

7 The Portrayal of the Treasure Fleet in *Xiyang ji*

The portrayal of the treasure fleet in *Xiyang ji* suggests the treasure ships (*baochuan* 寶船) were massive. The novel was, however, written during a time when knowledge about everything maritime has become merely theoretical at best, due to the “sea ban” (*haijin* 海禁) that made even approaching the coast illegal. It is therefore likely that Luo Maodeng’s dimensions for the treasure fleet made use of symbolic proportions rather than accurately describe the ships. Yet the idea of gigantic ships that sailed from China to Africa half a century before Vasco da Gama (1469–1524) took the opposite route captured the imagination of Chinese intellectuals at the end of the Qing dynasty. That China once surpassed the Western nations in maritime matters was a subject of great interest and provided consolation in a time when China was increasingly divided between Western colonial powers. Therefore Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929) saw no reason to question the description of *Xiyang ji* when he wrote his essay on Zheng He, “Zuguo da hanghai jia Zheng He zhuan” 祖國大航海家鄭和傳 (“Biography of the Great Chinese Seafarer Zheng He”, 1905), in which he mentions these numbers as facts. The article, which appeared in the Chinese journal *Xinmin* 新民, further compared the assumed size of the treasure ships to the newly launched *USS Minnesota*, then the largest ship in the world, as Sally Church pointed out. (See her articles below.) Subsequent scholarly essays on the treasure fleet have made it their subject to dismiss the *Xiyang ji* as a valid source for Ming dynasty shipbuilding and to recover the actual size of these ships. Their number goes well beyond the selection presented here, as some of them have gone so far as to omit the *Xiyang ji* altogether.

- 7.1.1 Church, Sally K. “The Colossal Ships of Zheng He: Image or Reality?”. In: *Zheng He: Images and Perceptions/ Bilder und Wahrnehmungen*, ed. by Roderich Ptak and Claudine Salmon [Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005], 155-176.

Sally Church traces the accounts of the enormous size of Zheng He’s treasure ships from Liang Qichao’s article and the entry in the *Mingshi* 明史 to the *Xiyang ji* and *Yingya shenglan* 瀛涯勝覽. She also recounts the scholarly discussion of the 20th cent. and links the question why scholars defended the enormous size of the ships despite contrary evidence to a discussion of national pride and an image of China’s greatness in the past.

- 7.1.2 Church, Sally K. “Zheng He: An Investigation into the Plausibility of 450-ft Treasure Ships”. *Monumenta Serica* 53 (2005), 1-43.

In this article, Church discusses the recorded size of the treasure ships in light of the assertions that the dimensions recorded in the *Mingshi* may have originated in *Xiyang ji*. Relying on sources written before 1597 (before the earliest known version of the novel), shipbuilding knowledge, and archaeological evidence she concludes that the treasure ships were in fact more likely to have been 200–250ft ($\approx 60\text{--}76\text{m}$) rather than 450ft ($\approx 140\text{m}$).

- 7.1.3 Lo, Jung-pang. “Ships and Shipbuilding in the Early Ming Period”. Unpublished conference paper, 1961. A copy of this paper is in the Offprints collection at the Needham Research Institute.

In this study, Lo points out a connection between *Xiyang ji* and *Kezuo zhuiyu* 客座贅語 (1618) by Gu Qiyuan 顧起元 that suggests that the latter’s author may have had access to the novel and copied the (erroneous) name of Bengal and the dimensions of the ships from it.

- 7.1.4 Shi Hequn 施鶴群. *Zheng He baochuan zhi mi* 鄭和寶船之謎. Harbin: Harbin gongcheng daxue chubanshe, 2005, 164.

In this monograph, Shi Hequn uses *Xiyang ji* as a supplementary source for particulars relating to Zheng He’s treasure fleet, while also cautioning against too much trust in the novel’s descriptions, which are prone to exaggerations. The author makes use of the novel in the discussions of the fleet’s make-up, the dimensions of the ships, communication methods used among the vessels and the formations in which the fleet sailed.

- 7.1.5 Shi Zulie 施祖烈. “*Xiyang ji* youguan Zheng He chuandui de jizai chukao” 《西洋記》有關鄭和船隊的記載初考. In: *Zheng He yu Fujian: Fujian Sheng jinian Zheng He xia Xiyang 580 zhounian xueshu taolun hui lunwen xuan* 鄭和與福建：福建省紀念鄭和下西洋 580 周年學術討論會論文選, ed. by Zheng He yu Fujian bianji zu 《鄭和與福建》編輯組 [Fuzhou: Fuzhou jiaoyu chubanshe, 1988], 242-250.

This book was compiled from papers presented at a conference on “Zheng He and Fujian” held in 1985. Unfortunately no copies seem to be available in Eu-

ropean or American libraries. The title of Shi Zulie's paper suggests that its subject is a preliminary analysis of the description of Zheng He's crew in *Xiyang ji*.

- 7.1.6 Su Mingyang 蘇明陽. *Zheng He xia Xiyang lishi mantan ji qita youguan lunshu* 鄭和下西洋歷史漫談及其他有關論述. Taipei: self-publication, 2005. [216 pp.]

Su's book consists of two halves: the first half contains "musings" on Zheng He's travels previously published in the university magazine of NTOU (Keelung, Taiwan). The second half consists of several academic articles that had appeared in the *Zheng He yanjiu yu huodong jianxun* 鄭和研究與活動簡訊. Two articles talk about the false portrayal of the treasure fleet in *Xiyang ji*.

- 7.1.7 Su, Ming-yang. Seven Epic Voyages of Zheng He in Ming China. See 1.1.4.

Su closes his chapter on the *Xiyang ji* with a discussion of the available sources on the actual size of the treasure ships and the ongoing scientific discussion.

- 7.1.8 Sun Guangqi. "Zheng He's Expeditions to the Western Ocean and His Navigation Technology". *Journal of Navigation* 45.3 (1992), 329-343.

I was unable to access the full text of this journal. It may contain reference to *Xiyang ji*.

- 7.1.9 Tang Zhibo 唐志拔. "Shilun Zheng He chuandui zhuangbei de bingqi" 試論鄭和船隊裝備的兵器. (1) In: *Zou xiang Haiyang de Zhongguo ren: Zheng He xia Xiyang 590 zhounian guiji xueshu yantao hui lunwenji* 走向海洋的中國人: 鄭和下西洋 590 周年國際學術研討會論文集, ed. by Nanjing Zheng He yanjiu hui 南京鄭和研究會 [Beijing: Haichao chubanshe, 1996], 200-205.

In this article Tang Zhibo traces the origin of the description that the *Xiyang ji* gives of the weapons of the treasure fleets to the military manual *Jixiao xinshu* 紀效新書 (1560) by Qi Jiguang 戚繼光 and canons introduced to China during the 16th cent. and Luo Maodeng's imagination. The article further discusses a more likely time for the equipment of Zheng He's vessels based on historical record and archeological findings.

- 7.1.10 Tang Zhibo 唐志拔. “Zheng He baochuan chidu zhi wojian” 鄭和寶船尺度之我見. (1) *Zheng He yanjiu* 鄭和研究 47 (2001), 26-32.
(2) *Chuanshi yanjiu* 船史研究 17 (2002), 21-27.

Tang Zhibo discusses various theories on the origin of the dimensions of the treasure ships recorded in *Mingshi*. The author argues that *Xiyang ji* is the earliest work to contain these dimensions and is therefore the most likely source.

- 7.1.11 Xi Longfei 席龍飛. “Zai langman yu xianshi zhongxunmi: Luo Maodeng *Xiyang ji* wei baochuan tigong zuozheng” 在浪漫與現實中尋覓—羅懋登《西洋記》為寶船提供佐證. In: *Studien zum Roman “Sanbao taijian Xiyang ji tongsu yanyi” 《三寶太監西洋記通俗演義》之研究*, vol. 1, ed. by Shi Ping and Roderich Ptak [Maritime Asia, 23. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2011], 71-92.

In this article, Xi Longfei explores how the *Xiyang ji* expands the depiction of the treasure fleet taken from *Yingya shenglan* with particular emphasis on their size and number of masts. He compares these details to archaeological data from the Song and Yuan periods, as well as Song Yingxing’s 宋應星 *Tiangong kaiwu* 天工開物 of the late Ming era. He concludes that while some “ship-related” segments of the novel are highly imaginative, others reflect reality and are of direct relevance to our picture of Zheng He’s treasure ships.

- 7.1.12 Xin Yuanou 辛元歐. “Guanyu Zheng He baochuan chidu de jishu fenxi” 關於鄭和寶船尺度的技術分析. *Chuanshi yanjiu* 船史研究 17 (2002), 1-20.

In this paper Xin Yuanou argues that Zheng He’s ships could not have been as large as recorded in the *Mingshi*, basing his argument on practical shipbuilding observations. Regarding the measurement given in *Mingshi*, he believes them to originate in *Xiyang ji*.

- 7.1.13 Xu Gongsheng 徐恭生. “Zheng He baochuan chidu ‘32’ zi jiedu” 鄭和寶船尺度“32”字解讀. *Haijiao shi yanjiu* 海交史研究 2004.1, 1-6.

This article discusses the 32 characters describing the dimensions of the treasure fleet in a Ming-dynasty edition of *Yingya shenglan* and, among other things, compared these numbers to the specifications in *Xiyang ji*.

7.1.14 Zhang Jian. “Shoulun Luo Maodeng Xiyang ji dui Zheng He xia Xiyang guimo de kuada”. See 5.1.11.

Zhang Jian explores factual exaggerations in various descriptions in *Xiyang ji*, including the routes, the size of the treasure fleet, crew and ships.

7.1.15 Zheng Hesheng 鄭鶴聲 and Zheng Yijun 鄭一鈞. “Lüelun Zheng He xia Xiyang de chuan” 略論鄭和下西洋的船. *Wen shi zhe* 文史哲 1984.3, 3-9.

This article uses the treasure ship dimensions recorded in *Xiyang ji* as one of many possible sources for their actual size.

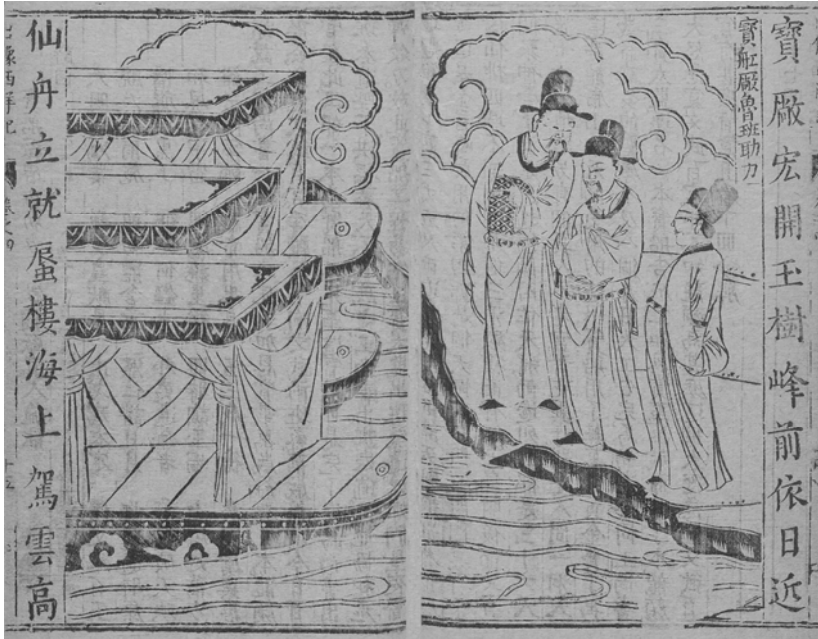


Fig. 14 *Xiyang ji*, Chapter 17 (4.14b-15a, 440f):
“At the Treasure Fleets Shipyard, Lu Ban Lends a Helping Hand.”