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# Zheng He and International Relations: An Asian Cultural Diplomacy Model

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# Abstract

Zheng He is not only an important figure in China's trade route in Southeast Asia until Africa, but He marked how cultural diplomacy carried out with a peaceful approach. Zheng He journey from China to various countries demonstrated how cultural diplomacy successfully is done. Therefore, the questions are: how is Zheng He diplomacy viewed from diplomacy in international relations study? What are the values that support this succeed? Is it can be a cultural diplomacy model in international relations study, at least for Asian countries? Those questions become the discussion in this article. The argument of this article is Zheng He does not only contribute to bilateral relations between China and the country where he visited, but he contributes in diplomacy study in international relations. Zheng He diplomatic style may become one of Asian diplomacy model, at least it contributes to the history of world diplomacy.

Zheng He tidak hanya menjadi tokoh penting dalam jalur perdagangan Tiongkok di Asia Tenggara hingga Afrika, namun Ia menandai bagaimana diplomasi budaya dilakukan dengan pendekatan damai. Perjalanan Zheng He dari Tiongkok ke berbagai negara menunjukkan bagaimana diplomasi budaya berhasil dilakukan. Oleh karena itu, pertanyaannya adalah: bagaimana diplomasi Zheng He dilihat dari diplomasi dalam studi hubungan internasional? Nilai-nilai apa yang mendukung keberhasilan ini? Apakah bisa menjadi model diplomasi budaya dalam kajian hubungan internasional, setidaknya untuk negara-negara Asia? Pertanyaan-pertanyaan tersebut menjadi pembahasan dalam artikel kali ini. Argumentasi artikel ini adalah Zheng He tidak hanya berkontribusi dalam hubungan bilateral antara China dan negara yang dikunjunginya, tetapi ia berkontribusi dalam studi diplomasi dalam hubungan internasional. Gaya diplomasi Zheng He dapat menjadi salah satu model diplomasi Asia, setidaknya berkontribusi pada sejarah diplomasi dunia.

Keywords: Zheng He; diplomacy; culture and international relations

## Introduction

The relationship between countries is one part of the history of human civilization. The relationship between countries provides an explanation of human cultural development and civilization. When they know other human beings in different regions, with different backgrounds and cultures, then man adapts himself or builds relationships with different humans in peaceful ways or even wars. In this context, it became known as diplomacy. In general, diplomacy is an effort to gain national interests of a country abroad. Therefore, when a political entity or group, called the state was established, whether, in traditional contexts (kingdoms and others) or modern state, diplomacy has begun.

Diplomacy is a basic and important field in international relations study. This is in accordance with the definition of diplomacy as a basis in relations among countries. However, from a historical perspective, diplomacy mostly discusses the development of modern countries or major kingdoms in Europe or the West. Then, the question is, how do about the other civilization like Asian? Do they contribute to diplomacy development? Don't they have their own models? This article focuses on some of the questions above by taking one of the historical stories in the relationship between nations in Asia, which is about the expedition of a Chinese admiral named Zheng He.

Zheng He was a world explorer who lived during the Ming dynasty of China in the 15th century. For 30 years with seven voyages, Zheng He has visited many regions and countries in Asia and Africa. In his numerous visits, Zheng He also gained many ties for China from the visited countries. Therefore, Zheng He's voyage has some significance. First, in every voyage, Zheng He did not only do a visit but also connected, built and strengthened the relationship between China and visited countries. In this context, Zheng He was a diplomat for China who conveying the friendship message as well as strengthening relations. Second, Zheng He generates voyage routes that are not only important for trading but also a route of diplomacy. The path abandoned or traversed by Zheng He then became part of Chinese history which in six centuries later, it is revived by the President Xi Jinping of China as part of current China's trading path and strategic partnership in OBOR (One Belt One Road) which is then BRI (Belt and Road Initiative). The OBOR adopts two main routes as part of China's great history called Silk road across Asia continent to Europe and Maritime route as Zheng He legacy across the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, and African waters. Therefore, OBOR or BRI is related to trade and diplomacy, like Zheng He did six centuries ago. Third, Zheng He as a Muslim figure. Zheng He is a Chinese Hui's Muslim, and his identity becomes important in the context of a cultural relationship between China and Muslim countries visited by Zheng

He. Zheng He becomes a cultural based friendship symbol (as his fellow Muslims) for countries like Indonesia and Malaysia to China.

There are strong elements of diplomacy according to Zheng He voyage and legacy. Zheng He is an explorer, diplomat, negotiator, and mediator. However, Zheng He has not been as famous as some other Asian diplomats such as Kautilya. It may because Zheng He did an activity like a diplomat, but he is better known as an explorer. Secondly, Kautilya wrote a book his travels and activities which are then known as diplomacy principles, while Zheng He wrote about voyage routes. However, it does not mean impossible to describes Zheng He in the context of diplomacy. This article seeks to take a simple description of Zheng He in the context of diplomacy, both as diplomats as well as in the practice of diplomacy that he does.

# **Diplomacy and International Relations**

When international relations are defined as inter-state relations, the way in which a state communicates and connects to the other countries then called diplomacy. Diplomacy is an official and institutionalized communication conducted among internationally recognized representatives of internationally recognized entities where they produce, regulate and distribute public goods.<sup>1</sup> Diplomacy contains three main points, communication, the recognition, and public good. Diplomacy is а process of communicating or transferring information or connecting by two or more countries through their representatives. Recognition contains two focuses, recognition to the countries represented, and recognition to representatives representing those countries. Diplomacy is related to national interests or public goods as the reason why a country is communicating with other countries. National interest needs to be communicated with other countries to looking for opportunities, avoiding conflicts and view another country's response.

The history of diplomacy is divided into diplomacy before 1815 and post 1815.<sup>2</sup> Diplomacy contains three main points, communication, recognition, and the public good. Diplomacy is a process of communicating or transferring information or connecting by two or more countries through their representatives. Recognition contains two focuses, recognition to the countries represented, and recognition to representatives representing those countries. Diplomacy is related to national interests or public goods as the reason why a country is communicating with other countries. National interest needs to be communicated with other countries to looking for opportunities, avoiding conflicts and view another country's response.

The post-1815, diplomacy is divided into four groups, namely old, new, total and diffusion diplomacy. Old diplomacy is characterized by the presence of the European Concert where the first conference or meeting between countries is used to achieve peace between countries in Europe. It was signed by the Treaty of Vienna in 1815 followed by peace in Europe. Diplomacy is also increasingly established with the mission, levels, and language of diplomacy and division of their work. New diplomacy marked the stage of diplomacy in post World War I with the advent of the League of Nations. Total diplomacy is more referring to the involvement of all elements in post-World War II diplomacy which is marked the emergence of the international organization of the United Nations. Diplomacy then, not only dealing with political affairs and security but also other matters such as economics. The diffusion diplomacy or diplomacy today, referring to the two themes. First is the involvement of nonstate actor, whether NGO or an individual who performs a diplomatic-related activity such as social movements, culture, religion, and others, which then requires the government to collaborate with them in certain cases. Secondly, the diffusion diplomacy deals with some new topics such as environmental, technology and information, public diplomacy, NGO diplomacy, diplomacy by multilateral economic institutions, trade diplomacy and Development. global civil society, humanitarian diplomacy, and other projects.

In general, diplomacy has four funtions.<sup>3</sup> First is the messager. Diplomats are sending a message of a country to other countries vice versa. Second is the negotiation. Diplomats are negotiators who negotiate at different times and forms. The third is mediation. The diplomat is a mediator. A diplomat plays the role of his country as a third party in a problem to find solutions and facilitate both. Fourth, is the talk. Talk is understood as a conversation or dialogue done by the state to convey a certain idea in a conference or a meeting with the main purpose of sharing the idea and make understanding the perspectives or thoughts.

# **Zheng He and Diplomacy**

Zheng He is more discussed in historical contexts and, even sometimes associated with myths or legends rather than a historical fact.<sup>4</sup> However, it can not be denied, based on historical and legacy records, the character of Zheng He is actually present and has the significance of at least two things namely China and Muslims.

Zheng He was an explorer who lived during the Ming dynasty in China. He was a Muslim who later served to Emperor Yong Le and Xuande. At that time,

as a state envoy, Zheng He had conducted 7 expeditions with different missions in approximately 30 years (1405-1433) by visited many countries in Southeast Asia, South Asia, east Middle to East Africa.<sup>5</sup> On the first expedition (1405-1407), the main mission was to trade and to overthrow pirates who disrupting the trade route in the Straits of Malacca. Zheng He visited several countries such as Champ, Java, Palembang, Malacca, Aru, Sumatera, Lambri, Ceylon, Kollam, Cochin, and Calicut. The second expedition (1407-1408), Zheng He visited Champ, Java, Siam, Sumatera, Lambri, Calicut, Cochin, and Ceylon. It aimed to improve trade relations and delivering ambassadors from the countries or kingdoms visited on the first expedition. The third expedition (1409-1411) aimed at making visits to new places and improving relations to previously visited countries or kingdoms. Some of the kingdoms or regions visited by Zheng He on this third expedition include Champ, Java, Malacca, Sumatra, Ceylon, Quilon, Cochin, Calicut, Siam, Lambri, Kaya, Coimbatore, and Puttanpur. The fourth expedition (1413-1415) had a mission to extend the relationship of the Ming dynasty to the Arab region by then carrying 18 ambassadors from the kingdom that resided to China. Zheng He visited Champ, Java, Malacca, Sumatera, Cyclon, Cochin, Calicut, Zheng He also visited Kayal, Pahang, Kelantan, Aru, Lambri, Hormuz, Maldives, Mogadishu, Brawa, Malindi, Aden, Muscat, and Dhufar. The fifth expedition was conducted on the 1416-1419 by visiting several countries visited on a fifth expedition with a mission to establish and improve relations with countries in Arab and Africa. Zheng He visited the kingdom of Aden in Africa for the first time and received a prize from the King of Aden to be brought back to China. The sixth expedition brought a mission to maintain diplomatic relations with the countries that had been visited and delivered government ambassadors who had settled in China and brought home the Ming Dynasty ambassadors back to China. The sixth expedition was held in 1421-1422 and the last expedition in 1430-1433 was Zheng He's last expedition by visiting 18 countries. During an expedition of about 30 years, Zheng He managed to write a book on "Navigation Guides" that showed the direction of the cruise, the sea distance and the position of several ports in the world.

According to the history of Zheng He voyages, there is some important point to be discussed. First, Zheng He was as a diplomat, a messenger of the Ming dynasty to establish and improve relations with countries he visited. Zheng He had acted as a message presenter and negotiator. Secondly, there are several countries, regions or kingdoms that are always visited by Zheng He such as Champa, Java, Malacca, and Sumatra. In addition, Zheng He also always visited the countries that had been visited on previous expeditions. This shows how Zheng He played an important role in maintaining diplomatic relations include ambassadors or messengers exchange from the Ming dynasty as well as from the country he visited. Third, in his voyages, Zheng He brought a large number, both in the context of the size of the ship and the personnel he brings, including the military, but no record of war or conflict is happening. In historical records, the war was undertaken by Zheng He occurred only when his fleet fought with Pirates in Palembang (Chen Zuyi), a conflict with King Ceylon (King Alagakkonara) and the use of a military fleet to demonstrate the power of the Ming dynasty in Africa but does not end the war.

In every voyage, Zheng He has always been equipped by two main devices. Both are trading items including valuables used for exchanges or prizes and military fleets. Therefore, we can see this Zheng He expedition in two perspective, trade and expansion. But there are no records about conflict or war in Zheng He's expedition. There was no colonialization, although according to the number of his military force, Zheng He capable to do it. Why did Zheng He not commit colonialization?

A Dahana states Zheng He voyages were more of as cultural diplomacy than violence and it is influenced by political and cultural factors.<sup>6</sup> The Ming dynasty was a dynasty that restored the Han people's power after the Chinese had been ruled by the Mongol Yuan dynasty. As the new dynasty, the Ming dynasty had a political interest primarily in relation to other countries whose interests were implemented by Zheng He. The Ming dynasty needed to inform other kingdoms, both the neighbor as well as the subordinate countries that China had already had a new ruler.

Second, the Zheng He expedition was used to ensure that the other countries did not threaten China while also ensuring that the subordinate countries acknowledged China's power as evidenced by delivery of tributes. This political factor seemed rational and explained why Zheng He brought a large military fleet in addition to security but also to demonstrate the power of the new Chinese ruler. The second factor is a cultural factor related to Confucian philosophy.

Confucianism governs the relationship between multilevel or feudal people based on their respective positions. Confucian teachings describe five important relationships in the community namely husband-wife, parents, the king-people, siblings, friends. This relationship affects the Ming dynasty's perspective on the outside world where they consider China to be the center of the world (*Zhong Guo*) and other countries or kingdoms under their influence. It is based on the relationship between the parent-child or king-people where the parents have a responsibility to the child, and the child must be devoted to the parents, or the king responsible to his people and the people must be devoted to the king. This thought encouraged the Ming dynasty to ensure that subordinate kingdoms remained "devoted" to China, while China was obligated to help "secure" or "protect" them. This thought influenced China to implement the Tributary system in its foreign relations.

Tributary system, in general, is China's international relations model where China becomes the center of the world and surrounding countries are under its influence, but more in the context of recognition than a colony.<sup>7</sup> However, it different than hegemony in Western perspective.<sup>8</sup> The purpose of a tributary system is to create harmony, peace and harmonious relationship.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, this establishes a Chinese mentality in regard to the international system where the limitation of influence is not on physical boundaries but on culture.<sup>10</sup>

The cultural diplomacy undertaken by Zheng He contained two meanings. The first is to use peaceful ways to establish relationships with other countries or kingdoms through exchange and trade. Secondly, the philosophy of international relations practices conducted by Zheng He comes from Chinese culture, Confucianism.

Zheng He's expedition is a peaceful diplomacy.<sup>11</sup> Tan Ta Sen realizes that the existence of a large military fleet invites the perception that Zheng Ho's expedition was another state conquest expedition that ended in colonization. Some Western researchers like Geoff Wade from Australia and Bokwahan from Russia argue in that way. Even Wade argues that Zheng He was a colonialist, colonizing another country by establishing a fortress and conducting military action in Sumatra, Java, Palembang, and Ceylon.

Tan rejected Wade's opinion by giving arguments based on historical notes and relics. The military action in Java was precisely due to the conflict between the west and the east kingdom and thus Zheng He soldiers were killed. Zheng He came as a mediator and reconciled both. Military action in Palembang, as explained earlier, more to the securing of the sea trade line from the pirate Chen Zuyi. Zheng He's fleet fought in assisting the rulers of the Pasai in the face of a revolt and after the problems of Zheng He and his fleet returned to China. The case of Ceylon was more in the case of Zheng He's self-defense and his fleet from the king of Ceylon.

Tan also rejected the argument about the occupation of Zheng He like what Portuguese did by built fortresses. It was the warehouse of the Zheng He fleet to store valuables before they brought them back to China. Tan also showed no Zheng He relics on he visited states that he was committing colonialization. This is evidenced by the absence of relics that show Zheng He left or put his troops in the country visited. Thus the Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang of the Ming dynasty delivered several neighboring countries that had good relations and were not invaded such as Korea, Japan, Ryukyu, Annam (Vietnam), Chenia (Cambodia), Siam (Thailand), Ocean, Java, Pahang, and Sriwijaya. Tan also argues that the perception toward Zheng He as an expansionist, caused by the lack understanding of Chinese Confucian culture and philosophy. Western countries are an industrial country where the expedition aimed to find new resources and markets, which resulted in colonialization. While China is an agrarian country which was banned in trade except by the government. Similar to Dahana, Tan also agreed that Confucian philosophy was influenced in Zheng He diplomacy.

Another thing that is always associated with Zheng He is the individual figure himself as a Muslim. The discussion about Zheng He was always split into two, as a messenger or diplomat and as a Muslim. We should distinguish these two things, in Zheng He roles as state servants and his individual contexts. However, the Muslim Zheng He could not be released in the role he played as a diplomat, especially in countries with Muslim populations. Zheng He becomes a symbol of the relationship between China and Muslim countries like Indonesia and Malaysia. Zheng He's identity as a Muslim became a bridge between these countries and China. It is not undeniable because some of Zheng He's relics especially in southeast Asia are showing how the relationship he builds with the local Muslim community. The King of Malacca, Parameswara and his Muslim successors established good relations with the Ming Dynasty and utilized the relationship to protect themselves from other countries.<sup>12</sup> Zheng He became an important figure in the relationship because the differences between the two countries were incorporated in the Zheng He figure, as the Chinese (Ming dynasty) as well as Muslims. Zheng He is also associated with the development of Islam in the visited countries, even regarded as one of the protagonists of Islam in the archipelago according to historical records and physical relics.<sup>13</sup> Even Zheng Ho and the Chinese Muslim community in Java have spawned a "Chinese theory"<sup>14</sup> which demonstrates his role in the development of Islam in Java, with the theory of Gujarat or Arabic.

The peaceful cultural diplomacy run by Zheng He contains the role of eastern culture in diplomacy.<sup>15</sup> Tan Ta Sen stated that Eastern cultures put forward peace in different cultural contacts. Asia's cultural philosophy of seeing world order and peace is based on the harmony of human relations with nature and occult things. Therefore, the relationship between among Asians is relatively playing in a peaceful way. In addition, the actors who make this cultural contact also become important in the context of spreading Islam in Nusantara. For example, traders who besides trade also give side effects to the spread of religion resulting in a new cultural contact or different from the local culture did on the peaceful way and not resulting in a conflict. This opinion is even, recognized as an alternative explanation or rather possibly a defense of Asian circles against the Great Western thesis on the clash of Civilizations.<sup>16</sup>

Returning to the discussion in the relationship between diplomacy and the Zheng He expedition, we can see that Zheng He's peaceful cultural diplomacy is sourced to Asian culture. Asian culture that focuses on peace and harmony is the basis of people relations. Meanwhile, Confucianism perspective became a special character from China, which also influenced the Zheng He's diplomatic philosophy. It centered on tributary systems where the large military fleet carried By Zheng He was not used for conquest or colonialization but for the sole security factor. While in the context of relations with other countries with different cultures, the cultural contacts conducted by Zheng He used a relatively acceptable trading way rather than invasion. Therefore, the main mission of the Zheng He Expedition is diplomacy and trade. However, it does not mean that this ZHeng Ho expedition was completely different from the concept of diplomacy that was heavily influenced by Western values. Thus, Zheng He's expedition represented four main functions in diplomacy i.e. messengers and negotiators (through the visit and exchange of Ambassadors), mediators (mediation in the case in Java and the ocean Pasai) and also in the function of talks with the local community in peaceful cultural contacts. This diplomacy model applied by Zheng He is described simply in the **Figure 1**.

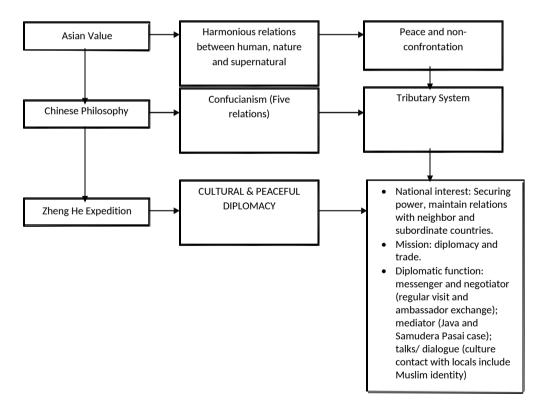


Figure 1. Zheng He's Cultural and Peaceful Diplomacy Model

## Zheng He and China's Diplomacy Today

Was the diplomacy model adopted by Zheng He 6 centuries ago only a part of history? Is there no inheritance maintained or affecting China's current diplomacy? This section briefly discusses these two questions. Zheng He's cultural and peaceful diplomacy seemed influenced current China's diplomacy. During the 2000s, when China enjoys economic rise, China's economic strength is not all positively responded to by other countries. Some Western countries view China's economic revival as a threat or known as the "China Threat" theory. China responds to this by conveying that the increase of China's economic strength is not a threat but an opportunity to take advantage together through economic cooperation. Chinese leader released a "peaceful rise" concept where China seeks to explain to the world that its economic raising is not a threat. Long before the concept of the peaceful rise emerged, China had itself since its inception had the principle of "peaceful co-existence" in its foreign policy. It simply means that China wants to coexist peacefully between countries.

When President Xi Jinping came to power, He came to the idea of economic cooperation called OBOR or One Belt One Road. OBOR is an idea of economic cooperation by returning back to the history of Chinese glory in the past, the Silk Road.<sup>17</sup> In 2013, President Xi presented two important ideas, namely the New Silk Road (on Kazakhstan) and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (in Indonesia). The New Silk Road is a revival of the famous ancient Silk Road as a trading route that connects China to central Asia and Europe, while the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road is a revival of the trade route through the sea refers to the path ever passed by Zheng He. The two lines are then known as belts (maritime route) and road (land route). In its development, to avoid the impression of China being a hegemon state, in 2016 the OBOR was changed to BRI or Belt and Road Initiative. This trade cooperation offers the absence of the terms of change or adjustment of the partner countries and cooperation agreements based on the agreement of both parties.

When we try to see the relationship between OBOR/BRI with a Zheng He's cultural and peaceful diplomacy model, we find some important and interesting things. First, Chinese culture (Confucianism) is still influential but with modifications. When the idea of OBOR emerged, it seemed to be a central Chinese impression of this economic and trade cooperation as these two lines met in China. It seems reflecting tributary system model. However, this impression was attempted to be was denied by China by replacing it with BRI. The influence of the tributary system does not mean completely lost, although it is not seen in a strictly political context. In the application of cooperation under the mechanism of BRI, China did not try to "change" its partners to comply with China, but the cooperation is done through dialogue to achieve mutual interest. In addition, the cultural approach used in BRI is to explore the history of the Silk Road in the past, which based on mutual cooperation than conflictual cooperation. In other words, China utilizes cultural and historical capital to raise and improve relations with the countries of the Silk Road.

Another important point of Zheng He's legacy is his map of diplomacy between China and Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and African countries. Zheng He did not only established trade and voyage routes but also diplomatic route. Zheng He has also placed the foundation of peaceful relations between Asia and Africa.<sup>18</sup> Zheng He also became a symbol of transnational relations in the context of the relationship between Muslims in China and other countries, for example in Indonesia.<sup>19</sup>

### Conclusion

The Zheng He expedition was not only a world exploration or a major history. The Zheng He expedition passed a model of diplomacy or diplomacy approach sourced from the Asian and Chinese philosophy that resulted in cultural and peace diplomacy. Zheng He was a diplomat who made an important contribution to China and giving the foundations of China's relations with countries that had been he visited 6 centuries ago. China, through Zheng He has had a cultural capital and historical relations with these countries and sought to be raised again today with BRI.

The relationship between the Zheng He expedition and Chinese diplomacy gave lessons to other countries, especially the countries that were passed on in their expeditions. Firstly, diplomacy is the relationship between two or more countries of equal nature. Zheng He's legacy is not only owned by China, but other countries have been he visited. Therefore, not only China can inherit Zheng He, but these countries can use Zheng He as a means to improve relations with China based on equal principles and mutual benefit. Secondly, OBOR policy to BRI is an important lesson that the great history in the past need to be studied and sought for possible use at this time. OBOR until BRI showed the Chinese successes in regenerating their passion to achieve progress as it has ever been achieved in the past. Other countries, like Indonesia, have a long and great history of the need to re-explore its history and be used as the spirit in development.

#### Endnotes

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