

January 2019

## The Soft Power Practices of the Ming Dynasty and Zheng He's First Voyage

Peter Weisser  
CSUSB

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/history-in-the-making>



Part of the [Asian History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Weisser, Peter (2019) "The Soft Power Practices of the Ming Dynasty and Zheng He's First Voyage," *History in the Making*: Vol. 12 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/history-in-the-making/vol12/iss1/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the History at CSUSB ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in History in the Making by an authorized editor of CSUSB ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@csusb.edu](mailto:scholarworks@csusb.edu).

## The Soft Power Practices of the Ming Dynasty and Zheng He's First Voyage

By Peter Weisser

*Abstract: This article will examine the soft power aspects of Zheng He's life as well as the soft power efforts of the People's Republic of China in the modern day, using Zheng He as an example to show the historical parallels between the two while examining the motivations of the PRC which is a search for legitimacy. This article will look into the parallels that exist between Zheng He and the soft power practiced in the fifteenth and twenty-first centuries within China. Furthermore, the perceptions and meanings of soft power in China may be different than that of other nations or other periods of time.<sup>1</sup>*

In the study of world politics today, there is a great deal of focus on the soft power aims of the People's Republic of China. Soft power is defined as a persuasive approach to world politics, usually accomplished through diplomacy, with influences both political and cultural in aim. Joseph S. Nye, the academic who first

---

<sup>1</sup> The following article contains text and excerpts from my longer scholarly work "The Admiral 's Carrot and Stick" which was a long and complex study regarding the relationships between Soft Power as practiced by the Ming-era Admiral Zheng He and its relationship to the soft power practices of the modern PRC. This article is a shortened version which focuses exclusively on the first voyage of Zheng He and the soft power practices of the Ming Dynasty along with some modern-day examples of the PRC continuing a soft power policy that reaches all the way back to the early dynasties of China, with specific focus on the Ming.

coined the term, describes soft power as the “carrot and stick” approach to world politics.<sup>2</sup> There is, however, a very common misconception that the PRC’s push for soft power is a recent affair. Indeed, China has been seen as a rising power in the last few decades but has taken a unique view of its own power as non-hegemonic. From the point of view of the PRC, they are a non-hegemonic power and claim that the amount of soft power that the PRC has gained in the last few decades has been a result of China’s peaceful rise. The perception of what soft power is, however, may differ from that of western nations. For example, soft power from the perspective of Beijing may include force so long as it’s not military in nature. This is not to say however that “charm” does not have a role in Beijing’s usage of soft power; indeed the massive cultural influence that Beijing holds is quite considerable and is used in negotiations through cultural soft power.

In the last few years, the United States under the Trump administration has moved away from international cooperation and the possibility that Trump is ceding America’s global leadership role is becoming more apparent. As the United States seems to be pushing away from globalization, and as America has been willing to push away former allies and interests, China under President Xi Jinping has been more than willing to fill the void. Historically, China has long considered the nineteenth century as its “century of humiliation” when colonial powers forced a series of unequal treaties during the two Opium Wars with Great Britain. In the first years of the twentieth century the anti-foreign Boxer Uprising aftermath also forced humiliating concessions on the waning Qing Dynasty. In 1911 they would fall from power leaving space for the Republic of China to take over.

First, in 1927, the Nationalist movement arose, and later in 1948, Mao Zedong’s Communists came into power, making the twentieth century a moment of upheaval in China’s history.

---

<sup>2</sup> Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Soft Power, The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs), 5.

Beijing's international relations today are often motivated by an urge to recapture the lost glory of the "Middle Kingdom" and through soft power methods China has found a way to accomplish this by finding ways to improve Beijing's international image. While some scholars would refer to "soft power" as a collective term for Beijing's motivations, there are problems with portraying these motivations as purely an issue of soft power versus hard power. What Beijing and the PRC's perception of soft power is can be very different from that of the United States and the European Union, for example. Beijing's perception of its soft power in some cases may blur the lines of the original concept of soft power as originally defined. In any case, it seems that the term soft power may be a problematic concept to give simple definitions to. It will be important to distinguish and unpack what soft power means, as well as discussing the problematic concept of soft power itself and critically examine if Beijing's diplomatic practices can be considered soft power at all.

The use of soft power in China's history has hardly been a recent development. During the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), Admiral Zheng He (1371-1433), a eunuch military commander and explorer, exercised soft power during the rule of Zhu Di, the Yongle Emperor (1402-1424) and third emperor of the Ming Dynasty. Zheng He traveled across the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, along the way visiting numerous countries in an effort to show both the wealth and power of the Ming Dynasty, a charm offensive in its own right. In the modern day, author Joshua Kurlantzick noted that China's soft power resembles that of a "lion and not a mouse."<sup>3</sup> This form of power may be different from traditional soft power in that it is used by authoritarian regimes as a form of coercing other countries viewpoints to the regimes point of view. According to The National Endowment for Democracy, a Washington based think-tank, this is defined as "sharp power."

---

<sup>3</sup> Joshua Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power is Transforming the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 6.

China has declared to the rest of the world on many occasions that it takes a path of peaceful development and is committed to upholding world peace and promoting common development and prosperity for all countries. At the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century and on the occasion of the ninetieth anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China (CPC), China declared solemnly again to the world that peaceful development is a strategic choice made by China to realize modernization, make itself strong and prosperous, and make more contributions to the progress of human civilization. Going forward, China will unswervingly follow the path of peaceful development.

This idea of cooperation and common development has been a crucial part of China's recent success in diplomacy within the last decade. Rather than seeing China as an antagonist on the world stage, the PRC has allowed a more benevolent and non-interventionist image of the country to be formed by its new state propaganda. This new view allows Beijing to wield its soft power in a way that creates an environment for former adversaries to become partners. Whether or not the Communist system of the PRC will survive going forward in its present form under the face of such pragmatism will also be something to consider in the coming decades.

### **The Emperor and the Admiral: The Life and Adventures of Zheng He and its Impact on Soft Power Relations**

Before covering the specifics of Zheng He's life, it would be prudent to present a basic overview of the early history of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), its first two emperors, and the rise of Zhu Di, the third emperor of the Ming Dynasty and Zheng He's patron. By looking at these historical figures we will see the kind of world Zheng He lived in, and what the political realities were that he faced. The Ming Dynasty was the last ethnically Han dynasty in the history of China. The previous dynasty, the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) founded by Kublai Khan (1215-1294) was

overthrown in 1368 by Zhu Yuanzhang, the leader of the rebellion against the Yuan, who would come to be known as Ming Taizu (r.1368-1398) first emperor of the Ming Dynasty. Like many founders of previous dynasties, Taizu was of humble birth, but he was able to rally support against the hated Mongols. He succeeded in his civil war despite the odds, against the more militarily powerful Yuan.<sup>4</sup> Once the Yuan Dynasty fell in 1368, Zhu Yuanzhang began to consolidate power in his new capital of Nanjing (Nanking) and began to build a state infrastructure. The Confucian scholars benefited the most from this new arrangement of power while the court eunuchs felt a decrease in power due to Zhu Yuanzhang's distrust of them.<sup>5</sup> Many of Zhu Yuanzhang's closest friends and allies took up the position of commanders of Ming's armies. But this arrangement would not last long. After the purges of 1380, many of the merit-based nobility in the empire were executed and Zhu Yuanzhang's sons would remain as the most powerful military commanders in the empire, commanding vast armies from their fiefs. Zhu Yuanzhang's government was, like many, autocratic and incredibly harsh in the face of rebellion. The Great Ming Code were the written laws of the Ming Dynasty and as seen from the following excerpt, the punishment for treason against the throne was harsh indeed, showing the considerable punishment any potential rebel would have:

Rebellion, (that is plotting against the dynasty) and lese-majeste (that is plotting to desecrate imperial ancestral altars, mausoleums, and palaces). All conspirators regardless of whether they are leaders or followers shall be executed by slicing. Their grandfathers, fathers, sons, grandsons, older brothers, younger brothers, and those who live with them regardless of surname differences; sons of

---

<sup>4</sup> William Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition, Vol. 1* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 779.

<sup>5</sup> Shin-Shan Henry Tsai, *Eunuchs of The Ming Dynasty* (Albany: State University of New York Press. 1996), 13.

paternal uncles and brothers regardless of whether they have the same registration; if they are sixteen years of age or over, regardless of serious or crippling disease, they shall be executed. Those fifteen or below, mothers, daughters, wives, and concubines older and younger sisters, sons' wives and concubines, shall be given as slaves to the households of titular nobility. Their property shall be confiscated by the government...<sup>6</sup>

### **The Origins of the Ming Dynasty**

The rise to power of Zhu Yuanzhang demonstrates the interplay between hard and soft power. Zhu Yuanzhang used the power of charm and persuasion when he was a peasant soldier rebelling against the Yuan Dynasty. Once Zhu Yuanzhang came to power however, he used coercion and strict autocratic policies to cement his rule. This is a common strategy throughout history with autocratic rulers who often play the liberator at first but become the tyrant once their power is achieved. Zhu Yuanzhang was very conscious of how he was able to overthrow the Yuan through popular rebellion and became increasingly paranoid that the same might be done to him. In 1380, he executed Chancellor Hu Weiyong on charges of conspiracy and forming a faction (a capital crime) and thereafter abolished the chancellery.<sup>7</sup> In the wake of this event, Zhu Yuanzhang established the Jinyiwei (Embroidered Uniform Guard) as his secret police and they would assist considerably in helping Zhu Yuanzhang in the purges during his later reign.

---

<sup>6</sup> Da Ming Lu, "Great Ming Code," as cited in William Theodore de Barry and Irene Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition, Vol. 1* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 784.

<sup>7</sup> Edward L. Dryer, *Zheng He and the Oceans of the Early Ming Dynasty* (New York: Pearson Education), 17.

Zhu Yuanzhong fathered twenty-six sons and sixteen daughters through the empress Ma and his numerous concubines.<sup>8</sup> One of these sons, Zhu Di (r.1402-1424) the future Yongle emperor, was born from Zhu Yuanzhang's lesser consorts. Zhu Di would eventually become the third emperor of the Ming Dynasty but not until after winning a successful civil war that would not end until 1402 against his nephew Zhu Yunwen (1377-1402) the future Jianwen emperor, who would rule as the second emperor of the dynasty.

### **The Early Life of Zheng He and Zhu Di's Ascension**

In the aftermath of the toppling of the Yuan Dynasty in 1368, the Mongols and remnant Yuan forces retreated to Yunnan, with the newly created Ming Dynasty hot on their heels. In 1374, Zhu Yuanzhang demanded that the Mongols and their leader Basalawarmi submit to Ming rule and sent envoys to convey this message. The envoys were killed, and in response the Ming forces under General Fu Youde invaded Yunnan. Fu Youde's 300,000 strong army successfully invaded Yunnan and by 1382 had captured the provincial seat of Kunming after which the rebellion's leaders committed suicide to avoid capture. Fu Youde then began a reign of terror against the local population, killing hundreds of thousands of Miao and Yao tribesmen.<sup>9</sup> Another common method used against the population was the kidnapping of young boys to serve as eunuchs in the imperial court. One of these boys was a young ten-year-old child by the name of Ma He. Ma He's surname Ma, according to Dryer, often but not always indicated Muslim faith.<sup>10</sup> Also, according to Dryer, Ma He's grandfather and father both had the name Haji indicating they had completed the Hajj, a pilgrimage to Mecca. While Ma He's family were of Chinese

---

<sup>8</sup> Hok Lam Chan, "Ming Taizu's Problem with His Sons: Prince Qin's Criminality and Early-Ming Politics," *Asia Major* 20, no.1 (2007): 45.

<sup>9</sup> Louise Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1405-1433* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 57.

<sup>10</sup> Dryer, *Zheng He*, 22.

Muslim extraction, Ma He was known to mostly practice Buddhism in his religious life and took a Buddhist name.<sup>11</sup> The boy was taken by Fu Youde and was subjected to castration. According to Levathes, in China during this time period castration was accomplished by the quick stroke of a knife that cut off both the penis and testes of the victim with a plug left in the urethra.<sup>12</sup> After this brutal act, Ma He was put into the household of the Prince of Yan, Zhu Di.

Growing up in the Prince of Yan's court, Ma He rose through the ranks to become an able military commander, one of the commanders during the siege of Beijing in 1399.<sup>13</sup> Early in his life at court, Ma He befriended Zhu Di, and the young prince and the eunuch had become very close friends. Ma He served as a boyhood companion and later in life as a rising military general. These early skirmishes in Mongolia were formative years for Ma He and were crucial for him to receive the necessary training for a military career. Most importantly, the campaigns and hard fighting forged an ever-closer bond between Zhu Di and Ma He. These campaigns would also give Zhu Di's troops an opportunity to "cut their teeth" in warfare. The veterans would prove crucial to the 1399-1402 Ming Civil War, especially the Mongol defectors of the Uriyangqad tribe who fought for Zhu Di in the civil war. In particular, a Mongol leader by the name of Nagahachu who surrendered to Zhu Di during his campaign against Inner Mongolia. Zhu Di treated Nagahachu and his men like honored guests and soon convinced them to join his forces. These expert horse-archers would prove to be a strategic asset in the civil war.<sup>14</sup> This consolidation of forces and military power showed that Zhu Di was thinking in the long term, indeed his chances of success in the beginning of the war was nowhere near as dramatic and climactic as the final siege of Nanjing in January 1402.

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>12</sup> Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas*, 57.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 124.

Zhu Di had left Beijing with his generals; among them were Ma He and Zhu Di's new Uriyangqad allies. With the help of two defected commanders who agreed to open the gates, Zhu Di, Ma He and the rebel army marched through Nanjing's Jinchuan gate on July 17, 1402. By the time Zhu Di had reached the Imperial palace, the Jianwen Emperor's last loyal servants and guards had set the Imperial Palace ablaze. A charred corpse was presented to Zhu Di as the corpse of his nephew, but the corpse was so badly burned it could not be identified. According to the *Comprehensive Mirror of the Ming Dynasty*, a work written by Chinese historian Xia Xe, the Jianwen Emperor Zhu Yunwen very likely died in the conflagration, although there were rumors he had escaped, most famously as a monk, as cited by Leavthes.<sup>15</sup>

Despite these rumors Zhu Di ascended to the Dragon Throne on the 17th of July as the Yongle (perpetual happiness) Emperor. Zhu Di, being an usurper was quick to find ways to give himself legitimacy and prove that the Mandate of Heaven had indeed been granted to him. However, the rumors of his nephew's survival haunted him and so he almost immediately started financing searches for his possible whereabouts or conclusive evidence of his death. Zhu Di's eunuch general Ma He for his part also rose in stature due to his invaluable generalship during this campaign. Ma He was elevated by Zhu Di to the position of Taijian (Grand Director) of the Directorate of Palace Servants, one of the highest-ranking positions a Palace Eunuch could attain. This also allowed Ma He the right to wear the red robes of a high-ranking Eunuch of the court, a symbol of his new status. In 1404 on New Year's Day in commemoration of Ma He's defense of the Zheng Village Dike during the civil war, Zhu Di conferred upon Ma He the name of Zheng in honor of his role in this battle.

### **The Practice of Ming Soft Power on Zheng He's First Voyage**

---

<sup>15</sup> Xia Xe, *Comprehensive Mirror of the Ming Dynasty* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), Chapter 14.

While Zhu Di now had full and absolute power as emperor, he was still in a very tenuous position. First of all, Zhu Di and the entire empire were painfully aware that he was an usurper. This was nothing new in the history of China, indeed the concept of the Mandate of Heaven, an ideal similar to the European “Divine Right of Kings” seemed to support it. The Mandate of Heaven was a concept started in the Zhou Dynasty (1046 BC–256 BC) that justified a ruler’s divine right of rule and the right of rebellion against an unjust ruler who would have lost the mandate in the eyes of the divine. The tricky part in this case was that the loss of the Mandate of Heaven usually applied to one dynasty overthrowing another, rather than a usurpation of the same dynasty, although Zhu Di was hardly alone in being the usurper of the same dynasty. The Mandate of Heaven in a more modern interpretation can be seen as analogous to popular public support of the ruling dynasty, the fact that the heavens had shown support by allowing the new Emperor to be victorious in a sense proved his legitimacy in the eyes of the people. Nevertheless, the possible survival of Zhu Yunwen, the Jianwen Emperor, disturbed and worried Zhu Di greatly. Not only were there rumors that he had escaped disguised as a monk, but there were other rumors that Zhu Yunwen had escaped overseas, plotting his return to China.<sup>16</sup> Regardless of whether this was true or not, Zhu Di was in desperate need to prove his rule as legitimate and there was no better way to gain legitimacy than to have it acknowledged by rulers of China’s neighbors.

In 1403, still new on the throne, Zhu Di ordered the construction of the Treasure Fleet, a vast armada of war and trade ships that would sail around the Indian Ocean and collect tribute and acknowledgement of the Ming Dynasty’s superiority from China’s neighbors<sup>17</sup> The military usage of this fleet and the threat of force in a hard power sense could not be denied, but Zhu Di’s plans intended a more diplomatic, soft power tone. These ships

---

<sup>16</sup> Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas*, 88.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

would display the vast wealth and power of the Ming and its new emperor, showing the benefits of token submission under the tribute trade system. The rumors of the Jianwen's survival overseas indeed may have been a motivation for these journeys although according to Yang Wei, that was very unlikely as the cost of launching seven voyages because of a mere rumor would not have been very feasible.<sup>18</sup>

In autumn 1405, after over a year of planning and construction Zheng He's grand armada sailed out of Longjiang towards the state of Champa (Vietnam). While in Champa, Zheng He traded in Ming porcelain and silks. Moving on from Champa, the armada made its way to the island of Java. The Chinese and Javanese had endured difficult relations in the past, culminating in the 1377 execution of several Chinese envoys—sent by China in order to force the recognition of the state Palembang, a rival of the Javanese—by Javanese King Hayam Wuruk.<sup>19</sup> This was, of course, an affront to the Dragon Throne, and trade as a result had dwindled to nothing; Zheng He was determined to reverse this.

On his way to Java and Sumatra, Zheng He had avoided the state of Palembang, which out of all the city states was the wealthiest.<sup>20</sup> Their wealth came as a result of a war between the Javanese city states who had claimed Palembang as their own and had installed a Javanese controlled puppet government in the city. The inhabitants of Palembang had thrown out the Javanese but during this time of upheaval, the notorious Chinese pirate Chen Zuyi took control of the city and made Palembang a stronghold of piracy and lawlessness, similar to the "Pirate Republic" of Nassau in the early eighteenth century during British rule in the Bahamas. On his return to China, Zheng He would deal with Chen Zuyi but the time was not quite right for a full military engagement, especially when Zheng He was trying to repair relations with the

---

<sup>18</sup> Yang Wei, "Admiral Zheng He's Voyages to the "West Oceans,"" *Education about Asia* 19, no. 2 (Fall 2014): 1.

<sup>19</sup> Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas*, 98.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

Javanese, showing that at least for now, soft power diplomacy would win the day.<sup>21</sup>

After spending some time in Java and Sumatra trading, the fleet moved on to the kingdom of Ceylon (Sri Lanka), where Zheng He met with a much different reception than he did in Java, which was rather positive compared to that of Ceylon. Zheng He noted that the ruler of Ceylon, as cited by Dryer and Levathes, had treated him and the emperor's emissaries badly and had proved "arrogant and disrespectful and wanted to harm Zheng He."<sup>22</sup> Zheng He decided it would be best to leave Ceylon for the time being but made note of Ceylon's military defenses and vast wealth in precious gemstones.

According to Ma Huan, a Chinese Muslim scholar who participated in the voyages and a contemporary of both Zheng He and Fei Xin, Zheng He and the fleet made haste to their original destination of Calicut which the Chinese regarded as "The Great Country of the Western Ocean" showing the amount of prestige and admiration the Chinese held for this West Indian city state. Ma Huan described the people there as being "honest and trustworthy." According to Levathes, Zheng He stayed in Calicut from December 1406 to April 1407.<sup>23</sup> The unusual extended duration of this trade mission was due to the rituals and bargaining that was a standard part of an official trade mission sent by the emperor. Zheng He's experience in Calicut was peaceful and he knew that by following a soft power policy he could gain a favorable trade relationship with Calicut, one of the busiest ports in all of Asia. From this port flowed goods from all over Asia, Europe and the Middle East. He also took great care to show respect to the Zamurim, the title of the ruler of Calicut.<sup>24</sup>

In April the fleet began its return journey to China. Coming along with Zheng He were ambassadors from Calicut, Java and Sumatra who were to be taken to the imperial court to submit

---

<sup>21</sup> Wei, "Admiral Zheng He," 28.

<sup>22</sup> Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas*, 100.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 100-101.

themselves to Zhu Di, a time-honored ritual in Imperial China. Emissaries would prostrate themselves before the emperor in submission, and in return the emperor would reward them with rich gifts and treat them as guests of extreme honor. But there was one further amount of business that had to be taken care of—the pirate Chen Zuyi. Here Zheng He abandoned his soft power policy and turned the wrath of the Ming Navy onto Chen Zuyi. Zheng He utterly destroyed the pirates and burned their hideout in Palembang, both freeing the people of Palembang from Chen Zuyi's rule and capturing alive the pirate. Chen Zuyi was bound in chains and was to be taken with Zheng He to Nanjing to face execution for his crimes.<sup>25</sup> Fei Xin one of Zheng He's officers also gives a firsthand account on the capture of the infamous pirate:

In the third year of Yung-lo (1405) when Emperor Tai-tsung Wen huang-ti (Zhu Di) of our present dynasty ordered the principal envoy, the Grand Eunuch Cheng Ho, and others to take supreme command of a fleet and to precede to all the foreign countries, the pirate Chen Tsu-I and his followers met in the country of Srivijaya where they plundered foreign merchants and even attacked our ships. [But] they became victims of a secret plan on the part of our principal envoy, and like brutes caught in a net, they were exterminated, their leaders being captured alive and sent as prisoners to the imperial palace. After this the seas were restored to imperial peace and order.<sup>26</sup>

The capture of the pirate Chen, as shown in this excerpt, demonstrates that while Zheng He was willing to mostly focus on a soft power strategy, he was not afraid to use hard power while carrying out Zhu DI's foreign policy objectives. From a soft power

---

<sup>25</sup> Wei, "Admiral Zheng He," 28.

<sup>26</sup> Fei Xin, *The Overall Survey of the Star Raft*, trans. J.V.G. Mills (Otto Harrassowitz, 1996), 53.

standpoint, this approach also worked by emptying the sea territory of Chinese pirates; a considerable boon to China's neighbors, not to mention a removing the significant embarrassment to the Ming Dynasty that these pirates were.

In the summer of 1407, the fleet had returned to China and Zheng He returned to a very pleased emperor. Although distraught that no word had been heard about his predecessor, Zhu Di was still very pleased that the legitimacy of his rule had been recognized by many rulers in southeast Asia and India. Overall, this first expedition had shown that Zheng He had a great grasp on both soft power and hard power. He re-established trade relationships using the awe and majesty of the Treasure Fleet, relationships that were in great disrepair for over thirty years. He also made quick work of a notorious Chinese pirate that was affecting trade relationships around the area. Ceylon had proved to be problematic in establishing relations, but they could be dealt with in the future, as Zheng He would later prove.

### **Zheng He and the Modern Day**

The journeys to Java and Calicut have had lasting impacts on the relations between China, India and Java today. A crucial part of China's soft power is using its past to establish that China's relations were peaceful and prosperous with its neighbors for centuries, especially when it comes to Zheng He, who has served as a useful bit of propaganda in the last few decades. In May 2005, the Nanjing Museum and many numerous cities in China, Java and India celebrated Zheng He's sixcentenary, celebrating 600 years since the first voyage of the admiral. The China Heritage Quarterly gives a brief summarization of the celebrations:

This tribute to Zheng He, master mariner of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), is merely one frisson in the flurry of activities organized for the sixcentenary. Stamped with patriotism, most events are designed to appeal to Chinese who hail from the

various hometowns and localities in China associated with Zheng He, or who now live in the areas of Southeast and South Asia, as well as the Middle East and even East Africa, once visited by Zheng He's fleets. Although Zheng He came to be deified and included in local Chinese pantheons in Tian Hou temples, he was in fact a Muslim, a fact not overlooked in the present celebrations.<sup>27</sup>

Beijing has found a great propaganda spokesman in the Ming admiral. The PRC has recently been using Zheng He in its relations with the Javanese and India as a way to promote the “peaceful co-existence” between nations that have had long standing relations with China. However, there have been some pitfalls in the relationship between the PRC and Java. In Tuban, a part of East Java, a 30.4-meter-tall statue of Guan Yu a famous Chinese general of the Three Kingdoms Era (220-280 BC) who was later deified was unveiled, sparking massive controversy with a fundamentalist minority of Tuban’s Muslim population. In the *Straits Times* the events and controversy are summarized:

Indonesia has urged officials to stand up to mob pressure after Muslim and nationalist protesters called for a 30 m-tall statue of a Chinese deity erected in a temple complex in an East Java town to be torn down. The brightly painted statue of Guan Yu, a general who is worshipped by some Chinese people, was inaugurated last month in a temple complex in the fishing town of Tuban, and is claimed to be South-east Asia's tallest representation of the deity. The statue in Tuban,

---

<sup>27</sup> China Heritage Project, “Shipping News: Zheng He’s Sexcentenary,” China Heritage Quarterly no. 2 (June 2005), [http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/articles.php?searchterm=002\\_zhenghe.in.c&issue=002](http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/articles.php?searchterm=002_zhenghe.in.c&issue=002).

about 100 km west of the city of Surabaya, has been partially covered up after the protests, provoking both praise and ridicule on social media in the world's most populous Muslim-majority country. Teten Masduki, chief of staff to President Joko Widodo, told reporters: "If they ask for the statue to be torn down, the authorities cannot bow to such pressure. "Protesters demonstrated this week outside Surabaya's Parliament against the statue, some wearing paramilitary-style outfits and waving placards that read "Demolish it" and "We are not worshippers of idols". Allowing a depiction of a foreign general was "a symbol of treason to this nation", an unnamed protester said in a video of the rally on news portal Kompas.com. Officials of the Kwan Sing Bio Temple in Tuban declined to comment, but the media have quoted residents as saying the statue was good for tourism.<sup>28</sup>

While China's perception of its soft power is a perception that celebrates peaceful exploration and relations, that perception may not always be shared with the nations China is attempting to woo. In the example shown in East Java concerning the Guan Yu statue, what China may see as sharing its culture, some Javanese natives may see as China's perception of its own soft power as being a kind of cultural imperialism. There is also a perception by an extreme religious minority that the statue serves as an insult to the Muslim populations' religious beliefs tinged with Indonesian nationalism clashing with Chinese nationalism. When it comes to Zheng He, there is perhaps a bit of irony in this point of view seeing that Zheng He was born to a Muslim father and there is considerable evidence he may have shared his father's beliefs at least on a cultural level. The overall point that is being established

---

<sup>28</sup> "Tension in East Java over statue of deity," *Straits Times*, August 12, 2017, <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/tension-in-east-java-over-statue-of-deity>.

here however, is that China's own perceptions of its history and soft power may at many times clash with what other nations and peoples consider Chinese soft (and hard) power to be. Quite likely in the case of the Guan Yu statue, religious belief may be used as an excuse and the real problem lies with nationalism, as implied in the article.

A large component of Chinese soft power practices is the idea of "legitimacy," the legitimacy that is perceived by members of the PRC government to have been lost in the nineteenth century and has only started to be regained in the waning years of the twentieth century. One of the main ideas of this paper is also that there is an explicit link between the ideas of Ming glory, non-hegemonic expansion and the Confucius Institute. A common claim made by the PRC regarding the foreign policy of China is that both historically and today China remains a non-hegemonic power with the peacefulness of its rise being touted by its leadership, which makes an implied claim that China's rivals—like the United States—do not follow a similar policy.

The distrust of China's motivations has also been a source of contention when it comes to national territory as well. The Senkaku and Diayou islands, dispute between China, Japan and Korea has shown that China is willing to forego soft power diplomacy when it comes to territorial integrity. From the forward to a white paper published by the PRC State Council in 2012, we can see how seriously China considers territorial integrity to be to its foreign policy.

Diaoyu Dao and its affiliated islands are an inseparable part of the Chinese territory. Diaoyu Dao is China's inherent territory in all historical, geographical and legal terms, and China enjoys indisputable sovereignty over Diaoyu Dao. Japan's occupation of Diaoyu Dao during the Sino-Japanese War in 1895 is illegal and invalid. After World War II, Diaoyu Dao was returned to China in accordance with such international legal documents as the Cairo Declaration and the Potsdam Proclamation. No matter what unilateral step Japan takes over Diaoyu Dao, it will not change the fact that Diaoyu Dao belongs to China. For quite some time, Japan

has repeatedly stirred up troubles on the issue of Diaoyu Dao. On September 10, 2012, the Japanese government announced the "purchase" of Diaoyu Dao and its affiliated Nanxiao Dao and Beixiao Dao and the implementation of the so-called "nationalization". This is a move that grossly violates China's territorial sovereignty and international jurisprudence.

China is firmly opposed to Japan's violation of China's sovereignty over Diaoyu Dao in whatever form and has taken resolute measures to curb any such act. China's position on the issue of Diaoyu Dao is clear-cut and consistent. China's will to defend national sovereignty and territorial integrity is firm and its resolve to uphold the outcomes of the World Anti-Fascist War will not be shaken by any force.<sup>29</sup>

Notice the terms “inseparable” and “inherent territory” in the language of this white paper. These concepts lend credence to the idea that past humiliations in losing territory to European powers in the nineteenth century shape China’s national and foreign policy. The idea of China being “inseparable” has long been a roadblock in finalizing territorial borders between China and her neighbors. Therefore, the concerns of nationalists in Indonesia doesn’t necessarily come from nowhere, or out of just pure nationalism and jingoism. There is a perceived fear of losing territory and cultural influence though both traditional and cultural imperialism, either from the aspect of territory as can be seen in the Senkaku island dispute or through cultural imperialism as seen through the incident involving the Guan Yu statue. As China’s soft power increases, there will be blowback about what is seen as China encroaching on the culture of others. This is something which can fuel conspiracy theories like one popular one amongst

---

<sup>29</sup> PRC Government, PRC State Council, “Diaoyu Dao 钓鱼岛, An Inherent Territory of China,” (Beijing: PRC State Council Information Office, 2012), 1.

certain nationalists in Indonesia, claiming that China's government is secretly in control of the entire Indonesian government, and that these soft power efforts are examples of China imposing its culture on an unwilling population, threatening cultural sovereignty.

The United States Congressional Research Service published a white paper in December 2015 summarizing many of these issues of sovereignty and territory. Titled "Maritime Territorial and Exclusive Economic Zone Disputes Involving China" the white paper asserts that China is using the so-called "nine-dash line," a vaguely located line of demarcation that the PRC asserts marks its territorial waters.<sup>30</sup> The white paper asserts that China is using a "'salami-slicing' strategy that employs a series of incremental actions, none of which by itself is a *casus belli*, to gradually change the status quo in China's favor" in the words of the report. China in many of these contexts may not even be following a full soft power strategy but may in some instances be following a "Sharp Power" strategy. Sharp power is distinct from soft power in that it focuses on distraction and manipulation. Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig writing for *Foreign Affairs* gives a concise definition of the term:

Contrary to some of the prevailing analysis, the influence wielded by Beijing and Moscow through initiatives in the spheres of media, culture, think tanks, and academia is not a "charm offensive," as the author Joshua Kurlantzick termed it in his book *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power is Defining the World*. Nor is it an effort to "share alternative ideas" or "broaden the debate," as the editorial leadership at the Russian and Chinese state information outlets suggest about themselves. It is not principally about attraction or even persuasion; instead, it centers on distraction and manipulation.

---

<sup>30</sup> Ronald O' Rourke, *Maritime Territorial and Exclusive Economic Zone Disputes Involving China* (Washington DC: United States Congressional Research Service, 2015), 1.

These powerful and ambitious authoritarian regimes, which systematically suppress political pluralism and free expression to maintain power at home, are increasingly applying the same principles internationally.<sup>31</sup>

This new display of “sharp power” may add a third dynamic to international power play. Since it is neither hard nor soft power, sharp power is hard to give a concise category to, but with recent electoral events in the United States and elsewhere in the last few years it cannot be denied that creating manipulation and causing divisiveness in a country’s population has been an effective strategy. If China is indeed being more aggressive in its territorial ambitions, this may give credence to the “sharp power” theory in that while China is using soft power to increase its territorial sovereignty, it is still using elements of coercion and flexing of military muscle to achieve that end.

---

<sup>31</sup> Christopher Walker and Jessica Lang, “The Meaning of Sharp Power,” *Foreign Policy*, November 16, 2017.

## **Bibliography**

### **Secondary Sources**

- Chan, Hok Lam. "Ming Taizu's Problem with His Sons: Prince Qin's Criminality and Early-Ming Politics." *Asia Major* 20, no.1 (2007): 45-103.
- China Heritage Project, "Shipping News: Zheng He's Sexcentenary," *China Heritage Quarterly* no. 2 June 2005, [http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/articles.php?searchterm=002\\_zhenghe.inc&issue=002](http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/articles.php?searchterm=002_zhenghe.inc&issue=002).
- Dryer, Edward L. *Zheng He and The Oceans of the Early Ming Dynasty*. New York: Pearson Education, 2007.
- Kurlantzick, Joshua. *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power is Transforming the World*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.
- Levathes Louise. *When China Ruled the Seas, The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1405-33*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994.
- Nye, Joseph S., Jr. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2004.
- Tsai, Shin-Shan Henry. *Eunuchs of The Ming Dynasty*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996.
- Straits Times, "Tension in East Java over statue of deity," *Straits Times*, August 12, 2017. <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/tension-in-east-java-over-statue-of-deity>.

*Soft Power Practices of the Ming Dynasty*

Walker, Christopher and Jessica Lang, “The Meaning of Sharp Power.” *Foreign Policy*, November 16, 2017.

Wei, Yang. “Admiral Zheng He’s Voyages to the “West Oceans.”” *Education on Asia* 19, no. 2 (Fall 2014): 23-30.

**Primary Sources**

de Bary, William Theodore, and Irene Bloom. *Sources of Chinese Tradition, Vol. 1*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.

PRC Government, PRC State Council. “Diaoyu Dao 钓鱼岛, An Inherent Territory of China.” Beijing, PRC State Council Information Office, 2012.

O’ Rourke, Ronald. *Maritime Territorial and Exclusive Economic Zone Disputes Involving China*. Washington DC: United States Congressional Research Service, 2015.

Xe, Xia. *Comprehensive Mirror of the Ming Dynasty*. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959.

Xin, Fei. *The Overall Survey of the Star Raft*. Translated by J.V.G. Mills. Otto Harrassowitz, 1996.

**Author Bio**

Peter Weisser is a MA graduate from California State University, San Bernardino. He attended the University of Redlands as an undergraduate and graduated with BA in History. Weisser then attended CSUSB for his Master's degree being awarded a degree in Social Science and Globalization in 2018, after writing his thesis "The Admiral's Carrot and Stick" which discusses the travels of Ming admiral Zheng He and his treasure voyages (1405-1433) as well as the soft power policies of China during the Ming Dynasty and the present day.



*History in the Making*