EIGHT POEMS
Translated from the Japanese by Graeme Wilson

This group of eight poems has been translated from the First Imperial Anthology (Kokinwakashu) which was apparently put together between 905 and 922 and contained one thousand, one hundred and eleven poems. As the translator says, 'this early Heian work contrives to maintain much of the drive and directness of the earlier Manyoshu poetry but adds to it a subtlety and sophistication which has not yet degenerated into the mere cleverness and insouled glitter of later Heian work'.

White Chrysanthemums
Masked as they are in the year's first frost,
I should get it right
Only by purest happen-chance,
luck's second-sight,
If I chose from these white chrysanthemums
One that had flowered white.
Oshikochi no Mitsune (859-907)

Dew Seasons
Could it be that autumn-colours
Reflect some change in dew,
That the leaves turn scarlet, golden, brown
As dye-dipped fabrics do
Only because, like all things else,
Dew suffers seasons too?
Anonymous (ninth century)

The Direction of Autumn
On one side of this plum-tree
Faster than all the rest
The green leaves lose their colour.
One might have guessed
That autumn, when it came, would come
Cold-hearted from the west.
Fujiwara no Kachiori (written in 883)

Moonlight
So cold, so clear the moonlight is
That the first water where
It falls to be reflected
Become the first to bear
Ice-witness to the frigor
Of that whiteness in the air.
Anonymous (ninth century)

Keepsake Sky
Of course, the sky can't be a keepsake.
Yet, if it can't, then why,
Whenever in my loneliness
I think of her, do I
Find myself with my face turned upwards
Staring at the sky?
Sakai no Hitozane (917)

Boat Torch
Since I am no such boat-torch
As fishers use to spear
Bedazzled fish, how comes it then
That I am floating here,
A blaze of flame upon my own
Long river-flow of tears?
Anonymous (ninth century)

Bedlam Heart
Of all the wild absurdities
With which the heart can cram
Its sad asylum, none's more daft
Than this mad need, this damn-idiot ache to be with you
When I already am.
Kiowara no Fukayabu (ninth century)

Plum Scent
If my robe is sweetly scented,
Wife, believe you me,
It means no more than that I've brushed
Against some flowering tree,
That plum-tree there.
She sniffs, I think,
Somewhat unworthy.
Anonymous (ninth century)
ZHENG HE,

ENVOY OF THE EMPEROR

Margaret Bocquet

The Emperor’s glorious envoy received the divine commands, “proclaim abroad the silken sounds, and go to the barbarous lands.” His giant ship on the roaring waves of the boundless ocean rode; Afar, o’er the rolling billows vast and limitless, it strode.

Ma Huan

IN THE month of July 1405 A.D. a mighty fleet left the city of Suzhou on the mouth of the river Lo in the province of Jiangsu in China. The fleet consisted of three hundred and seventeen ships with a crew of over 27,000 men. Its destination: the countries across the ‘Western Ocean’. The powerful commander of the fleet was Zheng He, a eunuch who carried the title of San Bao Taijian, the Grand Eunuch San Bao.

Zheng He was one of the most remarkable personalities in the history of the Ming Dynasty which ruled China from 1368 to 1644. Under his leadership the Chinese fleet cruised the Indian Ocean seven times, visiting over thirty countries and spreading the fame of China far and wide. These seven voyages under Zheng He were unique in the long history of traditional China and formed the peak of its naval history. They took place between 1405 and 1431 when China was powerful and prosperous. To hold command of the fleet was for Zheng He the culmination of his unusual career.

Not much is known about Zheng He’s youth. His biography was noted in the Historical Annals of the Ming Dynasty, but there was only a short statement on his origin.

Zheng He was a native of Yunnan. He is known as San Bao Taijian. At first he worked in the principality of the prince of Yan, He participated in the rebellion and because of his service (to the Prince) he was appointed Taijian (a Grand Eunuch).

Further, the biography only contained a cursory description of the seven famous expeditions. Perhaps the Confucian scholars who compiled the biography did not wish to elaborate on his achievement because Zheng He was a eunuch, a member of a class despised by the Confucian bureaucracy.

An inscription on his father’s gravestone mentioned that Zheng He was the second son of a man called Ma Hazhi, who originated from the province of Yunnan. It also stated:

From his youth He showed great talents, he serves the Son of Heaven, who has bestowed upon him the surname of Zheng and has appointed him to the rank of Superintendent of the office of eunuchs.

From this inscription another important fact became clear. Zheng He came from a Moslem family. Ma, his father’s surname, was then commonly used by Moslem Chinese. Hazhi might not have been a proper name at all but a Chinese transliteration of the word Haji denoting a Moslem who has made a pilgrimage to Mecca. There are other inscriptions which show that Zheng He himself embraced the Moslem faith.

From different sources the following facts about Zheng He’s life can be culled.

He was born in the district of Kunyang in the province of Yunnan in the year 1371 as the second son of a certain Ma Hazhi, a Moslem. He had one brother and four sisters. In the year he was born the first Ming Emperor was in the process of reuniting the fragmented country under his rule. Yunnan was one of the provinces which refused to acknowledge his suzerainty. In 1382 the Ming armies invaded and subdued the province. In the same year Zheng He’s father died and the family suffered want. Zheng He was then eleven years old. The year after, the boy was either abducted by Ming soldiers or ran away with them. Somehow he reached Peking, which was then the seat of power of Lord Yan, the fourth son of the Ming Emperor, who was given the northeastern districts to control. Zheng He landed in his household and was made a eunuch.

In the royal palaces of traditional China the eunuchs had a singular position. Their specific task to guard the concubines’ quarters made it easier for them to approach their lords than ordinary civil servants. Often they acted as intermediaries in the numerous intrigues which were continually brewing in palace circles. The eunuchs and the Confucian bureaucracy were often contending with each other for power. More than at any other time in Chinese history the eunuchs of the Ming Dynasty formed a particularly powerful group.

Zheng He rose from a humble servant in the inner quarters of the palace to become a person of exalted rank. In 1398, when he had been with Lord Yan for ten years, the Ming Emperor died. He was succeeded by his grandson,
Ming Hui Di, who was then barely twenty years old. Unwise-ly, the young Emperor followed the advice of some ministers and attempted to curb the power of his uncle, the Lord of Yan, in the north. The next year, Lord Yan revolted against his nephew. It must have been in the battlefields to conquer the throne that Zheng He showed his prowess and talents in leadership. It was then that he obtained the title of Grand Eunuch as the Historical Annals indicate. In 1402 Lord Yan succeeded in winning the throne of China. During his rule the Ming Dynasty would reach the apex of its glory. His hapless nephew disappeared and was never seen again. His fate remains one of those mysteries in history still waiting to be solved.

The new Emperor, who was called Ming Yong Le, decided to proclaim his rule and the glory of China to the world across the seas and ordered the launching of a spectacular expedition to the countries in the Indian Ocean. The commander-in-chief of this expedition had to be trustworthy and capable of strong leadership. Moreover, he should be acceptable as an envoy to the many Moslem rulers he was to visit. Zheng He was the obvious choice. Yong Le did not choose wrongly. The first expedition was a great success and throngs of foreign envoys came to Peking to pay homage to the Emperor. As a result Zheng He was given command of six similar expeditions which would make him famous far beyond the borders of China. For twenty-nine years Zheng He was more often on the deck of his ship than in the garden of his home. He died in Nanking not long after returning from his last journey in 1433. He was sixty-four years old. A contemporary of Zheng He gave this flattering description of the intrepid envoy:

He is nine feet tall, with a girth of 90 inches. His face is broad, his forehead high and his nose small. He is very in-telligent. His eyes are bright and his ears are of a lighter complexion than his face. His teeth are regular and his gait resembles that of a tiger. His voice is loud and clear . . . Wherever he goes he inspires fear and people submit to him . . .
Zheng He’s sea voyages were spectacular. Every journey took many months to prepare and some years to complete. The dates of the seven expeditions were as follows: I, 1405-1407; II, 1407-1409; III, 1409-1411; IV, 1413-1415; V, 1417-1419; VI, 1421-1422; VII, 1431-1433. By the time the seventh expedition was launched Emperor Yong Le had died and Emperor Xuan De was on the throne.

Many of the countries which were visited by Zheng He’s fleet were known to China. Countries like Champa, Cambodia, Thailand and Burma had been sending envoys to China for centuries. In times of peace and prosperity China has always exerted considerable influence over the countries in Southeast Asia. But when rebellions racked the land, its prestige dimmed and the stream of envoys paying homage to the throne stopped. This was particularly so whenever a dynasty fell and a new one established itself. Then the new dynasty had to recreate its sphere of influence. This was probably why Yong Le sent out his armadas. There was another reason. From 1366 to 1405 the armies of Tamerlane, founder of the Timurid dynasty, subdued the cities from West Turkestan to the North of India, cutting the trade routes which connected China with Central and Western Asia. To maintain its trade links China was forced to turn its attention towards the sea.

Sea voyages on the scale of Zheng He’s expeditions could only be undertaken by a nation advanced in navigational technology. In the Ming dynasty China was the paramount naval power of Asia. The compass had been known from the end of the eleventh century, and the southern provinces from which most of the crew members came produced excellent sailors.

It was recorded that Yong Le’s navy was comprised of over two thousand seven hundred warships, four hundred armed transport ships and two hundred and fifty large ‘treasure ships’, each of which could carry five hundred men. These treasure ships, the pride of the Ming navy, were so called for the many treasures they brought back to China. In every expedition a large number of these ships were included in the fleet. Sixty-two sailed in the first voyage. Exact information about the size of Zheng He’s ships has unfortunately been lost. The Ming Annals mentioned that Zheng He’s largest ships were four hundred and fifty-two feet long and one hundred and eighty-three feet wide. This, however, was regarded by experts as an exaggeration, since for safety reasons, the maximum length of wooden vessels was three hundred feet.

How meticulously these expeditions were organised could be seen from the composition of the personnel. The twenty-seven thousand eight hundred crew members who went with the first expedition included senior administrators, brigadiers, astrologers, doctors, medical officers and orderlies, interpreters, accountants, mechanics, carpenters and clerks. These complemented the various classes of rank and file sailors. Zheng He was even known to have taken units of cavalry with him.

The voyages would all follow a general route, but often detachments of ships separated from the main fleet to make side excursions of their own. Places regularly visited were for instance, Quilon and Champa in Vietnam, Kelantan and Malacca in the Malay Peninsula, Aceh and Palembang in Sumatra, Sri Lanka, some harbours in Central and East Java and Calicut in the South of India. Some ships went on to Aden and took pilgrims for Mecca to the port of Jiddah. On the fifth expedition, which was the longest, the fleet had sailed to the east coast of Africa.

Zheng He always took interpreters with him. The most famous of these was Ma Huan, a Chinese Moslem, who spoke Arabic. Ma Huan had published a book in which he recorded his experiences on his journeys. The book, called Yingai Shenglan (The Overall Survey of the Ocean’s Shores) gives a fascinating picture of the life and customs in twenty different countries.

A paper charm from the Sam Po Kong temple in Semarang, Central Java. Devotees believe that if this charm is passed on the front door it will ward off evil spirits. (Courtesy of the author)
Zheng He’s grand entourage, the display of power engendered by the well-manned and well-armed ships, the rich presents he bestowed on those rulers who agreed to pay homage to the Emperor of China and send tribute to him, all these left an indelible impression. Zheng He had been asked to give advice and to mediate in local political squabbles. It was recorded that Zheng He captured a pirate chief and wiped out his gang which terrorised Palembang. This happened on the first expedition. In the third expedition a rebellious king of Sri Lanka was subdued and replaced by a more amenable one, while on the fourth voyage, Zheng He restored the rightful ruler of Samudra in Sumatra to his throne after he had been ousted by a pretender.

From every expedition Zheng He brought back a rich array of rare mementoes, costly gems, rare plants and minerals and exotic animals, such as zebras, oryx (an African antelope) and ostriches. When after the fifth journey he brought back a giraffe from Aden the court was convinced that for China the Golden Age had arrived. The giraffe was identified as the Qillin, a mystical animal, which according to traditional belief was only seen in times of prosperity and general peace. The Qillin had a body like a deer, the tail of a cow and the hoofs of a horse. When the giraffe arrived in Nanking and was paraded in the streets of the town the whole population was agog.

As a result of Zheng He’s visits the suzerainty of the Chinese Empire over the countries south of China was once again established and trade flourished as never before.

Unfortunately Yong Le’s successors failed to grasp the importance of sea power and they withdrew their support from any maritime expansion. The expeditions of Zheng He’s remain an isolated case in China’s history. They have never been repeated ever since. Soon in China, Zheng He’s exploits were nothing but a faded memory.

In Southeast Asia, however, Zheng He’s memory lingered on until modern times. In several towns temples were erected in his name. Gradually his image changed into that of a god and his characteristics blended with those of local deities. In Java the worship of Zheng He has developed into a veritable cult. In these regions, however, he is known as Sam Po Kong, the Lord Sam Po.

In several cities on the north coast of Central and East Java the popularity of all kinds of objects which they believed originated from Zheng He’s ships or better still were once — used by him. These objects have magic powers. There is for instance a popular belief that bowls which had once been used by Zheng He or Sam Po Kong have two precious characteristics. Any food in these bowls remains fresh and any poisonous substance put in the bowl will be immediately neutralised.

If one sails along the coast near Lasem in Central Java one can see from a distance a pole, approximately fifteen metres high, which is planted at the foot of a limestone rock. From afar, the pole and the white limestone resemble a ship’s mast with its white billowing sail. Local belief has it that this rock and the pole were once part of a ship from Zheng He’s fleet which was petrified by the holy Moslem mystic Sunan Bonang who used to meditate not far from that spot. The local people pay respect to this stone; which they call Watu Layar (the Sail Stone), by offering incense and flowers on certain days. In the village of Mangkang near Semarang where Zheng He was supposed to have landed people will tell you that on the day of the traditional Chinese New Year the fragrance of burning joss sticks can be smelt.

But the cult of Sam Po Kong is most developed in Semarang, the capital of Central Java. On the outskirts of the town, on the spot where he was supposed to have gone ashore, there stands now an imposing Chinese temple with ornate gates, guarded by two ferocious looking stone lions and two elegant courtiers. There are two features of this temple which makes it different from many Chinese temples in Indonesia. The Sam Po Kong temple is built

Top to bottom: A sketch of Cheng Ho’s ship (courtesy the author), the outer gates of the Sam Po Kong temple and the grave of Dampu Awang. (Both courtesy the author and Photax)
around a natural cave in which stand five ancient stone sculptures, representing Zheng He and four adjutants. Beside this cave there is a Moslem grave believed to be that of a certain Kyai Jurumudi Dampu Awang (Dampu Awang, the Navigator). The whole cult is centred around these two places. For centuries countless people have brought their worries and sorrows, their hopes and desires to Sam Po Kong and Dampu Awang. One could pray for riches, wealth, health, offspring, a good husband or wife, anything the imagination could conjure up; Sam Po Kong or Dampu Awang could provide it all. And presumably they did, for the whole colourful complex of ornamental arches and gates, of prayer halls containing intricately carved prayer tables, gilded sculptures and exotic paintings as well as the large flower garden surrounding it was built, bit by bit, through funds donated by grateful devotees.

The temple attracts people from all ethnic groups and the way of devotion is completely ecumenical. You can burn joss sticks, if that is what you prefer, but you can also murmur Moslem prayers or make the Javanese ‘sembah’, or bow with the hands, palms joined, touching the forehead.

On every sixth month of the Chinese lunar year, which can fall in June or July, the Sam Po Kong temple forms the hub of a great celebration to commemorate the landing of the fleet on its visit to Semarang or as some say to celebrate his birthday. An image of Sam Po is placed in an ornately decorated sedan chair and carried in procession along the streets amid the loud clangs of cymbals and the steady rhythm of the drums. In front of the sedan-chair a person leads a bridled and saddled horse, representing Sam Po’s horse. People standing on the side of the road believe that the spirit of Sam Po is actually present during the procession and they devoutly lift their hands in respectful greeting when the horse and the covered chair pass them. Often children dressed up as figures from Chinese mythology are carried on small wooden platforms high above the heads of the carriers in the procession. Often they are the children of devotees. Groups performing the lively, acrobatic lion dances add to the festive atmosphere. Hundreds of people of all classes of society participate in this celebration. Such is the popularity of this festival that a special committee has to be formed to organise these yearly processions, the cost of which is entirely borne by the devotees. The same committee takes care of the upkeep of the temple.

Who actually was Kyai Jurumudi Dampu Awang who is supposed to be buried in the Moslem grave in the Sam Po temple complex? This question has never been quite adequately answered. Several historians have put forward different theories about the identity of the holy Dampu Awang. One theory has it that Dampu Awang was a Javanese holy man who became friends with Zheng He, who happened to land near the place where he stayed. When Zheng He left to continue his travels, this man missed him so much that he made a statue of his friend and the four adjutants who used to be with him. These he placed in a nearby cave. There the holy man would sit facing the stone statue, conversing in his mind with his absent friend. When he died, his pupils buried him near the cave.

Another version is that Dampu Awang was Wang Jinghong, a Chinese Moslem, who was second in command of the fleet. The story went that Wang Jinghong suddenly fell ill just when the fleet was cruising along the northern coast of Java. Zheng He then ordered the fleet to anchor and Wang was carried ashore. Zheng He left his friend in the care of ten crew members, leaving behind one big ship and abundant medicines and provisions. Wang recovered but never went back to China. His crew married local women and gradually the small encampment grew into a city. To honour his commander Wang made a statue of Zheng He and placed it in a cave. When he died many years later, he was buried by the local people in a Moslem grave near the cave. Dampu Awang is a Javanese transliteration of his name.

Let me finish with a story which shows Zheng He in a less than saintly mood, but with some sense of mischievous humour.

Once, the durian fruit, so beloved by some peoples of Southeast Asia, did not emit the pungent smell it has now. Its taste, however, has always been delectable. At one stage, Zheng He was irritated by a group of local people. To punish them the august Commander-in-Chief . . . relieved himself against a durian tree! We know the results . . .

Margaret Bocquet is a lecturer in the School of Modern Asian Studies, Griffith University, Brisbane.
