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Zheng He

The Great Admiral — Seven Historic Voyages That Connected China to the World

by Robert Miller

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PART ONE

The Making of an Admiral

Chapter One

The Hajji's Son

A Stone in Kunyang

On the slopes of a hill outside the town of Kunyang, south of the great lake called Dian that lies beside the city of Kunming in Yunnan province, there stands a gravestone. It is not large. Its inscription, carved in Chinese characters, runs to a few hundred words. For centuries it attracted little attention beyond the locality. Yet it is the single most important document we possess about the early life of Zheng He, because it was commissioned by Zheng He himself, at the height of his favor, to honor his dead father. Almost everything we know about the admiral's family comes from this stone.

The inscription was composed in 1405 by a scholar named Li Zhigang, who held the title of Minister of Rites in the household of a prince. Its title describes the man it commemorates as "the late Mr. Ma," and it gives his personal name in a form that reflects the custom of Chinese Muslims: he was known as Ma Hajji, the honorific "Hajji" designating a man who had completed the pilgrimage to Mecca. His own father, the admiral's grandfather, had also been a hajji. The inscription tells us that the family belonged to the people of Yunnan, that it had long lived in Kunyang, and that Ma Hajji was a man of upright character, generous to the poor and the weak, who would not tolerate injustice and who was respected throughout his district. He had married a woman of the Wen family, and they had two sons and four daughters. The elder son was named Wenming. The younger was named He, and the inscription records that he had been given the

surname Zheng and served the emperor as Grand Director of the Directorate of Palace Servants, a man of loyalty and diligence, praised by all the officials at court.

The stone also gives us two dates. Ma Hajji, it says, was born in the year jiashen, which corresponds to 1344, and died in the year renxu, 1382, at the age of thirty-nine by Chinese reckoning. The year of his death is the key to the whole story. In 1382, the armies of the Ming dynasty were completing their conquest of Yunnan, the last major territory in China proper to resist the new regime. The inscription does not say how Ma Hajji died. It does not mention the war at all. But the silence is eloquent, and most historians have concluded that the father of the future admiral died, directly or indirectly, as a result of the Ming invasion, and that his younger son was captured in the same upheaval.

That younger son was about ten or eleven years old. The inscription's date of 1405, combined with other evidence, allows us to place his birth around 1371. We do not know his childhood name with certainty; Ma He is the name by which he appears in early records, and Ma was the surname that Chinese Muslims very often bore, possibly as a Chinese rendering of the first syllable of Muhammad, though this derivation is debated. What we do know is that, when the Ming armies came, the boy was taken, and that within a few years he was a eunuch in the household of a prince on the other side of the empire.

Before we follow him there, we need to understand the world he came from, because it was not the China of popular imagination. It was a frontier, a crossroads of peoples and faiths, and a place where the conquests of the Mongols had left deep and lasting marks.

The Mongol Southwest

Yunnan, the name means "south of the clouds," is a land of high plateaus, deep river gorges, and mountain ranges that run north to south like the folds of a crumpled cloth. Four of Asia's great rivers pass through or near it: the Yangzi, the Mekong, the Salween, and the Red River, each cutting its own canyon toward the sea. The plateau around Lake Dian and the city of Kunming sits at nearly two thousand meters above sea level, with a climate so mild that Kunming is still called the City of Eternal Spring. To the west, beyond the lake of Erhai and the old city of Dali, the land climbs toward Tibet; to the south it falls away toward the jungles of Southeast Asia, the lands that would later become Burma, Laos, and Vietnam.

For most of its history, Yunnan was not part of China. From the eighth century to the thirteenth, it was the seat of independent kingdoms, first Nanzhao and then Dali, which traded and sometimes fought with the Chinese dynasties to the east while drawing on Buddhist and cultural influences from India, Tibet, and Southeast Asia. Their peoples spoke many languages, most of them belonging to the Tibeto-Burman family, and many of them are the ancestors of the Bai, Yi, Naxi, and other peoples who live in Yunnan today.

The Dali kingdom fell in 1253 to the Mongols. Its conquest was part of a grand strategy devised by the Mongol leaders to outflank the Southern Song dynasty, which still ruled southern China and had resisted Mongol attacks from the north for decades. The army that took Dali was commanded nominally by Khubilai, the grandson of Chinggis Khan, who would later become Great Khan and found the Yuan dynasty in China. By seizing Yunnan, the Mongols opened a second front against the Song, and the conquest of all China followed within a generation. When Khubilai's armies took the Song capital in 1276, Yunnan had already been a Mongol province for more than twenty years.

Mongol rule transformed Yunnan in ways that would directly shape the life of Zheng He. The most important was the arrival of Muslims.

The Mongol empire was the largest contiguous land empire in history, stretching at its height from Korea to Hungary and from Siberia to the Persian Gulf. Within it, people, goods, and ideas moved with a freedom unknown before. The Mongols themselves were few in number, and to govern their vast domains they relied on administrators, soldiers, and merchants drawn from among the conquered peoples. In China, they deliberately employed non-Chinese officials, whom they trusted more than the Chinese they had conquered. Many of these were Muslims from Central Asia and Persia, men from Bukhara and Samarkand, Khwarazm and Khurasan, who brought with them skills in finance, administration, engineering, and astronomy. Chinese sources of the period call such people semu, "people of various categories," a legal class ranked below the Mongols but above the Chinese.

The most famous of these men in Yunnan was a native of Bukhara named Sayyid Ajall Shams al-Din Omar. Born around 1211, he had entered Mongol service as a young man when Chinggis Khan's armies conquered his homeland, and rose through a series of posts in northern China. In 1274, Khubilai appointed him governor of Yunnan, a post he held until his death in 1279. In those five years he left an extraordinary mark. Chinese historians, not usually generous toward foreign administrators, remember him as one of the great governors of the province. He organized irrigation and water-control projects around Lake Dian, promoted agriculture, set up a provincial administration on the Chinese model, established schools and Confucian temples, and built mosques. He is credited with bringing Yunnan firmly into the orbit of the Chinese state, a role that has made him a figure of respect in both Chinese and Muslim tradition. His descendants held office in Yunnan for generations, and a large part of the Muslim population of the province, known today as the Hui, traces its origins to the soldiers, officials, and settlers who came in his time.

Later genealogies, compiled long after Zheng He's death, claim that the admiral was a descendant of Sayyid Ajall in the sixth generation. These genealogies cannot be fully verified, and some scholars treat them with caution, since family histories of this kind often attach themselves to illustrious ancestors. But the claim is not implausible. The family's surname, Ma, was common among Sayyid Ajall's descendants; the family lived in the Kunming region, which was the heart of his administration; and the fact that two generations of the family had made the pilgrimage to Mecca suggests a family of means and standing within the Muslim community. Whether or not the line of descent is exact, it is clear that Zheng He was born into the world that Sayyid Ajall had helped to create: a Muslim community, Persian and Central Asian in origin but increasingly Chinese in language and custom, settled on a frontier where it served as an intermediary between the Mongol rulers and the many peoples of the province.

The Pilgrimage

The detail in the father's inscription that most often captures the imagination is the pilgrimage. Both Zheng He's father and grandfather, the inscription tells us, were hajjis. They had traveled to Mecca.

We know nothing about how they made the journey. We do not know when they went, which route they took, how long they were away, or what they saw. The inscription does not say. But we can say something about what such a journey would have involved, and it is worth pausing to imagine it, because the voyage of a Yunnanese Muslim to Mecca in the fourteenth century was itself a feat of travel, and it is tempting to think that stories of it were told in the household where the future admiral grew up.

There were two broad possibilities. The first was overland, by the caravan routes that had linked China to Central Asia and Persia for more than a thousand years and that had been reopened and made safer by the Mongol peace. A traveler from Yunnan might go north

through Sichuan to the northwest, then out through the Gansu corridor to the oases of the Tarim Basin, across the Pamirs into Central Asia, and on through Persia and Iraq to Arabia. Such a journey could take a year or more in each direction. The second route was by sea. From Yunnan, a pilgrim could descend to the coast, perhaps to the great port of Quanzhou in Fujian, which in the Mongol period was one of the busiest harbors in the world and home to a large community of Muslim merchants. From there, ships sailed with the monsoon winds south to the straits of Malacca, west across the Bay of Bengal to India, and on to the ports of the Arabian Sea, from which a pilgrim could reach Jidda and then Mecca. This was the route taken by Ibn Battuta, the great Moroccan traveler, who claimed to have visited China in the 1340s, sailing from India to Quanzhou and back.

If the Ma family pilgrims went by sea, then the routes that Zheng He's fleets would later follow were, in a sense, a family inheritance. The ports of the Western Ocean, Calicut and Hormuz, Aden and Jidda, were not abstractions to the family of a hajji. They were names in stories. Some writers have built on this suggestion to argue that the admiral's Muslim background explains why he was chosen to command the voyages, and why the voyages went where they did. There is some truth in this, as later chapters will show: many of the states that Zheng He visited were ruled by Muslims, and the fleets carried Muslim interpreters, including Ma Huan, who wrote the best account of them. But the evidence does not allow us to say that the family's pilgrimages directly shaped the admiral's career. What it does allow us to say is that he grew up in a family that understood itself as part of a wider Islamic world, a world whose center lay thousands of miles to the west, and that this understanding was part of who he was.

A Boy in Kunyang

What was the boy Ma He like? We have no direct evidence. No childhood anecdotes survive from reliable sources, and the stories that circulated later, in novels and in local legend, are of no historical value. We can, however, describe the world in which he grew up, and the shape of a childhood in a prosperous Muslim family in fourteenth-century Yunnan.

Kunyang lies on the southwestern shore of Lake Dian, about forty miles from Kunming. The lake is long and narrow, stretching some twenty-five miles from north to south, ringed by hills and by the fields that Sayyid Ajall's irrigation works had helped to expand. In the fourteenth century, the shores of the lake were farmed by Chinese settlers, by Muslims, and by members of the indigenous peoples whom Chinese sources lumped together under various names. Trade moved along the lake by boat; a boy from Kunyang would have grown up around water, watching small sailing craft and fishing boats on a lake that, though fresh and landlocked, could be whipped into dangerous waves by the winds that came down from the hills. It is a small detail, but the future admiral did not grow up in a place without boats.

The family was Muslim, and the household would have kept the observances of Islam: prayer, the fast of Ramadan, the dietary laws, the celebration of the festivals. At the same time, the Muslims of Yunnan were by this time several generations removed from their Central Asian and Persian forebears. They spoke Chinese, at least in public; they wore Chinese clothing; and many of them took part in Chinese education and culture. The father's inscription, after all, was composed in classical Chinese by a Chinese scholar, and it praises Ma Hajji in the language of Confucian virtue, as a man of righteousness and generosity. This combination of Islamic faith and Chinese culture would be characteristic of the Hui people for centuries, and it would be characteristic of Zheng He himself, who, as we shall see, combined his Muslim heritage with a sincere devotion to Buddhism and to the

Chinese sea goddess Tianfei. To modern eyes this may seem a contradiction. To a man of fourteenth-century Yunnan, a frontier where many faiths lived side by side, it was simply the way the world was.

We may imagine, too, that the boy learned something of letters. A family of standing, and one wealthy enough to send two generations on the hajj, would have wanted its sons to be literate. Whether Ma He learned Arabic or Persian as a child is unknown. Later, as a man, he would work closely with interpreters of those languages, and he would erect a stone in Ceylon bearing an inscription in Persian alongside Chinese and Tamil, but there is no evidence that he could read it himself. What he certainly learned, at some point, was literary Chinese, because a man who rose to the rank he later held in the palace could not have done so without it.

The End of the Yuan

The world into which Ma He was born was a world in crisis. By the 1350s, the Mongol Yuan dynasty in China was collapsing. Its last emperor, Toghon Temür, presided over a court riven by factional struggles, while across the empire, natural disasters, famine, plague, and the burdens of taxation and forced labor drove the population to rebellion. The Yellow River broke its banks in 1344, flooding vast areas of northern China and displacing hundreds of thousands of people. When the government conscripted laborers to repair the dikes, the gathering of desperate men provided the tinder for revolt.

The rebellions that followed are known collectively as the Red Turban uprisings, from the red headbands that many rebels wore. They drew on a mixture of popular Buddhist millenarianism, which awaited the coming of Maitreya, the Buddha of the Future, and hatred of the foreign Mongol rulers. Over the next decade and a half, China dissolved into a patchwork of rival warlord regimes. Out of this chaos rose one of the most remarkable figures in Chinese history: a peasant from Anhui named Zhu Yuanzhang.

Zhu Yuanzhang was born in 1328 into a family of desperately poor tenant farmers. When he was sixteen, famine and epidemic killed his parents and most of his family in the space of a few weeks; he was so poor that he could not afford coffins to bury them. He entered a Buddhist monastery as a novice, and when the monastery could no longer feed its monks, he wandered as a mendicant for several years through the regions of central China where rebellion was brewing. In 1352, he joined a Red Turban army. His ability was quickly recognized, and within a few years he had his own command. In 1356, he captured the city of Nanjing on the Yangzi, which became his base. Over the next twelve years, he defeated his rivals one by one in a series of campaigns, culminating in a great naval battle on Lake Poyang in 1363, in which he destroyed the fleet of his most dangerous rival, Chen Youliang. In 1368, he proclaimed the founding of a new dynasty, which he named Ming, "brilliant," and took the reign name Hongwu, "vast military power." In the same year his armies captured the Yuan capital at Dadu, the city that would later become Beijing, and the last Yuan emperor fled north to the Mongolian steppe.

The battle of Lake Poyang deserves a moment's notice here, because it reminds us that the founding of the Ming was itself, in part, a maritime achievement, or at least a naval one. The fleets that fought on Poyang were enormous, with ships built as floating fortresses of several decks, and the battle was decided by fire ships sent against Chen Youliang's lashed-together vessels. The Ming dynasty was born with a tradition of large-scale shipbuilding and naval warfare on China's great inland waters. That tradition would bear fruit, a generation later, in the treasure fleets.

Ma He was born, then, around 1371, three years after the founding of the Ming. But in Yunnan, the Ming had not yet arrived. The province remained in the hands of a Mongol prince, Basalawarmi, the Prince of Liang, who held it in the name of the fallen Yuan dynasty. For thirteen years after the fall of Dadu, Yunnan was a Yuan loyalist enclave in the southwest, cut off from the steppe where the Mongol court had fled,

and refusing to submit to the Ming. The Hongwu Emperor sent envoys to demand its surrender; at least one of them was killed. The Muslim families of the province, whose position depended on Mongol patronage, had every reason to be loyal to the old regime. Ma Hajji, a man of standing in his district, was almost certainly among them.

The Conquest of Yunnan

In the autumn of 1381, the Hongwu Emperor launched the conquest of Yunnan. He assembled an army that Chinese sources number at three hundred thousand men, an enormous force even allowing for exaggeration, and placed it under three of his most capable generals: Fu Youde as commander-in-chief, with Lan Yu and Mu Ying as his deputies. Mu Ying deserves particular mention. He had been an orphan, adopted by Zhu Yuanzhang and his wife when he was a small child, and he had grown up in their household as a son. After the conquest he would remain in Yunnan as its military governor, and his descendants would hold the hereditary title of Duke of Qian and govern the province on behalf of the Ming for more than two and a half centuries, almost until the end of the dynasty.

The campaign was swift and brutal. The Ming armies advanced into Yunnan from the northeast, through Guizhou, in two columns. At the end of 1381, they met the main Yuan army at Baishi River near Qujing, east of Kunming, and destroyed it. Basalawarmi, seeing that all was lost, fled from Kunming with his family and, a few days later, committed suicide along with his wife and senior officials, drowning himself in a lake according to some accounts. Kunming surrendered in January 1382. The Ming forces then moved west against Dali, the old capital of the independent kingdom, where the Duan family, the hereditary rulers of the region under the Mongols, attempted to hold out. Dali fell in the spring of 1382. Resistance continued in the mountains and among the indigenous peoples for some time afterward, and the Ming armies conducted a series of punitive campaigns to subdue the remaining opposition.

It was in this campaign, in 1381 or 1382, that Ma He was captured.

The sources tell us almost nothing about how it happened. The father's inscription records only the date of Ma Hajji's death. Later accounts, of uncertain reliability, say that the boy was taken by the Ming armies and handed over, as many captive boys were, to be castrated and trained as a eunuch. Some writers have speculated that Ma Hajji was killed resisting the Ming advance, perhaps fighting for the Mongol cause; others suggest that he died of illness or hardship in the disruption of the war. We cannot know. What we can say is that a thirty-nine-year-old man of standing, the head of a Muslim family that owed its position to Mongol rule, died in the same year that the Ming armies conquered his province, and that his younger son was taken from his family and sent into the service of the conquerors. The coincidence is too strong to ignore.

The Fate of Captives

To a modern reader, the fate of the boy Ma He is horrifying. He was castrated, probably in his early teens, and sent to serve in the household of a prince of the dynasty that had conquered his homeland and destroyed his family. It is important to understand that, terrible as this was, it was not unusual. The conquest of Yunnan, like many campaigns of the period, produced large numbers of captives, and the practice of castrating captured boys and sending them into service as eunuchs was well established.

The Ming Veritable Records contain a revealing entry from 1385, a few years after the conquest. They report that Fu Youde and the other generals of the Yunnan campaign had castrated captive boys and sent them to the capital, and that the Hongwu Emperor, on learning of this, expressed his displeasure, though he did not halt the practice entirely. It is possible that Ma He was among these boys, although the record does not name individuals. Other evidence suggests that he was assigned at some point to the household of Zhu Di, the emperor's fourth son, who had been enfeoffed as Prince of Yan and sent to

govern the northern city of Beiping, the old Yuan capital, in 1380. Exactly when and how the boy reached the prince's household is unclear; some accounts suggest that he first served under Fu Youde, who led campaigns in the north as well as the southwest, and was transferred to Zhu Di's household as part of the arrangements by which the princes were supplied with servants.

The castration of boys was an ancient practice in China, with roots going back more than two thousand years. Eunuchs served in the imperial palaces of every major dynasty, attending to the emperor and his household and, in particular, to the women's quarters, where intact men were forbidden. Because they had no children, eunuchs were thought to have no family interests to compete with their loyalty to the throne, and emperors often trusted them more than the scholar-officials who staffed the regular bureaucracy. At various points in Chinese history, eunuchs rose to immense power, and the scholar-officials who wrote the official histories regarded them with deep hostility, blaming them for the downfall of more than one dynasty. This hostility would color the way the Zheng He voyages were recorded, and remembered, for centuries.

We should not romanticize what was done to Ma He. Castration was dangerous; the operation, performed without anesthesia and with crude instruments, carried a significant risk of death from bleeding or infection. Those who survived bore the physical and social consequences for the rest of their lives. In a culture that placed the highest value on the continuation of the family line, a eunuch could have no descendants, and so could offer his ancestors none of the sacrifices that filial piety required. He was cut off from the most fundamental obligation of a son. Many eunuchs, in time, adopted sons or nephews to carry on their names and tend their graves, and Zheng He himself, we are told by later family records, adopted a nephew, the son of his elder brother Wenming, whose descendants honored him as an ancestor. But the wound, in every sense, remained.

What the Boy Carried

When we try to understand Zheng He, we need to keep this beginning in mind. He was born into a family of standing, in a community that looked outward to the wider Islamic world. He lost his father, his home, and his manhood to the armies of the Ming. And he spent the rest of his life serving the dynasty that had taken them from him, rising to a position of trust and command that no one in his family could have imagined.

How did he feel about this? We do not know, and we should be wary of anyone who claims to know. There is no surviving letter, no diary, no account in his own words of his feelings about his childhood or his captivity. What we have is the stone he set up for his father in 1405, at the moment when he was about to sail at the head of the first great fleet. The stone tells us several things. It tells us that he remembered his father, honored him, and wished his name to be preserved. It tells us that, more than twenty years after the conquest, he was able to secure the services of a respected scholar to write the inscription, and presumably the means and permission to have it erected in Yunnan, a sign of the standing he had achieved. And it tells us that he wanted his own position, as a servant of the emperor who had been given the surname Zheng, to be recorded alongside his father's virtues. In that small act, a eunuch who could have no sons of his own made himself a son to his father once more.

There is one more detail. At the back of the stone, according to scholars who have examined it, there is a short additional inscription recording that in 1411, between voyages, Zheng He returned to his native place to sweep his ancestors' graves, performing the rites of filial respect. If this record is accurate, then the admiral, at the height of his career, went home, to the hills above Lake Dian where his father lay. It is one of the very few glimpses we have of the private man.

The boy who left Kunyang in the early 1380s, captive and maimed, carried with him a set of inheritances that would shape his life in

ways no one could then have foreseen. He carried the faith of his father and grandfather, and with it a connection to a world that stretched westward across the oceans to Mecca. He carried the experience of a frontier society where Chinese, Mongol, Muslim, and indigenous peoples lived together, an experience that may have prepared him to deal with strangers more easily than a man raised in the Confucian heartland. And he carried the wound of his captivity, which bound him, as it bound all eunuchs, entirely to the service of his master.

That master was to be one of the most ambitious men in Chinese history. In the northern city of Beiping, in the household of the Prince of Yan, the boy from Yunnan would begin the second chapter of his life.

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