60]

Perhaps to thank Bengal for the gift of the giraffe and to maintain good relations with that country, the emperor sent another embassy to Bengal in 1415. The entry in the *Shi-lu* of 13 August 1415, recording the departure of the commander of the expedition Hou Xian, reads as follows: 'The Grand Eunuch Hou Xian and others were sent as envoys to Bengal and various other foreign countries. The king was given velvet, brocade, gold-embroidered fine patterned silk, stiff silk, and other such items.'[61]

This entry in the *Shi-lu* comes immediately after one announcing the return of Zheng He's fourth expedition on the previous day (12 August 1415). Since the next major expedition did not leave until 1417, these outward-bound envoys to Bengal could not have travelled on any of Zheng He's expeditions. Nor did Hou Xian come back on one, as none of the expeditions returned in 1418. Duyvendak suggests that while Hou Xian returned in 1418, Fei Xin came home early in 1416,[62] and that the large group of foreigners arriving on 19 November 1416 may have come on Fei Xin's return voyage. Another possibility is that they are the same envoys who arrived in Nanjing a year earlier, with the return of the fourth expedition; in this case, the announcement in November 1416 would perhaps refer not to their arrival but to their audience with the emperor, for which, because of his visits to Beijing and his Mongolian campaigns, they may have had to wait almost an entire year.[63]

[60] These included Xia Yuan-ji 夏原吉 (1366–1430), Jin You-zi and Yang Shi-qi 楊士奇 (1365–1444).

[61] *Ming Tai-zong shi-lu*: 1859 (166:1a).

[62] Duyvendak, 'True Dates': 383. Fei Xin's return in 1416 is corroborated by the summary of his voyages that he gives at the beginning of *Xing-cha sheng-lan*.

[63] This was the period in Yong-le's reign when he was involved in building the new capital in Beijing, which was to become the official capital of the realm in 1421. Yong-le was spending increasingly more time in Beijing, and was also personally engaged in various military campaigns on China's northern borders for which he used Beijing as a base. The emperor simply may not have been available for an audience with the foreigners until November 1416. During the period from 1414 to 1416 he visited Nanjing only once, and this was in late 1416. It is possible that the foreign ambassadors had been waiting for him ever since their arrival in 1415. The tribute presentation took place only five days after he arrived in Nanjing, on November. If they had arrived in China in November 1416, on the other hand, they could not have come on any of Zheng He's voyages. See Church, 'Changing Attitudes': 65.

After the tribute mission bringing the giraffe in 1414, there is a gap of about six years when there were no envoys from Bengal. During this time Bengal was still beset with internal turmoil, but now external invasion threatened. Affronted at being ruled by 'infidels' and fearing that the Muslim regime might be completely overthrown, the Sufi mystic Nur Qutub 'Alam wrote a letter to Sultan Ibrahim Sharqi of neighbouring Jaunpur requesting that he send troops to Bengal to quash Raja Ganesh.[64] Because it had designs on Bengal, Jaunpur was happy to intervene. When Jaunpur began to invade, Raja Ganesh, according to some sources, approached Nur Qutub 'Alam and worked out a deal with him, whereby Raja Ganesh's son Jadu, then 12 years old, would convert to Islam and rule as a Muslim ruler. Nur Qutub 'Alam seems to have accepted this compromise and attempted to call off Jaunpur's attack. Jadu converted to Islam in 1414 or 1415, and ruled as a Muslim ruler until 1432 under the name Jalal al-Din Muhammad Shah. However, Jaunpur did not withdraw immediately. Nur Qutub Alam's letter was probably written in 1414, and Jaunpur was still threatening Bengal in 1420.

Jalal al-Din came to power in 1415, but his first few years were fraught with difficulty, first from the invasion of Jaunpur and second from the rise of other Hindu groups who succeeded in usurping power in many regions of the empire. The disruption was such that Jalal al-Din issued no coins for the years 1417–18. After this, however, he reestablished control and reigned as a strong ruler for his remaining years.

By 1420 Bengal had sought help against Jaunpur from China.[65] The *Shi-lu* contains an announcement, dated 16 October 1420, of a special mission from China to Jaunpur to persuade Ibraham Sharqi to withdraw:

> The eunuch Hou Xian and others were sent as envoys to Jaunpur. At that time the king of Bengal had accused Jaunpur's king Ibrahim of attacking his borders several times. Therefore Hou Xian and others were sent to deliver

[64] Ibrahim Sharqi is Shams al-Din Ibrahim Shah (r. 1402–40). This letter is discussed and quoted in S.H. Askari, 'New Light on Rajah Ganesh and Sultan Ibrahim Sharqi of Jaunpur from Contemporary Correspondence of Two Muslim Saints', *Bengal Past and Present*, vol. 57, 1948: 32–39.

[65] It is not clear how Bengal conveyed their request for help to China; perhaps it was via Hou Xian, who returned in 1418. In the *Ming shi*'s record of the same incident, it says that Bengal asked for help in 1420, but I was unable to find any evidence that Bengali envoys came between Hou Xian's return to China and the date of this notice, October 1420. Zhang Ting-yu et al. (eds), *Ming shi*, chapter 328: 8447–48.

> edicts to instruct them to stay within their own borders. They were given paper money, and the chiefs of the Diamond Treasury Throne (*Vajrasana*) regions they passed through also received paper money.[66]

There is evidence that Bengal also sought help from Shahrukh (r. 1405–47), the Timurid ruler of Herat, against Jaunpur around the same time.[67] Thus, the events in Bengal were felt over an extremely wide area—not only in China and eastern India but also in Central Asia. Less than one month after this notice in the *Shi-lu*, on 7 November 1420, a mission from Bengal to China is reported. It would have been rather too soon for them to be thanking China for intervening on their behalf, but perhaps it was to bring an advance payment: 'The chieftain Zhe-la-li-ding of Bengal sent the envoy Sa'id Muhammad and others to present famous breeds of horses. They were given paper currency.'[68]

This is the first time a ruler of Bengal named Zhe-la-li-ding appears in the *Shi-lu*. It must refer to Jalal al-Din Muhammad Shah (r. 1415–32). Note that he is called a chieftain (*tou-mu*) rather than a king (*wang*) in this passage, thus indicating a question about the legitimacy of his rule. One wonders how the word *tou-mu* came to be used here. Did the Chinese authorities apply this term to him because they did not recognise him as the legitimate ruler? Or did the envoy intimate to the Chinese authorities that he was not the legitimate ruler? This particular envoy, Sa'id Muhammad, had come to China several times previously under the reign of Ghiyath al-Din, whose line had now been bypassed in Bengal. The envoy may have expressed reservations about Jalal al-Din's regime. Many people disliked Jalal al-Din. Although he was a Muslim and a sultan, he

[66] *Ming Tai-zong shi-lu*: 229 (1b: 2226). The region of Jaunpur was called Throne of the Diamond Treasury because it was the place where the Buddha had supposedly achieved spiritual enlightenment. The report of this event in the *Ming shi* also adds that because it was so far away, Jaunpur did not send [regular] tribute to China. A short description of the reception of the Chinese envoys in Jaunpur can be found in Luo Ri-jiong's 羅日褧, *Xian-bin lu* 咸賓錄, Yu Si-li 余思黎 (ed.), Zhong-wai jiao-tong shi-ji cong-kan, vol. 11, Beijing, 2000: 77.

[67] In 1442, Abd al-Razzaq, a diplomat who served Shahrukh, wrote that the latter had intervened in the Bengal–Jaunpur crisis at the request of the sultan of Bengal, and that subsequently Shahrukh had directed Jaunpur to stop attacking Bengal. Jaunpur was intimidated and obeyed. See Abd al-Razzaq, 'Matla' al-sa'dain', in H.M. Elliot and John Dowson (eds), *The History of India as Told by its Own Historians*, vol. 4, Allahabad, 1964: 99; Eaton, *Rise of Islam*: 53, n. 55; Ray, *Trade and Diplomacy*: 81.

[68] *Ming Tai-zong shi-lu*: 2229 (230.1a).

had a Hindu background, and his father was the notorious Raja Ganesh.[69] It is doubtful that the Chinese authorities knew whether he was a legitimate ruler or not, given the complexity of the situation in Bengal. Rather than an expression of the Chinese officials' opinion, therefore, I tend to read the use of this term as an expression of the envoys' opinion—the Chinese officials probably wrote down what the envoys said.[70] This may also have been combined with the fact that Chinese authorities had no record of Jalal al-Din as ruler. In other words, they had not given him legitimacy.

Saif al-Din reappears as king again in the record of the following year (on 4 June 1421) when another tribute mission arrived: 'King Sai-fu-ding of Bengal sent the envoy Wu-du-man and others to present rhinoceros horn, ambergris, and other items. They were given official caps and sashes, robes, and paper money according to rank.'[71]

This designation of Saif al-Din as king strikes one as highly unlikely, unless it was a different king named Saif al-Din, and Bengal's record of kings does not indicate another one at this time.[72] The Chinese record thus conflicts sharply with Bengal's numismatic evidence. Bagchi's argument using the dual government to explain the discrepancy seems to stretch history too far. Ray obviously does not accept it, and simply attributes the mention of Saif al-Din to the earlier 'contamination' of the record, that is, to the earlier use of this name in 1412 and 1414.[73] This argument does not seem to hold either. It is not my impression from the

[69] The fact that historians call the regime that followed his the 'restoration' of the Ilyas Shahi dynasty, indicates the considerable feeling during Jalal al-Din's reign that a restoration was needed.

[70] Ray seems to think that the use of the term 'tou-mu' was a sign that the Chinese had taken sides. See his *Trade and Diplomacy*: 64. He also suggests that it might be a translation of the title 'amir', but this does not seem possible. There are many instances of the term 'tou-mu' in the *Shi-lu* and other texts where the word 'amir' would not have been appropriate. In the *Shi-lu* of this period, it is used for a Burmese leader in 1403, chieftains of the Wild Jurched in 1406, the Chinese pirate Chen Zu-yi 陳祖義 who wreaked havoc in Palembang in 1406, a leader in Melaka in 1431, and a powerful political figure in Makkah (Mecca) in 1433. It is also used for the leaders of Chamyndy, Menkent, Sairam and Shahrukhia in 1414. It thus has a wide range of application. Cf. Tatsuro Yamamoto, 'International Relations between China and the Countries along the Ganga in the Early Ming Period', *Indian Historical Review*, vol. 4(1), 1977: 13–19.

[71] *Ming Tai-zong shi-lu*: 2274 (237.1b).

[72] Jalal al-Din seems to have been solidly in power from 1418 to 1432 if one follows the numismatic evidence.

[73] Ray says that '[t]he name Saifuddin recorded for the next year is undoubtedly due to contamination of the earlier record', in *Trade and Diplomacy*: 62.

recent studies of the *Shi-lu* that Chinese record-keepers would slavishly copy the name of the previous ruler when it differed so substantially from reality. Perhaps the envoys told Chinese officials that the ruler was Saif al-Din, or perhaps Saif al-Din had somehow survived as an important political figure. Is it possible that Chinese officials remained committed to Saif al-Din because he was the one they had legitimised, and would not accept Jalal al-Din? The question remains unexplained at present and will have to await further study. As before, we note that the date of this embassy's arrival does not correspond to the dates of any of Zheng He's expeditions; the sixth expedition left China in the autumn of 1421 and returned in 1422. The name Wu-du-man is probably Othman or Osman, but we know nothing more about this envoy.[74]

Ma Huan tells us that during the sixth expedition the fleet divided at Samudra-Pasai and part of it, commanded by a eunuch Zhou, went on to Aden.[75] In the *Shi-lu* for the date 8 October 1423 we have the following record: 'The assistant commander of the capital guard Zhou Ding and others from Jiang-yin and other places, totalling 992 people, who had been sent as envoys to Bengal and other countries, returned. The Crown prince ordered the Board of Rites to reward them with paper money according to rank.'[76]

Ray's discussion of this passage is based on the interpretation that this Zhou Ding was the same person as the eunuch Zhou who sailed first to Aden, and on the way back to China stopped at Bengal. Ray assumes that the 992 people are envoys from the places Zhou visited on the Arabian peninsula and in India. However, the passage says that the 992 are people who had been sent, presumably from China, as envoys to Bengal and other countries, and were now returning. Moreover the eunuch Zhou, possibly Zhou Man 周滿, may not be the same person as Zhou Ding.[77]

[74] *Ibid.*

[75] Mills, *Ma Huan*: 155.

[76] *Ming Tai-zong shi-lu*: 2401 (263.1a). The date of this passage given in Zheng and Zheng, *Zheng He xia Xi-yang zi-liao hui-bian*, vol. 2: 1069, is the twenty-eighth day of the ninth month. This should be corrected to the fourth day of the ninth month. The number of travellers is also given as 93 in Zheng and Zheng instead of 992.

[77] There was a person named Zhou Ding (1401–87) who held some military posts, particularly in the Zheng-tong period (1436–49). Could he have served on some of the expeditions when young? Some collections of his poems and other writings survive. Another set of visitors from Bengal came in February 1424 and presented tribute. As they seem to have been monks or clerics rather than diplomats, I have omitted them from this discussion. See *Ming Tai-zong shi-lu*, 21 February 1424: 2426 (267.2b) and 25 February 1424: 2427 (267.3a).

Emperor Yong-le died in 1424 while on a campaign against the Mongols. After this there were not many diplomatic exchanges with Bengal. There were none during Hong-xi's reign. Under Xuan-de, Bengal is listed among a number of countries who sent representatives to China in 1429,[78] but there do not seem to have been any others, and no envoys are mentioned in the context of the last voyage (1431–33). Two Bengali embassies arrived in China during the Zhengtong 正統 era (1436–49). By this time in Bengal, Jalal al-Din had been succeeded by Shams al-Din Ahmad Shah, who ruled for only one year. After a short chaotic period with several different rulers issuing coins, Nasir al-Din Mahmud I restored the Ilyas Shahi dynasty in 1433 and reigned until 1459. His reign was a strong one, and both of these embassies were sent to China during his reign. The first, which arrived on 19 October 1438, brought another giraffe—thus making a total of five giraffes that had been received from foreign countries since the expeditions began[79]—and some exotic animals: 'Bengal sent the emissary Xia-er-ye-mei and others to bring tribute consisting of a giraffe (*qi-lin*), white parrots, red parrots, doves and other such items. A banquet was held for them and they were given gold-embroidered robes and paper currency, according to rank.'[80]

The name of the ruler is not given here, and nothing is known about the envoy. Ray suggests that his name could be Ziaul Ahmad or Ziaur Rahman.[81] The following year, on 23 April 1439, another Bengali envoy came, together with others from Melaka and the Ryukyu islands.

> Bengal sent the emissary Na-ding, Melaka sent the envoys Wei-jia-zhe-la and Tuo-man-da-la, and the Ryukyu islands sent the envoy Liang Shuibao, and others. They all came together to present tribute of horses and local products. A banquet was held for them and they were given paper currency and other items.[82]

In a similar argument to that about Bayazid mentioned earlier, Ray says that the person designated as emissary from Bengal, Na-ding, is actually

[78] Zhang Ting-yu, *Ming shi*, chapter 9: 120. The others included Java, Champa, Ryukyu, Hami, Turfan and Samarkand. I have not found evidence in the *Shi-lu* of a Bengal embassy arriving this year.

[79] In addition to the giraffe from Bengal in 1414, from Malindi in 1415, and from Aden in 1419, there was also one from Makkah (Mecca) in 1433. They are all called *qi-lin* in the records.

[80] *Ming Yingzong shi-lu*: 905 (47:1a).

[81] Ray, *Trade and Diplomacy*: 62.

[82] *Ming Yingzong shi-lu*: 1018 (53:5b).

Sultan Nasir al-Din Mahmud Shah (r. 1435–59) who reigned at the time. Again, I am sceptical about this, as it does such violence to the Chinese text. The terminology used here in this passage is exactly the same as in hundreds of other passages in the *Shi-lu*, and the phrase concerning Bengal is exactly parallel to those concerning Melaka and Ryukyu in the same passage.[83] Here the term *shichen* 使臣 or envoy is used to describe Na-ding, so we do not even have the possible ambiguity we encountered earlier with the term *peichen*. Moreover, when the *Shi-lu* records the gifts the emperor bestowed on the envoys of Bengal and Melaka a week after this (1 May 1439), the same term is used in the same way. This second passage can serve as a check for the first:

> The emperor ordered the envoy Na-ding from Bengal and the envoy Wei-jia-zhe-la from Melaka, to receive imperial orders (of office), as well as gold-embroidered patterned twill, brocade lengths and such things, to take back to their country and give to their king and his consorts.[84]

It thus seems highly unlikely that the Na-ding in this passage can be referring to Sultan Nasir al-Din, and much more natural to read it straightforwardly as the name of the envoy. Ray's use of the same type of argument in this case as in the case of Bayazid casts doubt on his argument concerning Bayazid as well.

Conclusion

From what has been said here we can draw a number of conclusions. First, it seems that the relationship between the maritime expeditions and China's contemporaneous diplomatic and tributary interchange with individual countries might not have been as close as is normally thought. Certainly, the evidence presented shows that the diplomatic and tribute missions to and from Bengal hardly ever coincided with the outgoing or incoming voyages of the seven major expeditions. For the most part they seem to have been launched as separate affairs, not as part of Zheng He's expeditions.[85] There was also a set of specialised personnel (Yang

[83] Ray, *Trade and Diplomacy*: 62.

[84] *Ming Yingzong shi-lu*: 1024 (53:8b).

[85] Eaton's statement that two out of the seven major expeditions visited Bengal is in error. See his *Rise of Islam*: 49, n. 40. Bagchi also makes the assumption that some of the major expeditions went to Bengal ('Political Relations': 101, 105). In fact Zheng He

Chi, Hou Xian and Fei Xin, but not Zheng He) who tended to go to Bengal, separate from those who travelled on the seven major expeditions, though there was some overlap. The same is true of some of the other countries—particularly for the islands to China's south-east, such as the Philippines (Sulu), Brunei and such areas—and for Japan and the Ryukyu islands. These regions were reached on separate expeditions, perhaps sometimes on offshoots or side expeditions branching off from the major seven. Despite the separateness of relations with these countries, these relations probably would not have been conducted with such vigour, and certain policies might not have come about, if it had not been for the expeditions going on at the same time. Yet, the assumption of some historians, that foreign activity during this period had to be related to the expeditions simply because they were going on simultaneously, needs to be re-examined.

The voyages themselves were not entirely as monolithic as they are sometimes portrayed in textbooks and general accounts. The first voyages were largely self-contained—as far as we know they simply went to their destination and came home again, without dividing or taking any side trips. Later on, however, the fleets began to divide into sub-fleets or branch fleets in some of the major ports and visited other countries from these ports.[86] Perhaps this was a natural progression as Chinese sailors and commanders became more accustomed to navigating the Indian Ocean and felt comfortable about taking more risks. With over 250 ships in each fleet, they could subdivide into smaller fleets and travel in different directions. After the first few expeditions, there would have been several experienced commanders who could assume the role of commander on the various branch expeditions.[87]

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probably never visited Bengal. Ray gives a good discussion of question of whether Zheng He ever went there. He concludes that Zheng He did not, but that Ma Huan did, on the last expedition. See *Trade and Diplomacy*: 48–49, 64–69.

[86] For example, we know that there was a division of the fleet during the sixth expedition (1421–22): 'When they reached the country of Semudera [Samudra-Pasai], the fleet was divided, and the eunuch Zhou arrived there in command of several treasure-ships.' See Mills, *Ma Huan*: 155. This matter is also discussed in Zheng and Zheng, *Zheng He xia Xi-yang zi-liao hui-bian*, vol. 2: 1001, editor's note.

[87] Certain sections of the 'Mao Kun map', a navigational chart that probably resembles those used on voyages, suggest divisions in the fleet, particularly for reaching relatively isolated destinations off the main route. A copy of this map is preserved in the *Wu-bei-zhi* 武備志, compiled by Mao Yuan-yi 茅元儀, grandson of Mao Kun 茅坤 (1511–1601), from the materials in Mao Kun's library and offices. Mao Kun served as governor of Fujian province and was avidly interested in coastal geography. See esp. fol. 19v, the

Not only were the voyages themselves more complex than it may first seem, but the Indian Ocean was also a bustling place before, after, and during the expeditions, with ships from many different countries coming and going in all directions. The official Ming mariners were in fact latecomers on a stage that was already quite lively and full. If we confine our view of the Indian Ocean trade network of the time to the activities of the seven Chinese maritime expeditions alone, we shall see only a small part of this big picture. For one thing, the official records of arrivals and departures of foreign and Chinese envoys in the *Shi-lu* and elsewhere tell only part of the story. They show only the officially-sanctioned activity of the Chinese government-sponsored expeditions. This was probably only a hint of what was really going on, which included many unofficial voyages of private traders from many different countries, and some from China herself. The extent to which this is true is evident in the clampdowns on private shipping that were instituted from time to time.[88]

Bagchi suggests that the policy of sending envoys to China was more strongly supported by Raja Ganesh and Jalal al-Din than by Ghiyath al-Din and Saif al-Din. However, the evidence seems to point to the opposite conclusion. Ghiyath al-Din began the policy of sending envoys to China, and even sent them on an annual basis for a time. I have mentioned why Saif al-Din would have had strong reasons for continuing this policy. Jalal al-Din, on the other hand, did not send envoys to China between 1414 and 1420, when he was consolidating his power. Only when help was required against Jaunpur did he send a single, isolated mission, perhaps as advance payment for China's help. Possibly cultural differences and the lack of traditional connections were stronger reasons for the failure of relations to develop with Jaunpur. It does not seem that distance is an adequate reason, as travelling to Jaunpur must have been easier than travelling to Nepal, especially because they were able to use the sea route as far as Bengal.

The appearance of Saif al-Din in the Chinese records after 1412 suggests that he was still alive and had some sort of power, but we cannot say for certain whether this was true, for lack of evidence. No coins were issued in his name after 1412. The use of the term *tou-mu* for Jalal

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thirty-fifth in the series of 40, showing routes from Sri Lanka around the tip of India to Cochin and Kozhikode, westward to the Maldives and Lakshadweep, and further westward to Africa. It is reproduced in Mills, *Ma Huan*: 290–91.

[88] See the proclamations issued by Yong-le's successor Hong-xi, cracking down all such activity. See *Ming Ren-zong shi-lu*, Zhong-yang yan-jiu-yuan series, Taibei, 1962–67: 15ff (Yong-le 22, eighth month, *ding-si*, 1A.3a–8b).

al-Din may indicate that because the Chinese government had granted legitimacy to Saif al-Din, they would deny it to Jalal al-Din because they could only allow one legitimate ruler at a time. Perhaps one of the envoys told the authorities that Jalal al-Din was a usurper or otherwise illegitimate. My efforts here have by no means completely unravelled the complex political situation in Bengal at the time.

Returning briefly to the various questions raised at the beginning of this paper, I think the main reasons that the emperor commissioned Shen Du's painting of the giraffe were probably the rarity of the animal in China and its unusual appearance—its pure majesty. Its arrival at the Chinese court seems to have created a major spectacle.[89] Another important reason was the association of the giraffe with the ancient Chinese mythical animal, the *qi-lin*.[90] Whereas the emperor seems to have played down the supernatural dimension, he still wished to commemorate its arrival, and the painter Shen Du made the association between giraffe and *qi-lin* explicit both in the style of the painting and in the poem inscribed at the top. Shen Du painted in a delicate, refined style, giving the giraffe a benign, gentle face, a delicate and slender body with a detached, otherworldly majesty. Its spots are not longer spots but are transformed into a fish-scale motif that is characteristic of the *qi-lin*. The poem clearly associates the appearance of this *qi-lin* with the presence of a benevolent ruler on the throne:

> When a sage possesses the virtue of utmost benevolence so that he illuminates the darkest places, a *qi-lin* appears. This shows that Your Majesty's virtue equals that of Heaven; its merciful blessings have spread far and wide so that its harmonious vapors have emanated a *qi-lin*, as an endless bliss to the state for a myriad, myriad years.[91]

Whereas to some the image of a giraffe arriving from a foreign land was fascinating and auspicious, to others it signified extravagance and waste. Some government ministers felt that too much attention and money had been spent on acquiring exotic things that were of no use to the people, and that this was detrimental to the people's welfare and the empire's financial security. There was a traditional Confucian injunction

[89] It was the subject of numerous poems, including the poem written on the painting by the artist. The poem is translated in the section on 'The Auspicious Giraffe' by Duyvendak in 'True Dates': 399–405.

[90] The emperor had refused to have congratulatory memorials written on this occasion.

[91] Adapted slightly from Duyvendak's translation, 'True Dates': 403.

against seeking and valuing foreign things,[92] and some of the high officials of Yong-le's reign expressed similar sentiments. Hong-xi vigorously opposed the expeditions and did what he could to stop them. Later on, Liu Da-xia 劉大夏, the official responsible for burning the relevant documents that were in the official archives, denigrated the items brought from foreign countries as 'nothing but betel, bamboo staves, grape-vine, pomegranates, ostrich eggs, and such odd things'.[93]

The image of the giraffe of Bengal has now come to epitomise the cosmopolitan spirit of Yong-le's reign, when for a brief time during the Ming dynasty China reached out beyond its borders and welcomed the strange and exotic into its empire. Patricia Ebrey uses the painting to illustrate this cosmopolitan spirit in her chapter on the Ming dynasty in *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*.[94] It shows China's openness toward foreign people and things during this period. The mention of foreign people calls attention to the man, presumably from Bengal, in the lower right-hand corner of the painting, holding the giraffe. The painter treats him differently from the giraffe. While the giraffe is tamed, and sinified in the act of being captured on paper by Chinese brush and ink, the man is hardly sinified at all. He is somewhat unkempt, dressed in foreign clothing, with a dark moustache and beard, a turban and bulging eyes.[95] The giraffe, as part of the natural world, was perhaps easier for the painter to assimilate into the Chinese cultural sphere than the representative of the human world who has customs and dress that perhaps

[92] One of the most revered Confucian classics, the *Shujing* 書經 or *Book of History*, in a chapter entitled the 'Hounds of Lü' 旅獒, says: 'A prince should not . . . value strange things, . . . fine birds and strange animals he will not nourish in his kingdom. When he does not look on foreign things as precious, foreigners will come to him . . .' James Legge (tr.), *The Chinese Classics*, vol. 3—*The Shu Ching*, 1898 (rpt.), Taibei, 1972: 349.

[93] Duyvendak, 'True Dates': 397.

[94] Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*, Cambridge, 1996: 211.

[95] The original of this painting has been lost. Several copies were made and are markedly different from one another. In one there are two men holding the giraffe instead of one, and they look more sinified than the one shown here. Despite their somewhat Chinese appearance, Berthold Laufer still describes them as 'two turbaned and bearded Arabs . . . clad in long, red, girdled gowns and high boots'. The giraffe in the illustration reproduced in Laufer also looks bulkier and less delicate than the one shown here. See Laufer, *The Giraffe in History and Art*, Chicago, 1928: plate IV and 48–49. Laufer notes that giraffes were first used as gifts to foreign rulers by ancient Egyptians and continued to be used in this way all over the world, especially during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

seemed strange. Yet, Shen Du included him in the painting, and this is the important point. He welcomed him into the vision along with the giraffe. This acceptance of the 'other', however different, into the Chinese world is characteristic of the welcoming atmosphere of the Yong-le period.

The contrast between the treatment of the giraffe and that of the man illustrates two aspects of the cosmopolitanism of the time: the desire to assimilate the foreign into the Chinese, and the fascination with, and relative openness toward the 'other'. These two were to some extent in tension with each other, one focusing inward and the other focusing outward, both with parallels in the realm of foreign relations. The desire to assimilate the 'other' is manifested in the tribute system, through which China attempted to bring foreign countries into its own world order. The tendency to reach out and accept the 'other', while acknowledging its differences, is expressed in China's willingness to welcome and entertain the new and the 'strange' (*qi* 奇)—a tendency that reached new, albeit shortlived heights during the maritime expeditions. It was seen as risky and dangerous by the conservatives in power, and it was this spirit of reaching out that was curtailed, while the tribute system survived. I would argue that this outward-looking tendency was shortlived not because of any lack of curiosity or interest on the part of the Chinese people toward things foreign, but for political reasons; China was forced to change its policies because they were causing a drain on its finances and distracting the government from what needed to be its first concern, the welfare of its people.

The presentation of the giraffe is a picturesque moment in time that came about through a complex conjunction of historical events and forces both in China and in Bengal, extending over many years and across a large geographical area. There is a linear chain of cause and effect leading to it, beginning with the death of Bengal's ruler, continuing through the various missions back and forth between the two countries, and culminating in the gift of the giraffe. In turn, the gift cemented a friendship that led to China's involvement in a triangular relationship with a third country, when it intervened against Jaunpur on Bengal's behalf. China's intervention to stop Jaunpur's invasion also became a point of connection between China and Shahrukh's Timurid empire in Herat. One cannot help imagining the possibility that envoys from China and Herat met in Jaunpur during this time, though no such event is recorded. This is not the only connection between China and Herat at the time. On the day the giraffe arrived in China from Bengal in 1414, Emperor Yong-le's overland diplomatic mission to Herat, led by the envoy Chen Cheng 陳誠, had

almost reached that city.[96] The foreign relations China conducted by sea have traditionally been studied separately from those conducted over land. Perhaps something can be gained by breaking down the barriers in our thinking between the two and examining these points of intersection more closely.

[96] Chen Cheng made three diplomatic trips to Herat as Chinese ambassador to the Timurid empire. These were in 1414–15, 1416–18, and 1418–20. His embassy was responsible for carrying letters between Shahrukh and the Yong-le emperor for six years, from 1414 to 1420. On these letters, see Joseph F. Fletcher, 'China and Central Asia, 1368–1884', in John K. Fairbank (ed.), *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations*, Cambridge, MA, 1968: 206–24.