

# ADMIRAL ZHENG HE AND CONTEMPORARY MALAYSIA

## 郑和与现代马来西亚

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### Abstract

Admiral Zheng He and his voyages have in recent years been accorded increasing coverage and attention in Malaysia. This growing interest has arisen largely from the coming commemoration of the 600th year in 2005 of his first naval expedition. It also coincides with the 30th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Malaysia and China. Various events have been organized by both the Melaka state and the Federal governments to mark the two anniversaries and these will continue until next year.

Following a brief review of the historical background of relations between China and the Malay Peninsula, the paper will examine the recollections of past bilateral relations in local records as well as the recollections of Zheng He by Malaysian Chinese. The conventional views of the Ming voyages in historical writings are then discussed followed by a focus on the shifts in historiography concerning the period in which these voyages occupied such an important place.

### 摘要

在马来西亚, 郑和及其航海事迹近年越发受到关注, 这很大程度上乃因2005年纪念郑和首航西洋600周年活动而起。同时, 马中建交也恰逢30周年。马六甲及联邦政府已组织了这两个周年纪念的系列庆祝活动, 并将持续至明年。

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本文将概括地评析中国与马来半岛关系的历史背景，并审视在本土记录中有关两国双边关系的过去记忆，以及马来西亚华人对郑和的历史记忆。西方学者针对明朝航海的传统观点也将被论析，并进而探究对此航行的历史视角之当代变换。

## Introduction

Admiral Zheng He (Cheng Ho / 郑和) and his voyages to Southeast Asia have in recent years been given increasing attention in Malaysia. Ming China in the early 15th century sent out huge armadas and among these were the seven naval expeditions of Admiral Zheng He which first called at Melaka in 1405. The growing interest in Zheng He has partly to do with the world-wide commemoration of the 600th anniversary of the first expedition in 2005. It also coincides with the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Malaysia and China. There was much media publicity on Zheng He when Dato Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Malaysia's Prime Minister, made reference to commemorating the two events while visiting China in 2003 (*The Star*, 16 September 2003).

Zheng He has emerged as a recognizable image to promote Malaysia-China relations. With improving bilateral relations and China's growing economic power, the 15th century mariner is not only a symbol of historical ties between Ming China and the Melaka Sultanate but contemporary ties between Malaysia and China. Being a Muslim, the admiral has come to represent the Islamic side of China. The Ming voyages are presented as expeditions of friendship with Melaka underlined by a common faith which Zheng He shared with the Malay rulers. The appreciation of these features helps to narrow the cultural distance between the two countries. Zheng He has, in the process, gained an enhanced standing in Malaysia's historical understanding of its 15th century history.

This embracing of Zheng He by the wider society in Malaysia and the publicity given is a relatively recent development. The Chinese admiral did not figure prominently in the earlier works in Malaysia. Yet it is clear that his naval expeditions marked the earliest and most important phase of Sino-Malay diplomatic relations. Six hundred years ago when China stepped out into the international scene with its huge armadas, it was a world power and probably the most formidable. For Melaka, the most striking feature of the visits was the common strategic and commercial interests that developed between China and Melaka, then a new and rising sultanate. Using Melaka as a base, the Chinese safeguarded the strategic Straits of Melaka through which Chinese traders reached the Indian Ocean and the

Arabian Sea. For Melaka, Ming China was a powerful ally to deter Siamese and Javanese ambition in the Malay Peninsula. With the backing of Ming China in its formative years, Melaka expanded its own influence to become a major emporium.

However, by the middle of the 15th century, China ended all overseas expeditions. Melaka, the centre of the Malay empire, was itself captured by the Portuguese in 1511 and this marked the beginning of the coming of the West in the region. The next 500 years witnessed a gradual decline of Malay political power and the ascendancy of key European powers and the Americans. In such an environment, early Chinese voyages and relations with Melaka received less attention by scholars whose approach to writing and interpreting the history of the region was framed by a more Euro-centric perspective.

The recent recovery of Zheng He and the Ming voyages in public discourse in Malaysia is due to several factors and these are the changing regional order, the improving relations between Malaysia and China, a more Islamic consciousness in Malaysia and therefore an appreciation of Zheng He's Muslim background, and a shift in historiography.

## **Background**

Some background of Sino-Malaysian relations is useful for an understanding of the contemporary situation. It would touch on how the Zheng He episode in early Malaysia-China relations came to be largely neglected and how it has since been recovered and given a fresh interpretation. In short, the Zheng He story offers a sub-text to the larger account of the evolving inter-state relations between China and Malaysia, and how such changing relations shape historical writings and public presentation especially at a popular level.

Following the last of the Ming voyages to Melaka, official relations between China and what is today Malaysia came to a halt. And after the Second World War and independence in 1957, several factors delayed the opening of relations between the two countries. China's relations with the Malayan Communist Party and its policy towards Malaysians of Chinese origin were two crucial issues. When the People's Republic of China was established in October 1949, Southeast Asia was still in the process of decolonization. The new government in Beijing declared support for all political struggles against colonialism and this included the ongoing communist insurgency in Malaya. Secondly, China continued to recognize that "any person born of a Chinese father or mother was a Chinese citizen regardless of

birthplace."

Tunku Abdul Rahman, the first Prime Minister, saw the communist insurgency as being inspired by China and was therefore not in favour of establishing diplomatic ties. The pro-West Tunku, in an environment of the Cold War, regarded China as a threat to regional security. Additionally, several leaders in the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), the coalition partner of the ruling Alliance party, had previous links with the Kuomintang Party of China and were anti-Beijing.

It was under Tun Abdul Razak, prime minister from 1971 to 1976, that Malaysia established relations with China. Tun Razak shifted Malaysia away from its largely pro-Western foreign policy. Malaysia had helped to found the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and was anxious that the region be turned into a zone of peace and neutrality. To achieve these objectives, Tun Razak decided that ASEAN countries must engage China, which was then emerging as a major power. By this time too, the Malayan Communist part was no longer a military threat.

China, too, was changing. It had relied on ideological arguments of central planning in efforts to develop its economy and some progress was made. But the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s and the Cultural Revolution of 1976-77 brought disastrous results and the Chinese people suffered severe hardships. China's leaders thereupon introduced reforms in the late 1970s to modernize the economy and became more realistic about its place in the larger geopolitics of East Asia. Its growing strength and potential influence were recognized by the United States and in 1972 President Richard Nixon visited China as a start to the rapprochement process.

### **The Recollection of Past Malay–Chinese Relations**

In a period when there were no official relations with China, public and official interest in China was minimal or guarded, and public perception of China was influenced by the China policy of the Malaysian government. But to a large extent, too, local perception of China and of early ties between China and the Malay states were likely to be shaped by memory of a distant past. This is where the story of Zheng He and the Melaka sultanate is useful as it offers some ideas as to how past Malay-China relations were recollected. How did the Melaka era and pre-colonial people in Malaysia see early contact with China? Did Admiral Zheng He appear in that early memory?

The earliest Malay text is the 17th century *Sejarah Melayu*. It is the oldest

Malay historical text and covers the Melaka part of Malay history. The *Sejarah Melayu* has three references to China. One of the references is an episode of the pre-Melaka sultanate period. The other two are associated with Mansur Syah whose rule in 1456-77 came well after the visit of Zheng He. But there is no mention in the text of the mighty Ming fleets.

It is interesting to note how the *Sejarah Melayu* portrays China. In the first episode the *Sejarah Melayu* describes how the Chinese became fearful on hearing of an invasion by Raja Chulan of Nagapatam of India. To stave off the threat, the Chinese devised a ruse. They sent a ship filled with rusty nails, fruiting trees and manned by a number of very old men to meet the invasion fleet which had reached Temasek (today's Singapore). When asked by men of Raja Chulan how far China was from Temasek, the old men on the ship pointed out that the thick steel had turned to rusty nails and the seeds they had when they left China had become fruiting trees. They themselves had sailed out as young men but were now toothless old men. On hearing this Raja Chulan turned back (*Sejarah Melayu* : 9-11).

The second episode is a narration in some length of the marriage of Hang Liu (popularly referred to as Hang Li Po / 汉丽宝) to Sultan Masur Syah. The *Sejarah Melayu* describes that Mansur Syah had sent a delegation to China and managed to convince the Emperor that Melaka had as large a population as China. Impressed by this the Chinese emperor decided to give his daughter as wife to the Melaka ruler. To accompany the princess, 500 youths of noble birth and several hundred beautiful women were selected. On their arrival the young men and women were given residence in a hill which has since been named Bukit Cina (*Sejarah Melayu* : 80-82).

The third episode is about how the Chinese emperor had fallen ill and despite the efforts of all the doctors, could not be cured of the ailment. Eventually an aged doctor explained that the emperor had fallen ill because he had considered a letter sent by the sultan of Melaka as an act of "obeisance" or tribute. The Chinese emperor therefore could only be cured of his sickness if he drank water that had been used to wash the feet of the sultan. Chinese envoys were thereupon sent to Melaka to obtain such water. After drinking the water the Chinese emperor was healed of his illness (*Sejarah Melayu* : 86-87).

It is significant that there is no reference in the traditional Malay historical text on Admiral Zheng He or of the visits of the Ming naval armada. If indeed a "historical" figure was used to symbolize and portray early relations between China and Malaysia in the *Sejarah Melayu* it was the Chinese princess Hang Li Po. Hang Li Po, however, is not mentioned in Chinese records.

The *Sejarah Melayu* presents Melaka as a state with almost parity in

diplomatic standing with China. China is not portrayed as a strong military power and hence in the first episode the text narrated how it sought to avoid engaging an impending attack by Raja Chulan. Melaka's claim to equality with China is underlined by the giving of Hang Li Po, the Chinese princess by the Chinese emperor to Mansur Syah in marriage. Lest any doubt remains of power parity, the *Sejarah Melayu* recounted how the Chinese emperor fell ill when he interpreted a letter from Melaka as an act of submission to China. This framework of Melaka power in the *Sejarah Melayu* defined by Malay cultural perspective could not therefore accommodate the Zheng He episode and his mighty fleet of ships. Significantly, as Zheng He is not mentioned there is also no discussion of the Islamic feature of China and of the early Chinese in Southeast Asia.

Thus, the lack of any reference to Zheng He or the Ming voyages may not be simply a question of colonial historiography alone. The presentation of early contact with China and of China was shaped by indigenous memory which itself was determined by its own world-view. It is likely that the compiler of the *Sejarah Melayu* had not heard of Zheng He or of his Muslim background. If he did, he probably considered the story of Zheng He as of little significance within the perspective he was guided by. Furthermore, the compiler might have been more drawn towards the coming of trade and Islam from the Indian coasts and the Middle East.

### **Recollection of Zheng He by Malaysian Chinese**

It is among the Chinese in Malaysia that there is recollection of Admiral Zheng He. But this memory mixes history with myth and legends. Zheng He is probably the better known of the historical figures other than Yap Ah Loy (叶亚来) among the Chinese in Malaysia. Although Yap Ah Loy, who led a faction in a civil war against a rival Hakka Chinese faction, and considered a founder of Kuala Lumpur, yet in some ways Zheng He was a more enduring historical figure and seen as possessing character and admirable leadership qualities. However, there had been difficulties in constructing Zheng He as a major figure within the local community because he was, after all, a Ming and therefore foreign admiral.

For many Chinese in Malaysia, Zheng He is more popularly known as Sam Po or Sam Bao (三保) and worshipped as a deity. In a number of places in Southeast Asia there are temples dedicated to worshipping Sam Bao (Salmon 1993). It is likely that Chinese traders and immigrants crossing the dangerous seas saw Sam Bao as a

protector. Geoff Wade pointed out that the earliest evidence of the worship of Sam Bao is found in a text *Dongxi Yangkao* (《东西洋考》) of 1618. Wade believes that this worship of Sam Bao underlines past understanding of the military role and protection offered by the Zheng He missions (Wade, undated).

Of all the places in Southeast Asia it was Melaka that Zheng He was most closely associated with. Bukit Cina in Melaka is usually referred to as Sam Bao Shan (三保山) and supposedly linked to Zheng He. According to Malay tradition, Bukit Cina was given in the 15th century to the Chinese. There are also Sambao temples in Trengganu, Penang, and Ipoh.

### **The Ming Voyages in Historical Writings**

References to the Ming voyages are found in earlier standard texts of Malaysian history. But the details and the thrust of presentation vary. The story of Zheng He's voyages are mostly in the context of the founding of Melaka. Richard Winstedt (1948: 39) in his *Malaya and Its History* narrated:

"In 1411 the famous admiral Cheng Ho, or Ong Sam Po, where the Malacca Chinese today worship as a minor deity, called at Malacca with a fleet of great junks and took Parameswara, his consort, followers, 450 people in all, to China, where the Malay prince was entertained by the Emperor in person...."

Interestingly, Zheng He's Muslim background is not mentioned in Winstedt's work nor in most of the other books that followed. D. G. E. Hall, Dartford, and Tan Ding Eing all referred to Zheng He briefly but made no reference to his Islamic background. This despite the fact that the discussions were made within the context of the founding of Melaka and the coming of Islam.

It was only Tregonning (1964: 23-24), in his *A History of Modern Malaysia*, that Zheng He was first described as a Muslim:

"A powerful fleet was assembled and the famous Admiral Cheng Ho given the command. Cheng Ho, a Muslim set out in 1403 to exact tribute from the many states among the islands."

The significant point to note is that these early scholarly works generally

portray the early 15th century Chinese voyages as a demonstration of China's imperialist ambition. The fleets, according to them, were sent to display China's naval might and to exact tributes.

Hall (1968: 209) commented:

"Ming policy, as we have seen, aimed at restoring Chinese control over the states of South-East Asia. Ambassadors were sent from port to port to explain China's policy and were followed by a war fleet to enforce it where necessary. The mission which appeared at Malacca in 1403 was sent by the third Ming emperor Ch'eng-tsu (Yunglo). It was the one that went to Java and found two kings there. It was followed by a war fleet under Cheng Ho whose series of voyages began in 1405"

Harrison (1967: 57-58) in writing about the Ming gaining power in China:

"These political changes in China soon had repercussions in South-east Asia. Ming land forces drove down into the Indo-Chinese peninsula and conquered Vietnam. A series of seven naval expeditions was sent across the China Sea and into the Indian Ocean during the first thirty years of the fifteenth century to assert Chinese suzerainty, which was acknowledged by the despatch of embassies and tribute to Nanking or Peking from as far as Aden and the East African port at Magadoxo."

Tregonning (1957: 23) wrote:

"Among the outside influence affecting South-East Asia by the fifteenth century was the might of Ming China. The dynasty was founded in 1368 and by 1400 it was fully prepared to venture southward in unprecedented strength in an effort to secure imperial recognition and tribute."

Such interpretation of the imperialist ambitions of Ming China, given the atmosphere of the Cold War, probably arose out of and reinforced the perceived threat of communist China's expanding influence to neighbouring countries.

Significantly, two major books made no reference to Zheng He. Brian Harrison whose *South-East Asia: A Short History* was published in 1967 does not feature the Chinese admiral even though there is a chapter on the coming of Islam. A more

recent and well-written book entitled *A History of Malaysia* by Barbara and Leonard Andaya also does not discuss Zheng He.

### Shifts in Historiography

This presentation of imperialist Ming voyages soon changed and the fleets are now presented as expeditions of peace and friendship, in line with the new international order and relations among states. Recent interest in Zheng He in Malaysia was given a boost by a number of developments. The most important of these was the focus given to the Ming admiral in a number of new publications. In 2001 *Time* magazine had a special feature story of the Zheng He voyages. There were other publications such as Louise Levathes' *When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne 1405-1433* published in 1994. More recently there was Gavin Menzies who wrote *1421 The Year China Discovered the World*. In October 2003, Menzies made a lecture tour to promote his book in Malaysia. He spoke to packed halls in Melaka, Kuala Lumpur and Penang with the audience captivated by his claims that Zheng He reached America and Europe.

With Melaka being a stop for the 15th century Ming voyages, it is to be expected that there would be positive response to this revived interest in Zheng He. But other factors also helped to foster this interest. There are, for instance, the greatly improved relations between Malaysia and China. Furthermore a more stable and harmonious inter-ethnic configuration in Malaysia has ensured that the public articulation and presentation of Zheng He would now not cause unease to any community.

Certainly the enhanced Malaysia-China relations under the premiership of Dr. (now Tun) Mahathir have helped to give Zheng He high visibility in public discourse. Dr. Mahathir's views of a changing world order are an important factor in the evolving bilateral relations. Dr. Mahathir, in speaking up for the developing countries, had been critical of the West on several issues such as trade policies, the international financial system, the United Nations, and differing perceptions of human rights and democracy. In many of these concerns the position taken by Malaysia is not too dissimilar from that taken by China.

That the two countries have moved closer together was evident during the first Malaysia-China Forum held in Kuala Lumpur in January 1995. Aware that there is within the Malay community still deep reservation about China, Dr. Mahathir, in his keynote address, declared that Malaysia did not regard China a military threat,

noting that China's military spending was less than that of Japan, Korea, and the United States. And before his August 1999 visit to China, Dr. Mahathir praised China for not devaluing the Chinese currency which some feared could have worsened the region's financial crisis then. In turn, President Jiang Zemin during his official visit to Kuala Lumpur in November 1995, gave China's support to the East Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC) proposal made by Malaysia (Saravanamuttu 2004: 307-317).

It is significant that in August 1994, Mahathir's deputy Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim on his first official trip to China visited the mausoleum of Zheng He in Nanjing. As an official visit Anwar, the Deputy Prime Minister, met with the Chinese Premier Li Peng and was taken to various factories and industrial sites. But it was his visit to Zheng He's tomb, accompanied by his wife and a large number of officials and businessmen, which perhaps was most significant. Malaysian newspapers noted that Anwar thus became the first Malaysian minister to have visited the mausoleum. And thus in taking a step back into history, Anwar had turned the event into a historic moment as well. It was reported that during the visit the Federal Auto chairman, Ahmad Saad, read a small *doa* (prayer) at the grave site of the Chinese admiral. Anwar then stepped into a resthouse about 100 metres from the grave site and there using a Chinese brush wrote "In appreciation of the great Cheng Ho for a lasting Malaysia-China friendship - signed Anwar Ibrahim" on a piece of paper.

Anwar's visit to Zheng He's mausoleum certainly gave a lift to efforts in establishing the Chinese admiral as a figure deserving of attention in Malaysia. Anwar was a rising political leader in UMNO and was already expected to succeed as Prime Minister. Anwar was seen by supporters as both a Malay nationalist and an Islamic leader. And because of his standing, Anwar's tribute to Zheng He marked the start of a gradual acceptance of the Chinese admiral among Malays of either nationalist or Islamic persuasion.

Interestingly, the Malaysian press highlighted the fact that the grey-stone mausoleum of Zheng He bears the Quranic verses of "In the name of Allah, the compassionate and the merciful" and that Zheng He's name was written in Chinese characters at the back. The same report published in a widely-circulated Malay daily also suggested that during one of the Ming expeditions, it was Zheng He who accompanied Hang Li Po for her marriage to the Melaka ruler.

The visit by Anwar to Zheng He's mausoleum reflected the inter-civilizational interest which the deputy Prime Minister was beginning to articulate. Some of the subsequent decisions which Anwar made suggest strongly a desire to encourage

inter-civilizational dialogue. In 1995 he encouraged a number of academic staff at the University of Malaya to organize a conference with civilization dialogue as a theme to which leading scholars, both local and overseas, were invited. In this inter-civilization dialogue, Anwar probably saw Zheng He as significant. He believed that the Ming admiral was a figure that could help correct a perspective in world history of which his own thinking about Asian renaissance was being formed. In August 1997 Anwar urged that local history should be reconstructed and understood with a Malaysian world view. History, according to him, had been perceived from a "strong Euro-centric viewpoint". Hence children understand and appreciate Christopher Columbus more than Admiral Zheng He even though, according to Anwar in his speech, Zheng He had a superior fleet. He added that Zheng He was the world's most powerful and renowned explorer and admiral of his time and yet the history of Columbus was better known.

He added in his speech that present day Malaysians and Chinese should learn from history and strengthen the ties of friendship which were begun by Zheng He and the Melaka Sultanate. Anwar made the speech while opening a week-long Zheng He Memorial Exhibition in Kuala Lumpur. The exhibition was organized by the MCA Cultural Bureau, the Chinese Cultural Society, the Malaysian-China Friendship Association and the China Yunan External Cultural Exchange Association.

Dr. Mahathir was more interested in the economic side of Malaysia-China relations than the cultural and historical part. He seemed to have left the civilizational aspects to his deputy. Still, Dr. Mahathir showed a keen awareness of the historical dimension of Malaysia-China relations. Attending a dinner jointly hosted by the Malaysia-China Friendship Association and the China-Malaysia Friendship Association in August 1999 he noted that ties between the two countries started more than 600 years. He added:

"For us Malaysians, names such as Yin Ching, Admiral Cheng Ho and Princess Hang Li Po were associated with the history of the Malacca Empire".

Dr. Mahathir added that the close relationship between the two countries at that time began to deteriorate once as the Western powers began to colonize the two countries.

The references to Zheng He and China by both Anwar and Mahathir were important in helping to shift attitudes and perspectives in Malaysia. Indeed in 1996

the Malaysian Language and Literary Institute (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka), a government institution to promote Malay language and studies, organized a conference on Malay Studies in Beijing. In October 2002 a second conference was held in Beijing where some 300 Malay academics gathered once again in Beijing. Underlying the interest among the Malay academics was not only the attempt to compare Malay and Chinese culture but also to re-discover the links between the Melaka sultanate and China. Keen interest was expressed in visiting the Forbidden City where Malay academics believed Mansur Syah and Hang Tuah, a Malay admiral and hero, were entertained. A conference paper also referred to Zheng He being Muslim and the strong influence of Islam in Ming China, and thereby suggesting that Melaka-China relations were connected to the spread of Islam in the region (*Utusan Malaysia*, 18 October 2002).

Other government officials have since taken a keen interest in Zheng He. As an example, the mayor of Klang suggested during a function in May 2004 that the city existed even before the founding of Melaka and as evidence claimed that reference to Klang River is found in maps used by Zheng He (*Berita Harian*, 22 May 2004).

Since the statements by Dato Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in September 2003, activities to commemorate the visit of Zheng He to Melaka have officially started. The celebration began on 10 January 2004 with the arrival of a replica of Admiral Zheng He's boat ferrying China's Vice Minister of Culture which was given a traditional Malay welcome at the Parameswara Jetty in Melaka. On board the replica ship was China's ambassador to Malaysia Hu Zheng Yue as well as senior Malaysian officials. To receive the replica ship was the Melaka state Chief Minister Datuk Seri Mohd Ali Rustam (*Mingguan Malaysia*, 11 January 2004).

In all these, the tourism factor is also important in explaining the great interest shown by the Malaysian government especially that of Melaka in promoting the Zheng He celebrations. The Ministry of Tourism is closely involved and provides considerable funding to the events. Indeed, the Ministry announced that it is commissioning the production of a film on Zheng He and the Ming princess Hang Li Po (*The Star*, 27 February 2003).

In the recent past, it was Hang Li Po who was seen as an important inter-cultural bridge.<sup>1</sup> This role is now beginning to be given to Zheng He. This re-discovery of Zheng He has since been expressed in several theater performances in Malaysia and Singapore. In the opera entitled Hang Li Po in 1971, explanatory notes to the performance suggested that it was probably the effort of Zheng He who made possible the marriage of Sultan Mansur Syah and Hang Li Po.

## Conclusion

The Zheng He re-discovered in Malaysia from history is a very acceptable image. He is regarded as a bridge to friendship of nations and of cultures. His expeditions are portrayed as missions of peace. For those taking a nationalist stand, Zheng He is part of the Hang Li Po story where a Chinese princess married a Malay ruler. Recent recounting of the Melaka sultanate claims that one of Zheng He's voyages was to escort the princess to Melaka to be bride to the Melaka sultan, even though Zheng He died long before Mansyur Shah. For those speaking for the nations of the South, Zheng He is a reminder of an era when Asian states ruled the seas. For the Malaysian Chinese it is now possible to claim Zheng He as part of their heritage without being accused of being chauvinistic. This is because in the present Islamic resurgence in Malaysia and in the wider region, Zheng He is beginning to be claimed with pride by the Malays and Muslims. The Ming admiral is therefore seen as a figure of inter-civilization encounter.

Thus, as contact and exchanges continue, the two countries are recalling the historical experience they once shared. Malaysia-China relations suggest how history can be drawn upon to help improve ties and that this evolving relations in turn shape the way the past is looked at. The story of Admiral Zheng He is an example where political circumstances once obscured his role but changing international order is now highlighting him.

But a cautionary note must be made. Were the Ming voyages missions of friendship or were they expeditions to gain tributes? While popular political interest is necessary sometimes to renew interest in a particular neglected period or individual, the historians must still remain faithful to the text. And indeed if the text is interpreted correctly, there is much to be gained in scholarship and for society and nations at large.

## Notes

- 1 In the past, plays seeking to celebrate Sino-Malay or China-Malaysia relations have dwelt on the story of Hang Li Po. Since the early 1960s there had been at least six musicals or dances about Hang Li Po. The love story between Hang Li Po and Sultan Mansur Syah in all these plays by both Malay and Chinese have generally been well received (Kong 2001). Hang Li Po continues to be a central figure in the newer productions. The most recent is the musical *Puteri Hang Li Po* by Istana Budaya International. As a result historical accuracy suffered. For added romance in the musical, Rahimidin Zahari introduced the character of Admiral Ming You who escorted Hang Li Po to Melaka. But Ming You was more than an escort. He turned

out to be a lover of Hang Li Po.

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