

Zheng He Goes Traveling—Again

By James R. Holmes



Bronze sculpture showing Zheng He and his fleet at the site of Zheng He Treasure Ship Park in Nanjing, Jiangsu province, June 28, 2005. ©2005 ImagineChina

A Usable Seafaring Past?

Prompted by its real and growing dependence on foreign supplies of oil, natural gas, and other commodities—supplies transported predominantly by sea—China has turned its gaze to the seas for the first time in centuries. As it does so, leaders in Beijing are busily fashioning what the historian Henry Steele Commager would call a “usable past” to justify an increasingly ambitious maritime strategy to China’s traditionally land-oriented populace and to ease worries such a strategy might arouse in Asian capitals. Commager explains how early Americans, starting anew in the Western Hemisphere, went about creating a historical narrative of their own. They crafted a heroic past, deliberately stimulating an American nationalism to bind the new republic together. And they did so quickly. “Nothing,” writes Commager, “is more impressive than the speed and the lavishness with which Americans provided themselves with a usable past,” which found expression in history, legends, and heroes, not to mention cultural artifacts such as paintings and patriotic ballads.¹

In order to rally the Chinese populace behind seagoing pursuits, China’s maritime-oriented leadership must work some cultural alchemy similar to that of Commager’s founding Americans. The Chinese have regarded their nation as a purely continental power for centuries.² Mao Zedong was famously dismissive toward the seas, exhorting the nation to continue thinking of itself in land-based terms.³ For Mao, control of the waters immediately adjacent to Chinese shores was enough. During the Deng Xiaoping era, China’s most senior military officer, Adm. Liu Huaqing, urged Beijing to break with its Mao-inspired tradition of coastal defense. Liu, who commanded the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLA Navy) throughout much of the 1980s, espoused a more assertive “offshore active defense” strategy designed to give China control of East Asian waterways, along with critical geographic

nodes such as the island chains that roughly parallel China's coastline. Ultimately, around 2050, the PLA Navy would take its station as a blue-water force on par with the US Navy, putting to sea aircraft carriers and a full panoply of naval weaponry.⁴⁵

But Adm. Liu's pleas on behalf of sea power went mostly unrequited until the 1990s, when rapid economic growth impressed upon China's leadership how important secure sea lanes were to the nation's "peaceful rise" to economic development, and ultimately to its bid for regional great-power status. With the appeal of communist ideology on the wane, the Chinese regime has increasingly sought to buttress its legitimacy and appease public sentiment by promoting economic development and the physical comforts prosperity brings. China first became a net importer of oil in 1993, and its appetite for energy has only grown since then.⁵ Mindful of their nation's resource needs, Chinese leaders will likely modify Liu's phased maritime strategy, turning their strategic gaze southward, along the sea lanes that convey seaborne supplies of oil and gas—principally from the Middle East—rather than eastward, toward competition with the US Navy in the broad Pacific.⁶ As they do so, they will attempt to cultivate an affinity among the Chinese body politic for seagoing pursuits.

An Ancient Mariner Helps China Remake Its "Strategic Culture"

And, indeed, China's leaders have increasingly sought to rally the support of the citizenry behind oceanic endeavors while allaying any misgivings their naval buildup might provoke among the Asian maritime nations. In short, they have set out to incorporate a seagoing element into China's overall culture. As Beijing shifts its gaze toward the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, history supplies a useful ally for its effort to construct a usable nautical past: Zheng He, the Ming Dynasty's "eunuch admiral," who set sail six centuries ago on the first of seven voyages of diplomacy, trade, and discovery, calling at ports throughout coastal Southeast and South Asia. The expeditions served the self-interest of Zheng's master, the emperor Zhu Di, who allegedly feared that the nephew he had unseated from the Dragon Throne would return from exile to seek retribution.⁷ Understandably, though, Chinese officials and scholars today accentuate the diplomatic and commercial nature of Zheng's cruises.

Hugely popular in this centenary year, both in China and throughout maritime Asia, the ancient mariner helps Beijing reorient Chinese citizens toward the sea, instilling in them a sense of mission. "Today we are commemorating Zheng He's voyages," editorializes the *People's Daily*, the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party's Central Committee, "to promote the ethos with patriotism as the core . . . in an effort to strengthen the sense of identification with Chinese civilization and . . . strengthen the cohesiveness and the attraction of the Chinese nation."⁸ Declares *Jiefangjun Bao*, the influential daily of the General Political Department of the People's Liberation Army:

*The seas are not only wide roads towards international exchange and a treasury of valuable strategic resources for sustainable human development, but are also an important field in the world strategic pattern in which large powers strengthen their strategic positions and diplomatic voices. The seas have already become "new command fields" in international competition About 600 years ago, Zheng He led a huge fleet overseas in an effort to materialize glory and dreams through the blue waves. Today the task of materializing the blue dream of peaceful use of the seas has been assigned to our generation by history.*⁹

By conjuring up Zheng, moreover, Beijing can reach out to nations along the waterways of the Ming "treasure fleet"—so named for the valuables it carried to trade with foreign peoples—once plied. In so doing, it helps calm worries about China's naval ambitions and remind Asian nations that China once exerted a benign, sea-based supremacy over the region. History, then, influences China's outlook on maritime affairs, imbuing Beijing's oceanic aspirations with a sense of destiny. China's leadership connects today's policies and strategies directly to past enterprises, making frequent use of this political and diplomatic instrument.

Scholarship can help Asia-watchers comprehend what Beijing is up to as it propagates its Zheng He narrative. Scholars of international security affairs explain a nation's strategic choices—such as China's decision to reorient its foreign policy seaward—partly in terms of



Dedication ceremony for the Zheng He Memorial Hall in Jinghai Temple, Nanjing, Jiangsu province, June 28, 2005.
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its “strategic culture.” Writing in the 1970s, Jack Snyder, who coined the term in a RAND study of Soviet attitudes toward nuclear weapons, defined strategic culture as “the body of attitudes and beliefs that guides and circumscribes thought on strategic questions, influences the way strategic issues are formulated, and sets the vocabulary and perceptual parameters of strategic debate.”¹⁰ From his study of Soviet cultural attributes, Snyder concluded that Moscow thought far differently about nuclear deterrence and warfighting than did Washington—with consequences of considerable moment for US foreign policy and military strategy.

Today, those who study strategic culture fall into two broad schools of thought. Some maintain that culture and the mental traits to which it gives rise represent an important, even critical determinant of thought and action. Others counter that culture, far from shaping action, simply gives dominant groups a vocabulary that resonates widely with political and military elites and ordinary citizens. This helps dominant groups frame strategic debates opportunistically, in their own interests. In essence they cloak policies founded on traditional realpolitik in cultural symbols and traditions that are readily intelligible to target audiences. Who has it right? Neither, and both. The two schools have exaggerated their differences: culture is a mass of history and traditions that primes each of us, including political and military leaders, to look at the world in a certain way and to act accordingly. But at the same time, it is true that adroit leaders, themselves influenced by culture, can use history, tradition, and symbols to set the terms of contemporary debate, framing issues to suit their purposes.¹¹ Both traditional power considerations and ideational influences come into play.

And both dynamics manifest themselves in China’s Zheng He narrative. Strategic culture is helping sculpt the worldview of China’s communist leaders—and these leaders in turn are consciously using the deeds of a venerated seaman to summon up support for the oceanic ventures Beijing has in mind.

Broadening China’s Cultural Appeal—At Home and Abroad

Zheng He, the embodiment of China’s heroic maritime past, makes an elegant ambassador for an increasingly confident, outward-looking nation. Beijing uses Zheng’s endeavors to convey several messages. First, Chinese leaders contend that China by its nature is a more trustworthy steward over maritime security in Asia than any Western power—namely the United States, which has ruled the waves in the region since World War II—could be. The tributary system over which the Dragon Throne presided during the Ming Dynasty was in great part the handiwork of Zheng He, who negotiated agreements under which local potentates acknowledged Chinese suzerainty in return for certain economic and diplomatic benefits. Zheng seldom used force to uphold the system, and even then only in limited fashion.

This is a common refrain in Chinese diplomacy today, and it has some basis in scholarship. Some Western observers compare the hierarchical arrangement of the Ming years favorably to the European balance-of-power system, noting that the resort to arms was relatively rare during the era of Chinese dominance.¹² In like manner, Chinese officials declare that their nation is intent on a peaceful rise to regional eminence, or, in Beijing’s latest formula, on achieving “peaceful development.”¹³

Chinese officials thus use Zheng’s expeditions of commerce and discovery to portray China as a beneficent, non-threatening power. Chinese power, they suggest, is intrinsically self-denying, and history proves it. Declared Premier Wen Jiabao while visiting the United States, Zheng “brought silk, tea and the Chinese culture” to foreign peoples, “but not one inch of land was occupied.”¹⁴ Guo Chongli, China’s ambassador to Kenya, proclaimed, “Zheng He’s fleet [was] large But his voyages were not for looting resources”—code for Western imperialism—“but for friendship. In trade with foreign countries, he gave much more than he



Launch of a new ship at a shipyard in Shanghai.

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Chinese dancers perform at the launching ceremony of Cosco Ningbo, the biggest container carrier in the world at Ningbo Port, Zhejiang province, March 22, 2006.

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took,” fostering “understanding, friendship and trade relation[s] between China’s Ming Dynasty and foreign countries in southeast Asia, west Asia, and east Africa.”¹⁵ Agrees the *People’s Daily*, Zheng’s expeditions gave “full expression to the Chinese spirit of ‘harmony,’” as expressed in Confucian teachings, whereas Columbus and his successors “opened up a large group of colonies” in the Americas, “which was a typical predatory rise.”¹⁶

The message to countries wary of Beijing’s ambitions: despite China’s mounting political, economic, and military power, it can be counted on to refrain from territorial conquest or Western-style military dominion.¹⁷ China’s strategic culture will restrain it, just as it did in the days of the treasure fleet, so banding together to balance it is unnecessary.¹⁸ Proclaims China’s ruling State Council in a White Paper titled *China’s Peaceful Development Road*:

It is an inevitable choice based on China’s historical and cultural tradition that China persists unswervingly in taking the road of peaceful development . . . The spirit of the Chinese people has always featured their longing for peace and pursuit of harmony. Six hundred years ago, Zheng He . . . [reached] more than 30 countries and regions in Asia and Africa . . . What he took to the places he visited were tea, chinaware, silk and technology, but did not occupy an inch of any other’s land. What he brought to the outside world was peace and civilization . . . Based on the present reality, China’s development has not only benefited the 1.3 billion Chinese people, but also brought large markets and development opportunities for countries throughout the world. China’s development also helps to enhance the force for peace in the world¹⁹ (my emphasis).

Second, China’s leadership uses the treasure expeditions to burnish China’s credentials as a seafaring nation, skilled in navigation, shipbuilding, and—though this usually remains unstated, presumably to avoid creating undue alarm—naval combat. Zheng He’s cruises in effect made China the first country to station a naval squadron in the Indian Ocean.²⁰ The treasure fleet was a technological wonder by the standards of the day. Compasses had been in use since the Song Dynasty. Navigators knew how to determine latitude and follow a course to a predetermined destination, using charts accurate enough that many of them remained in use in the eighteenth century. And Zheng’s *baochuan*, or treasure ships—essentially giant seagoing junks, some outfitted with as many as nine masts—featured technical innovations that did not make their way into Western naval architecture until the nineteenth century.²¹ If a treasure ship suffered hull damage from battle or heavy weather, for instance, the watertight bulkheads that subdivided the interior of the vessel limited the spread of flooding, helping it resist sinking.²² If battle loomed, the *baochuan* were equipped with incendiary weapons, such as the catapult-thrown gunpowder “grenades” the treasure fleet used to overawe and defeat a pirate armada near Malacca, then as now a critical artery for seaborne trade and commerce.²³

And third, Zheng allows Beijing to indulge in one-upmanship at Western expense. On a recent trip to Europe, for example, Premier Wen reminded audiences that the Chinese explorer had “sailed abroad earlier than Christopher Columbus.”²⁴ Chinese spokesmen routinely contrast the size and technical sophistication of Zheng’s vessels with the relatively backward fleets put to sea in fifteenth-century Europe.²⁵ They also point out that China was a power in maritime Asia first, owing to Ming seamanship. In 2003, for instance, President Hu Jintao depicted Zheng He’s expeditions as a historical basis for the Sino-Australian relationship, telling the Australian parliament, “Back in the 1420s, the expeditionary fleets of China’s Ming Dynasty reached Australian shores,” bringing “Chinese culture to this land” and “contributing their proud share to Australia’s economy, society, and its thriving pluralistic culture.”²⁶ Hu’s claim that Chinese seafarers settled in Australia during the Ming years is fanciful, but his central message is not: China’s presence and power in maritime Asia far antedated those of Europeans.²⁷ Such rhetoric makes an excellent focal point for Chinese nationalism.

Like many national legends—one thinks of Parson Weems’s whimsical account of George Washington chopping down the cherry tree—Beijing’s Zheng He narrative rates so-so marks as history. For one thing, the nature of the ruling regime matters, in China as else-

where. The communist regime in Beijing cannot claim to be a direct descendant of the Ming Dynasty, so, contrary to Chinese diplomacy, historical events make an unreliable predictor of Chinese behavior today.²⁸ For another, Zheng’s voyages spanned only a brief interval in China’s long history. It would be rash to conclude from Zheng’s generally peaceful yet short-lived endeavors that China has no proclivity for military dominance today. Had the Ming Dynasty not retreated from the seas—dismantling its formidable navy, and ultimately outlawing the construction of seagoing vessels—it might have upheld the tributary system by force, more or less in Western fashion. Indeed, the treasure fleet occasionally did use force to support kings loyal to the Dragon Throne. In 1411, for example, marines from the treasure fleet intervened in an internal war in Ceylon, quelling an insurrection led by the Buddhist chief Alakeswara and asserting Ming sovereignty over the island.²⁹

More such episodes might have followed. This should give pause to Asian statesmen who appraise Beijing’s Zheng He diplomacy with a critical eye. In short, China might not be quite so unique a great power as it advertises itself to be.

An Impressive Use of Maritime History and Tradition

Despite problems with the historical niceties, Beijing has made impressive use of sparse historical resources, using tales of feats six centuries past to recast China’s strategic culture in nautical terms and to bolster China’s cultural appeal vis-à-vis Asian coastal nations. Will this campaign ultimately work? First consider the domestic component. While assessing Chinese public opinion is always a difficult task, citizens have reportedly flocked to museums dedicated to Zheng He’s legacy. Maritime museums now stand in Zheng’s home city of Nanjing, as well as elsewhere in China.³⁰ One testament to the campaign’s effectiveness: many youthful Chinese now clamor for their government to be *more* assertive about the nation’s maritime legacy. Some have even beseeched Beijing to embrace Gavin Menzies’s dubious claim that the treasure fleet reached North America decades before Columbus’s tiny flotilla did.³¹ This raises the intriguing prospect that public opinion may come to lead rather than lag China’s drive for sea power.

Second, consider the wider international component. Officials in maritime Asian capitals number among Zheng’s most outspoken admirers. Indeed, perhaps the most comprehensive tribute yet to the centenary of the treasure fleet’s voyages took place in the summer of 2005, at a conference held in Singapore.³² Similarly, countries throughout the regions traveled by Zheng He—along the sea lanes that now sustain China’s economic development and preoccupy Chinese naval strategists—have organized tributes to his works. While only time will allow outside observers to ascertain the effectiveness of this multifaceted maritime charm offensive, the early signs suggest that it is indeed muting worries about the intentions of an increasingly potent, sea-power-minded China.³³ Zheng He alone cannot fulfill China’s diplomatic aspirations in the region, but he has proved a surprisingly useful arrow in Beijing’s diplomatic quiver. Enthusiasts for a robust Chinese strategic culture predicated on seagoing pursuits increasingly populate China and maritime Asia.

Supplying a focus for Chinese strategic culture while advancing Chinese maritime strategy—that’s no mean accomplishment for a relic of the Ming Dynasty. Zheng He’s latter-day “travels” will doubtless continue, propelled by Chinese diplomacy, officially sanctioned ceremonial occasions, and other mechanisms for cultural outreach. Beijing will persist with its effort to reshape the nation’s strategic culture, and it may well succeed. Yet Ming history can also alert the United States should China’s leadership depart from the benevolent purposes and methods conveyed in its charm offensive. That is, Washington should use Beijing’s Zheng He narrative—in particular its central claims with regard to peaceful maritime commerce and diplomacy—to help determine what kind of sea power China is becoming. Should trouble signs appear, and assuming it wants to maintain its leading position in regional waters, the United States may need to adjust its own policy and strategy. China’s ancient mariner, it seems, can render good service—in both capitals. ■

NOTES

1. Henry Steele Commager, *The Search for a Usable Past and Other Essays in Historiography* (New York: Knopf, 1967), 3–27. Commager’s view of common history, traditions, and legends is consistent with scholarship on ethnonationalism. See, for instance, Ted Robert Gurr, *Minorities at Risk: A Global View of Ethnopoliti-*

- cal Conflicts* (Washington: US Institute of Peace Press, 1993); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991); Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).
2. On the Ming Dynasty's turn away from the oceans, see, for instance, Valerie Hansen, "China in World History 300–1500 CE," *Education About Asia* 10:3 (winter 2005), 4–7.
 3. For an account of China's naval efforts during the Cold War, see John Wilson Lewis and Xue Litai, *China's Strategic Sea Power: The Politics of Force Modernization in the Nuclear Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).
 4. Bernard D. Cole, *The Great Wall at Sea: China's Navy Enters the Twenty-first Century* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2001), 165–68; Jun Zhan, "China Goes to the Blue Waters: The Navy, Sea Power Mentality, and the South China Sea," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, September 1994, 180–203; Alexander Chieh-cheng Huang, "The Chinese Navy's Offshore Active Defense Strategy," *Naval War College Review* 47:3 (summer 1994), 9–18.
 5. See for instance David Hale, "China's Growing Appetites," *National Interest* 76 (summer 2004), 137–47.
 6. Taiwan is of course a complicating factor in China's emerging maritime strategy, but I consider it a neutral factor in the analysis presented here. Not only does the island sit at the centerpoint of the first offshore island chain, potentially obstructing China's access to the Pacific high seas, but it also sits astride sea lanes connecting northern Chinese seaports with the Strait of Malacca and thence to suppliers of much-needed oil and natural gas. Either way, consequently, settling the Taiwan question on its terms will remain uppermost in the minds of China's leadership. See Toshi Yoshihara and James R. Holmes, "Command of the Sea with Chinese Characteristics," *Orbis* 49:4 (fall 2005), 677–94. For a contrary view, see Robert D. Kaplan, "How We Would Fight China," *Atlantic* 295:5 (June 2005), 49–64. Kaplan prophesies that the PLA will indeed surge out eastward into the Pacific, as Liu Huaqing urged.
 7. Louise Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1405–1433* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 73.
 8. "Carry Forward Zheng He Spirit, Promote Peace and Development," *Renmin Ribao* [*People's Daily*], July 13, 2005, FBIS-CHN-200507131477. See also the other installments in this series, published in the *People's Daily* on July 15, 19, and 20.
 9. *Jiefangjun Bao* Editorial Department, "On Our Military's Historic Missions in the New Century, New Stage—Written on the 50th Anniversary of the Founding of 'Jiefangjun Bao,'" *Jiefangjun Bao*, February 17, 2006, FBIS-CHN-200602171477.
 10. Jack Snyder, *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Nuclear Options* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1977), 9.
 11. Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 1–31. For more on the debate over strategic culture, see Jeffrey S. Lantis, "Strategic Culture and National Security Policy," *International Studies Review* 4:3 (fall 2002), 87–113; Colin S. Gray, "Strategic Culture as Context: The First Generation of Theory Strikes Back," *Review of International Studies* 25 (1999), 49–69; Stephen Peter Rosen, "Military Effectiveness: Why Society Matters," *International Security* 19:4 (spring 1995), 5–31.
 12. See for instance David C. Kang, "Hierarchy in Asian International Relations, 1300–1900," *Asian Security* 1:1 (January 2005), 53–79.
 13. Zheng Bijian, "China's 'Peaceful Rise' to Great-Power Status," *Foreign Affairs* 84:5 (September/October 2005), 18–24; Esther Pan, "The Promise and Pitfalls of China's 'Peaceful Rise,'" Council on Foreign Relations Web site, April 14, 2006, <http://www.cfr.org/publication/10446/>.
 14. Chen Jian and Zhao Haiyan, "Wen Jiabao on Sino-US Relations: Cherish Harmony; Be Harmonious But Different," *Zhongguo Xinwen She*, December 8, 2003, FBIS-CPP-20031208000052.
 15. "Kenyan Girl Offered Chance to Go to College in China," *Xinhua*, March 20, 2005, FBIS-CHN-200503201477.
 16. "Enlightenment Drawn from Global Worship of Confucius," *Renmin Ribao* [*People's Daily*], September 29, 2005, FBIS-CHN-200509291477. Beijing has organized a network of overseas "Confucian Institutes" in an effort to popularize the teachings of Confucius and, in the process, further buttress China's "soft power" vis-à-vis its Asian neighbors. For more on China's use of soft power, see James R. Holmes, "'Soft Power' at Sea: Zheng He and China's Maritime Diplomacy," *Southeast Review of Asian Studies* 28 (2006), <http://www.uky.edu/Centers/Asia/SECAAS/Seras/2006/2006TOC.html>.
 17. In Zheng He's day, notes one Chinese commentator in a riposte to the Pentagon's 2005 report on Chinese military power, the Ming Dynasty "did not make use of its formidable national strength to extend its boundaries and territory, conversely, it extended and strengthened the Great Wall for its own defense. Furthermore, instead of establishing overseas colonies and plundering other countries, China's mighty fleet treated other nations kindly and generously but demanded little in return . . ." Li Xuejiang, "US Report 'The Military Power of the People's Republic of China' Harbors Sinister Motives," *Renmin Ribao* [*People's Daily*], July 27, 2005, FBIS-CHN-200507271477.
 18. International-relations scholars of "realist" inclinations, most prominently Kenneth Waltz, contend that lesser powers tend to band together to counterbalance the rise of a new, potentially dominant great power. More recently, some scholars of Asian politics have declared that balance-of-power politics is primarily a Western phenomenon, and that the Asian system inclines less to balancing than to hierarchy. For an overview of the realist analysis, see Kenneth N. Waltz, "The Emerging Structure of International Politics," *International Security* 18:2 (fall 1993), 44–79, and *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979). For a sample of other realist analyses, see Aaron Friedberg, "Ripe for Rivalry," *International Security* 18:3 (winter 1993/94), 5–33; Richard K. Betts, "Wealth, Power, and Instability: East Asia and the United States after the Cold War," *International Security* 18:3 (winter 1993/94), 34–77; and Avery Goldstein, "Great Expectations:

- Interpreting China's Arrival,” *International Security* 22:3 (winter 1997/98), 36–73. For a rejoinder to the realists, see David C. Kang, “Getting Asia Wrong: The Need for New Analytical Frameworks,” *International Security* 27:2 (spring 2003), 57–85; Kang, “Hierarchy in Asian International Relations,” 53–79.
19. State Council Information Office, “White Paper: China's Peaceful Development Road,” Xinhua, December 22, 2005, FBIS-CHN-200512221477. See also Hu Jintao, “‘Strengthen Mutually Beneficial Cooperation and Promote Common Development,’ Speech at Mexican Senate on 12 September,” Xinhua, September 13, 2005, FBIS-CHN-200509131477.
 20. Bruce Swanson, *Eighth Voyage of the Dragon: A History of China's Quest for Sea Power* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1982), 28.
 21. The dimensions of the baohuan are a matter of some dispute. Ming histories report that the vessels were 440 feet long and 180 feet wide—a ratio that would make them so broad-beamed as to be “unresponsive even under moderate sea conditions,” in the opinion of one modern analyst, Bruce Swanson. Swanson contends that the treasure ships more likely resembled the large junks used in succeeding centuries, estimating their length at 180 feet. He further contends that ships with these dimensions would have been large enough to accommodate ship's companies of the size reported in the histories. Others, notably Louise Levathes, accept the figure from the histories. Either way, the treasure ships dwarfed the ships sailed by Zheng He's near-contemporaries, Columbus and Vasco da Gama. (Columbus's *Santa Maria* was all of 85 feet long.) Swanson, *Eighth Voyage of the Dragon*, 33–34. See also Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas*, 19.
 22. Swanson, 34–36. In contemporary parlance, “compartmentation”—using watertight bulkheads to subdivide the interior of a ship's hull into many small compartments—restricts flooding to one or a few compartments. Barring major damage to the hull that breaches multiple bulkheads, a compartmented ship stands a good chance of withstanding “progressive flooding” that might sink a ship not so equipped.
 23. Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas*, 47, 50–52. On China's present-day “Malacca dilemma,” see Ian Storey, “China's ‘Malacca Dilemma,’” *China Brief* 6:8 (April 12, 2006), 4–6; Liu Jiangping and Feng Xianhui, “Going Global: Dialogue Spanning 600 Years,” *Liaowang*, September 8, 2005, FBIS-CHN-200509081477.
 24. “Premier Wen's Several Talks During Europe Visit,” Xinhua, May 16, 2004, FBIS-CHN-20040516000069. Wen sounded similar themes during a spring 2005 trip to South Asia. See Xiao Qiang, “Premier Wen's South Asian Tour Produces Abundant Results,” *Renmin Ribao [People's Daily]*, April 13, 2005, FBIS-CHN-200504131477. On the extent of Chinese predominance in fifteenth-century Asia, see Roderich Ptak, “China and Portugal at Sea: The Early Ming Trading System and the *Estado da Índia* Compared,” in Roderich Ptak, *China and the Asian Seas: Trade, Travel, and Visions of the Others (1400–1750)* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), 21–37.
 25. Reporting on the efforts of Yao Mingde, the official in charge of the activities commemorating the treasure voyages, the official news service Xinhua observed that “Zheng He's fleet surpassed all other marine navigators of his time in scale, sophistication, technology and organizational skills in his seven sea trips, which were a great event in the world's navigation history.” “China Launches Activities to Commemorate Sea Navigation Pioneer Zheng He,” Xinhua, September 29, 2003, FBIS-CHN-20030928000052.
 26. Hu Jintao, “‘Constantly Increasing Common Ground’: Hu's Speech to Australian Parliament,” October 24, 2003, <http://www.australianpolitics.com/news/2003/10/03-10-24b.shtml>.
 27. Intriguingly, Hu's questionable claims were based on Menzies's *1421*, an account deemed wildly speculative by most academic experts. Menzies claims, for example, that Zheng He reached American shores 70 years before Columbus. See Gavin Menzies, *1421: The Year China Discovered America* (New York: William Morrow, 2003); Hansen, “China in World History,” 4–7; Wang Gungwu, “China's Cautious Pride in an Ancient Mariner,” *YaleGlobal Online*, August 4, 2005, <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/article.print?id=6095>.
 28. Chinese spokesmen have portrayed Beijing's contemporary policies, in particular peaceful development, as an extension of venerable Chinese traditions. To name one, Xiong Guangkai, deputy chief of the PLA's General Staff, maintains that “China's persistently taking the road of peaceful development has historically inherited China's outstanding traditional culture and has also given important expression to the idea of peaceful diplomacy.” During Zheng He's voyages, “what the Chinese nation disseminated to the outside world was the friendly heartfelt aspiration of peace, development and cooperation.” Xiong Guangkai, “Unswervingly Take the Road of Peaceful Development and Properly Deal with Diversification of Threats to Security,” Xinhua, December 28, 2005, FBIS-CHN-200512281477.
 29. Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas*, 114–18; Frank Viviano, “China's Great Armada,” *National Geographic*, July 2005, 41.
 30. Author correspondence with Dr. Lyle Goldstein, US Naval War College, Newport, RI, January 2006. On China's efforts to construct a network of Zheng He museums, see, for example, “Experts Hope to Emulate Chinese Columbus,” BBC News, October 22, 2002, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/2349929.stm>.
 31. Wang, “China's Cautious Pride in an Ancient Mariner.”
 32. See for instance George Yeo, “Speech by George Yeo, Minister of Foreign Affairs, at the Opening Ceremony of the ‘Third International Conference of Institutes and Libraries for Chinese Overseas Studies’ on August 18, 2005 at 9:20 AM,” HuayiNet Web site, <http://www.huayinet.org/happening/zhenghe/keynote.htm>.
 33. See for instance “Photo Exhibition to Commemorate Zheng He's Voyages Opens in Dhaka,” Xinhua, April 3, 2006, FBIS-CHN-200604031477; “Myanmar Contestants Win Third in Worldwide Zheng He-China Knowledge Contest,” Xinhua, April 2, 2006, FBIS-CHN-200604021477; Jia Qinglin, “‘Strengthening Exchanges and Cooperation, Creating a Beautiful Future Together,’ Speech at a Welcome Party Held by Personalities of Various Circles in Indonesia,” Xinhua, March 27, 2006, FBIS-CHN-200603271477; “Hu Jintao Meets Kenyan President, Calls Kenya ‘Key Partner’ in East Africa: ‘China, Kenya Agree to Further Political, Economic Ties,’” Xinhua, August 17, 2005, FBIS-CHN-200508171477; “Zheng He Anniversary Harvests Peace, Prosperity,” Xinhua, August 6, 2005, FBIS-CHN-200508061477.

JAMES R. HOLMES is a former naval officer, a Senior Research Associate at the University of Georgia Center for International Trade and Security, and co-author of the forthcoming *Chinese Naval Strategy in the 21st Century: The Turn to Mahan* (Routledge, 2007).