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Zheng He's contribution to the development of China's soft power concept

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Abstract. The article discusses how Zheng He's travels to the West created a good reputation and image of China in the world. Zheng He led his fleet to visit countries in Asia and Africa, showcasing China's achievements in various fields including culture, economy, science and technology. It not only promoted the exchange of goods, but also strengthened cooperation between China and foreign countries through cultural exchange. Such diplomacy has successfully shaped China's soft power and laid a solid foundation for subsequent public diplomacy. As a result, peaceful and friendly attitude towards neighboring countries, as well as scientific, technological and cultural cooperation laid the foundations of a soft power policy. This approach had successfully attracted many countries to join the Ming Dynasty's tributary system and the international order with Ming as its priority.

Keywords: soft power of China, public diplomacy, Zheng He, Ming Dynasty

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Научная статья

Вклад Чжэн Хэ в развитие концепции мягкой силы Китая

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Аннотация. Статья посвящена периоду, когда китайский император Юнлэ осознал, что посредством мирных обменов с соседними странами, расширения культурного влияния, укрепления народной власти и облегчения обмена информацией и товарами с соседними странами можно достичь долгосрочных результатов развития. Он предпринял ряд мер по продвижению собственных ценностей, культуры и политики, чтобы сформировать предпочтения других стран, привлечь и склонить их к участию во взаимодействии. В то время военно-морской флот династии Мин обладал неоспоримой властью в мире, поэтому император послал Чжэн Хэ, чтобы посетить страны Азии и Африки, демонстрируя достижения Китая в различных областях, включая культуру, экономику, науку и технологии. Это не только способствовало обмену товарами, но и укрепило сотрудничество между Китаем и зарубежными странами посредством культурного обмена. Деятельность Чжэн Хэ – это не только многолетняя дипломатическая деятельность, но и политическая деятельность в форме экономической и культурной дипломатии. Путешествие пропагандировало процветание и высокий имидж Китая, произвело положительное впечатление на жителей других стран.

Такая дипломатия успешно сформировала мягкую силу Китая и заложила прочную основу для последующей публичной дипломатии. В результате миролюбивое и дружественное отношение к соседним странам, а также научно-техническое и культурное сотрудничество заложили основы политики «мягкой силы». Такой подход привлек многие страны к присоединению к системе данников династии Мин и международному порядку, приоритетом которого является Мин. С другой стороны, в результате исследования авторы приходят к выводу, что, преследуя эффект масштаба в современном международном взаимодействии, Китай должен видеть скрытый кризис. Если проводить параллель с инициативой «Один пояс, один путь», то, несмотря на выдающиеся результаты, Китай должен всесторонне оценивать экономические издержки, придерживаться принципа равенства и взаимной выгоды и в любой момент подстраиваться под обеспечение национальных интересов.

Ключевые слова: мягкая сила Китая, публичная дипломатия, Чжэн Хэ, династия Мин

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Soft power holds a unique and important position in international relations. In essence, soft power includes culture, influence, thought, public diplomacy, and the ability to compete and cooperate [1. P. 19]. This power is not only used in contemporary times, but also reflected in ancient international exchanges. In the Ming Dynasty of China, Emperor Yongle attached great importance to utilizing soft power to build the national image. The Ming Dynasty navy had an undeniable power in the world at that time. However, Emperor Yongle realized that through peaceful exchanges with neighboring countries, expanding cultural influence, exerting the power of the people, promoting information sharing and commodity exchange with neighboring countries, could achieve more long-term development results. Therefore, the emperor took a series of measures to articulate his own values, culture, and policies, in order to shape the preferences of other countries, attract and persuade them to participate in the interaction [2], among which the most classic example is Zheng He's navigation activities

Zheng He led a huge fleet to sail along the South China Sea, crossing the Indian Ocean, and ultimately reaching eastern Africa. Navigation uses trade and culture as the medium to achieve the exchange of products and culture between China and countries along the route. At the same time, Zheng He's fleet did not use military power to carry out colonial activities. Instead, as ambassadors of love and peace, they spread the image of China's peace and win-win situation to other countries, and communicated the emperor's idea of universal harmony with the people of the countries they sailed to. They exported the values and cultural traditions of the Ming Dynasty to the world, expanding China's influence at that time, He successfully completed the initial attempt of public diplomacy under the social background at that time [3. P. 114].

I. The social background of the time

The Ming Dynasty was established by Zhu Yuanzhang, a peasant by birth, who overthrew the Yuan Dynasty. Ming dynasty was a dynasty with significant influence in the political, economic and cultural fields. Since the beginning of the Ming Dynasty, the greatest threat faced by the Ming Dynasty came from the nomads in the north. In order to concentrate on the possible counterattack at any time, Zhu Yuanzhang made several military strikes against the Mongolian army and had his sons each hold part of the military force stationed on the northern border. Among them, Zhu Yuanzhang's fourth son Zhu Di (later Emperor Yongle) was stationed in Beijing (the capital of the Yuan Dynasty). Zhu Di possessed military talent, and with a strong military force at his disposal, Zhu Di became a powerful local power in both power and fame.

However, after the death of his eldest son Zhu Biao (the Crown Prince), Zhu Yuanzhang, the first emperor of the Ming Dynasty, selected Zhu Biao's son - Zhu Yunwen - as the new successor. Later, with the death of the first emperor, conflicts arose between the young heir-Zhu Yunwen, and his powerful uncle-Zhu Di. The battle between the two sides resulted in Zhu Di's victory. Zhu Di usurped the throne and became emperor with the year

Yongle, and he moved the capital from Nanjing to Beijing.

While the internal struggle for power within the empire was going on, the northern nomads aimed for the opportunity to attack continuously, but due to the powerful military talents of Emperor Yongle, he personally led his army many times and repelled the Mongol attacks again and again.

Whereas, the empire still faced constant crises. On the one hand, the usurpation of power affected reputation, so the powerful civil official group formed a certain degree of restraint on the imperial power. On the other hand, the economic and trade activities between the Ming dynasty and foreign countries were affected by years of war, and pirates attacked the coastal trade rampantly. Under the internal and external pressure, considering that the existing military hard power was mainly used to deal with the nomads from the north, how to use other flexible forces to stabilize the empire and expand its influence was an important issue for Emperor Yongle. Therefore, in 1405, the emperor Yongle supported Zheng He's sea voyages, hoping to improve country's public diplomatic image [4. P. 6].

II. The official purpose of Zheng He's voyage activity

The voyages of Zheng He were a diplomatic activity combined with pragmatism, a top-down political activity that represented the aspiration of the ruler. From 1405 to 1422, Zheng He completed six voyages. While preparing for his seventh voyage in 1424, Zheng He's operations were suspended due to the death of Emperor Yongle. Then, in 1430, Zheng He completed the 7th and last voyage of his life.

All ancient Chinese dynasties had a cruel eunuch system in which all male chamberlains were castrated. As a senior chamberlain in internal official of the Yongle Emperor, Zheng He had no way to have offspring, so unlike the civil official group, Zheng He had no conditions or ideas to profit for his offspring or family.

In this case, the emperor chose Zheng He to hold sailing activities because Zheng He would be completely loyal to the emperor. Zheng He had enough appreciation from the emperor, and the great power in Zheng He's hands all came from the emperor. So the voyages could completely express the ideas of the emperor.

Zheng He's voyages had the following main purposes: Firstly, to strengthen diplomatic interaction with various countries, to stabilize China's relations with neighboring countries, to maintain Ming Dynasty own security, and to make neighboring countries recognize the orthodoxy of Emperor Yongle. Secondly, highlighting China's prosperity, enhancing the level of trade development, promoting economic interdependence, and creating a profitable atmosphere for countries along the route with constantly evolving cultural and social realities, expanding official control over high-value trade, enabling both sides to benefit from trade activities [5. P. 24]. Thirdly, to improve the national prestige of the Ming dynasty through the establishment of a tributary system, to establish the Ming dynasty's central and exclusive position in the world, and to further expand the space for imperial development.

III. The soft power elements in Zheng He's voyage event

III.1. Peace and friendship are the mainstream idea of diplomacy

After the establishment of Ming Dynasty, except for the military strikes against Mongolia in the north, it seldom took the initiative to conquer neighboring countries. Zhu Yuanzhang learned the experience of conquests of Yuan Dynasty (Yuan Dynasty had sent armies to conquer Java, Japan and other countries), and formulated the "Ancestral discipline of Emperor in Ming Dynasty" to admonish future generations to get along with all countries in a peaceful and friendly way. Zhu Yuanzhang admonished his descendants to learn the experience and conscientiously fulfill it, and specifically pointed out that the Ming Dynasty should not conquer 15 countries, including countries in East and Southeast Asia as well as South Asia, such as Korea, Japan, Ryukyu, and countries that had established regimes in the region at that time, such as Malaysia, Indonesia, India and Brunei. Zhu Di inherited Zhu Yuanzhang's idea of peace and friendship as a diplomatic guideline. He hopes to promote the prosperity of the country through unique culture and concepts, thereby establishing and enhancing China's positive image in the international community [6. P. 21].

During voyages, Zheng He's fleet faithfully carried out the policy of good neighbor, "sharing the blessings of peace" with the countries along the route.

According to the Emperor Yongle's idea, the role of the Ming Dynasty was gradually attracting other countries to follow China, China leading the world towards a peace and harmony. Guided by this strategic goal, Zheng He was very cautious in his travel, and although he had a powerful force, he did not abuse it. The few times Zheng He used troops, they all were self-defense [7].

A total of three military operations took place during Zheng He's series of voyages.

The first was the suppression of Chen Zuyi. Chen Zuyi was a fugitive from Guangdong Province, China. During Zheng He's voyages, Chen Zuyi plundered merchants and tourists in the Palembang City area, kidnapped overseas envoys to China. In 1406, Chen Zuyi was captured by Zheng He and brought back to China.

The second was the Ceylon (Sri Lanka) War. In 1411, this battle was initiated by the local king who coveted the wealth of Zheng He's fleet after a well-designed war. This fight resulted in the defeat and capture of the king.

The third was the Battle of Sumatra, which took place in 1415. This battle was due to the internal struggle of the local regime, where Zheng He's fleet passed through to bestowed upon the previous royal family, and the opposition was discontented for not receiving the bestowed wealth, thus carrying out violent activities against Zheng He's fleet. The final result of the war was the victory of the Zheng He's fleet.

In Chinese historical documents, Zheng He was only involved in these three wars during his series of voyages. These wars were all self-defense wars, not active attacks of a hegemonic nature. There were many countries on Zheng He's voyages, yet no large-scale wars occurred,

which was determined by the purpose of Zheng He's voyages, which was a peaceful and friendly activity to seek information, establish relationship and extend trade, rather than an action for the purpose of conquest.

III.2. Science, technology and economic strength constituted the foundation of confident diplomacy

The era of China's navy dominating the ocean was earlier than that of Europe, and the development of Zheng He's soft power activities in voyages was inseparable from the support of hard power such as science and technology [8. P. 80].

Zheng He's team was the largest ocean-going fleet in the 15th century. Its crew was about 27,000 people each time. The ships were huge, and there were more than 200 large and small sea ships each time, and the largest ship named "treasure ship", which length was 130-150 meters and width was 50-60 meters. In addition, there are also horse ships, grain ships, war ships, water ships and other kinds of ships [9. P. 280-282, 290].

Due to the support of science, technology and economic strength, the shipbuilding and navigation technology of Ming Dynasty reached a peak. The fleet scale, navigation information and logistic support, the power of these fields were advanced level at that time, which helped Zheng He's team to be able to travel to ocean-going countries. Zheng He's fleet used navigational instruments such as compasses and bathymetry, and drew the "Zheng He Navigation Chart". The fleet came with cooks, doctors and skilled workers to guarantee the daily life of the whole fleet members.

Zheng He's team reached as far as the African countries along the Red Sea. Dialogue with foreign audiences is the condition for the success of this public diplomacy abroad [10. P. 14]. The shock of citizen after seeing Zheng He's fleet on the way was undoubtedly, it is the best form of soft power propaganda. The purpose of such a large, luxurious fleet driving to here, not to conquer by force, but to be willing to carry out diplomatic activities and trade activities. This scene is an effective advertisement. Zheng He transmitted cultural elements with Chinese characteristics such as compass, gunpowder, shipbuilding technology, traditional books, religious beliefs, scientific research methods, experience in agricultural technology, and advanced concepts of governing the country on his way. The spread of culture narrowed the gap between countries, deepened the effect of China's foreign contacts, and brought closer ties with many countries, while cultural phenomena were recorded, saved and carried forward. Since then, Zheng He's voyages to the Ocean have opened up diverse channels for Chinese culture to the outside world by the way of dissemination and exchange [11].

III.3. "To be partial to other while neglecting self" approach

The concept of political connotation of tributary relationship in Chinese history is complicated, and to some extent, it is similar to the political alliance relationship in modern times. Its goal is to prevent and eliminate the

influence of common external threats and maintain the survival and safety environment of alliance relationship. The common concept of the two "provides the feasibility expectation of reaching an agreement, provides the credibility expectation of keeping the promise", which is conducive to maintaining the long-term and rationality of the alliance [12].

Zheng He's fleet had a strong military forces, but Zheng He did not use this force to invade the relevant countries to establish the subsidiary relation between China and the countries along the route. This is a characteristic of Zheng He's voyages that differs from the Western "geographic discoveries". Zheng He did not occupy the lands of overseas countries, nor did he establish any colonial institutions of governing (similar to the British East India Company and other institutions that ruled colonies) during his diplomatic activities. In addition, Zheng He's voyages focused on the principle of "generosity in dealing with the subsidiary". This principle focused on bestowing the vassal states with great wealth, and Zheng He's fleet did not have clear requirements or quantitative limits on the products that the vassal states could pay as tribute, and the value of the products paid by the vassal states was far less than the wealth bestowed by the Ming Dynasty. This was in contrast to the West's plundering of raw materials and slaves from the colonies, which also was the main reason for the popularity of Zheng He's voyages in the region.

Rather than seeing tribute and bounty as forms in vassal relations, tribute and bounty should be seen as a medium for liaising harmonious and friendly values. Bounties was an active but paradoxical political device by giving gifts to the rulers of the countries along the route and then inviting the local rulers to participate in tributary relations, rather than conquering the local rulers and forcing them to join.

The acceptance of the bounty by the local rulers meant that they recognized the status of Ming suzerainty and became members of the tribute system from then on. Such bounties could be described as an attractive activity in the form of exchange or advance payment. Unlike the constant supply of raw materials to the suzerain state by the colonies under Western rule, the tribute at that time was bartering character, was a limited, rare and unique relationship.

By conducting activities through generous bestowing wealth, the countries along the route felt the strong and prosperous of the Ming Dynasty as a suzerain state, which led to the idea of interacting with China. By issuing documents to the vassal states, the Ming Dynasty was in fact just concluding a promise of friendship in writing with the smaller neighboring states, a promise that was a mild statement rather than an unequal treaty. The countries along the route did not lose their sovereignty such as diplomacy, so this was the main reason why the countries along the route want to establish relations with the Ming Dynasty. Importantly, this relationship shows how countries along the route benefit from interaction with China. This relationship follows the principle of non-interference, focuses on listening to the needs and ideas of various countries on trade, and systematically promotes and disseminates Chinese values while serving economic activities [13. P. 15].

III.4. Cultural interaction and immigration during navigation

Zheng He's voyages were recorded in documents, which became an important record for the study of related history. Zheng He's attendant Ma Huan wrote *Ying Ya Sheng Lan* (It means to enjoy the ocean scenery) Gong Zhen wrote *Western Countries*, Fei Xin wrote *Xing Cha Sheng Lan* (It means to enjoy the scenery on the boat), and *Zheng He Navigation Chart* all recorded the relevant national conditions, which greatly enriched Chinese people's knowledge of the world [14].

Zheng He's fleet was so large that many of the crew members, when they were old enough to marry, married indigenous women in the area and had offspring. The descendants of these people became part of the early Chinese immigrants overseas. The descendants of these Chinese immigrants actively integrated into local life and lived in harmony with the local people. Zheng He was a Muslim and many of the members of his fleet were Muslim as well. Zheng He's fleet sailed to Southeast Asia and made a significant contribution to the spread of Islam there. The mosques in the city of Malacca nowadays are built in the style of Chinese mosques [15]. A variety of cultures mingle and converge here, reflecting the inclusiveness of Chinese culture. At the same time, Zheng He brought the beliefs of the fishermen of the southeast coast of China in Mazu to Southeast Asia, and temples were built in many places in Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia to pay homage to Mazu.

In addition, Zheng He himself has become an object of worship and faith for the people of the countries along the route. There are many temples and pagodas named Zheng He in Southeast Asia. For example: In Malacca, Malaysia, there are places named after Zheng He, such as Sambo Mountain, Sambo Temple, Sambo Pavilion, and Sambo Well. (Sambo is the name given to Zheng He by the emperor).

In Sri Lanka, there is a stone tablet carved by Zheng He during his voyage. It is inscribed with Chinese, Tamil and Persian characters. The Tamil text tells the story of the Chinese emperor to praise the greatness of the protector when emperor heard the protector of the Tamil help people. The Persian text means dedicated to Allah and the Holy One of Islam. The Chinese text is about the Ming emperor giving tribute of gold, silver and other items to the temple. The difference in meaning between the three texts is a sign of respect for the three cultures and a representation of the harmony of many cultures, reflecting the cultural inclusiveness and integration in Chinese voyages.

III.5. Commodity exchange and tribute enthusiasm

Chinese silk and ceramics have always enjoyed a good reputation in Asian countries, many countries have long wanted to develop trade relations with China, but pirate attacks were frequent in the early Ming Dynasty. The Ming Dynasty implemented a long period of "maritime prohibition" policy. Since Zheng He visit to the ocean, many countries thought that establishing friendly trade relations with China by paying tribute to China was an effective method to obtain economic benefits [16. P. 138].

Zheng He's voyages meant the abolition of the maritime prohibition policy, and the trade network established by the voyages rapidly connected all countries, with the characteristics of primary globalization. Zheng He's fleet brought Chinese porcelain and silk, especially precious porcelain such as celadon and saffron porcelain, many kinds of textiles such as silk, satin, brocade, gauze, and products such as iron and bronze, which contained advanced technology and were welcomed for maritime state local. And the featured products of various countries were also imported in large quantities by Zheng He's team. Zheng He's fleet was equivalent to a modern shopping cart, adding many types of products at once and exporting many types of products as well. Products such as gems, corals, ivories and rhino horn from Africa, pearls and colored glaze from the Persian Gulf, double-edged knives from Syria, frosting sugar from Bengal, and cotton cloth from India were imported to China.

Chinese and foreign production technology reached the purpose of exchange and communication, Chinese ceramic firing technology spread to the Arab region, and China introduced glass firing technology from overseas [17]. Although the initial purpose of trade was for tribute, in the process of product exchange, in addition to bartering, the circulation of money exchange was also gradually formed. Chinese copper coins and silk cloths were used for market transactions and such, and Chinese copper coins were also used in the Palembang [14].

IV. The effect of Zheng He's voyage event

Zheng He's voyages were the culmination of the development of friendly relations between China and maritime countries during the Ming Dynasty, and even throughout the ancient period.

First of all, Zheng He's voyaging activities spread China's reputation to the whole world and enhanced its international influence. Zheng He showed a prosperous, powerful Ming Dynasty image to all countries, spread the prestige of Emperor Yongle to all countries. Zheng He's activity made all countries along the route recognize Ming Dynasty's status as the sovereign of the world.

Secondly, through Zheng He's voyages, Ming dynasty attracted many Indian Ocean countries and even African countries that had never been in contact with China to interaction, which further improved the development of tributary system. The far-ranging tribute system laid the foundation for the development of friendship between China and the neighboring maritime countries. The Voyages also achieved the goal of peaceful coexistence between China and other countries, which to a certain extent reflected the success of the ruler's soft power policy.

In addition, Zheng He's voyages promoted the economic and cultural interaction between the Ming Dynasty and other countries, and spread Chinese production, technology exported to the world, while China also introduced products and technology from other countries. The tribute system promoted the prosperity of commerce in relevant countries, the inclusiveness and harmonious cultural ideas of Ming Dynasty also spread to the world. At the same time, both rulers and Chinese citizen, got knowledge of the

world and reshaped their respective worldviews in some extent.

V. Drawbacks

The biggest weakness of Zheng He's voyages was the lack of attention to economic benefits, thus failing to open up a new pattern of world historical development. Zheng He's voyages relied entirely on the personal will of Emperor Yongle and lacked strong economic motivation. The excessive bestowed wealth and huge sailing costs put serious pressure on the national economy, so the voyages were not sustainable.

Besides, the rulers of the Ming Dynasty still belonged to the traditional ideological outlook of the agricultural nations and did not have deeper understanding of the sea. Emperor Yongle did not further explore the additional value of economic, social integration and circular development between the maritime countries and China.

Summary

In essence, Zheng He's navigation activities were the product of the era when Emperor Yongle (Zhu Di) actively developed diplomatic relations. It was an attempt by the rulers to apply the soft power factor to the diplomatic and political fields. This attempt successfully attracted many countries to join Ming Dynasty's tributary system and the international order with Ming as its priority. The activity achieved the three main purposes expected by the rulers to publicize the national prestige, build a harmonious and friendly international environment, and promote economic interaction.

Zheng He's navigation activities are not only a diplomatic activity that has lasted for many years, but also a political activity in the form of economic and cultural integration. This activity fully reflected Emperor Yongle's thinking of breaking through the convention under the social background at that time. It was a kind of fantastic idea and embodied the emperor's political wisdom. These voyages were established on the premise of economic prosperity, without considering costs of reward, were led by strong rulers from the top. Although Zheng He's voyages are a brilliant page in world history, they are not replicable and unsustainable.

From my perspective, Zheng He's voyages were a subjective diplomatic activity initiated by ancient China, and there was no denying its expansionary factors. However, in essence, Zheng He's series of activities did not colonize or enslave the countries along the line. He did not change the order of the world at that time, nor did he use hegemony. The voyage publicized China's prosperity and advanced image, left a positive and friendly impression on the people of other countries. Voyages also attracted and promoted economic and cultural ties around the world at that time.

While pursuing scale effect in current international interaction, China should see the hidden crisis. When a country provides a large number of loan assistance to some countries with weak economic strength, if the credit of small countries collapses and cannot be repaid, the im-

pact on the countries that provide loans will also be great. China should fully assess economic costs, adhere to the principle of equality and mutual benefit, and adjust at any time to ensure national interests. China needs to formulate detailed strategies according to the different national conditions of each country to achieve the sustainable development of soft power and promote the further development of diplomacy, rather than replicating diplomatic strategies in a model way and letting economic strength pay more for soft power.

In addition, for other countries, this era is full of competition and opportunities. It is a greater victory to abandon the conservative thinking in the past and try to use a variety of methods to cooperate with different types of countries. Understanding the differences between China and the West in maritime activities, deepening the understanding of China's relevant policies, and fully recognizing the value of soft power will enable countries around the world to better carry out diplomatic activities and promote common development.

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