

# The instrumental use of Zheng He's travels in official Sino-African relations' discourse

## 1. Introduction

Zheng He's travels (1371-1433) have become a central point in Sino-African relations' discourse. Historiographic attention to Zheng He and its meaning for Sino-African relations has shifted from very scarce coverage throughout history to an ever greater interest in recent years. The first official records that we know of nowadays have covered the voyages in a superficial way, putting little importance to said endeavor. In recent decades however, we can perceive an increased interest towards historically analyzing the voyages, and towards rhetorically using them in official foreign relations' discourse. While some scholars consider Zheng He's travels to be pacific explorations, others claim that if analyzed from a different perspective, they can be seen as a kind of disguised colonialism. However, even if historical evidences are scarce, primary sources lead us to assume that the expeditions were neither completely pacific nor aggressive. As we will show further below, they can be understood as a quest for overseas recognition which intended to include foreign countries into the Ming tributary system by what modern-day international relations scholars would denominate a credible way of appeal: namely an awe-inspiring military equipment. Even if Zheng He's travels should not be interpreted as "peaceful exploration" or "friendship travels", Chinese politicians are nevertheless spreading this image via China's foreign relation discourse. Therefore, it is our aim to argue that, in the case of Sino-African relations, Zheng He's historical precedent is wrongly represented in order to justify China's involvement in Africa by creating a benevolent image of herself, legitimizing its presence and reassuring African audiences. This analogical use of Zheng He's travels to Africa is thus exaggerating and even distorting historical facts for the purpose of satisfying present political needs.

In order to argue the said, this article is going to be structured in two main parts: a historical reevaluation of Zheng He's travels to Africa, and a critical assessment of the discursive use of this historical precedent in contemporary Sino-African relations discourse. Firstly, we are going to give a short historical contextualization on Zheng He and its voyages to Africa in order to clarify the necessary background information upon which the expeditions can be analyzed. Consequently, we will focus on the academic debate concerning the whether-or-not peaceful character of Zheng He's voyages. In this first part, it is our aim to clarify that Zheng He's travels should not be understood as peaceful exploration, but as a confident endeavor of Ming dynasty power projection. Secondly, we will pay attention to the way in which historical events can be instrumentally used to fulfill

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contemporary political needs. Based on this theoretical discussion, and by making use of recent examples mentioning Zheng He in Sino-African relations' discourse, we are going to show that Zheng He's travels have been instrumentalized and dehistoricized for the purpose of projecting a benevolent image of China.

## 2. Zheng He's travels to Africa

### 2.1. Historical context and Zheng He's travels to Africa

Zheng He grew up in a well-off Muslim family who had traditional ties with the Mongol rulers of Yunnan during the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368). After the collapse of said dynasty and throughout the following invasion of Ming troops to Yunnan province, Zheng He was captured as a war criminal and taken to Nanjing. Consequently, he was castrated and taken to the then Prince of Yan, Zhu Di (1360-1424), as a eunuch servant. Zhu Di was going to be the future emperor Yongle (r. 1402-1424) of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), and it was during this period of time that Zheng He already established good relations with him. It was these twenty or so years of close relationship with the future emperor that made possible his posterior designation as leader of the "treasure fleet" expeditions<sup>1</sup>. The expeditions of the "treasure fleet" –as they are known due to carrying highly precious products such as silk, porcelain etc.– are commonly agreed upon to be a total of seven. The biggest voyages included up to 300 vessels and 27,000 men. Wang explains that "the first three expeditions went as far as the west coast of India; the fourth went farther, crossing to the Persian Gulf; the fifth and the seventh expeditions visited the east coast of Africa"<sup>2</sup>. Thus, we are dealing with the biggest maritime expeditions that we have historical evidence of to this point<sup>3</sup>. In addition to being manned up to a considerable extend, the vessels were similarly characterized by being heavily armed, carrying entire troops that could be employed if necessary<sup>4</sup>. In order to place Zheng He's expeditions in the right context, it is necessary to mention that they were not the only ones to be hold during Yongle's reign. According to the *Cambridge History of China*, there have been a total of 62 maritime missions to a range of Southeast Asian countries and 95 envoy missions in return<sup>5</sup>. Zheng He's vessels visited Africa on the fourth (1412/14-1415), the fifth (1417-1419), the sixth (1421-1422) and probably the seventh mission (1431-1433)<sup>6</sup>. While on the fourth expedition they probably just visited Hormuz, the other missions payed visits to up to twenty countries on the Eastern coast of Africa<sup>7</sup>. While

1 Information based on (Tsai, 1996, 156); For instance, due to the close relationship between Yongle and Zheng He, when the earlier got enthroned, Zheng He directly became Grand Director of the Directorate of Palace Servants (Dreyer, 2007, 22).

2 (Wang, 1998, 320); the general pattern of all the travels was something like this: China - Champa - Strait of Malacca - northern Sumatra - Ceylon - Calicut, while those expeditions who went to Africa further passed through Hormuz - Aden - East coast of Africa (Dreyer, 2007, 35).

3 Phillip Snow says in his book about Sino-African relations that Zheng He's fleet made those of Columbus and Vasco da Gama "look like amateurs" (Snow, 1988, 21).

4 (Dreyer, 2007, 27)

5 (Mote and Twitchett, 1988, 270)

6 Ibid. 75-95.

7 (Li, 2015, 54)

there is considerable debate over the exact countries the fleets might have visited in Africa, most agree on the principal countries being Mogadishu, Brava, Jubu and Malindi<sup>8</sup>. The initial visits started a kind of intercourse between Chinese and African envoys respectively sending gifts and tributes throughout the time-frame of Zheng He's expeditions<sup>9</sup>. In response to this interchange, all of these travels have been partly organized to escort previously dispatched envoys to their home countries<sup>10</sup>. Since it is commonly agreed on that these expeditions may have been the first large-scale direct contact between Africans and Chinese, they have been considered "the most important period for Sino-African relations in history"<sup>11</sup>.

The initial motivation for Zheng He's fleet to sail further into previously undiscovered lands may be explained by the incentive received from exotic animals such as the giraffe<sup>12</sup>. This idea is underpinned by a statement in the *Taizong shilu* which manifests that the giraffe was the only reason for sending Zheng He's fleet so far south<sup>13</sup>. According to Duyvendak, Zheng He and his companions had their first encounter with a giraffe in Bengal in 1414, which on itself was a gift by the African country of Malindi to the Bengal king. He says that the Somali pronunciation of "girin" might have made the Chinese relate this animal with the mythical *qilin*, which on itself is a "symbol for heaven's favor and proof of the virtue of the Emperor"<sup>14</sup>. In response to this encounter, Zheng He may have decided to travel to Malindi for the purpose of returning one of these mythical animals to the Ming court. The immediate interest in that animal by the Chinese can be reflected in a *Mingshi* entry on Malindi which, in contrast to the other African countries, does not mention any sociopolitical aspects of the locality but dedicates itself completely to the description of the giraffe/*qilin*<sup>15</sup>. Duyvendak interpreted this encounter in a quite romantic fashion, saying that

Thus it happened that the giraffe from the African wilderness, as it strode into the Emperor's Court, became the emblem of Perfect Virtue, Perfect Government, and Perfect Harmony in the Empire and in the Universe. Rarely have such extravagant cosmic claims been made in such refined language for any living animal. Surely it is the most sophisticated instance of theolatriy in history, the apogee of the lore of the unicorn! This is what the discovery of Africa did for Chinese Confucian ideology.<sup>16</sup>

Apart from this enlightening and self-legitimizing encounter, Zheng He's travels to Africa were particular because they seem to have been realized without any considerable conflicts with local countries. Accounts like a novel by Luo Maodeng tell us about armed conflict in the encounters of

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8 (Gao, 1984, 245)

9 (Snow, 1988, 25)

10 (Dreyer, 2007, 91)

11 (Gao, 1984, 245)

12 The idea of the giraffe motivating Zheng He to sail further westwards to the coastal countries of Africa is accepted by (Duyvendak, 1949, 32); (Snow, 1988, 24); (Dreyer, 2007, 90).

13 *Taizong shilu* cited in (Dreyer, 2007, 90).

14 (Duyvendak, 1949, 32)

15 Mention to *Mingshi* in (Dreyer, 2007, 90).

16 (Duyvendak, 1949, 35)

Zheng He's fleet with African countries, but these literary sources cannot be sustained by historical evidences<sup>17</sup>. Snow, for instance, emphasized the fact that "[...] the Chinese were tactful, anxious to avoid disturbing the small coastal states any more than was necessary to achieve their basic ends"<sup>18</sup>. It is important to mention this with regard to the military capability of the fleets. Based on these assumptions, we can thus insinuate that even if the Chinese had the military capacity, they were not making use of them in Africa in order to impose anything as would thereafter be the European fashion. As we will see further below, this conflict-avoiding approach can best be explained when understanding Zheng He's travels proper reasons and goals.

Another crucial fact in this important historical moment of Sino-African relations is that the Chinese visitors didn't come to stay or create long-term settlements. As we will argue later on, this is principally due to the fact that the Chinese were not searching for trade enclaves or commercial dominance. However, it is still remarkable that there is very little evidence for any type of Chinese settling due to other reasons. Recently, there has been a lot of media coverage about a village in eastern Kenya, whose inhabitants claim to be descendants of Zheng He's crew. However, if the story is true, then those Chinese who settled there would not be considered intentional settlers as they arrived by accident<sup>19</sup>. In this regard, Zheng He's fleets didn't have any important social impact apart from inspiring trade reflected in the creation of a greater demand for overseas products, and establishing short-term intercourse between peoples of both entities. Snow accordingly resumes this stupefaction saying that "none, in the end, is as startling as the simple fact that for once in African history an armada of foreigners came, did their business and went away again"<sup>20</sup>.

## 2.2. Zheng He - Proto-colonialism or friendship expeditions?

When asking us about the nature of Zheng He's expeditions, it is necessary to recognize the limited amount of primary sources that we can draw on. For instance, the *Mingshi*, the official historiographic register of the Ming dynasty, just mentions Zheng He's travels with 700 characters<sup>21</sup>. For the displeasure of subsequent historians, "Chinese writers of later times never considered them glorious achievements and never took any serious interest in them"<sup>22</sup>. The reasons for this lack of historiographic covering is most probably due to ideological and power struggles between the Confucian civil servants and eunuchs<sup>23</sup>. As in contrast to the eunuchs who understood Zheng He's travels as a means to advance their group interests, Confucianists generally despised this activity for being "wasteful and frivolous"<sup>24</sup>. It is due to these reasons that most of the interpretations about

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17 (Dreyer, 2007, 84)

18 (Snow, 1988, 29)

19 Li Xinfeng made an exhaustive study about this village, see (Li Xinfeng, 2005).

20 (Snow, 1988, 33)

21 (Tsai, 1996, 154); it is also important to mention that the *Mingshi* was just finished under the Qing dynasty in 1739, further questioning the accuracy of the recorded events (Dreyer, 2007, 218).

22 (Mote and Twitchett, 1988, 773)

23 (Tsai, 1996, 154)

24 (Snow, 1988, 31)

the travels' intentions make their arguments on the grounds of some of the eunuchs' travelogues<sup>25</sup>. It seems plausible that due to this lack of historical evidence, interpretations can be strongly biased to fulfill the narrator's intentions. Since Zheng He's travels were imperial endeavors, it is necessary to ask us about the Ming court's foreign policy ambitions in order to resolve the dilemma about its intentions. At the beginning of the dynasty, Ming foreign policy was not expansionist in nature. After several defeats in the northern plains and failing to reconquer Outer Mongolia in 1372, the first Ming emperor Hongwu (r. 1368-1398) turned out to be rather defensive<sup>26</sup>. With regard to maritime expeditions, said emperor stated that "foreign countries beyond the seas that are not harming China should not be attacked without cause"<sup>27</sup>. Hongwu established a list to be taken into account by following emperors, which contained fifteen countries that should not be invaded nor occupied<sup>28</sup>. From this perspective, it seems reasonable to contextualize Zheng He's voyages into a relatively peaceful environment of Ming foreign relations.

On the other hand, emperor Yongle's approach towards foreign lands is characterized by a far more expansionist undertone. The latter is probably most known to subsequent generations for the invasion of Vietnam, five expeditions to Mongolia, the capital movement to Beijing and Zheng He's voyages<sup>29</sup>. Yongle's relationship with foreign countries breaks, at least in part, with his predecessor's approach as he decides to annex Annam, which was part of Hongwu's list not to invade. According to Wang, these expansionist moves can be explained by Yongle's "usurpation and his desire for universal legitimacy"<sup>30</sup>. However, it is important to mention that Yongle's expansionist ambitions were not positively regarded by the Confucian civil servants surrounding him<sup>31</sup>.

Needham, in his great work on the development of Chinese science and technology, argues that Zheng He's expeditions lack any type of territorial supremacy or colonizing intentions. Said scholar promotes the vision that all of the Chinese operations were made to pay friendship visits to foreign harbors, and that the Chinese ships cannot be called "*armadas*" but rather mercantile vessels of a national commercial authority<sup>32</sup>. He claims that during these expeditions, just three armed attacks of self-defense had been produced<sup>33</sup>. While highlighting this pacifist character, Needham compares these travels with the Portuguese endeavor nearly 50 years later. In this regard, said scholar claims that "[...], the Chinese, [were] calm and pacifist, without the disturbance of a legacy of enmity, generous to a certain extent, without threatening the life of anyone, tolerant with their condescension

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25 The most common travelogues are "The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores" (*Yingyai shenglan*) by Ma Huan; "The Overall Survey of the Starry Raft" (*Xingcha shenglan*) by Fei Xin; and "Description of the Barbarian Countries of the West" (*Xiyang fanguo zhi*) by Gong Zhen.

26 (Dreyer, 2007, 16)

27 Citation in (Dreyer, 2007, 16).

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid. 6

30 (Wang, 1998, 320)

31 (Dreyer, 2007, 24)

32 (Needham, 1978, 70)

33 Ibid. One in Palembang 1406, in Ceylon 1410 and in Sumatra in 1414/15.

of weapons, but without colonizing or establishing strongholds”<sup>34</sup>. According to Needham, Zheng He’s expeditions were not only pacifist; they were furthermore characterized by a high degree of respect towards other cultures and religions. He makes this statement by referring to a three-lingual (Chinese, Tamil and Persian) inscription on a stone stele found on the island of Ceylon in 1911. The inscriptions mention gifts offered by Zheng He to all the three religious authorities present on the island: Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist. In Needham’s eyes, this is an argument to prove that the Chinese didn’t think of themselves as having any religious authority. He argues that, in contrast to the Portuguese, this underlying conception allowed the Chinese to deal with the locals in a way of mutual respect<sup>35</sup>. Needham’s approach, in analyzing Zheng He’s expeditions, needs to be criticized from several perspectives. First of all, it is highly probable that if the Chinese didn’t preach any type of religious superiority, this may not be due to a sense of mutual respect. It is rather plausible that this way of behavior was rooted in pragmatism mixed with sinocentrism. With regard to Zheng He’s encounter with Africans in Mogadishu, Snow argues that “extensive contact with barbarians was neither desirable nor necessary”, so if there was no disruption of their life, this may be explained by an underlying sentiment of superiority<sup>36</sup>. If Western colonialists understood cultural superiority as a pretext for forcing their views on others, Chinese didn’t even feel the need to intermingle in the first place. This doesn’t mean that China did as worse as Western countries in their approach to Africa, however recognizing this background helps us reconsider and deconstruct the romantic narrative of mutual support. Secondly, Needham doesn’t include the sociopolitical context of emperor Yongle’s ambitions in his recount of Zheng He. It is necessary to analyze the voyages in the political context of the latter, since it was Yongle himself who promoted them<sup>37</sup>. The intrinsic relationship between Yongle’s personal ambitions and Zheng He’s expeditions can be seen by the fact that they started with his accession to the throne and –with the exception of one last voyage under emperor Xuande (r. 1425-1435)– finished with his death. Hence, the fact of not mentioning Yongle’s ambitions when recounting Zheng He’s voyages is like “relating the voyages of the Spanish Armada without mentioning that the political intentions of Philip II had a lot to do with that”<sup>38</sup>.

In contrast to Needham, other scholars such as Wade and Finlay present a less pacifist interpretation of Zheng He’s expeditions. The earlier does this by contextualizing the travels with emperor Yongle’s other expansionist policies in Yunnan and Dai Viet. Furthermore, he makes his argument through an analysis of armed conflicts during Zheng He’s travels themselves. While using the word *gunboat* to refer to Zheng He’s vessels, Wade insists on the importance of including the military aspect in the overall account in order to demystify “the stress placed on these missions in much current scholarship, both Chinese and non-Chinese, as ‘voyages of friendship’”<sup>39</sup>. His point of view is thus coherent with Finlay’s, inasmuch as the latter argues that the voyages were not tranquil due to the Chinese’s pacifist character, but due to the fact that the “troops in the fleet were experienced, heavily armed, and greater in number than the entire population of most *entrepôts* between Nanjing and

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34 (Needham, 1978, 76)

35 Ibid. 75

36 (Snow, 1988, 30)

37 (Dreyer, 2007, 24)

38 (Finlay, 2000, 296)

39 (Wade, 2005, 47)

Mombasa”<sup>40</sup>. What is striking with regard to Wade’s argument, is the fact that he even goes one step further, claiming that the expeditions can be understood as some kind of *proto-colonialism*:

They were engaged in that early form of maritime colonialism by which a dominant maritime power took control (either through force or the threat thereof) of the main port-polities along the major East-West maritime trade network, as well as the seas between, thereby gaining economic and political benefits.<sup>41</sup>

According to said scholar, the only reason for Zheng He’s expeditions not to develop into a kind of colonialism with European features was their abrupt ending after Yongle’s death. Even if Wade’s argument is broadly coherent when looking at it from a Western colonial experience, there are actually little evidences that support his view in the Chinese context. It is true that trade was one of the motivating factors for Zheng He’s expeditions, but little evidence points to the idea of trying to establish a kind of monopoly of trade as suggested by the latter<sup>42</sup>. For instance, great effort had been put into foreign trade through governmental control<sup>43</sup>, but private maritime trade, which had flourished during the Song dynasty, was gradually being restricted by the Ming<sup>44</sup>. Zheng He’s mission was not meant to guarantee commercial access and forcing trade on countries throughout Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean, trade was merely a second-level intention. As Duyvendak accurately put it in his early speech on Sino-African relations, Zheng He principally went “shopping for the ladies of the Imperial Harem”<sup>45</sup>. In fact, Zheng He’s voyages should neither be understood as peaceful voyages, nor as proto-colonialism, it is much more accurate to identify them as a Ming power projection by means of extending the tributary system<sup>46</sup>. According to Dreyer, the *Mingshi* is unexpectedly precise when talking about the expeditions intentions. In the biography on Zheng He, said historiographic collection says that Yongle “wanted to display his soldiers in strange lands in order to make manifest the wealth and power of the Middle Kingdom”. It goes on saying that Zheng He’s fleets “went in succession to the various foreign countries, proclaiming the edicts of the Son of Heaven and giving gifts to their rulers and chieftains. Those who did not submit were pacified by force”<sup>47</sup>. This primary source reveals quite accurately the main intentions of the expeditions. While they were not meant to impose any kind of colonial rule or religious doctrine, these travels were principally engaged to include overseas countries into the traditional Chinese tributary system<sup>48</sup>.

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40 (Finlay, 2000, 296)

41 (Wade, 2005, 51)

42 (Dreyer, 2007, 3)

43 (Duyvendak, 1949, 26)

44 (Dreyer, 2007, 3); even though officially restricted, it has been argued that this “the ban during the Yongle reign was flexible”, see (Meicun and Zhang, 2015, 418).

45 (Duyvendak, 1949, 27)

46 (Dreyer, 2007, 26)

47 Ibid. 33

48 Ibid. 3; according to Dreyer, including foreign countries into the tributary system meant that countries should officially recognize Chinese power by presenting tributes to the emperor and use the Chinese calendar at least when communicating with China. In return, the Chinese would bring gifts such as silk, porcelain etc. Ibid. 34.

Hence, Zheng He's travels can be understood as demanding the "symbolic acquiescence in the Chinese view of the world", principally a matter of prestige for the ruling court<sup>49</sup>. The fact that the *Mingshi* includes "force" as an instrument to make other countries submit to this worldview, explains why the ships were so well-armed. Furthermore, it deconstructs the myth of the travels being a wholly peaceful exploration on the basis of mutual equality.

### 3. Zheng He in Sino-African relations discourse

#### 3.1. The use of historical precedents in foreign policy discourse

Having clarified that Zheng He's travels shouldn't be reduced to being a phenomenon of peaceful exploration, we now want to dedicate our attention to how sociopolitical representations of historical events can be ascribed with new significations according to contemporary needs. History as a discursive tool can help creating a sense of collective identity as well as legitimizing certain contemporary phenomena by rooting them into the past. However, if we accept the fact that history is primordialily playing a role of satisfying present needs in contemporary representations, then we have to admit its biased nature, accept the fact that history may be distorted in a way to better suit our contemporary purposes. The rhetorical use of analogical reasoning is a good example of said concern, shifting history towards becoming a simple justificatory instrument. As we will see below, this mode of social representation is suited when targeting foreign audiences in a country's foreign policy discourse, especially when it comes to rectifying novel foreign policy phenomena.

Making use of history in contemporary sociopolitical representations has a range of benefits. In its most fundamental role, history or collective memory is useful for the social construction of identity among those who participate in a certain discourse. This is due to the fact that history itself gives people a feeling of belonging. Being able to identify with past events, communities or localities gives peoples' existence a meaning, purpose and value<sup>50</sup>. On a broader level, history is able to construct a sense of national or communal identity if it is collectively shared<sup>51</sup>. Liu and Hilton quite succinctly sum up the idea when stating that "a group's representation of history will condition its sense of what it was, is, can and should be, and is thus central to the construction of its identity, norms, and values"<sup>52</sup>. Acknowledging the fact that historical representation constitutes collective identity helps us understanding how these representations condition responses to contemporary phenomena. There is thus a causal relationship between how history is represented in a certain society, how this influences the construction of a collective identity in said place and how this identity finally conditions a specific response to external stimuli. By alluding to familiar historical phenomena that resemble a certain contemporary situation, the rhetorical use of history creates a type of traditional legitimacy for it<sup>53</sup>. In other words, a new or uncommon situation becomes more "normal" or acceptable when it is historically rooted. As Lowenthal emphasized, what has been there before is

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49 (Snow, 1988, 23/29)

50 (Lowenthal, 1985, 41)

51 Ibid. 44.

52 (Liu and Hilton, 2005, 537)

53 (Lowenthal, 1985, 41)



generally perceived to be more legitimate than recent phenomena<sup>54</sup>. In order to render a society's social and political arrangements the grade of legitimacy needed, they can be linked to a common historical precedent, a kind of heritage that has seemingly developed linearly into the contemporary phenomenon. According to Liu and Hilton, "it is through providing such charters that are informally accepted by public opinion as true that social representations of history legitimize a society's current social and political arrangements"<sup>55</sup>. The authors understand "charters" as an account of a group's origin and historical mission. Therefore, they reinforce the idea that correctly representing history is a crucial tool to foster legitimacy for sociopolitical phenomena.

What most people are not aware of though is that in order for the past to be able to play this contemporary role of identity-construction or legitimization, people are "continually readjusting the past to fit the present"<sup>56</sup>. In order for a historical precedent to suit the need of the present, they are constantly reinterpreted, at times exaggerated. Reinterpretation of historical facts may be done to rend contemporary situations more comprehensible, to justify present attitudes and actions or to underscore changes of faith<sup>57</sup>. The problem is that at times the historical precedent itself may not be glorious enough to succeed in its new task as justificatory evidence. If this is the case, Lowenthal argues, we might just "'improve' it —exaggerating aspects we find successful, virtuous, or beautiful, celebrating what we take pride in, playing down the ignoble, the ugly, the shameful"<sup>58</sup>. What Lowenthal is trying to say is that we intend to present the past in a way that accentuates those values or characteristics that we consider positive or honorable nowadays. The same pattern is also recognizable in those historical accounts that intend to foster national or collective identity, since many reconstructed histories are actually narrowly chauvinist inasmuch as they exclude alien achievements for the purpose of highlighting those of the proper nation or ethnicity<sup>59</sup>. This anachronistic and biased way of reinterpreting and highlighting particular features of the past in order to make them harmonize with contemporary expectations, can be done either on purpose or unconsciously. It is important to recognize that exaggeration and embellishment of historical precedents is a commonly committed flaw underlying much of contemporary sociopolitical representation of history that aims to satisfy contemporary sociopolitical needs.

One way in which historical events can be instrumentally used to put forward contemporary political agendas is through analogical reasoning. Since our topic is related to the analogical use of a specific historical precedent in contemporary Chinese foreign policy discourse, our focus lies on analogical reasoning in foreign relations rather than for domestic purposes. Put succinctly, analogical reasoning in international politics can be understood as the action of using historical analogies to make sense of recent phenomena. Historical analogies are thus comparisons between a past event and a new phenomenon, *if they share common structural similarities*<sup>60</sup>. As has been adequately summed up

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54 Ibid. 53.

55 (Liu and Hilton, 2005, 539)

56 (Lowenthal, 1985, 53)

57 Ibid. 325.

58 Ibid. 332.

59 Ibid. 334.

60 (Houghton, 1996, 525)

by Meierheinrich, this method of reasoning can be used in two major ways: by means of reason or rhetoric. On the one hand, if a certain international actor draws on a historical precedent in a comparative way for the purpose of facilitating or informing the foreign policy decision making process, this can be categorized as analogical reasoning based on *reason* itself. On the other hand, if a historical precedent is rhetorically used to justify or explain a certain foreign policy, previously decided upon, this becomes known as analogical reasoning based on *rhetoric*<sup>61</sup>. Since in the latter case the foreign policy goals are already set, using historical analogies to support one's view primarily acquires a practical quality. As Mumford succinctly put it in his article on "Parallels, prescience and the past", analogical reasoning, when rhetorically used to justify or explain certain recent foreign policy phenomena, "becomes self-serving, rests upon a particularly lazy interaction with the past, and, because of the political function it is now increasingly being used for, forces history into a deliberately persuasive role"<sup>62</sup>. As we have seen before, historical precedents hold the capacity of legitimizing certain contemporary behavior. From this perspective, analogical reasoning in the rhetorical realm becomes a practical tool towards generating legitimacy for contemporary events.

Historical reductionism is what inevitably results from such a practical approach of using history for present political needs. If analogies are used to rhetorically undermine a political purpose, they are reduced to mirroring ideas or ideal outcomes that have been constructed previously. The analogy gets constructed into evidence *a posteriori*, it is not the evidence that helps creating the purpose. Mumford agrees with this way of thinking as he argues that rhetorically used analogies may "simply reflect back the base fears/hopes of an ideological position"<sup>63</sup>. Furthermore, he claims that this is the reason why

this schema [of rhetorically using analogical reasoning] nullifies the potential cognitive advantages analogies residually possess because those analytical benefits require a greater objectivity of purpose (in other words, being open to analogies that may dissuade you from a favoured course of action) than the constricting subjectivity of an entrenched ideological position.<sup>64</sup>

As we can see from Mumford's theoretical discussion, when reinterpreted historical events are used to put forward a certain contemporary political or ideological agenda, then this analogy itself loses historical validity. It shifts to a place of mere instrumental utility where "history is shoe-horned into analysis in an inductive manner that reinforces already held views of thinking"<sup>65</sup>. The political successes that can be made based on historical analogies thus have to be built upon historical reductionism. Making use of analogical reasoning is considerably augmenting the possibility of falsified historical representation. As we have seen above, in order for an analogy to be valid, there have to be structural similarities between the historical situation and the contemporary one. Since historical events are never entirely comparable with contemporary ones, making historical analogies to create sense for a recent phenomenon requires a significant amount of historical determinism in the first place. If a novel political situation is meant to be justified through analogical reasoning,

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61 (Meierheinrich, 2006, 3)

62 (Mumford, 2015, 3)

63 Ibid. 14.

64 Ibid.

65 (Lawson, 2012)

we are left with only two alternatives: drawing only partial analogies that may only justify certain aspects of the situation; or “seek, by various mechanisms, to enhance the degree of overlap between the present dilemma and a favoured analogy”<sup>66</sup>. In other words, if the historical event that is meant to legitimize novel policies doesn’t quite fit, its representation may just be modified so as to do so. Since analogical reasoning is rhetorically used by governments to justify certain policies, we are most likely to find its appearance in official rhetoric. Public statements are the place where governments justify and/or explain the implementation of new policies to the broader public. In this regard, Strauss claims that official rhetoric serves as a kind of framework through which “policy and initiatives are developed, explained and legitimated both domestically and internationally”<sup>67</sup>. Since our point of interest is foreign policy discourse produced in occasions of international fora or in a diplomatic context, we are going to focus mainly on discourses that are directed to justifying policies to a foreign public. In this regard, official rhetoric in international politics can be seen as a space of political persuasion where historical narrative, the targeted audience and contemporary concerns converge<sup>68</sup>. Foreign policy discourse is where politics and historical analogies encounter themselves to create a seemingly genealogical narrative, creating linear linkages between (imagined) historical events and contemporary politics. Since historical narrative in official rhetoric is transformed into supporting evidence, it is the place where we most probably find incongruity between historical fact and discursive representation.

### 3.2. Zheng He in Sino-African relations discourse

The scarce interest towards Zheng He’s travels in Ming historiography lies in stark contrast with recent emphasis in Chinese political discourse. The official narrative on Zheng He in Sino-African relations’ discourse has become a frequently used analogy to historically justify and explain China’s recent engagement in Africa. As Philip Snow used to put it, “it is no accident that today, when China is once more opening up to the world after a phase of withdrawal, that the Chinese Columbus is remembered as a hero”<sup>69</sup>. Mentions of Zheng He are thus systematically added to public documents and diplomatic speeches about China’s foreign policy. While looking at some representative examples of this discourse, we will argue that Zheng He’s travels have been decontextualized from their historical meaning for the purpose of fulfilling present foreign policy needs. These needs include fostering an exclusive identity of a peaceful China in contrast to an aggressive West; legitimizing Chinese involvement through historical rooting; and reassuring African audiences of China’s well-intentioned engagement. However, analogical reasoning is not suitable in this case since the Zheng He precedent lacks the structural similarities with contemporary Sino-African relations. The Zheng He analogy is therefore used in an instrumental, anachronistic and de-historicized way in order to achieve the goals mentioned above. Based on our historical discussion about Zheng He’s expeditions, we can confirm this perspective, arguing that the foreign policy discourse on Zheng He’s travels is considerably exaggerating their historical value and meaning in order to satisfy contemporary political goals.

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66 (Houghton, 1996, 525)

67 (Strauss, 2009, 779)

68 Ibid. 778.

69 (Snow, 1988, 32)

Social representations on Zheng He have increased drastically in both domestic as well as international contexts since the turn of this century. Domestically, Zheng He's travels have been represented in various forms such as by celebrating the 600th anniversary in 2005<sup>70</sup>, by publishing a TV series, opening museums and celebrating diverse cultural events to commemorate his achievements<sup>71</sup>. But apart from this public policy directed towards domestic Chinese audiences, the Zheng He narrative has also been included in political discourses in international fora or in occasions of diplomatic meetings. The Ming dynasty expeditions have not just become a frequent anecdote in diplomatic discourse; they literally foreground most general official discourse on China-Africa relations<sup>72</sup>. One arguably representative instance to show the importance of this historical analogy is given by the Chinese White Paper on "China's Peaceful Development". The text goes as follows: "The famous Ming Dynasty navigator Zheng He made seven voyages to the Western Seas, visiting over 30 countries and regions across Asia and Africa. He took along with him the cream of the Chinese culture and technology as well as a message of peace and friendship"<sup>73</sup>. In the latest 2011 version of this document, Zheng He is directly used as a historical analogy to represent China's peaceful character, since it is included in the part on "China's Path of Peaceful Development Is a Choice Necessitated by History". The white paper, as an official document published by the Information Office of the State Council, is a government mouthpiece that intends to make clear China's intentions and practices to an international audience. The document is commonly criticized for presenting a very one-sided and idealistic vision of the international situation, presenting China as a benevolent international player that presumably holds up the ideals of non-intervention, anti-hegemonic and peaceful cooperation<sup>74</sup>. It is not surprising that the authors of this document decided to make use of Zheng He's precedent as an analogy to demonstrate these characteristics.

In other occasions, both, former Party Secretary Hu Jintao as well as the actual Chinese leader Xi Jinping have made reference to Zheng He in speeches directed to an international public. On occasion of his visit to South Africa in 2007, Hu Jintao publicly stated at Pretoria University that,

The Chinese nation has a long peace-loving tradition; China upholds the principle of not bullying the weak and poor, and advancing the harmonization of all nations. Already 600 years ago, the famous Chinese navigator Zheng He lead a group of sailors to reach the African East coast four times. As opposed to gun diplomacy, pillage and slavery, what the Chinese brought to the Africans was the wish for peace and real friendship.<sup>75</sup>

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70 "Zheng He Anniversary Highlights Peaceful Growth" in *China Daily*, July 12, 2005 [consulted December 2017].

71 For a detailed account on the increase of Zheng He's public celebration see (Li, 2005, 15).

72 (Strauss, 2009, 794)

73 "China's Peaceful Development" White Paper. See [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/topics\\_665678/whitepaper\\_665742/t856325.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/whitepaper_665742/t856325.shtml) [consulted December 2017].

74 See for instance "Chinas 'Peaceful' White Paper" in <http://thediplomat.com/2011/09/chinas-peaceful-white-paper/> [consulted December 2017].

75 中华民族历来爱好和平、主张强不凌弱、富不侮贫、主张协和万邦。早在600年前、中国明代著名航海家郑和率领庞大船队4次到达非洲东海岸。他们给非洲人民带来的是和平的愿望和真诚的友谊、而不是刀剑枪炮和掠夺奴役。“胡锦涛在南非比勒陀利亚大学发表的演讲” see [http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2007-02/07/content\\_5711506.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2007-02/07/content_5711506.htm) [consulted December 2017].

As can easily be seen in this extract, Hu Jintao makes use of Zheng He's analogy to send a signal of peace and cooperation. The whole speech were this extract is taken from is a hymn of praise to China's friendly and increasing relations with Africa. He also directly draws a contrast between the Chinese approach, as represented by Zheng He, and the Western approach, as represented in colonialism. The paragraph that includes Zheng He is arguing that China is not, and will never be a colonizer. Further down in the same paragraph, Hu manifests that "China has never, is not, and will definitely never impose her will and unequal practices on other countries. Even less so will China do anything that might harm African people"<sup>76</sup>. Looking at his statement from this perspective, we can see that the Zheng He analogy has been used to contest certain worries that are broadly held among African audiences. In a very similar fashion, Xi Jinping included the following in a discourse presented at the "Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries" in 2014,

600 years ago, China's Zheng He lead by then the strongest fleet to travel seven times into the Pacific Ocean and the Western Indian Ocean, visiting more than 30 countries and regions. He hasn't occupied an inch of territory, but he spread the seeds for peaceful friendship. What he left behind was a friendly relationship with the coastal people and much-told positive tales about Chinese civilization.<sup>77</sup>

Xi Jinping's discourse presents exactly the same message as either Hu Jintao's speech or the White Paper: they all evoke Zheng He as a historical analogy to China's peaceful and cooperative foreign policy approach. In a similar fashion as Hu Jintao's speech, Xi Jinping's mentioning of Zheng He comes as a justificatory response to those opinions that uphold the so-called "China threat" theory. The section of his discourse that incorporates Zheng He begins by saying that "on the international stage, there are some people who are worried about China becoming a hegemon, some people mentioned the so called 'China threat theory'"<sup>78</sup>. He then goes on mentioning three historical analogies to refute this point of view: the Silk Road, Zheng He's travels and twentieth century national humiliation. While using these historical precedents to demonstrate China's peaceful character, he also implicitly describes what China is not: "expanding aggressively toward foreign countries [...], and penetrating into new areas in the fashion of colonialism"<sup>79</sup>. This mention is therefore indirectly alluding to the idea that historical analogies such as Zheng He's travels represent China's peaceful character as opposed to Western aggressiveness.

There are numerous other examples that depict Zheng He in a similar light, either in more comprehensive fora on international relations or on specific diplomatic occasions in Sino-African relations<sup>80</sup>. However, it suffices to mention the examples of Hu, Xi and the White Paper in order

76 中国过去不会、现在不会、将来也决不会把自己的意志以及不平等的做法强加于其他国家、更不会做任何有损于非洲国家和人民的事。Ibid.

77 600多年前、中国的郑和率领当时世界上最强大的船队7次远航太平洋和西印度洋、到访了30多个国家和地区、没有占领一寸土地、播撒了和平友谊的种子、留下的是同沿途人民友好交往和文明传播的佳话“习近平在中国国际友好大会发表重要讲话”。see <http://news.enorth.com.cn/system/2014/05/16/011886356.shtml> [consulted December 2017].

78 “国际上有些人担心中国会走”国强必霸“的路子、一些人提出了所谓的”中国威胁论” Ibid.

79 “中华民族【。。。】不是对外侵略扩展【。。。】而不是开疆拓土的殖民主义” Ibid.

80 Two other examples to demonstrate the local implementation of this discourse would be two speeches given by Liu Guijin, 刘贵今, the Chinese ambassador to South Africa, and the now ambassador of Cape Verde Du Xiacong, 杜小丛. The first speech was given at the "African Business Leaders Forum" in Johannesburg in 2007, whereas the

to demonstrate the general pattern of including the Zheng He analogy in political discourses. All the three examples are produced on the highest possible level of Chinese politics, either by the Party Secretary himself or by a representative institution of the government. Therefore, we can confidently affirm that using Zheng He as a historical analogy in Chinese foreign policy discourse, especially in Sino-African relations discourse, is quite common. The need to make use of Zheng He in official rhetoric as analogical reasoning for peace and friendship has to be understood in the light of recent criticism on Chinese involvement in Africa by both Western as well as African voices. Those who decry China's supposedly ill-intentioned interests in Africa are being more and more numerous<sup>81</sup>. These critiques range from calling China a "neo-colonialist" player that benefits from a raw-material exploitation, to accusing her for playing a game of unfair competitiveness in Africa, not caring about labour rights, and having a bad impact on the environment etc.<sup>82</sup> Confronted with this situation, Zheng He's historical analogy has been included in public speeches as a tool for refuting these arguments<sup>83</sup>. It is in this fashion that "allusions to epochs that long pre-date CCP's rise to power serve a different function in that they deliberately speak to African concerns as to the long term impact of China's deepening involvement in Africa"<sup>84</sup>. Consequently, we have to understand the use of Zheng He as a *rhetoric* analogical reasoning, such as previously discusses by Meierhenrich. It is purposefully included in official rhetoric in order to support arguments previously held, it serves as a historical evidence for a broader geopolitical purpose. In this regard, the analogical use of Zheng He's travels can be summed up in three mutually interrelated main categories: it creates an essentialist Chinese identity to project the image of a benevolent China, it creates legitimacy for China's recent engagement in Africa through historical rooting; and it reassures African audiences about China's positive intentions.

By creating a binary distinction between West and China, on an aggression versus peace axis, the Zheng He analogy is reinforcing the idea of how history can manifest group identity through discursive representation. In accordance with what Liu and Hilton argue, identity-construction through historical representation is eventually essentializing each group's characteristic traits<sup>85</sup>. In the Zheng He analogy, these identity traits can be identified as "'benevolent', 'peaceful', 'respectful', and 'generous', juxtaposed to the Western *other* constructed by differentiated signs such as 'imperialistic', 'aggressive', 'oppressive', and 'greedy'"<sup>86</sup>. Faced with numerous accusations about

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second one was held on occasion of the "Symposium of Africa-China Relations" in New York in 2010. Both speeches equally emphasize the peaceful character of Zheng He's travels, they draw parallels between trade in both instances and use it in order to construct the Chinese peaceful essence in contrast to the Western aggressiveness. See "Oil, global influence driving Hu Jintao's trip", Inter Press Service, Johannesburg, 2007 and "China's Role in Africa", speech by Du Xiacong at the Symposium on Africa-China Relations, 8th April 2010, Syracuse, New York. See [www.china-un.org/eng/czthd/P020100421203228984964.rtf](http://www.china-un.org/eng/czthd/P020100421203228984964.rtf) [consulted December 2017].

81 See for example (Lyman, 2005) and (Norberg, 2006).

82 (Jian and Donata, 2014)

83 Another example of these justificatory discourses, however without mentioning Zheng He, can be found in Wen Jiabao's speech on June 18th 2006 in Egypt. The then prime minister refuted publicly those arguments that see China as a neo-colonial power in Africa.

84 (Alden and Alves, 2008, 55)

85 (Liu and Hilton, 2005)

86 (Sverdrup-Thygeson, 2017, 61)

China's neo-colonialist intentions, Chinese government officials draw a historical parallel with this historic identity and Chinese recent involvement in Africa. Speeches on Sino-African relations that include Zheng He generally include some variation of this purposeful distinction between a supposed Western colonialist character and a Chinese essence of equality. As we can see, this is a rhetoric way of using analogical reasoning that aims to manifest an essentialized binary identity for the purpose of contesting contemporary accusations. Since this benevolent Chinese identity is constructed in a simplified and easily digestible way, it favors the contemporary Chinese agenda of projecting a benevolent image to African audiences<sup>87</sup>. The Zheng He analogy comprises the capacity to legitimize Chinese involvement in Africa through historical rooting. As a direct result of the aforementioned binary identity construction, China is represented as a more legitimate player than the West. As Sverdrup-Thyngson correctly pointed out in a recent article, "through presenting China in this positive light, a direct comparison with the West is drawn, where China is legitimized and the West delegitimized"<sup>88</sup>. We saw earlier that rooting a contemporary event in history provides this novel situation with a kind of traditional or historical legitimacy. By representing Sino-African relations as something that already had its peak 600 years ago, Chinese official rhetoric renders the whole situation less "novel", and thereby less controversial.

Finally, making use of the Zheng He analogy is reassuring African audiences on the positive outcome that their reinforced cooperation may have. The logic of the discourse goes somewhat like this: assuming that China has never engaged in any conflict with African countries during Zheng He's time, and claiming that China engaged in peaceful and mutually beneficial trade, today Africans should not be preoccupied by the kind of fears expressed in "China threat" representations or the like. This parallel is further substantiated when stressing that China was the biggest maritime power during the time Zheng He's travels were held, relating this to China's current power status. Therefore, history, as represented by the Zheng He analogy, comes to play a role of assuring African leaders that despite China being an emerging superpower nowadays, she will act in accordance with her historical legacy<sup>89</sup>. Relating this idea with China's supposedly benevolent identity, this means that the Zheng He analogy is meant to reassure African audiences that "commercial ties will not result in exploitation or even some form of colonialism on the part of China"<sup>90</sup>. In other words, Africans should be able to undue their concerns as they recognize that China has been intermingling with Africa before without creating any problems. The problem with this narrative is that, from a historical perspective, making use of Zheng He for analogical reasoning that is supposed to justify Chinese recent engagement in Africa is not very suitable. The structural similarities between a historical event that happened more than 600 years ago and contemporary Sino-African relations are too big to oversee, therefore they considerably weaken the validity of the points intended to be made. As has been rightly pointed out by Li Xinfeng, there are a range of structural differences between the historical context of Zheng He's travels and today's China-Africa relations. For instance, contemporary China-Africa relations have surmounted considerably those of Zheng He's times; now they have a strategic outline; they are based on mutual agency instead of being merely instigated by China; they produce themselves in a much more integrated globalized world order etc.<sup>91</sup> In fact,

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87 Ibid. 54.

88 Ibid.

89 (Alden and Alves, 2008, 46)

90 Ibid. 55.

91 (Li, 2012, 55-57)

official Chinese rhetoric is trying to compare two sociopolitical phenomena that have produced themselves in completely different historical contexts, have different purposes, a considerably different grade of impact and last but not least more than 6 centuries separating them from each other. Even if one was to consider the contextual frame to be comparable, one must stick to a radically essentialist understanding of identity in order to accept the premise that it has been static throughout all this time. Therefore, it seems logical that in order for this analogy to work out, those who produce the discourse have to turn a blind eye on various historical facts.

The Zheng He analogy is a good example of how people introduce contemporary ideals and values into past events in order to make them fit better into the contemporary agenda. As we have seen, the Zheng He discourse has to be understood as a response to the type of “China threat” criticism mentioned above. In order for the Zheng He analogy to be able to refute contemporary accusations, it has to be filled with those values that sustain the argument. In this regard, China’s peaceful rise, win-win cooperation, non-interference and anti-colonial struggle are all concepts that become useful assets to rhetorically justify China’s involvement in Africa<sup>92</sup>. As we have seen in the extracts above, the general tendency in policy discourse is to relate Zheng He with these mentioned values and concepts. However, critically speaking these values have not been part of Zheng He’s missions. Firstly, it is true that Ming China was the most powerful country in the world during the time of Zheng He’s travels; however the geopolitical aspirations were arguably very different historically and today. With exception of Yongle’s rule, the Ming court was principally introvert without a lot of interest in “going out”. Zheng He’s travels were ephemeral and tightly related to the personal aspirations of Yongle, they should thus not be interpreted as an integral part of some imagined process of Ming dynasty’s “rise”. Secondly, the same is true for win-win cooperation or mutual benefit, as equally claimed by the Zheng He discourse. Even if trade can be seen as a minor motivating factor for the expeditions, it was mostly conducted under the banner of the tributary system, a kind of exchange a la *houwang-bolai*. The latter refers to a kind of trade where you usually receive less than you give. The ideological values of these two kinds of trade are different<sup>93</sup>. Finally, non-interference has also been belatedly projected into Zheng He’s voyages. The fact that the expeditions’ agenda was to introduce African states into their tributary system and make this happen forcefully if needed refutes this idealized perspective. In sum, all these values that are a posteriori projected into Zheng He’s travels are a complete contemporary construction. Instead of actually representing historical facts, the discourse tries to decorate the Zheng He precedent with those values that Chinese politicians consider important today.

The problem of making analogical use of Zheng He’s travels is that, in order for it to function, it is considerably exaggerating or even falsifying historical facts. The proper construction of the “benevolent” and “peaceful” China in the Zheng He analogy is created upon the premise that Zheng He’s travels have been a peaceful exploration. But as we have seen before, from a historical perspective this can’t be stated this way without any problems. As Dreyer accentuates, Chinese official discourse is considerably overstating the peaceful nature of Zheng He’s travels<sup>94</sup>. All the three main sets of ideas that the Zheng He discourse intends to project, a benevolent Chinese identity, the legitimacy of Chinese involvement in Africa and reassurance to African audiences all

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92 (Strauss, 2009, 280)

93 (Duyvendak, 1949, 26); for the symbolic value and the use of “厚往薄来” in Ming Dynasty foreign trade see (Li Xinfeng, 2010, 53).

94 (Dreyer, 2007, 29)



depend on a historical imagination of Zheng He as a peaceful and friendly visitor. If this premise is questioned, the discourse could not sustain itself any longer and the very instrumentality of the Zheng He analogy would become nullified. Therefore, the case of the Zheng He analogy shows pretty clear how a rhetorical use of analogical reasoning is dehistoricizing past events for the sake of justifying recent phenomena.

## Conclusion

Throughout Sino-African relations' discourse, Zheng He's travels have become tools to better fit contemporary political needs. This is done by considerably distorting, exaggerating and decorating this great historical event. In order to argue the said, this article has been separated into two main parts: the historical discussion on the peaceful character of Zheng He's travels; and an analysis of the Zheng He analogy in contemporary Sino-African relations discourse.

First, instead of interpreting Zheng He's expeditions as either peaceful voyages or proto-colonialism, they should be understood in what Dreyer calls "Ming power projection" through the expansion of the tributary system. Through a historical contextualization of the voyages and an analysis of Ming diplomacy, we found out that Zheng He's expeditions are actually more an expression of Yongle's personal aspirations instead of a representation of Ming dynasty foreign relations. So even if there are historical records that describe Ming foreign relations to be thoroughly peaceful in nature, we considered that the historical discussion on Zheng He's travels have to reintroduce Yongle's personal ambitions, which were considerably more expansionist. By drawing on the Zheng He entry of the *Mingshi*, we found out that the purposes of these travels were already succinctly summed up, namely to manifest the power of Ming dynasty throughout foreign countries, however using force to pacify those who didn't submit. In this regard, we argued that to claim these expeditions to be "friendship voyages" or "peaceful explorations" is not accurate, since this peace is achieved by threatening the use of force. The fact that we don't have evidences to prove the *explicit* use of force doesn't allow us to make overhasty judgments.

Second, even if the argument of Zheng He's expeditions being a peaceful endeavor cannot be supported by historical evidences, they are rhetorically molded to be represented as such, for the purpose of serving as a historical analogy to refute contemporary accusations about China's ill-intentioned involvement in Africa. In order to support this claim, we took the theoretical discussion on history's instrumental use in analogical reasoning as our starting point. Since history benefits the present by providing group identity and legitimizing novel sociopolitical phenomena, it is often rhetorically used to do so. However, as can be seen through the case of the Zheng He analogy in Sino-African relations discourse, historical analogies have to be frequently remolded in order to serve contemporary needs. By citing three examples of the recent rhetorical use of the Zheng He analogy in high level diplomatic representations, we found out that Zheng He is used to foster an image of a benevolent China, to legitimize China's involvement in Africa and to reassure African audiences about China's intentions. We argued that these goals have to be understood as a reaction to international criticism. However, in order for these objectives to be achieved, the discourse ignores that the contextual differences between Ming dynasty and contemporary China are simply too big to draw simplified comparisons. Additionally, it projects contemporary values into the Zheng He voyages, and it considerably exaggerates or even distorts the premise on Zheng He being a peaceful endeavor. Due to these reasons, we claimed that the Zheng He discourse has been dehistoricized

in contemporary Sino-African relations discourse to serve contemporary needs of justifying China's recent engagement in Africa.

The politicized narrative surrounding Zheng He's travels and their relationship with contemporary needs makes us recognize the broader connectivity between power and historical reproduction. Sverdrup-Thygeson is right when stating that:

An event may support many equally valid narratives, some of them gaining prominence, due to being nurtured by groups with the power to establish this version of the truth as dominant, and the will to do so, because of inherent qualities with that narrative suiting it to serve those groups' interests.<sup>95</sup>

His statement reaffirms the fact that historical representations are never objective. In order to reduce the biased nature of dominant narratives, we have to ask ourselves who produces certain types of discourses and with what intention in mind. The vulnerability to use the Zheng He narrative for different purposes is arguably reinforced by the scarce historical references we have. However, we have seen that even if there are certain evidences that counter a certain way of representation, this doesn't mean representations can't be molded according to the producers taste. Therefore, recognizing this instrumental adaptability of historical events should contribute to create awareness among those of us who consume historical discourses to reconsider their level of veracity.

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95 (Sverdrup-Thygeson, 2017, 62)

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