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## *The Early Chinese Mariners, Natal and the Future*

This is not a tale that aspires to any great scholarship, but rather the drawing together of a few threads that have interested me. Natal comes into it, but not only Natal; so do the Portuguese and so does the naval diplomacy of Cheng Ho, the 'Columbus' of the Ming Chinese, whose ships visited southern Africa in the first decades of the fifteenth century, fifty years and more before the Portuguese discoverers, apparently rounding the Cape before Diaz.

The story of the seven Chinese sea voyages in the early 1400s, with Africa as an objective, when the Indian Ocean became a virtual Chinese lake, gives us a glimpse of an epic golden period before the European depredations and wars which gave rise to centuries of colonialism, the last vestiges of which are only now finally being erased with the end of apartheid.

It was not always peaceful in olden times in Africa of course; competition for food and land and to get away from tropical raiders must have been behind the original migrations of African people southwards from the equatorial rain forests more than two thousand years ago. These migrations gradually moved across the savanna until they reached what is today southern Africa.

The Matola tradition tells us that early iron age people were settled in Natal near the coast by the third century AD as far south as modern Scottburgh. They were pastoral and agricultural folk, trading peacefully with stone age hunter gatherers, otherwise known as Bushmen or San people who lived in the hinterland.

The early iron age came to an end, stylistically speaking, around AD900. Then the late iron age commenced, and in Natal the coastal-dwelling Africans began to penetrate the grasslands, sometimes supplementing the defences of their villages with stone walls, choosing their environment more carefully, practising slash and burn agriculture and moving around quite a bit, possibly living in summer and winter grazing camps. The economy was typically agro-pastoral, and from 1400 onwards the late iron age people of Natal were culturally, linguistically and physically the direct ancestors of today's black population. Their lives were essentially similar to the Nguni of the last century, but they shared broad links culturally and linguistically with other black southern African communities including those further north with whom the Ming Chinese mariners had their first recorded contact in 1415.

So to that extent, and because Natal as a concept didn't exist, it is enough to think of coastal east and southern Africa as part of the same seamless web with common traditions and a similar language base; and in beaching on the coast at Malindi before moving south, the Chinese had touched a nerve in a shared world where news of these contacts would have reached the periphery by word of mouth.

By 1400, Natal was already fairly well populated with villages along the coast made up of hemispherical huts of thatch and poles; presenting clusters of human settlement on the green hillsides visually the same as the Natal countryside of the nineteenth century; and Chinese ships sailing along this coast would have looked at a landscape little different to that witnessed by the early British settlers.

But the peaceful character of Natal was not destined to last forever. It changed with the arrival of the Europeans, albeit over two or three centuries, when the competition for resources grew fiercer, (conflict over grazing lands being a typical aggravation, e.g. the decline of the Delagoa Bay ivory trade and the rise in the trade in cattle) and the politics of southern Africa became charged with patterns of oppression and counter oppression, occupation and disoccupation, by both black and white, that last to this day.

Now that the European era is symbolically coming to an end, it would be tempting, although simplistic to conclude that southern African history can pick up as it were, where it was before the Portuguese ships, with sails like knives, visited the continent.

But even if it cannot, it could mark a philosophic return nonetheless to that gentler age when the only pre-European contact southern Africa had experienced was with the early Chinese whose extraordinarily peaceful seaborne embassy in Africa left abiding memories, instilling in African coastal communities a sense of trust towards foreign elements which contrasted strongly with the brutalities of the Portuguese as they sailed up the African coast pillaging and looting in their primary effort to drive a dagger through the soft underbelly of the Muslim world, whose Turkish leaders had, through their closure of Constantinople, so recently and effectively blockaded the overland spice routes to the East that had been followed since Marco Polo's time.

Today it might be argued that the inevitable African majority rule that will follow F. W. de Klerk's policy changes must result in the 'disembarkation' of the European presence that began not only when Vasco da Gama mapped Natal, but when Bartholomew Diaz was claimed by the Europeans to be the first man to sail around the Cape in 1488.

In fact modern scholarship suggests he was not.

Thanks to the new accessibility of Chinese archives after decades of having been closed to Western scholars, it now appears we can go beyond all the speculation about Arabs, Phoenicians and the like (which gave rise among others to fanciful stories about the origin of the Brandberg White Lady) and state with some certainty that the first non Africans to clap eyes on the famed Table Mountain were the crew of a junk of the Chinese Imperial fleet who doubled the Cape of Good Hope, not later than the seventh Ming expedition of 1431-3 to Africa, under the command of Admiral Cheng Ho, Grand Eunuch to his Imperial Majesty, Emperor of the Great Ming, Yung Lo.

Recent scholarship by Dr Joseph Needham, sometime master of Gonville and Caius college, Cambridge, and one of the most respected sinologists in the world, suggests that the Chinese rounded the Cape, picked up an ostrich egg on the way back for good measure and confirmed the only Chinese-produced and accurate map of the east and west coasts of South Africa then in existence. This was 57 years before the European discovery of the Cape and could have been even earlier, perhaps during the four voyages made by Admiral Ho between 1409 and 1425.

His research suggests that that lone junk could have been driven down to the Cape and beyond by a storm, the Agullas ferociousness with which we are all

familiar. It conjures up an extraordinarily vivid picture; the slatted sails furled, the nine masts bare, the great ship, because they were great — some 1 500 tons as opposed to the tiny 300 ton Portuguese caravels — heaving and rolling in the spume-tossed sea with, in the distance, the flat cloud-covered brow of old Tafelberg. Until at last, far out in the Atlantic off the shores of the south western coast of Africa they were able to bring the great craft about, probably with difficulty (although ships of Cheng Ho's fleet were able to sail much closer to the wind than modern junks), and work their way back, perhaps with the help of a following north westerly wind. After such an epic encounter with the elements they would doubtless have made a landfall to make good their craft, perhaps to reconnoitre the terrain and obtain fresh water and food, although most of the Imperial junks grew their own vegetables on board and had their own livestock for slaughter. The Chinese knew all about scurvy and even cultivated limes at sea. What must the local Hottentots have made of such a leviathan off the coast, the Emperor's crimson dragon banner streaming in the wind! The mind boggles.

Given such a long journey down the east coast of Africa by a single ship of the fleet, with the main Imperial presence at anchor at various times off what is today Mozambique, it seems likely that others of Cheng Ho's complement would have touched the Natal coast somewhere on this and previous expeditions, where their contact with the locals, given what we know of Cheng Ho, would have been peaceful and entirely in keeping with the Confucian ethic. Certainly current scholarship is confident enough of this likelihood to have included precise route maps showing a landfall in Natal close to where Vasco da Gama landed. The difficulty has always been one of deciphering the Chinese texts and the vagueness of their description of the coast south of Sofala in Mozambique, but the premise is that landfalls were made somewhere along this coast. Longer routes, such as the voyage to the Cape, have been easier to establish by virtue of the navigational details provided.

The details of specific contacts with any indigenous Natalians are relatively unimportant; what is important is that the Chinese between 1405 and 1433 were making contact with these Indian Ocean and African people united locally from Great Zimbabwe down to Natal by common languages, skills and traditions; iron age migrants who were commonly established when the Chinese made their first African landfalls at Malindi and Mombasa, and later Sofala, of which more later. The point about the Natal Africans with their shared kinships with cousins not far to the north is that their very presence in this part of the world ensured that what we know as South Africa today cannot be immune from the diplomatic impact of the early Chinese expeditions. The coastal people of Natal were distant hosts to those Chinese, and, the salt from their table falls through the centuries to our own time.

Theirs was the relatively serene lifestyle described earlier, and it was matched by life in China itself where the Ming period during the early decades of the fifteenth century saw a dramatic flowering of the arts, the consolidation of the Middle Kingdom and the most amazing feat of scholarship the world has ever witnessed: the compilation of the *Yung Lo Encyclopaedia*. Between 1403 and 1407 some 2 000 scholars compiled 22 000 chapters in over 11 000 volumes. Only three copies were made and the last of these was largely destroyed by British troops during the sack of the Summer Palace in 1860. It was during this amazing period, with a scientific, intellectual and tolerant political revival in China that Admiral Cheng Ho turned the Indian Ocean into his Chinese backwater for thirty years until 1433 when the era of

maritime expansion came to an end with the drawing in of the Ming empire after the reverses in Annam in 1427 caused the occupying Chinese forces to withdraw and the northern frontier to shrink to the line of the Great Wall. The great ships of Cheng Ho's fleet were destroyed and no junk with more than two masts was henceforth permitted to sail off China.

But for three decades, and fifty years before the arrival of the Portuguese, east and southern Africa knew an extraordinary window of diplomacy (though from about the eighth or ninth centuries Islamic traders were regularly visiting the east coast). The principal power in the Indian ocean was China and when China left the region the Portuguese sailed into a classic power vacuum, but one still marked by the footprints of Cheng Ho.

When the Portuguese arrived, people still remembered the Ming Chinese, whose Indian Ocean story had begun with the appointment of Admiral Ho as commander of the Chinese fleet by Emperor Yung Lo, who wished to revert back to a state-controlled overseas trading system similar to that practised in the period of the Two Sung.

Cheng Ho, a physically and intellectually impressive man well over six feet tall, was chosen to be admiral not only because of his extraordinary native talents as an ambassador and mariner, but also because he was a eunuch, and would as such not pose a threat to the Emperor by threatening usurpation. He could, in other words be trusted with a powerful fleet.

Cheng Ho, born in Yunnan about 1371 of Mongol Muslim parents, (Ho himself remained a Muslim all his life) had already made his name during the campaigns in defence of the Great Wall against the Mongols during the 1390s and in the Civil War of 1398 to 1402 against Yung Lo's nephew, Hui Ti, who had been appointed Emperor by his Grandfather Hung Wu, founder of the Ming dynasty. The war started in the first place because Hui Ti had been ill advised by his court elders against his uncle, Yung Lo, of which more later.

We've already got a picture in our minds of the pastoral simplicity of the Africans along the Natal coast and farther north. They would shortly be meeting the emissaries of a country, China under the Mings which, by 1404 was the most technically advanced in the world. A greater contrast cannot be imagined. It is as though benevolent explorers from outer space had set foot on another planet which, although not necessarily backward, was technologically out of step by a millenium or so.

Although it is fashionable to say that China was civilized when the rest of Europe was still in skins, and the invention of gunpowder is frequently advanced as an example of the disparity in knowledge, we are often not aware of just how developed the Chinese were. A good example of the advanced state of Chinese technology can be gauged by the fact that by the ninth century already the Chinese had invented a manufacturing process allowing for the reduction of zinc oxide and the consolidation of small particles of zinc. Pure zinc does not occur in nature and can be obtained only by gasifying one of the zinc ores and then condensing the gases in a separate container. The processes can have an application in gold mining and Chinese zinc technology only became known in the West as late as the eighteenth century. This is advanced chemistry known by the Chinese nine hundred years before the Europeans.

Cheng Ho was instructed to build a fleet suitable for long-range ocean-going voyages. He drew liberally on the vast technical expertise and wealth at his disposal, and began construction of the first order for 250 ships on the Yangtze river near Nankin. The nucleus of the fleet consisted of 62 junks, the likes of which had never before been seen. They were so big that contemporary

accounts of their size have been disbelieved by modern scholars until the discovery in 1962 of a rudder post of one of these ships buried on a beach near Nankin. It is twelve metres long and is capable of steering a vessel of 160 metres long. The 62 flagships were 134 metres in length and 55 metres in beam, with four decks, a hull divided into watertight bulkheads and buoyancy chambers and nine masts. They were as big as modern cargo ships. Their sails were technologically speaking brand new, being made from bamboo slats, which allowed these huge craft to sail against the wind, something traditional junks then and since have always found difficult. In fact the technology was very similar to the multi-masted computer-controlled ships which are under construction on an experimental basis in Europe today; their sails are also rigid, being made from slatted alloys, and arranged in a fixed fashion junk rig style.

The money for this immense exercise, equivalent to the Chinese of putting a man on the moon for the Americans today, came from history's first known privatization exercise when Yung Lo sold off the imperial hunting grounds to farmers and landlords. In this way he was able to avoid financing the fleet by raising taxes which could have been an unpopular move. In a sense he was little different from a shipping magnate of today, an Aristotle Onassis of old China.

Each ship had a crew of 500 men and displaced 1 500 tons, and the smaller junks that accompanied this nucleus were in themselves marvels of construction. As I've already mentioned, food was grown on board and livestock bred and slaughtered. Under sail the fleet could maintain a speed of six or seven knots, and were so finely balanced that oars were only necessary in absolute windstill conditions. Compasses and stellar navigation ensured that they were never lost, except when exploring completely unknown territory, and unlike the Portuguese the Chinese had the courage to strike out of sight of land for weeks at a time. In fact one suggested route for the Cape voyage shows a more or less direct trip from Galle on the tip of India, skirting Madagascar, but probably visiting Mauritius.

Cheng Ho was not exactly entering uncharted seas. The Ming Chinese had a shrewd idea of what lay beyond the horizon because of earlier Chinese Mongol voyages which were also remarkable in themselves and although it is not recorded, could easily have explored the African coastline a century before Cheng Ho. For example Ibn Batutah, the great Arab traveller, described 13 junks of the Chinese Mongol navy anchored off Calicut midway up the West coast of India in 1330, manned by a thousand men. The route from Calicut to Malindi on the East African coast was already well known to Arab sailors by then, and it takes little imagination to contemplate that a Mongol fleet could have made the crossing at some time.

Be that as it may, the early voyages starting in 1404 saw Cheng Ho visit South East Asia, Ceylon, India, Persia, the eastern coast of Africa as far south as Zanzibar and Arabia. Champa, Java, Malacca and various Indian Ocean islands were also visited during the third voyage from 1409 to 1411 (30 000 troops, 48 big junks). During these voyages Cheng Ho traded for precious foreign goods including rhinoceros horn and gold with the only currency then permitted in China to be used to pay for imports, namely silk, brocades and porcelain. Porcelain was prized everywhere and details are recorded of porcelain being used as a medium of barter in places as far apart as East Africa and Borneo. This is one of the reasons why so much early Ming porcelain has been discovered in the Indian Ocean basin including the Zimbabwe ruins. It

was simply used as an alternative currency. Indeed porcelain, much of it of good quality, remained a major item of trade around the Cape until the nineteenth century.

In 1415 a singular event occurred when the Sultan of Malindi, the ruler of the Zinj empire centered around what is today Mombasa, sent an embassy to China with the fourth fleet with various gifts including a magnificent giraffe and what are thought to have been a zebra and an oryx. So touched was Emperor Yung Lo that the ambassadors were escorted all the way home on the fifth voyage of Cheng Ho of 1417–19, which is believed to have been the voyage which saw the Chinese fleet move farther south to Sofala and beyond, very possibly to Natal. As one Chinese author put it:

How different the Ming expeditions were from those of the Portuguese. Instead of pillaging the coastline, slaving, seeking to establish colonies and monopolize international trade, the Chinese fleets were engaged on an elaborate series of diplomatic missions, exchanging gifts with distant kings from whom they were content to accept formal overlordship of the son of Heaven. There was neither intolerance of other religious beliefs nor the search for one's personal fortune in the discovery of Eldorado.

A stele dated February 15, 1409, in Chinese, Persian and Tamil was set up by Cheng Ho at Galle in southern India (from where one of the ships was thought to have set off for the Cape). It reads in part:

His Imperial Majesty, Emperor of the Great Ming, has despatched the Grand Eunuchs Cheng Ho, Wang Ching Lien and others to set forth his utterances before the Lord Buddha, the world-honoured one . . . Of late we have despatched missions to announce our Mandate to foreign nations, and during their journeys over the oceans they have been favoured with the blessing of thy beneficent protection. They have escaped disaster or misfortune, journeying in safety to and fro, ever guided by thy great virtue.

What an extraordinary thing to pay homage in this way, one religion to another, all those years ago. What depth and maturity of understanding of other people's cultures this shows. And so we have a picture in our minds of the Chinese arriving in Africa, bearing gifts, behaving courteously and being well received.

In the new year 1498, Vasco da Gama forged on from Natal to Malindi, arriving at the exact spot visited by Cheng Ho fifty years before. Everywhere the Portuguese heard puzzling tales of earlier visits by strange ships with many masts, crewed by people with strange clothes speaking in a language totally unknown.

After Malindi an Arab pilot guided da Gama on to India where he made a landfall at Calicut in May 1498. He sailed for Portugal laden with spices and returned by the same route in 1502 (a year after Bartholomew Diaz drowned in a storm off the coast of South Africa) to pillage African and Indian ports, ostensibly in revenge for the ill-treatment of Portuguese traders, but in reality because the Portuguese national resources were so run down they had nothing worth trading with. Without manufactured goods to exchange for the desired spices and silks, in contrast to the beautiful goods the Chinese imperial envoys were able so freely to distribute, the Portuguese were obliged to seize by force what they wanted.

Terror was fundamental to their authority; however it was justified as righteous conflict with the heathen. No quarter was given in combat and treatment of prisoners was ruthless. The conquistadores pursued scope for personal riches, a potent drive to acquire an adequate return for the enduring dangers of battle and voyage that the distant authorities in Lisbon were unable to control.

Vasco da Gama has a reputation as a cruel man. The landscape was blasted by his cannon; a favourite trick of the Portuguese captains was to fire the severed limbs of captured Africans into villages along the coast as an inducement to subservient behaviour. To those areas brought under Christian rule the Portuguese transplanted the awful symbol of their rejection of other creeds and beliefs: the Holy Inquisition. What a juxtaposition this tyrannical behaviour was with that of the Chinese Admirals who made a positive point of discoursing about the religious beliefs of the people of the southern countries without foresaking the basic teachings of the Chinese sages.

It is difficult to convey the gravity of the closure of the land spice routes in the fifteenth century to a modern audience that thinks of pepper as something to put on one's Avocado Ritz. But to the meat-loving Europeans it was a crisis equivalent to, say, the cutting off of petrol today, and in a sense the Americans are doing in the Gulf only what Vasco da Gama set out to do five hundred years ago. And in the same way that the UN allies have triggered off Islamic fundamental perceptions of a colonial Western occupation of the heartland of the Islamic world that must needs be brief, so the arrival and now symbolic departure, given tangible shape through capital divestment, of the Europeans in Africa, is the end of a precise chapter which leaves the Africans to get on with lives otherwise interrupted by this interregnum. As modern European scholars are increasingly wont to say about Africa, we came, we saw, we conquered and now we're buzzing off!

The Chinese chapter in Africa marked the end of a willingness by the Mings to interact with the wider world; for centuries, ever since Cheng Ho's last voyage, China was closed, and out of step with the world. The northern frontier retreated to the Great Wall after military reverses which made it very difficult for travellers from western latitudes to reach China overland. In China itself the Grand Canal and other inland waterworks were completed and absorbed shipbuilding capacity, and the era of Chinese maritime reconaissance came to an end after only thirty years. It is only comparatively recently that China is again reaching out, and it seems to me entirely logical that we should pick up the threads of the Chinese rediscovery of Africa today from the hem of those last years of the Ming experience in the Indian ocean.

Why did the Chinese decide to undertake their naval expeditions in the first place? Was it to ward off Mongol invasion by sea? Or to develop sea trade routes now that land trade routes had dwindled? Or to import drugs and other precious items including gold? Or to puff up the Emperor and show people what a fine fellow he was? The economic reasons we know were connected with Yung Lo's intention to reassert Chinese authority in the southern ocean after the Mongols and to return to the state-controlled trading system of the Two Sungs. But we also know now that another primary motive was to search out the Yung Lo's emperor's nephew Hui Ti, who disappeared after his uncle had sacked Nankin and defeated his armies.

For years people believed Hui Ti, the only Ming emperor not to have a tomb, to have lived a secret life as a monk. In fact 40 years after the fall of Nankin a

monk did emerge and claim to be the deposed emperor; he was imprisoned in comfort for a year and then died. But Dr Needham has produced evidence showing that Hui Ti may have fled Nankin by ship and disappeared into the vastness of the Indian Ocean. Trade with the Arabs and Persians had already taught the Chinese much geography as we have seen, and the adoption of the compass by the Chinese long before the Europeans enhanced their navigational skills, so Hui Ti could well have had a junk equipped with Arab guide and competent crew. Since we know the political motive for Cheng Ho's voyages was in part to 'search for his traces' and because we know the frightened twenty year old boy was prepared to go to the ends of the earth to escape death at the hands of his usurping uncle, although in truth he probably had little to fear; and since both modern technology in the form of ships, charts and navigation knowledge of the coasts of Africa as far as Sofala, gateway to Great Zimbabwe was available to his advisors, there was no reason why he should not have eventually fetched up at the southernmost points of the compass, including those visited in southern Africa by Cheng Ho.

A few words about Hui Ti are necessary to allow our imagination to fill out the human gaps.

Our story really begins in 1369 when the first of the great Mings, Hongwou, became emperor a year after the Mongols were driven from China. Hongwou had fought a brilliant campaign with the trusted General Suta at his side, igniting in the Chinese people a form of early nationalism and driving a spike into Mongol morale, already sapped after the death of the greatest Khan of all, Kublai. The great palace at Xanadu had rapidly decayed, although Hongwou refused to permit its destruction by the victorious Imperial troops. But it was symptomatic nonetheless of the temporariness of the Mongol occupation of China that its walls, without attention, were soon eroded by the relentless icy blast of the winds from the northern plain.

Hongwou was an inspired leader of his people after the barren corruption, degeneration and Lama lawlessness of the Mongol Yuan dynasty. The Yuans had promoted military rule as the centrepiece of their system of government and for more than a century the Chinese people lived under what amounted to martial law. Hongwou was determined to restore civil government. He downgraded the status of the army, which had exalted the military class, and although he would continue to need his troops to maintain order, Hongwou would not make his army the sole prop of his power and basis of his authority. This was why he and indeed his ultimate successor the Yung Lo emperor dealt only through the kind of men that every nation throws up from time to time, men of the highest integrity and ability, like General Suta on land and Admiral Cheng Ho later at sea.

Above all the Emperor was keenly aware that, at bottom, he was dealing with a nation of shopkeepers who desired only peace in order to return the country to prosperity. To retain the affection of his subjects he was to introduce impartial justice and fair taxation and restore standards of education, neglected during the Mongol occupation. He was the first ruler ever to introduce modern state care for the elderly.

The new Ming emperor decided to isolate his country from external influence even more than the Mongols had done. His motive was principally economic but also partly political. The Mongol government had stopped Chinese merchants from travelling abroad to trade. The ban was later extended to dealing with foreigners who visited China. When Hongwou took over from the Mongols he converted this system into one in which foreign trade would be

permitted only with countries acknowledging China's sovereignty. In other words, tributary trade. Gradually, as the years passed a general philosophy was formulated that granting trade to Barbarians was a favour and that trade should be engaged in only when it could be used to manipulate foreigners in order to control them.

Although Hongwou was not to know this, it was this perception of the limits of China's ability to control the Barbarians through trade alone, the further Cheng Ho's voyages enlightened the Ming Court as to the extent of the known world, which undermined whatever Chinese enthusiasm there may have been to continue the voyages after the seventh, when the principal sponsor, the Emperor Yung Lo, was already dead.

Again, as we examine some of the other problems which were to confront Hongwou, we are struck by the sophistication of Chinese society and economy when compared with the pastoral simplicity of coastal Natal, a good paradigm for much of east Africa which the Chinese would soon be visiting. During this period, for example, it is difficult to contemplate currency and inflation problems preoccupying the good folk of Natal overmuch in the late fourteenth century. Yet this was one of Hongwou's most pressing problems, and his position and indeed response was little different from that of a modern central banker. The nub of the problem was that the Mongols had recklessly issued inconvertible notes and insisted that only paper money be used in commerce. Contract prices could only be determined by Mongol paper money and traders were forbidden on pain of death from using gold, silver, silk or other precious barter goods to effect a means of exchange. Economic crimes were taken as seriously then as they were during the worst excesses of the Communist Chinese reign. But there was little to back this paper money up, nothing in the Mongol reserves, and with paper money losing its value day by day, the average trader began using silk thread as an alternative money, but because the value of the thread was dependent upon market conditions, ultimately, unlike gold and silver, lawsuits were frequent.

When Hongwou came to power he was confronted with a good old fashioned liquidity crisis, with inadequate stocks of gold and silver in the central vaults to buttress the value of the new paper money he began issuing to replace that of the Mongols. The shortage of gold and silver led to a geological search on a grand scale for new mines and new technologies, for example zinc making as a refining process in gold extraction, were developed. But the deficiencies in gold and silver were very definitely one of the reasons why the Yung Lo emperor was prepared to invest so much in Cheng Ho's voyages. It was his hope that gold would be discovered abroad.

China in those days had a population of sixty million people, some fifteen percent inflation annually and a war-ravaged economy. Through fiscal prudence inflation was eventually reduced somewhat, the currency gained value as a result and the coffers were further replenished through wise tax policy. Peace returned to China and prosperity gradually filtered down to all classes of the population.

But the Mongols continued to be a problem even after their defeat. It took twenty years of unprecedented slaughter before General Suta finally defeated the cruel Mongol general Arpuha. In the meanwhile Chinese authority was gradually consolidated for the first time beyond the Great Wall over the wilderness approaches to the principal trade route with Turkestan and the West. It was a mediaeval version of defence in depth. The Mongols left their mark on history. In Hochow, a city of tens of thousands, rather than allow its

citizens to live under the advancing Chinese, the retreating Mongol army slaughtered every man, woman and child. Confronted with these thousands of rotting corpses, the eerie wastelands around them, the desert winds howling through the ramparts of the ghost city, the Chinese army almost lost heart, but eventually stayed on to repopulate the once prosperous centre.

In 1389, general Suta returned to Nankin as Governor to the Prince Imperial. There he died when he was only 54 years old, thirty of them spent under arms, a Generals general. He had conquered a capital, three provinces, several hundreds of towns and his departure was keenly felt, not only by Emperor Hong Wou, then 63, but also by an eight year old boy, Hui Ti, son of Hong Wou's eldest son and natural heir who had died of a sudden disease.

After these events the heart seemed to leave the old man, but he ruled on for another nine years before dying in 1398. At this point the seventeen year old Hui Ti (also known as Chu Yun Wen) became emperor in accordance with the Ancestral Admonition, the dynasty's house law.

At this point enter the uncles. Without going into detail, it was clear from old Hong Wou's instructions that Hui Ti, the grandson, was also his preferred heir because the old man was afraid his surviving sons would squabble over the empire. In fact they accepted Hui Ti initially until it became clear that the young man was being ill-advised by his father's old court retainers who had ambitions of their own. Against his will Hui Ti was persuaded to arrest some uncles, bankrupt others and so on until eventually he found himself locked in a civil war with his eldest uncle Chu Ti, who later became the Yung Lo emperor responsible for Cheng Ho's voyages.

Hui Ti's uncle wrote to him frequently warning him against his advisers, but the letters were either intercepted or the boy was overawed by them because eventually there was nothing for it but to prosecute the civil war in a manner which devastated China. Finally Hui Ti's uncle cornered the boy Emperor in Nankin which was besieged and burnt. Hui Ti disappeared as we already know, but what we assume, because of the correspondence between uncle and nephew, is that the new Yung Lo emperor, while wishing to apprehend Hui Ti because he still provided a potential rallying point for dissenters, also had his well-being at heart. Certainly Cheng Ho would have been part of the picture . . . hence the admonition to search the oceans everywhere until the young man was apprehended.

So in conclusion, we can see in our mind's eye a time not long before the arrival of the Europeans when southern Africans, and those in Natal, going by the research of scholars in Pietermaritzburg, lived peaceful lives, coexisting in a seamless web of interaction with their fellows to the north in what is present day Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Tanzania; and being touched in turn by the Chinese whose story from 1395 to 1435 when the Mings destroyed their great fleet, permitting no junk at sea with more than two masts, is both riveting and poignant. For the Chinese it was an extraordinary lapping at the edges of another world they had yet to know, thirty brief years which saw them criss-cross the Indian ocean and leave their foot prints on the shores of Africa, as discreet as visitors from outer space, to be found fifty years later by the first European explorers who had rounded the Cape.

#### REFERENCE

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