

Popularity and Representation of Zheng He's Image: Pre-Eliminary Research

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Abstract

Zheng He (Cheng ho) Mosques become iconic mosques in Indonesia as its architecture represents well Chinese culture. Even though, the legacy of the figure behind this name turned out to be a concern. Many people do not know that Zheng He is one of the figure who has contributed greatly to spread Islam in Indonesia. For this reason, the major objective of this study is investigating how Zheng He's image and perception formed in the view of young Muslims, as the new generation who have big responsibilities related to the continuity and the development of Islam. The other purposes of this research is to find out how far Zheng He is known, as a diplomat and great explorer, become a role model in the process of young Muslim's character building. Furthermore, reconstruction is carried out to form a positive image and perception of Zheng He and reconstruct the representation of Chinese culture and its relation to Islam.

Masjid Zheng He (Cheng ho) menjadi masjid ikonik di Indonesia karena arsitekturnya mewakili budaya Tionghoa dengan baik. Padahal, warisan sosok di balik nama ini ternyata menjadi perhatian. Banyak yang tidak mengetahui bahwa Zheng He adalah salah satu sosok yang berjasa besar dalam menyebarkan Islam di Indonesia. Oleh karena itu, tujuan utama dari penelitian ini adalah untuk mengetahui bagaimana citra dan persepsi Zheng He terbentuk dalam pandangan pemuda Muslim, sebagai generasi baru yang memiliki tanggung jawab besar terkait dengan kelangsungan dan perkembangan Islam. Tujuan lain dari penelitian ini adalah untuk mengetahui sejauh mana Cheng Ho yang dikenal sebagai diplomat dan penjelajah hebat menjadi panutan dalam proses pembentukan karakter pemuda Muslim. Selanjutnya, rekonstruksi dilakukan untuk membentuk citra dan persepsi positif terhadap Zheng He serta merekonstruksi representasi budaya Tionghoa dan hubungannya dengan Islam.

Keywords: representation; image; zheng he; Islam; chinese

Introduction

Zheng He, who was interpreted as "China's great maritime giant" has succeeded in completing extraordinary marine expeditions, even the expeditions he carried out were often compared to European shipping expeditions which marked the discovery of the modern era.¹ Zheng began his first voyage in 1405, presiding over 300 ships containing nearly 28,000 people. More than 28 years, Zheng He managed to lead 7 trips to 37 countries, passing Southeast Asia, Africa, and Arabia. One of its main goals is to build Chinese trade relations.

Unfortunately, Zheng He's expedition ended in 1433 where the new Emperor of China at that time assumed that the Zheng He expedition was too expensive. For the Emperor, the resources used in the expedition were far more needed to maintain security on land. For this reason, he gave orders to stop Zheng He's expedition. Even the government also limits information about the significance of the expeditions carried out by Zheng He. Only a few official publications discuss this. China started to acknowledge the great contribution of the expedition around the 20th century,² *"Eventually, by the 20th century, the Chinese recognized the significance of Zheng He's journeys and the role they played in developing relations between China and Islamic countries."* Another source also mentioned that immediately after Zheng He died, most of the footage about Zheng He and his trip had been destroyed. In addition, after Emperor Yongle's death in 1424 no more expeditions were carried out during the next regime (Emperor Hongxi's regime). Zheng He's last expedition was carried out at the time of Emperor Xuande who was the grandson of Yongle.

In contrast to what happened in China, on the contrary in Southeast Asian countries, especially in many Chinese communities, Zheng He is considered an honorable hero. Cited from Kristof³ *"Curiously, it is not in China but in Indonesia where his memory has been most actively kept alive. Zheng He's expeditions led directly to the wave of Chinese immigration to Southeast Asia, and in some countries he is regarded today as a deity."* Many notes and stories in Southeast Asian countries that show well that Zheng He has helped spread Islam in the region. This topic is one thing that cannot be separated from the talk of cultural exchanges between China and Southeast Asia.⁴

In social discussions and various arts and cultural activities, people of Javanese descent are used to have a reunion with Chinese and Arab people. Cultural acculturation is a representation and mixture of immigrant and local cultures formed through a long journey of Javanese coastal cultural history since the 14th century.⁵ This is visualized in the form of building architecture with a variety of forms of a combination of Javanese, Chinese, and Islam. For example, in the city of Semarang there was a large temple which was

made to honor Zheng He, right where Zheng He used to take care of his sick friend. Until now, many prayed to Zheng He to ask for healing and luck.

Although Zheng He and his fleet sailed through Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean with a large defense force compared to the strength of the indigenous people, they did not intend to colonize. In contrast, Zheng He's fleet is known to be very helpful in fighting pirates. For example, Zheng He's fleet defeated Chen Zuyi's pirate fleet in Palembang. Not only that, Zheng He⁶ also fought Alakeshvara's in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and Sekandar's (Indonesia) which was a reminder that the Chinese Ming Dynasty had great power in the maritime path. Nonetheless, there is no written evidence from existing sources where there is a form of monopoly or the tendency of the Zheng He expedition to control the sea trade. Dreyer as quoted from Wang Min-qin⁷ stated that the activities carried out were only trade exposures and promotions in the area of the South China Sea or Indian Ocean.

Zheng He and the Spread of Islam: Forgotten History?

When talking about the relationship between Zheng He and Islam in Southeast Asia, most researchers agreed that Zheng He expedition was very helpful in connecting between the East and North Sumatra via sea transportation. In addition, another crucial role is to expand the network and strengthen relations between Southeast Asia and the Islamic world, especially to accelerate the dissemination of Islam itself. Zheng He, as a Ming Dynasty envoy, supported independence from the Malacca Kingdom at that time and became a driving force in the spread of Islam.

The discussion about Zheng He and the diffusion of Islam so far has been dominated by discussions about Zheng He activities in Nusantara, especially in Java Island. Many Indonesian scholars discussed this topic such as Liem Thian Jo, Benny G. Setiono, Buya Hamka, Mangaradja Onggang Parlindungan, Usman Effendi, Agus Sujudi, Hartono Kasmadi, Wiyono and Heru Christiyono. The spread of Chinese Muslims on Java and parts of Southeast Asia was during the Zheng He expedition involving thousands of people from various professions, including elite figures such as Ma Huan, Ha-san, Wang Ching-hung, Kung Wu Ping, and Fei Hsin are adherents of Islam. In each kingdom and the sultanate they visited, Zheng He built and placed ambassadors and consulates like Bong Swie Ho in the Majapahit kingdom. The aim was to build diplomacy both economically and culturally between China and the local government at that time.

Quoting an explanation from Yuanzhi, "Tuanku Rao" as one source, contains a section entitled "The Role of Chinese Hanafiyah Believers in Spreading Islam on Java (1411-1564)" who explained in detail about Zheng He's

activities at that time. These activities can be divided into two major activities. The first activity is the construction of mosques in Java, where Zheng He praying in these places, as written by Mangaradja Onggang Parlindungan in 1413. From 1411-1416 Zheng managed to build a Chinese Muslim community (Hanafiyah) and several mosques located in Jakarta, Sembung, Lasem, Tuban, Gresik, Cirebon (Joratan), and Mojokerto (Cangki).

Zheng He's second activity was building a Muslim community in the area of Sumatra. Zheng He successfully built for the first time in Kukang, and in the same year a Muslim community in Sambas, Kalimantan also established. In 1416, Zheng He built a third community in West Sumatra in the Batanggadis area. This was also conveyed by Slamet Muljana in the book, "Runtuhnya Keradjaan-Keradjaan Hindu Djawa Dan Timbulnja Negara-Negara Islam Di Nusantara."

Unfortunately, Zheng He's contributions and the Muslim community in Javanese history and the formation of culture itself have long been hidden. Qurtuby uses the term "mummified" and borrows Adam Smith's term "Invisible Hand" to describe this irony.⁸ During this time, the existence of Islam in Indonesia by Muslim communities was believed to be spread by Arab and Gujarat (Indian) traders and Sufis from Persia. So far, only a small number of researchers, historians, and academics have known the existence and major contribution of the Chinese Muslim community in the process of Islamization in Indonesia. In fact, mentioning that many people still find it difficult to accept that the Chinese Muslim community plays an important role in the development of Islam in Indonesia, including Zheng He's own Islam as one of the figures in the Islamization process is still debated, subjects of History in Indonesian's schools did not teach about it.

In the research carried out, the author did not find any History or Islamic Religion Education books in schools, both from the Elementary School (SD), Middle School (SMP), and High School (SMA) levels that alluded to Zheng He figure. Similarly, public schools, in the curriculum of History of Islamic Civilization in Indonesia at the level of Madrasah Tsanawiyah (MTs) and Madrasah Aliyah (MA) is also no mention of the presence of the figure of Zheng He, especially in the topic of the spread of Islam in Indonesia, though this topic entered in the curriculum set by the government for the level of Senior High School (SMA) and Madrasah Aliyah (MA).

Discussions about the history of the entry of Islam in these textbooks are still focused on three major theories such as those developed by Ahmad Mansur Suryanegara related to the origin and time of arrival. First, the Gujarat theory in which Islam is believed to come from the territory of Gujarat (India) through the role of Muslim Indian merchants around the 13th century. Secondly, the Mecca theory in which Islam is believed to arrive in Indonesia directly from the Middle East through the services of Muslim Arab traders

around the 7th century. Third, the Persian theory in which Islam arrived in Indonesia through the role of Persian traders who on their way to Gujarat before going to the archipelago around the 13th century.

In the book “Pendidikan Agama Islam dan Budi Pekerti” for class XII SMA/MA/SMK/MAK which was published by the Ministry of Education and Culture in 2015 based on the 2013 Curriculum, actually has mentioned little about China's contribution to the Islamization process in Indonesia, as quoted from the following explanation.

In the early stages, the channel used in the process of Islamization in Indonesia was trade. This can be known through the existence of busy trade traffic in the 7th century AD until the 16th century. This trading activity involved many nations in the world, including Arabs, Persians, Indians, and Chinese. They took part in trade in the Western, Southeast and Eastern countries of the Asian Continent.

However, the explanation contained is only limited to that paragraph. There are no other supporting explanations, especially those concerning Zheng He expeditions or Chinese Muslims. Qurtuby⁹ explained that no mention of the contribution of Chinese Muslims in these theories was potential for disruption of national stability. Since 1960s several books that have elevated the role of Chinese (Chinese Muslims) in the Islamization of the Archipelago were banned from circulating by the New Order government. Since then efforts have been made to always reduce all major contributions of Chinese Muslims to various forms of Indonesian Islamic culture. This situation improved after the fall of the New Order regime in 1998. The reform movement became the point where Indonesia began to recognize the contribution and change the rules that referred to anti-China, even to be able to celebrate and implement Chinese cultural traditions.

Zheng He, Our not so Famous Idol

The failure to discuss Zheng He and his contribution to Islamization in Indonesia was one of the factors that made Zheng He a less popular figure. Zheng He in Indonesia has not been known to many people. From the research conducted by the author, out of a total of 109 respondents only 30% knew or had heard of “Zheng He”. More than 70% said they did not know or had heard of “Zheng He”. In different questions, as many as 86 % knew Zheng He's figure with “Cheng Ho”, 14% did not know “Cheng Ho” at all.

The better known name of Cheng Ho compared to Zheng He cannot be denied is the result of the great contribution of the existence of the Haji Muhammad Cheng Ho mosque, as found in Surabaya and Pandaan (Pasuruan Regency). Nevertheless, Zheng He, through Cheng Ho's name, who is more

familiar to the public, was only known as a name. Who is the figure of Zheng He and what his contribution is still unknown to many circles, even the Muslim community itself.

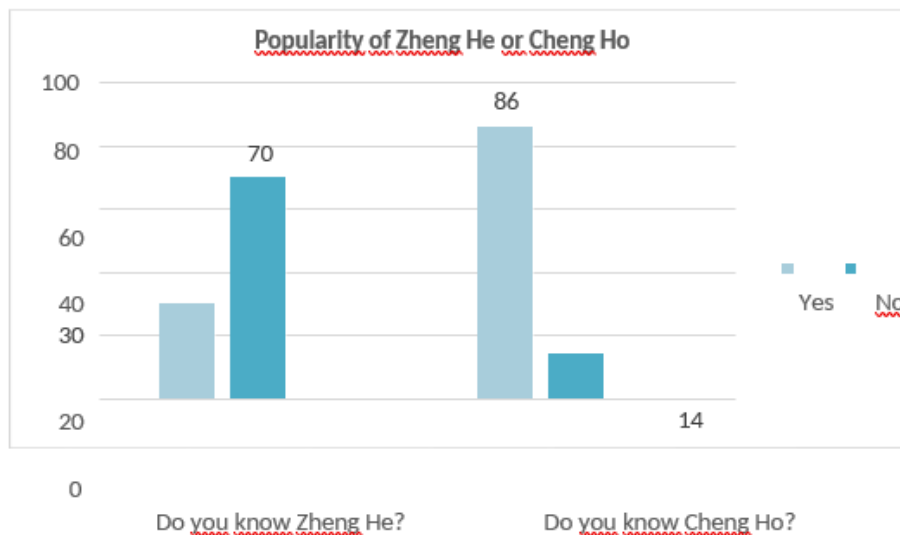


Figure 1. Popularity of Zheng He or Cheng Ho

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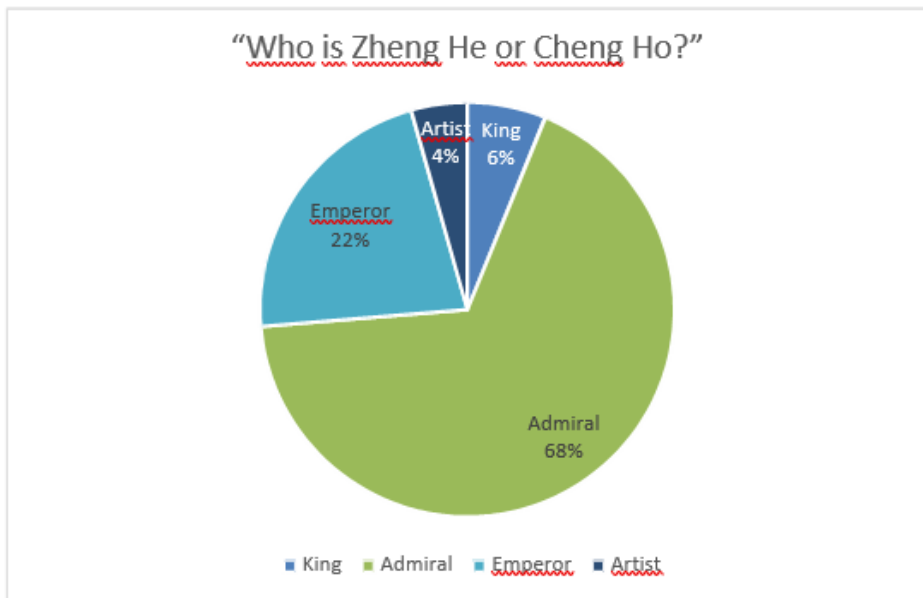


Figure 2. "Who is Zheng He or Cheng Ho?"

There are still many wrong perceptions of Zheng He's figure (as many as 32%) supporting the statement that Zheng He is still not popular compared to other explorer figures such as Ibn Batutta and Christopher Columbus. Of those same data showed that many who do not know the contributions of Zheng He or Cheng Ho in spreading Islam in Indonesia, only 46% of respondents who know about it. Many respondents showed surprise when they learned this fact. On the contrary, most of the respondents considered that after his arrival in Indonesia it was Zheng He who converted to Islam. There were even some respondents who answered that Zheng He's contribution was expel the Dutch from Indonesia. The high misperception about who Zheng He is and his contribution in Indonesia shows that there is still a stereotype that there is no common thread between China and Islam. As constructed in society: China is non-Muslim, even though the existence of Zheng He with his legacy managed to break this proposition.

Image and Representation of Zheng He Image

The failure to discuss Zheng He and his contribution to Islamization in Indonesia was one of the factors that made Zheng He a less popular figure. Zheng He in Indonesia has not been known to many people. From the research conducted by the resemblance, or even a constructed portrait. These representations can be individuals, social groups, ideas, or events. Quoting from Hall,¹⁰ "The word representation or representation does sort of carry with it the

notion that something was there already and, through the media, has been represented." This representation can trigger stereotypes that often lead to misrepresentations and misconstructions.

Related to Zheng He, each media has a different representation of the portrait of the figure, both physical and character depictions of Zheng He. The physical portraits of Zheng He figures represented by the media are shown in the following table.

Table 1. Zheng He's Portrait Description

Zheng He's Portrait Description	Positive Representation	Negative Representation
<i>"His eyebrows were like swords and his forehead wide, like a tiger's. When he gave an order, his sailors obeyed immediately."</i>	Forceful	-
<i>"From his deck, Zheng saw his ships spread behind him as far as he could see. He looked with pride at the vessels that followed his out of the harbor of Luijia, near Nanjing, China's capital."</i>	Charismatic	-
<i>"He showed a talent for strategy, and commanded the respect and obedience of others. He also won Chenzu's complete trust."</i>	Intelligent	-
<i>"We know the emperor's exact words because Zheng He carved reports about the expeditions into stone tablets that still exist."</i>	Diligent	-

From the data that the researchers got, some of Zheng He's figure images formed among them are shown in the following table.

Table 2. Representation of Zheng He's Characters

Representation of Zheng He's Character	
Positive Representation	Negative Representation
Assertive	-
Firm and have extensive insight	-
Wise, smart, obedient Muslims	-
Firm, kind, generous, wise, smart	-
Role model	-

Representation of Zheng He's Character	
Positive Representation	Negative Representation
Smart, businessman, adept at preaching with Chinese Muslim culture	-
A true adventurer, wise, heard by many people, friendly	-
A strict and influential admiral	-
Firm, authoritative, respected, smart	-
Gentle, wise	-
Strong	-
obedient, firm	-
Wise	-
Firm, role model, strategic, charismatic	-
Firmly authoritative	-

Conclusion

Zheng He or Cheng Ho figures can be said to be still less popular in Indonesia. The unpopularity of Zheng He and his contribution is either due to the lack of material content or the non-mention of Zheng He in the history of the spread of Islam in Indonesia, especially in history learning books. This is an important factor because historical knowledge is mostly obtained from teaching and learning in schools. In addition, the strong stereotype of "China is not Muslim" or the absence of a relationship between China and Islam also became a barrier to the popularity of Zheng He.

Endnotes

¹ Maritime Asia, "Admiral Zheng He's Voyages to the 'West Oceans' (2014).

² PBS Learning Media, <https://www.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/marco-polo-ibn-battuta-zheng-he/lesson-plan/>

³ Nicholas D. Kristof, 1492: The Prequel, (New York Times Magazine, 6 June: 1999). Kristof, Nicholas D, 1492: The Prequel, (New York Times Magazine, 6 June: 1999).

⁴ Khong Yuanzhi, "On the Relationship between Cheng Ho and Islam in Southeast Asia", (Southeast Asian Studies in China: Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia Issue 10 August 2008).

⁵ Diah Ayuningrum, "Akulturasi Budaya Cina Dan Islam Dalam Arsitektur Tempat Ibadah Di Kota Lasem Jawa Tengah", (Sabda: Jurnal Kajian Kebudayaan 12 (2) : 1999), 122. <https://doi.org/10.14710/sabda.12.2.122-135>.

⁶ Edward L. Dreyer. Zheng He-China and the Oceans in the Early Ming Dynasty, 1405-1433. (Pearson Education, Inc., 2007)

⁷ Wang Min-qin. 2018. What Are Reflected by the Navigations of Zheng He and Christopher Columbus. (International Relations and Diplomacy 6 (2), 2018), 110–21. <https://doi.org/10.17265/2328-2134/2018.02.005>.

⁸ Sumanto Al Qurtuby, *The Imprint of Zheng He and Chinese Muslims in Indonesia 's Past 1*, 2018.

⁹ Sumanto Al Qurtuby, *The Tao of Islam : Cheng Ho and the Legacy of Chinese Muslims in Pre - Modern Java*, (2018).

¹⁰ Stuart Hall, *Representation and The Media*, (Media Education Foundation Transcript: 1997).

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