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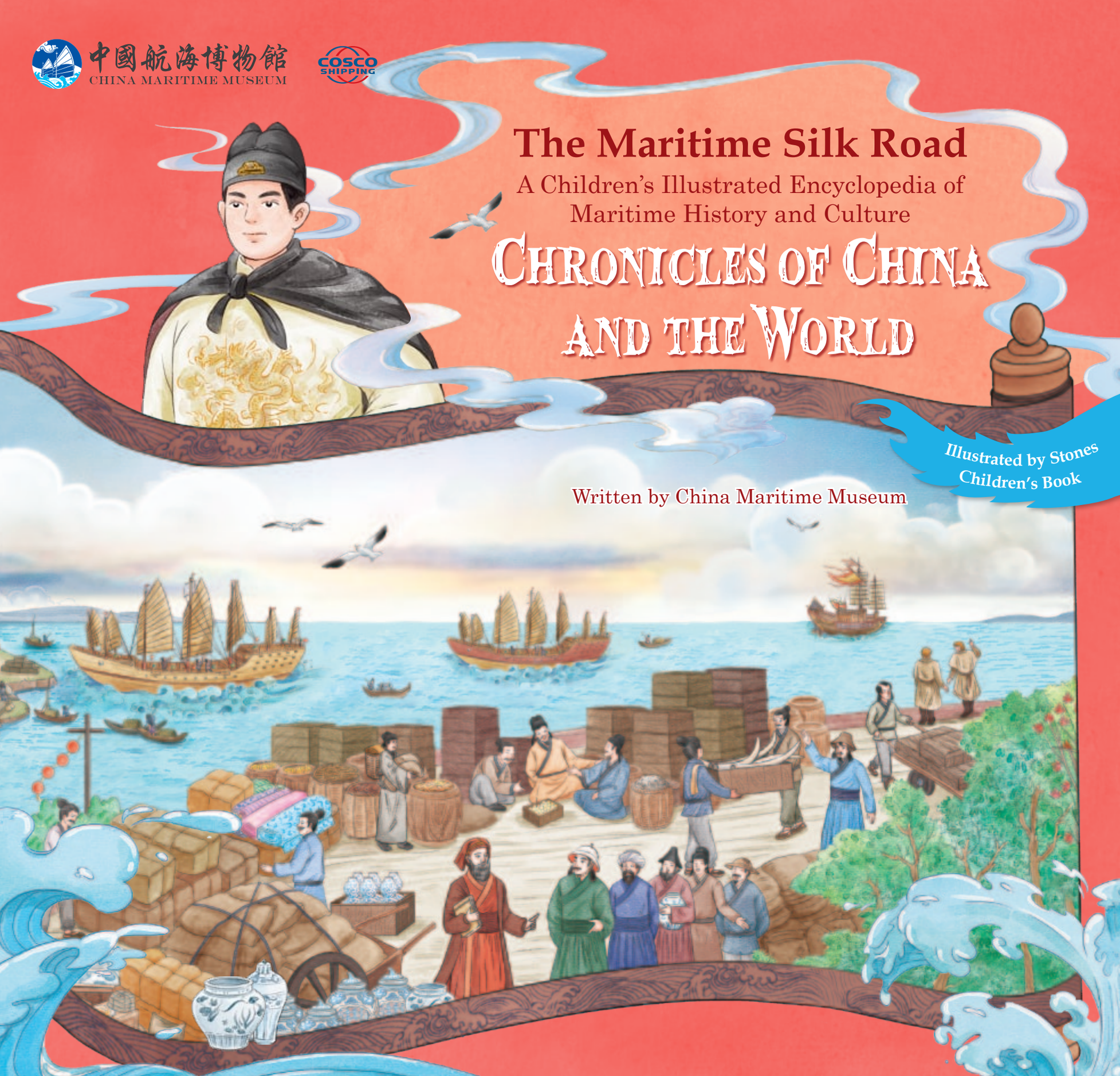
The Maritime Silk Road

A Children's Illustrated Encyclopedia of Maritime History and Culture

Chronicles of China and the World

Illustrated by Stones Children's Book

Written by China Maritime Museum



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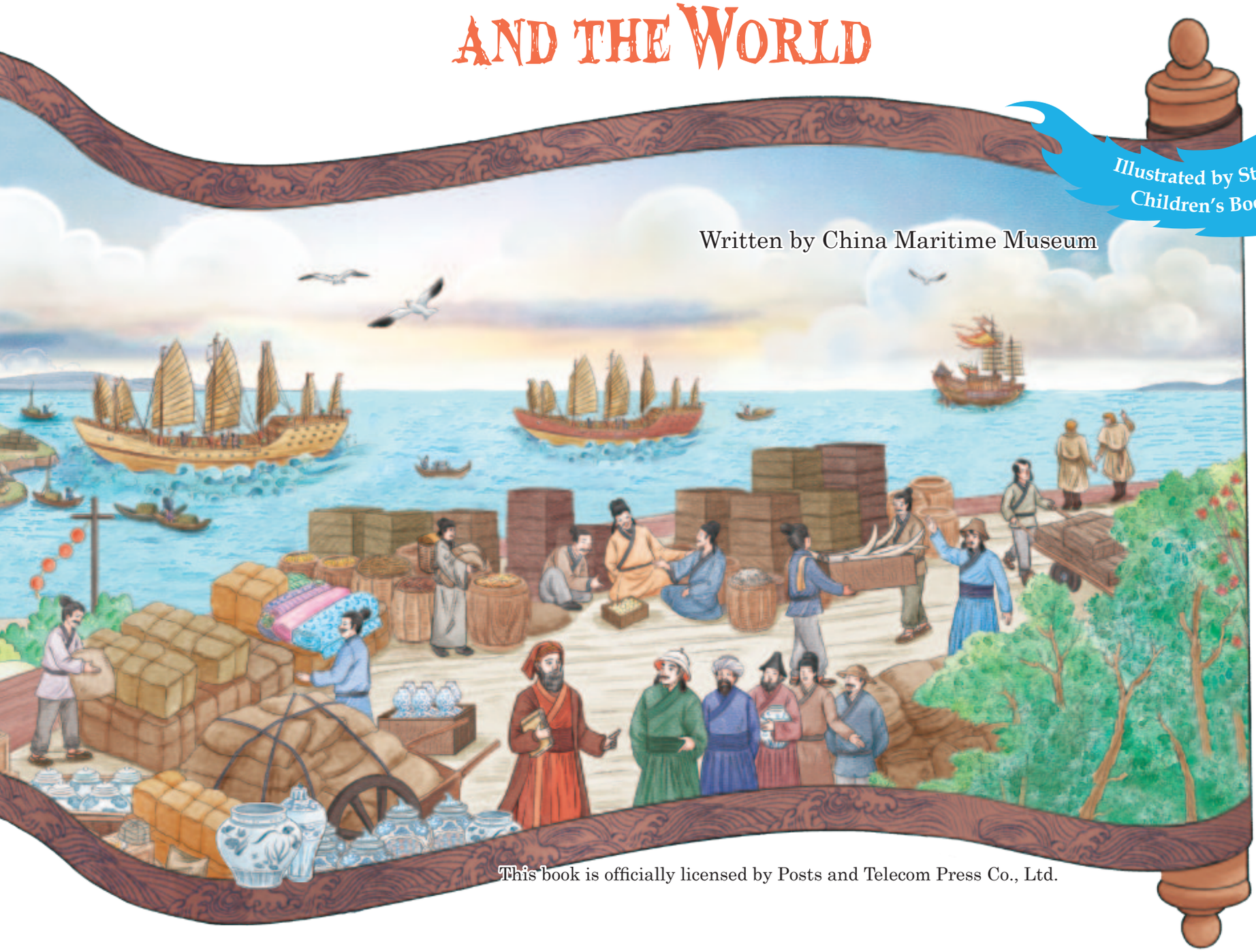

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The Maritime Silk Road: A Children's Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Maritime History and Culture
CHRONICLES OF CHINA AND THE WORLD

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Preface



Covering 70 per cent of the Earth's surface, the ocean is the cradle of life and a vital link between civilisations. China's maritime history stretches back millennia, marked by ingenious shipbuilding and legendary feats.

Eight thousand years ago, the Kuahuqiao culture of the lower Yangtze River crafted a dugout canoe, one of the earliest known examples of prehistoric boatbuilding. From the Qin and Han Dynasties, China's shipbuilding flourished, reaching a global pinnacle during the Ming Dynasty.

Supported by a sophisticated administrative system, Chinese craftsmanship enabled Zheng He to lead seven epic voyages with his massive fleets, leaving an indelible mark on history.

To honour this heritage, the Ministry of Transport and the Shanghai Municipal Government established the China Maritime Museum. As China's first national-level maritime museum, it celebrates seafaring history, fosters international exchange and supports Shanghai's status as a global shipping hub. Visitors can explore the evolution of navigation from ancient times to the modern era.

The year 2025 marks the 620th anniversary of Zheng He's voyages. To celebrate, the four-volume series 'The Maritime Silk Road: A Children's Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Maritime History and Culture' was published. This series explores shipbuilding, investiture missions, navigation technology and cross-cultural encounters. Through engaging narratives, it recounts how China, building on the legacy of the overland Silk Road, extended a hand of friendship across the seas, demonstrating leading maritime technology and an indomitable spirit of exploration.

We thank the authors and illustrators for bringing these adventures to life. We hope every young reader finds the courage and curiosity to become a 'little navigator', sailing boldly towards the world's vast horizons.

China Maritime Museum







The Investiture Ship Returns

During the Ming Dynasty, Chinese shipbuilding and navigation technology ranked among the most advanced in the world. In addition to the well-known voyages of Zheng He, the Ming court established a systematic investiture system, regularly sending investiture envoys to tributary states. These missions demonstrated the empire's power and prestige while helping expand the Maritime Silk Road and deepen cultural and commercial ties with countries overseas.

In 1534, Chen Kan was appointed as an investiture envoy to the Ryukyu Kingdom to conduct an investiture ceremony. After completing the mission, the delegation remained on the islands for several months, awaiting a shift in the seasonal winds. When the northeast monsoon finally arrived, the investiture ship raised its sails and began the journey home.



Strong, sturdy and excellent at carrying heavy loads, horses in Ryukyu were regarded as symbols of wealth and power. According to the *Veritable Records of the Ming Dynasty (Ming Shilu)*, since the Hongwu reign, the Ryukyu Kingdom had been regularly sending horses as tribute to the Ming court.

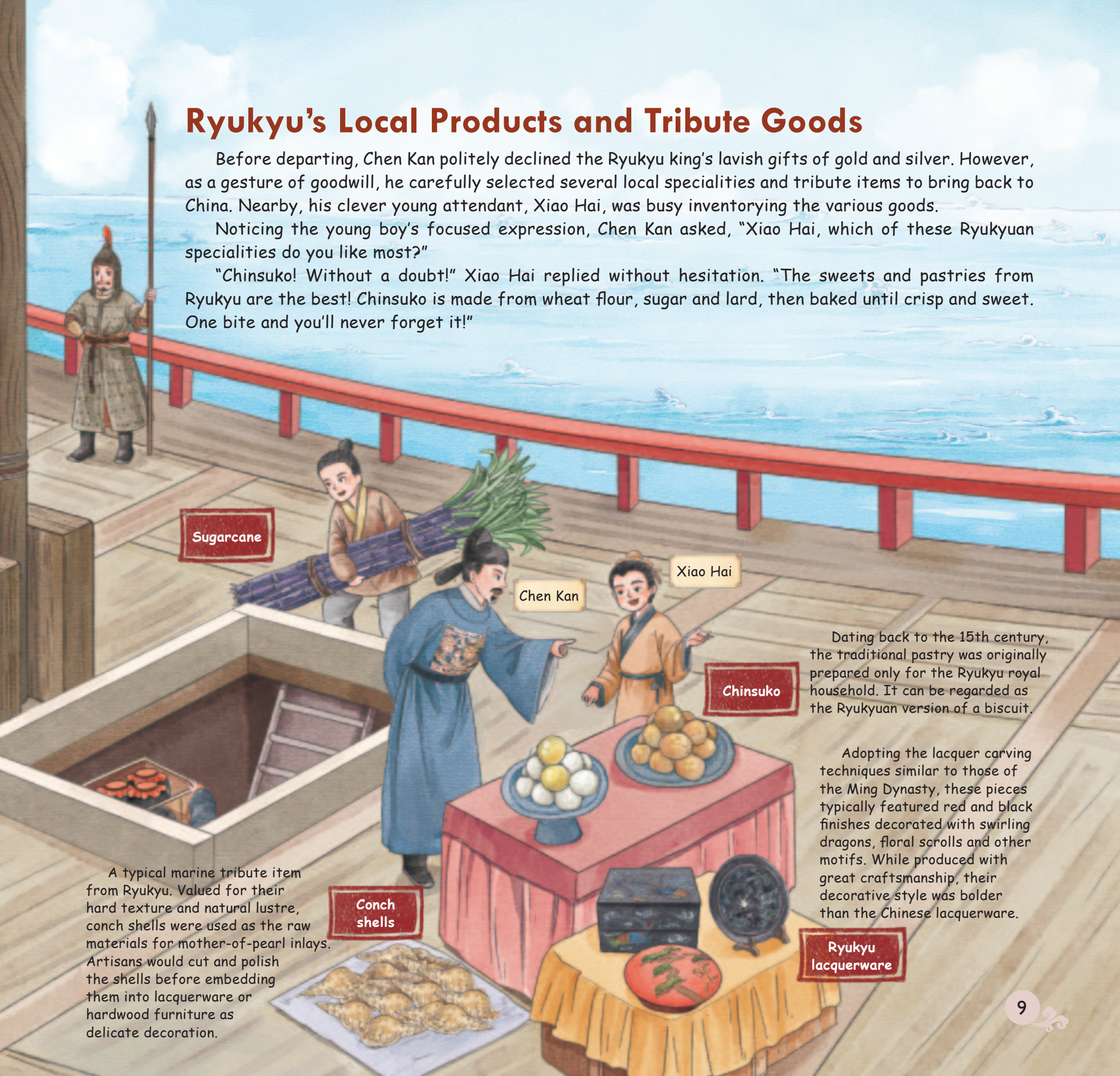
Sulphur was much more than just a mineral. It was a key ingredient for making gunpowder. Although sulphur was also produced in Ming China, Ryukyu's natural sulphur mines yielded a purer product, making it a valuable military resource for the Ming Empire.

Ryukyu's Local Products and Tribute Goods

Before departing, Chen Kan politely declined the Ryukyu king's lavish gifts of gold and silver. However, as a gesture of goodwill, he carefully selected several local specialities and tribute items to bring back to China. Nearby, his clever young attendant, Xiao Hai, was busy inventorying the various goods.

Noticing the young boy's focused expression, Chen Kan asked, "Xiao Hai, which of these Ryukyuan specialities do you like most?"

"Chinsuko! Without a doubt!" Xiao Hai replied without hesitation. "The sweets and pastries from Ryukyu are the best! Chinsuko is made from wheat flour, sugar and lard, then baked until crisp and sweet. One bite and you'll never forget it!"



Dating back to the 15th century, the traditional pastry was originally prepared only for the Ryukyu royal household. It can be regarded as the Ryukyuan version of a biscuit.

Adopting the lacquer carving techniques similar to those of the Ming Dynasty, these pieces typically featured red and black finishes decorated with swirling dragons, floral scrolls and other motifs. While produced with great craftsmanship, their decorative style was bolder than the Chinese lacquerware.

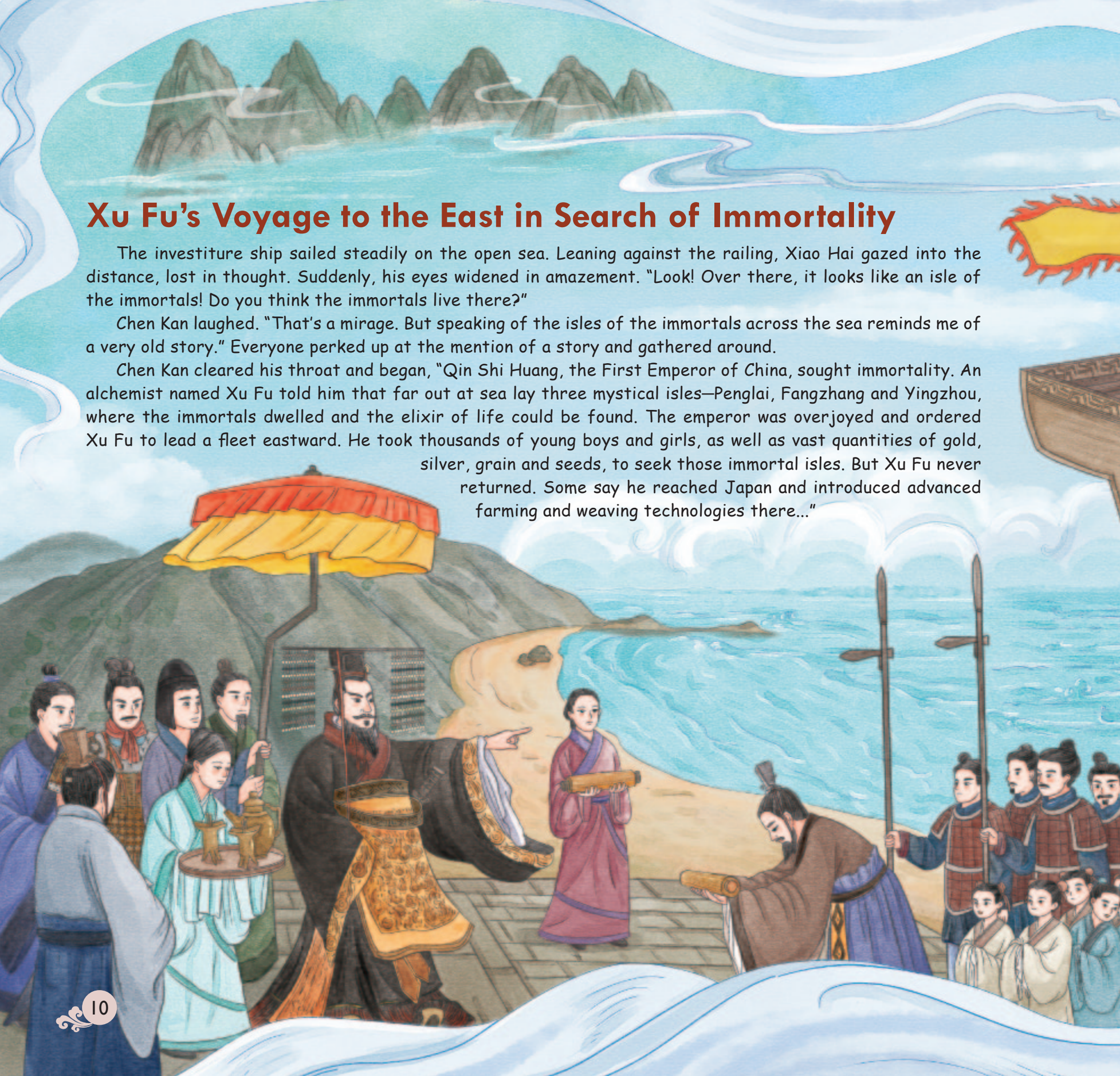
A typical marine tribute item from Ryukyu. Valued for their hard texture and natural lustre, conch shells were used as the raw materials for mother-of-pearl inlays. Artisans would cut and polish the shells before embedding them into lacquerware or hardwood furniture as delicate decoration.

Xu Fu's Voyage to the East in Search of Immortality

The investiture ship sailed steadily on the open sea. Leaning against the railing, Xiao Hai gazed into the distance, lost in thought. Suddenly, his eyes widened in amazement. "Look! Over there, it looks like an isle of the immortals! Do you think the immortals live there?"

Chen Kan laughed. "That's a mirage. But speaking of the isles of the immortals across the sea reminds me of a very old story." Everyone perked up at the mention of a story and gathered around.

Chen Kan cleared his throat and began, "Qin Shi Huang, the First Emperor of China, sought immortality. An alchemist named Xu Fu told him that far out at sea lay three mystical isles—Penglai, Fangzhang and Yingzhou, where the immortals dwelled and the elixir of life could be found. The emperor was overjoyed and ordered Xu Fu to lead a fleet eastward. He took thousands of young boys and girls, as well as vast quantities of gold, silver, grain and seeds, to seek those immortal isles. But Xu Fu never returned. Some say he reached Japan and introduced advanced farming and weaving technologies there..."



Did You Know?
Seeds of Sino-Japanese Friendship

The legend of Xu Fu's eastern voyage is widely told in both China and Japan, and has become an important cultural link between the two nations.

According to legend, Xu Fu introduced rice cultivation techniques to Japan, along with improved farming tools and irrigation methods. These innovations are said to have greatly increased grain yields and helped relieve famine.





He is also said to have introduced sericulture, silk weaving, hemp spinning and dyeing techniques, enabling people to produce warm and beautiful clothing.





Another story claims that Xu Fu passed on medical knowledge that helped combat disease and improve public health, leaving a lasting influence on the development of Japanese medicine.

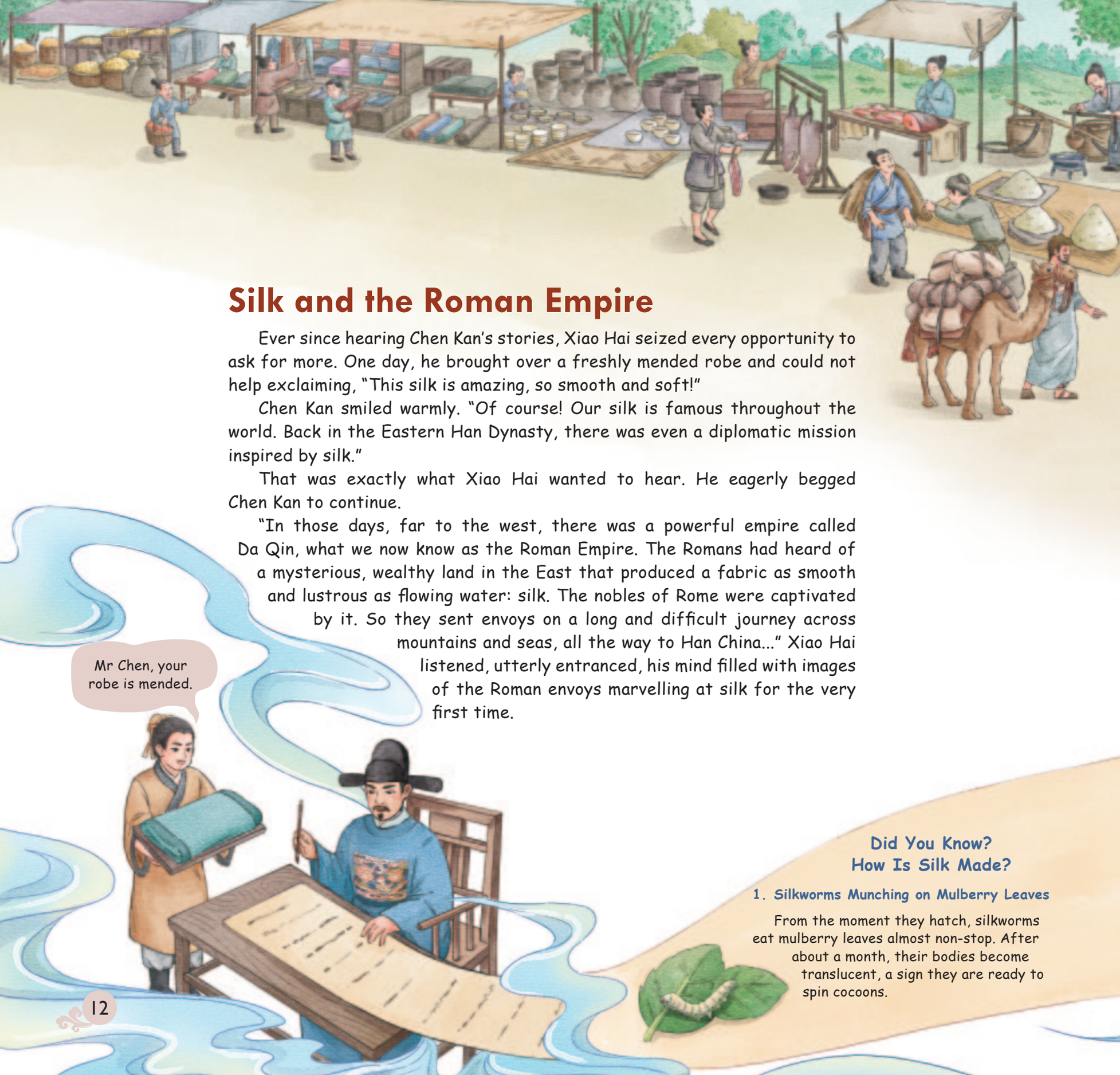
Silk and the Roman Empire

Ever since hearing Chen Kan's stories, Xiao Hai seized every opportunity to ask for more. One day, he brought over a freshly mended robe and could not help exclaiming, "This silk is amazing, so smooth and soft!"

Chen Kan smiled warmly. "Of course! Our silk is famous throughout the world. Back in the Eastern Han Dynasty, there was even a diplomatic mission inspired by silk."

That was exactly what Xiao Hai wanted to hear. He eagerly begged Chen Kan to continue.

"In those days, far to the west, there was a powerful empire called Da Qin, what we now know as the Roman Empire. The Romans had heard of a mysterious, wealthy land in the East that produced a fabric as smooth and lustrous as flowing water: silk. The nobles of Rome were captivated by it. So they sent envoys on a long and difficult journey across mountains and seas, all the way to Han China..." Xiao Hai listened, utterly entranced, his mind filled with images of the Roman envoys marvelling at silk for the very first time.



Did You Know? How Is Silk Made?

1. Silkworms Munching on Mulberry Leaves

From the moment they hatch, silkworms eat mulberry leaves almost non-stop. After about a month, their bodies become translucent, a sign they are ready to spin cocoons.





2. Spinning Silk and Forming Cocoons

Mature silkworms find a quiet spot and begin spinning fine silk threads from their spinnerets, wrapping themselves layer by layer to form smooth, oval-shaped cocoons.



3. Boiling Cocoons to Reel Silk

Artisans soak the cocoons in warm water to soften the sericin, then carefully unwind the silk filaments. A single cocoon can yield a continuous thread of up to 1,000 m.



4. Weaving Beautiful Silk

The silk threads are arranged neatly on a loom. With the click-clack, click-clack of the loom, gorgeous silk fabric soon takes shape.



Over 60? That's even older than my grandfather! How amazing!

The Earliest Voyage Log: *A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms*

As Xiao Hai was daydreaming about shimmering silk, he noticed Chen Kan was writing something. Curious, he moved closer and asked, "Mr Chen, what are you writing every day?" Chen Kan set down his brush. "This is a voyage log. It records everything we see and experience on our journey. Reading it later will be like reliving the trip."

Seeing Xiao Hai's strong interest, Chen Kan continued, "The first person to keep such a log was the great monk Faxian of the Eastern Jin Dynasty. Though already over 60, he was so devoted to Buddhism that he undertook a dangerous pilgrimage to Tianzhu (ancient India), two centuries before the famous monk Xuanzang!"



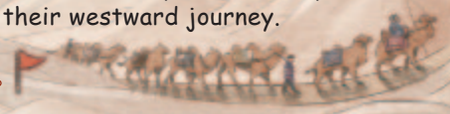
Departure from Chang'an
(now Xi'an, Shaanxi)

In 399, Faxian and his companions set out from Chang'an on a journey to Tianzhu (ancient India) in search of Buddhist scriptures.

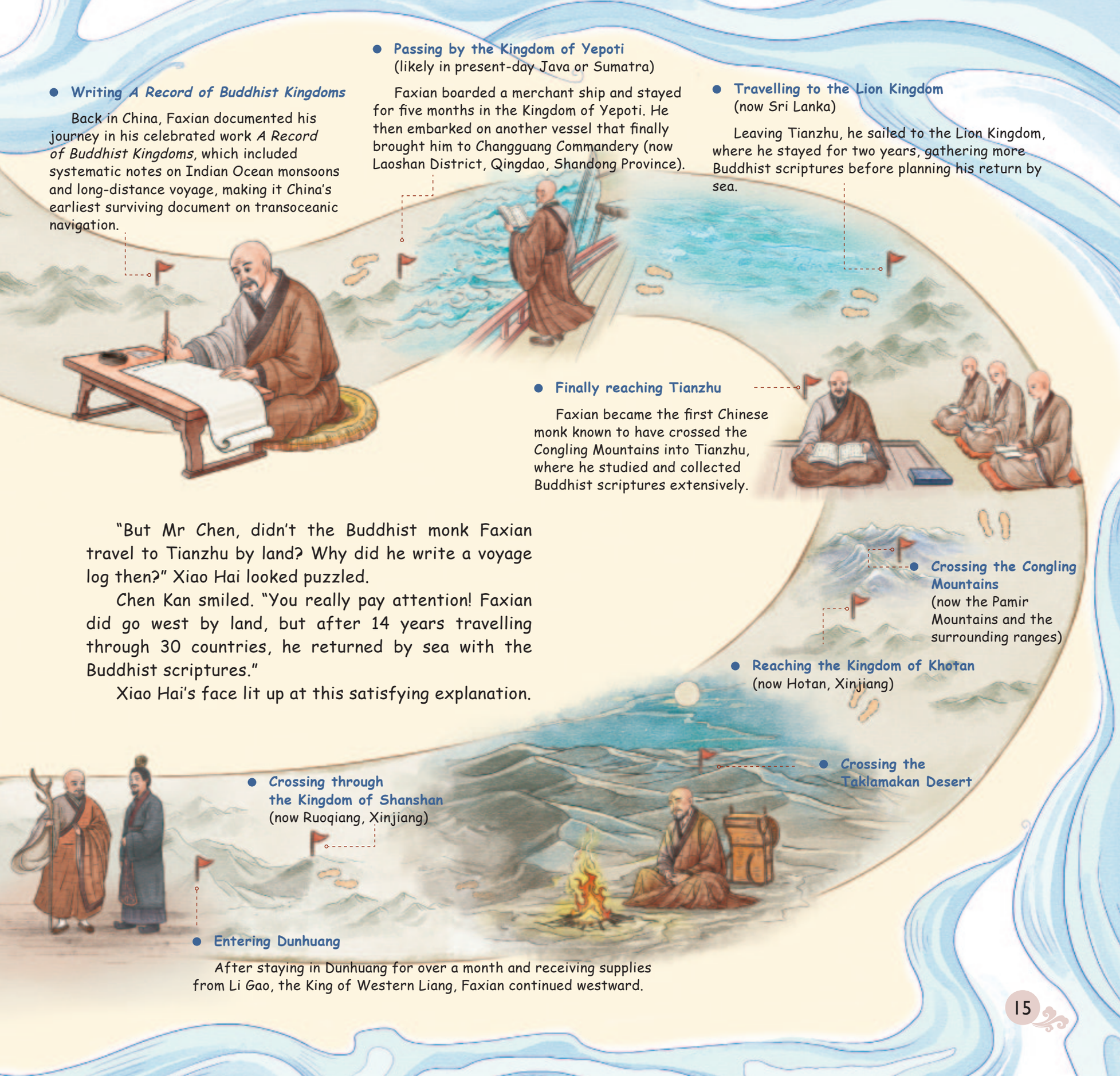
Crossing the Long Mountains
(now southern section of Liupan Mountains)

Arriving at Zhangye

Faxian stayed in Zhangye for about five months. During this period, he met other monks, finished their Vassa retreat for the rainy season and planned the next stage of their westward journey.



Arriving at the Kingdom of Qiangui
(now Lanzhou, Gansu)



Writing *A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms*

Back in China, Faxian documented his journey in his celebrated work *A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms*, which included systematic notes on Indian Ocean monsoons and long-distance voyage, making it China's earliest surviving document on transoceanic navigation.

Passing by the Kingdom of Yepoti
(likely in present-day Java or Sumatra)

Faxian boarded a merchant ship and stayed for five months in the Kingdom of Yepoti. He then embarked on another vessel that finally brought him to Changguang Commandery (now Laoshan District, Qingdao, Shandong Province).

Travelling to the Lion Kingdom
(now Sri Lanka)

Leaving Tianzhu, he sailed to the Lion Kingdom, where he stayed for two years, gathering more Buddhist scriptures before planning his return by sea.

Finally reaching Tianzhu

Faxian became the first Chinese monk known to have crossed the Congling Mountains into Tianzhu, where he studied and collected Buddhist scriptures extensively.

"But Mr Chen, didn't the Buddhist monk Faxian travel to Tianzhu by land? Why did he write a voyage log then?" Xiao Hai looked puzzled.

Chen Kan smiled. "You really pay attention! Faxian did go west by land, but after 14 years travelling through 30 countries, he returned by sea with the Buddhist scriptures."

Xiao Hai's face lit up at this satisfying explanation.

Crossing the Congling Mountains
(now the Pamir Mountains and the surrounding ranges)

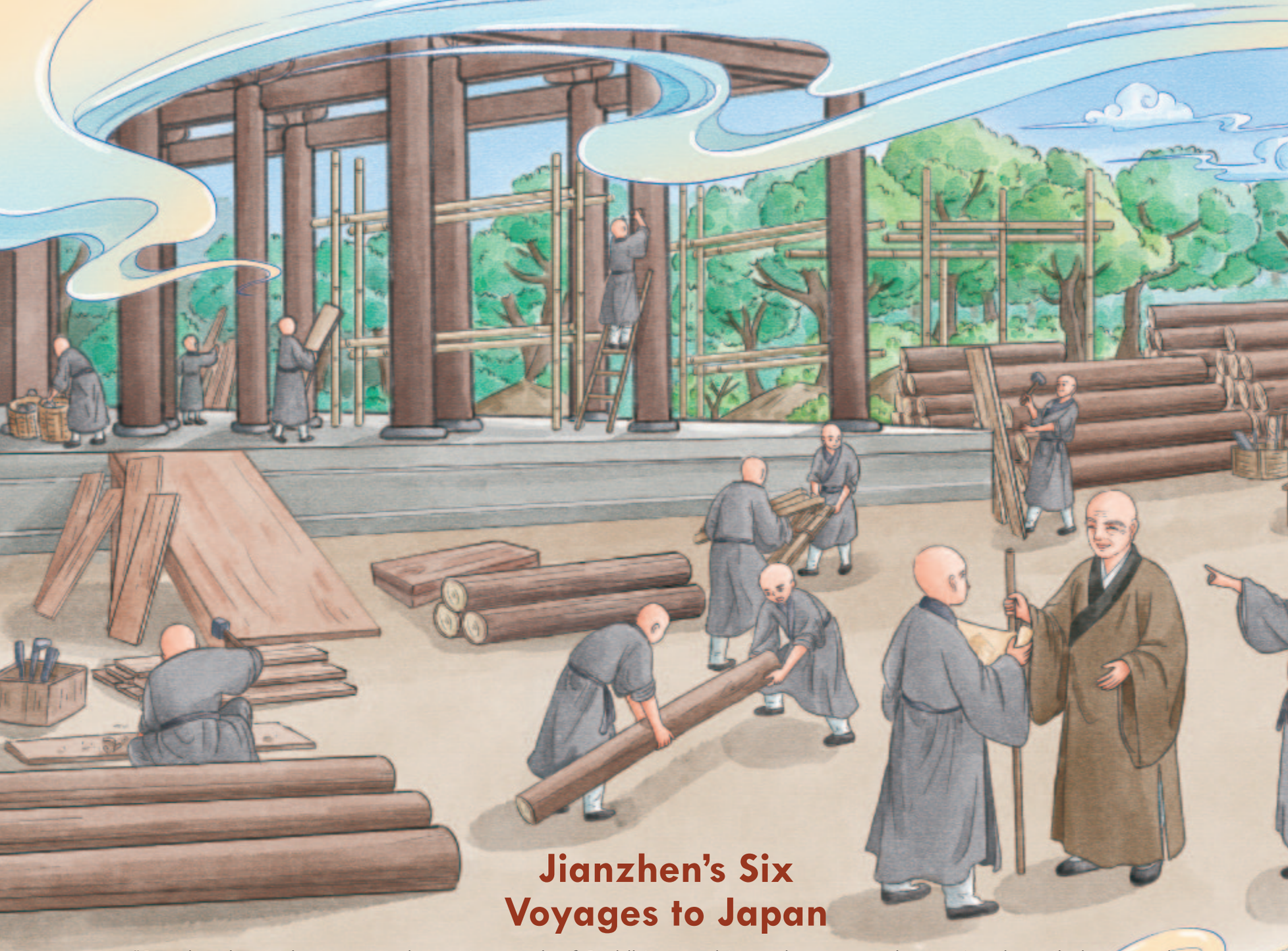
Reaching the Kingdom of Khotan
(now Hotan, Xinjiang)

Crossing the Taklamakan Desert

Crossing through the Kingdom of Shanshan
(now Ruoqiang, Xinjiang)

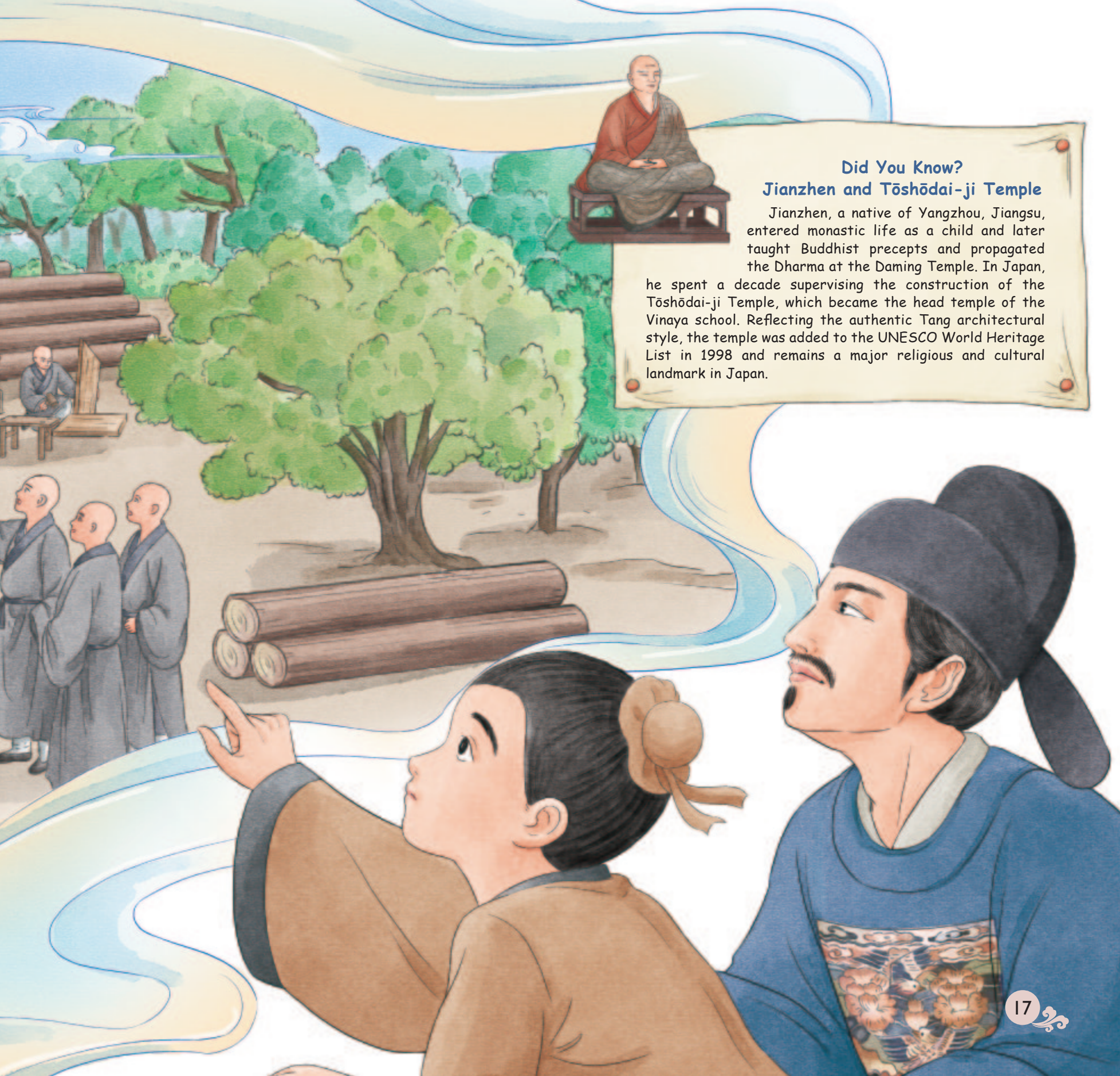
Entering Dunhuang

After staying in Dunhuang for over a month and receiving supplies from Li Gao, the King of Western Liang, Faxian continued westward.



Jianzhen's Six Voyages to Japan

"Besides those who journeyed west in search of Buddhist teachings, there were also monks who sailed across the sea to spread Buddhism," Chen Kan went on. "During the Tang Dynasty, Master Jianzhen was one of them. Japanese monks studying in China repeatedly invited him on behalf of their court to teach Buddhism in their homeland. Moved by their sincerity, he agreed. Beginning in his fifties, he attempted the eastern crossing six times over the course of more than ten years. The first five attempts failed due to storms, shipwrecks, and even human interference. But Jianzhen never gave up. Finally, at the age of 66, he succeeded in reaching Japan, where he founded the Tōshōdai-ji Temple and introduced medicine, calligraphy, architecture, painting, and many other aspects of the Tang culture."



Did You Know?
Jianzhen and Tōshōdai-ji Temple

Jianzhen, a native of Yangzhou, Jiangsu, entered monastic life as a child and later taught Buddhist precepts and propagated the Dharma at the Daming Temple. In Japan, he spent a decade supervising the construction of the Tōshōdai-ji Temple, which became the head temple of the Vinaya school. Reflecting the authentic Tang architectural style, the temple was added to the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1998 and remains a major religious and cultural landmark in Japan.

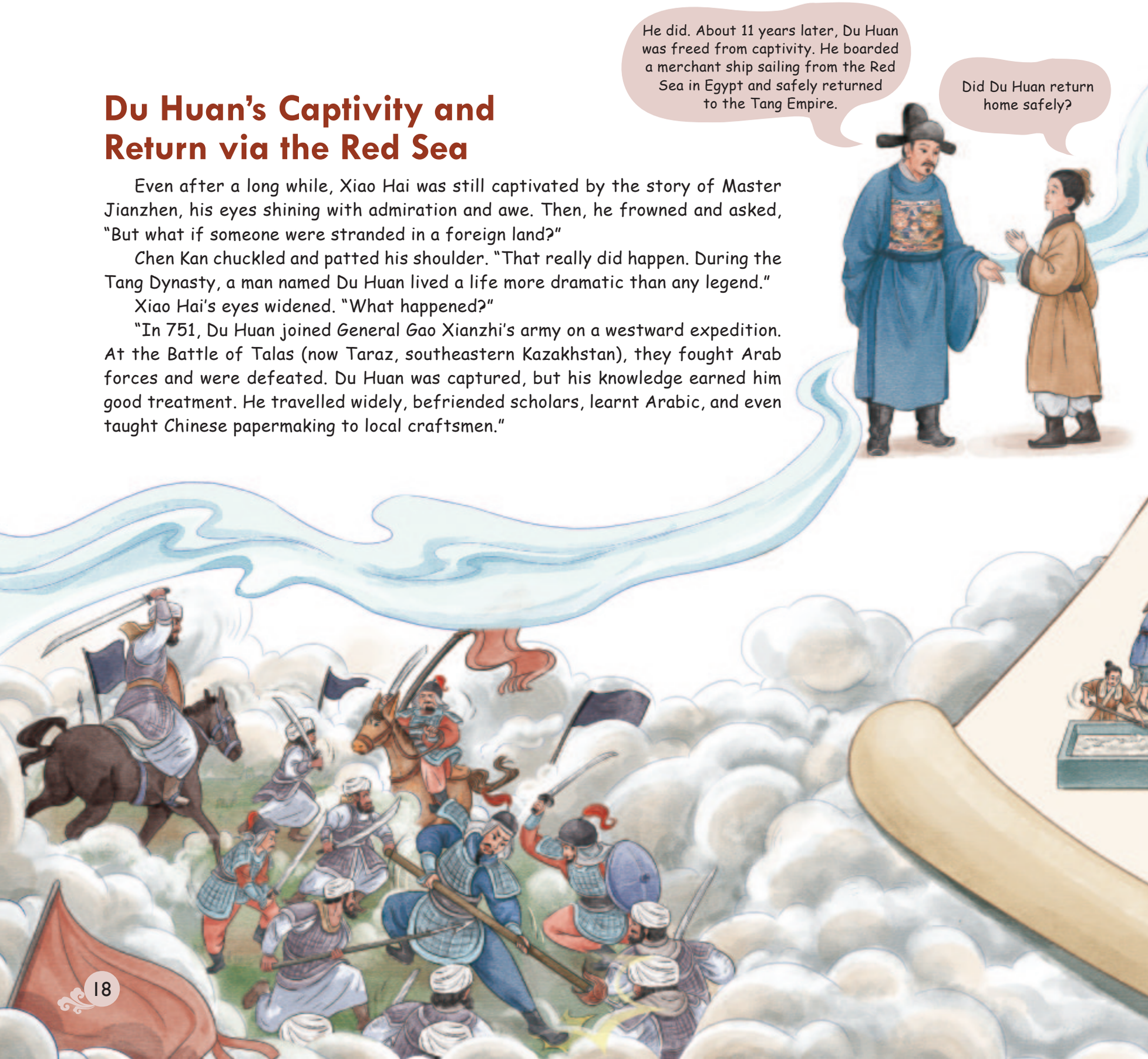
Du Huan's Captivity and Return via the Red Sea

Even after a long while, Xiao Hai was still captivated by the story of Master Jianzhen, his eyes shining with admiration and awe. Then, he frowned and asked, "But what if someone were stranded in a foreign land?"

Chen Kan chuckled and patted his shoulder. "That really did happen. During the Tang Dynasty, a man named Du Huan lived a life more dramatic than any legend."

Xiao Hai's eyes widened. "What happened?"

"In 751, Du Huan joined General Gao Xianzhi's army on a westward expedition. At the Battle of Talas (now Taraz, southeastern Kazakhstan), they fought Arab forces and were defeated. Du Huan was captured, but his knowledge earned him good treatment. He travelled widely, befriended scholars, learnt Arabic, and even taught Chinese papermaking to local craftsmen."





Did You Know?
The Wonder of Ancient Papermaking

Papermaking is one of China's Four Great Inventions. By the Western Han Dynasty, people had already mastered the basic techniques. During the Eastern Han Dynasty, Cai Lun improved the process by using inexpensive and easily available materials such as tree bark, hemp, rags and old fishing nets. This innovation significantly lowered costs and greatly improved the quality of the paper. Paper gradually replaced bamboo slips and silk, becoming a widely used writing material. By the Tang Dynasty, papermaking had advanced further, and people began experimenting with bamboo to make paper.

Foreign Guests in Tang China: Abe no Nakamaro

As sunset coloured the horizon, Xiao Hai leaned on the railing, reflecting on all he had heard. Then he asked curiously, "Mr Chen, during the Tang Dynasty, did people from other countries come to China as well?"

"Of course!" Chen Kan replied. "The Tang Empire was prosperous and open, attracting students from many lands who came for its culture and technology. One of them was Abe no Nakamaro, a Japanese scholar who travelled to China with a Kentōshi mission. He admired Tang culture so much that he took a Chinese name, Chao Heng. He passed the imperial examinations, became an official, and won favour at court. Learned and well-liked, Chao Heng made friends with famous poets such as Li Bai and Wang Wei. In his fifties, he longed to return to Japan and boarded a ship with a returning envoy fleet. But during the voyage, a fierce storm struck the fleet..."





Just as Xiao Hai was lost in the story—WHOOSH!—a violent typhoon hit, and the investiture ship began to pitch and roll violently.

When rumours reached Li Bai that Chao Heng had perished at sea, he was filled with grief and wrote a moving poem to mourn his friend.

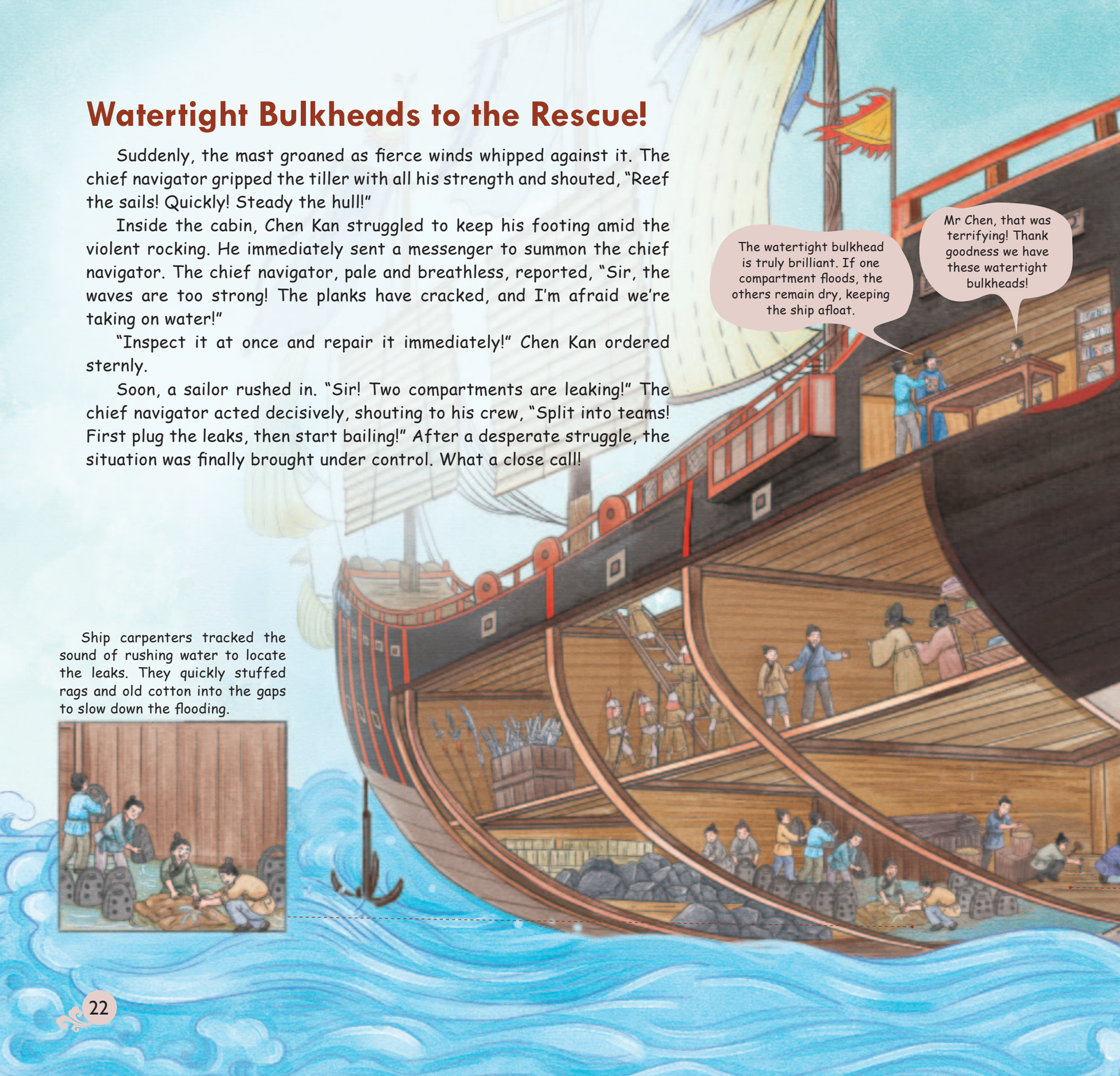
Watertight Bulkheads to the Rescue!

Suddenly, the mast groaned as fierce winds whipped against it. The chief navigator gripped the tiller with all his strength and shouted, "Reef the sails! Quickly! Steady the hull!"

Inside the cabin, Chen Kan struggled to keep his footing amid the violent rocking. He immediately sent a messenger to summon the chief navigator. The chief navigator, pale and breathless, reported, "Sir, the waves are too strong! The planks have cracked, and I'm afraid we're taking on water!"

"Inspect it at once and repair it immediately!" Chen Kan ordered sternly.

Soon, a sailor rushed in. "Sir! Two compartments are leaking!" The chief navigator acted decisively, shouting to his crew, "Split into teams! First plug the leaks, then start bailing!" After a desperate struggle, the situation was finally brought under control. What a close call!

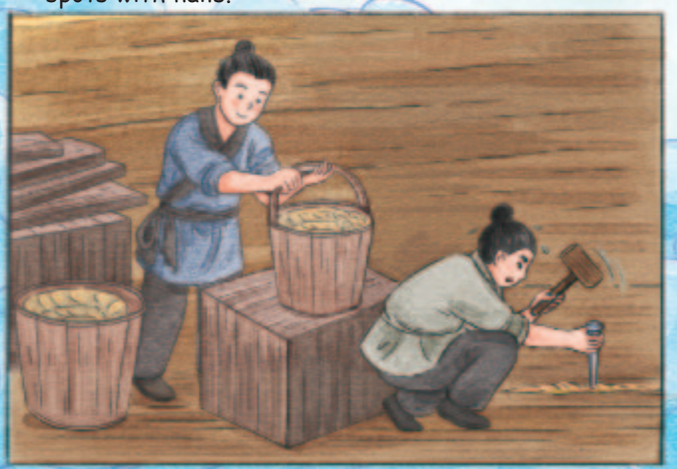


Ship carpenters tracked the sound of rushing water to locate the leaks. They quickly stuffed rags and old cotton into the gaps to slow down the flooding.

Meanwhile, three helmsmen strained at the rudder, struggling to keep the ship on course as they awaited the chief navigator's orders to make adjustments.



Nearby, artisans hammered caulking material made from ramie fibre, tung oil, lime or oyster shell ash into the seams, reinforcing the weak spots with nails.



Song Dynasty Diplomatic Voyage: Xu Jing's Mission to Goryeo

After the storm subsided, Chen Kan spoke slowly, "Storms are common at sea, but the ancients had clever ways to cope with them. Beyond shipbuilding skills, we also had advanced navigation tools such as the compass and sea charts, which were already in use during the Song Dynasty."

"During the Xuanhe reign, an envoy named Xu Jing was sent to Goryeo (on the Korean Peninsula)," Chen Kan continued. "His fleet also encountered a terrible storm, so violent that the rudder broke. Luckily, their ships were sturdy and the sailors highly skilled, so they eventually returned safely. Xu Jing later recorded the entire experience in his book, *Illustrated Account of the Mission to Goryeo in the Xuanhe Era*."







Did You Know? The 'Divine Ships' and 'Guest Ships'

Xu Jing's fleet was sizeable, consisting of two 'Divine Ships' (Shenzhou) and six 'Guest Ships' (Kezhou). The Divine Ships were grand official ships for envoys, lavishly decorated. Meanwhile, the Guest Ships were privately owned ships requisitioned by the government and were smaller than the Divine Ships but exceptionally well-designed.

According to the book *Illustrated Account of the Mission to Goryeo in the Xuanhe Era*, the layout of a Guest Ship was carefully designed. The front cabin housed a stove and water tanks, with soldiers living below, while the midsection was divided into four compartments.

The rear cabin was where officials rested. It was richly decorated, with bamboo awnings that were only opened when it rained.

The Divine Ships shared a similar layout to the Guest Ships but were three times larger, so massive that they looked like floating mountains on the waves, drawing crowds of marvelling onlookers.



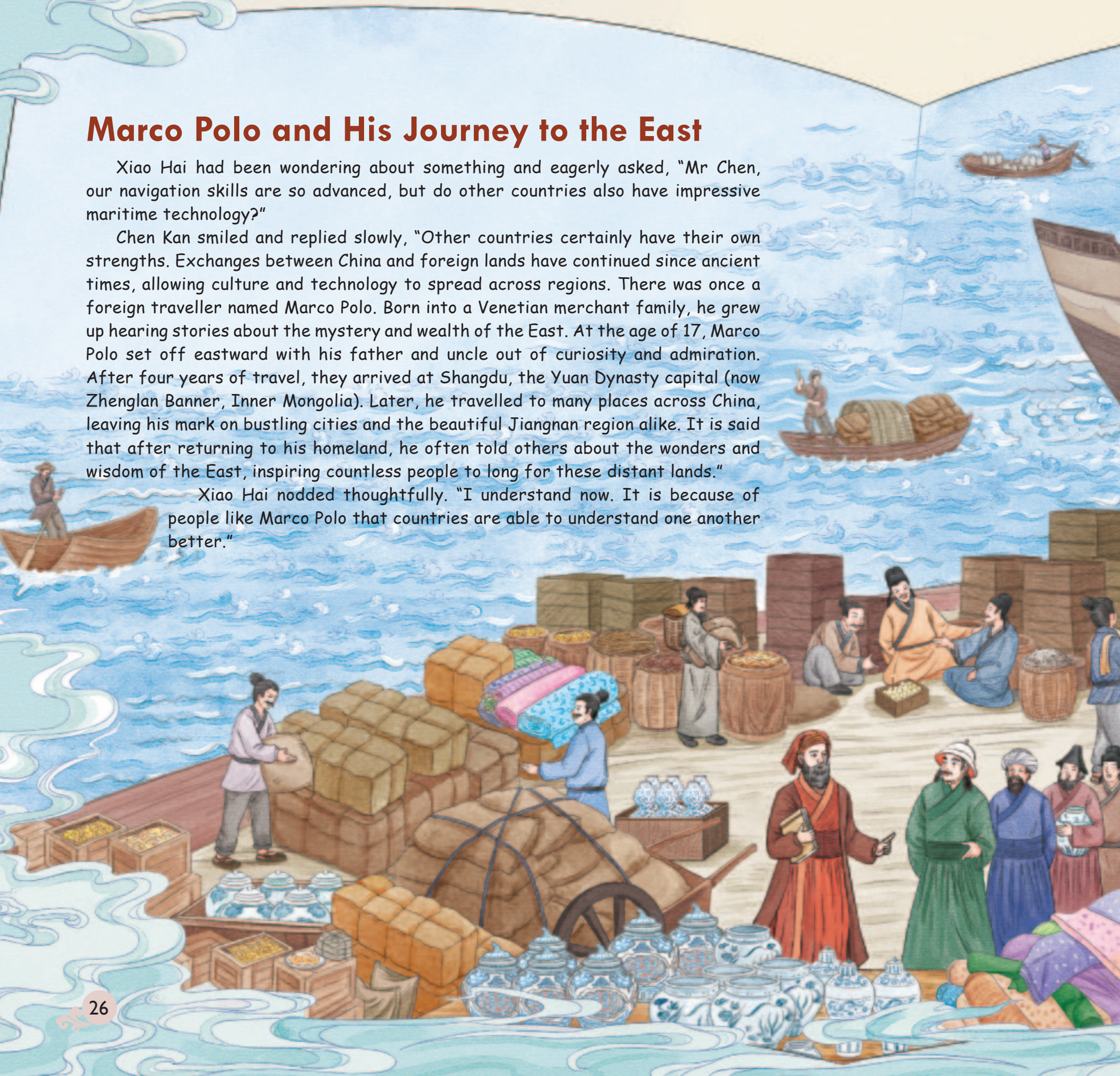


Marco Polo and His Journey to the East

Xiao Hai had been wondering about something and eagerly asked, "Mr Chen, our navigation skills are so advanced, but do other countries also have impressive maritime technology?"

Chen Kan smiled and replied slowly, "Other countries certainly have their own strengths. Exchanges between China and foreign lands have continued since ancient times, allowing culture and technology to spread across regions. There was once a foreign traveller named Marco Polo. Born into a Venetian merchant family, he grew up hearing stories about the mystery and wealth of the East. At the age of 17, Marco Polo set off eastward with his father and uncle out of curiosity and admiration. After four years of travel, they arrived at Shangdu, the Yuan Dynasty capital (now Zhenglan Banner, Inner Mongolia). Later, he travelled to many places across China, leaving his mark on bustling cities and the beautiful Jiangnan region alike. It is said that after returning to his homeland, he often told others about the wonders and wisdom of the East, inspiring countless people to long for these distant lands."

Xiao Hai nodded thoughtfully. "I understand now. It is because of people like Marco Polo that countries are able to understand one another better."





Did You Know?
The Travels of Marco Polo

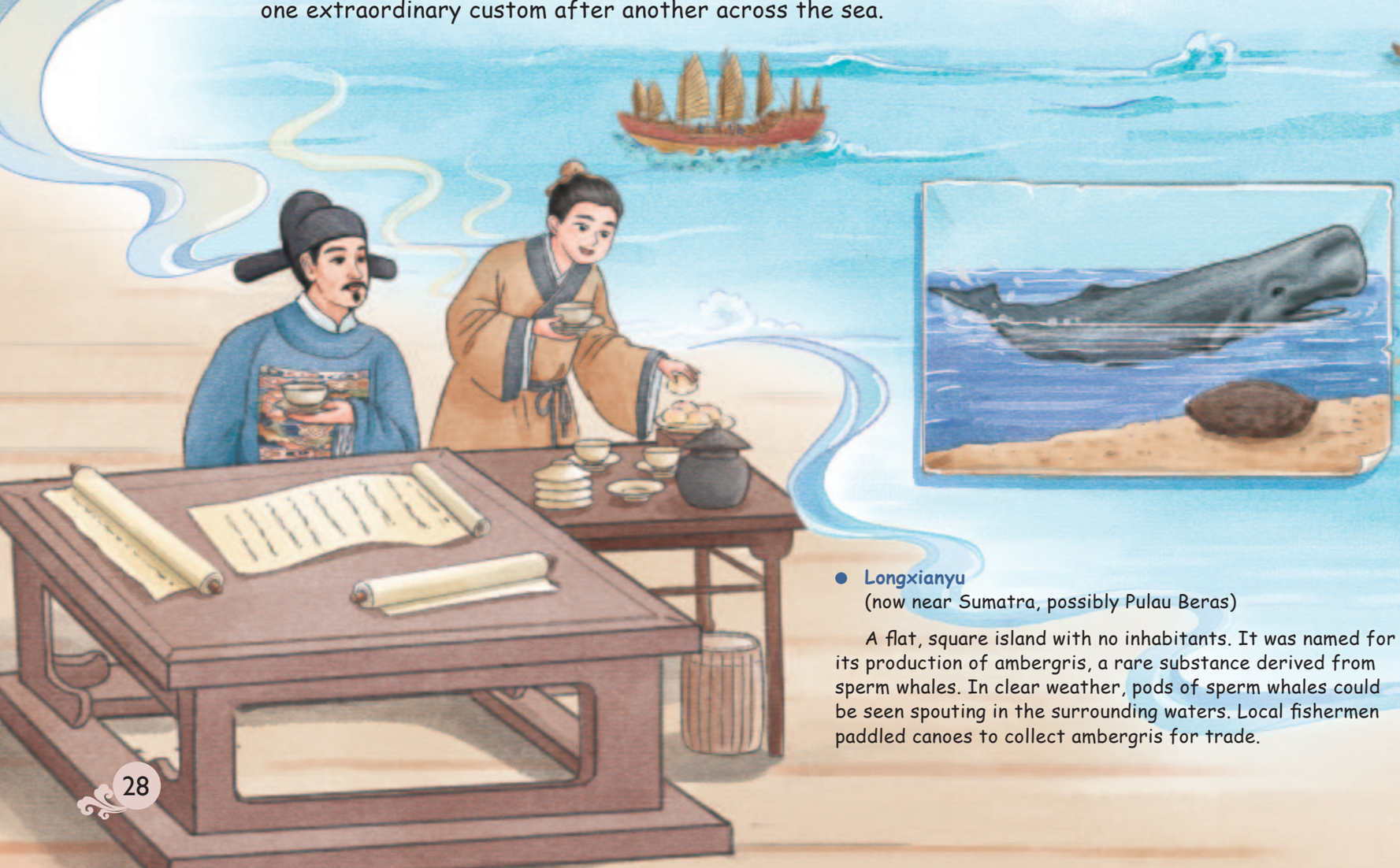
During the 17 years that Marco Polo lived in China, he travelled to many different places and was fascinated by many things he encountered: fine porcelain made from clay, paper and printed money produced from tree bark, black stones (coal) used as fuel, and an efficient communication network built around relay stations. Marco Polo shared these remarkable observations with others, who later compiled them into a book, *The Travels of Marco Polo*. The book became a window for the Europeans into the Eastern world.

Wang Dayuan's Adventures

"I want to be like Marco Polo in the future," Xiao Hai said eagerly. "I'd love to travel overseas and write a book full of interesting sea stories!"

"There was already someone like that! Also during the Yuan Dynasty, a man named Wang Dayuan became a legendary civilian navigator. He was born in Nanchang, a city filled with merchant ships. From a young age, he was fascinated by the sea. At 19, he joined a merchant vessel as a crew member and set out on his first voyage. Wherever he went, while others were busy trading porcelain and silk, he paid close attention to local customs and recorded unusual sights. In his book *Brief Records of Island Barbarians*, he described exotic lands and peoples, including one place where children had wooden boards bound to their heads to shape their heads into square forms. In another place, both men and women shaved their heads, ate bananas, boiled seawater to produce salt, and exchanged it for grain."

Xiao Hai listened in fascination, as if he were travelling alongside Wang Dayuan, discovering one extraordinary custom after another across the sea.



- **Longxianyu**
  (now near Sumatra, possibly Pulau Beras)

  A flat, square island with no inhabitants. It was named for its production of ambergris, a rare substance derived from sperm whales. In clear weather, pods of sperm whales could be seen spouting in the surrounding waters. Local fishermen paddled canoes to collect ambergris for trade.

Did You Know? Wang Dayuan's Adventures Overseas

Wang Dayuan lived a life full of adventures and wonders, documenting these incredible adventures in his book, *Brief Records of Island Barbarians* (which was renamed during the Qing Dynasty).

- **Zhenla**
  (now Cambodia)

Wang Dayuan marvelled at the luxurious lifestyle of the local aristocracy. According to his records, palace walls were adorned with gold, and chairs were inlaid with jewels. With its warm climate and fertile land, Zhenla yielded many treasures such as rhino horns and peacocks.





- **Manali**
  (possibly East Africa or Northern Australia)

According to *Brief Records of Island Barbarians*, this island was covered with trees and surrounded by the sea. Massive amounts of oysters piled up along the coast, forming hills. There was a strange type of bird (which Wang called the 'immortal crane') that would spread its wings and dance whenever it heard people clap. The area also produced camels, which the locals used to transport heavy goods.

Treasure Ship

Known as 'the ship carrying treasures', it was mainly used to transport trade goods, tribute items and imperial gifts. The largest of these treasure ships served as the flagship of Zheng He's fleet, accommodating commanders, diplomatic envoys and foreign ambassadors.

The Main Fleet of Zheng He

Besides the flagship treasure ships, the fleet also included several other types of vessels:

Combat command ship

The principal escort warship of the fleet, serving as the command vessel for military officers and their staff.

Combat ship

Smaller than the combat command ship, its main roles were fleet escort and naval combat.

Horse ship

A multipurpose transport vessel primarily used for carrying warhorses and armaments, it had a long, narrow hull for higher speed and also used for reconnaissance, communications and combat support.

Grain ship

Responsible for transporting food supplies, ensuring the fleet remained well-provisioned throughout the voyage.

The Logistics Fleet

Water ship

An auxiliary vessel specifically designed for storing and transporting fresh water.

Eight-Large-Oar Vessel: A mid-sized coastal transport vessel

Six-Oar Vessel: A small coastal transport vessel

Eight-Medium-Oar Vessel: A mid-sized coastal transport vessel

Zheng He's Seven Voyages to the Western Seas: A Grand Maritime Legend

"Look ahead! That's our Ming harbour!" Xiao Hai cried out. The sailors rushed onto the deck, cheering. Chen Kan stepped out of the cabin and gazed at his long-absent homeland with deep emotion. He then began to recount the greatest maritime legend of their dynasty.

"In the early Ming Dynasty, Lord Zheng He commanded more than 200 ships and over 20,000 crew members on seven voyages to the Western Seas. His fleet was awe-inspiring, featuring enormous treasure ships as flagships, supported by escort ships, horse ships, grain ships, water ships and combat command ships. The personnel on board had clearly defined roles, including envoys, soldiers, navigators, cooks, interpreters, suppliers and skilled craftsmen." Chen Kan continued, "The fleet carried a wide range of goods from our empire, including fine silk, imperial porcelain, classical texts, high-quality tea, medicinal materials, lacquerware and large quantities of gold and silver. They travelled to more than 30 countries and regions."

The *Qilin* Voyage

"Wherever Zheng He's fleet went, they generously presented gifts to show goodwill and the prestige of the Ming Dynasty. They also engaged in trade and brought back many exotic treasures, such as *Huafu* deer (zebras), coral, jewels, and an animal known as the *qilin*," Chen Kan explained vividly.

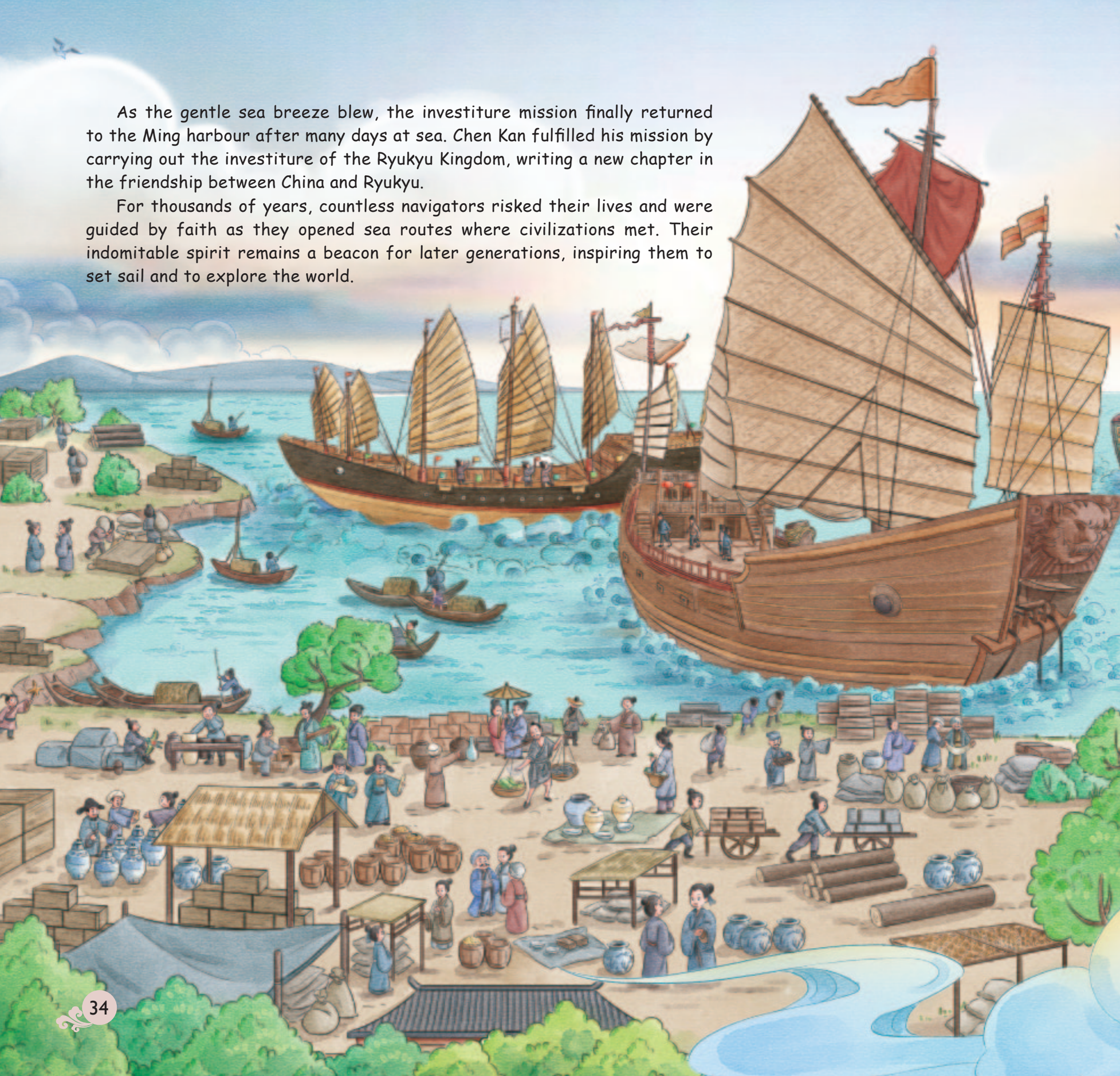
"What is a *qilin*, Mr Chen?" Xiao Hai quickly asked.

"It was a rare creature with an extraordinarily long neck. When Zheng He's fleet reached Malindi (now Kenya), they encountered this animal whose local name sounded similar to 'girin'. Its appearance was so unusual that our envoys believed it matched the mythical *qilin* of Chinese legends, so they brought it back to the emperor as tribute," Chen Kan said.

Later, envoys from the Kingdom of Banggela (now Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal) also presented a *qilin* (giraffe) to China. This story became one of the most famous examples of early cultural exchange between China and other regions.

As the gentle sea breeze blew, the investiture mission finally returned to the Ming harbour after many days at sea. Chen Kan fulfilled his mission by carrying out the investiture of the Ryukyu Kingdom, writing a new chapter in the friendship between China and Ryukyu.

For thousands of years, countless navigators risked their lives and were guided by faith as they opened sea routes where civilizations met. Their indomitable spirit remains a beacon for later generations, inspiring them to set sail and to explore the world.





Great Pioneers Who Linked East and West



Zhang Qian

An outstanding diplomat and explorer of the Western Han Dynasty. Commissioned by Emperor Wu, he undertook two missions to the Western Regions, opening the famous Silk Road. His journeys laid the foundation for exchanges between China and the regions of Central Asia, West Asia and Europe, fostering political, economic and cultural exchange between East and West.

Ban Chao — A renowned military strategist and diplomat of the Eastern Han Dynasty, and the youngest son of the historian Ban Biao. Leaving behind his scholarly pursuits, he joined the military and led campaigns into the Western Regions; there, he repelled the coalition forces of the Xiongnu and several local states, successfully restoring Han rule over the area. For his achievements, he was granted the title "Marquis of Dingyuan," and became widely known as "Ban Dingyuan." Over his 31-year tenure in the Western Regions, Ban Chao reopened the once-blocked Silk Road, revitalizing trade between the Han Dynasty and the Western Regions and significantly advancing cultural exchange between East and West.

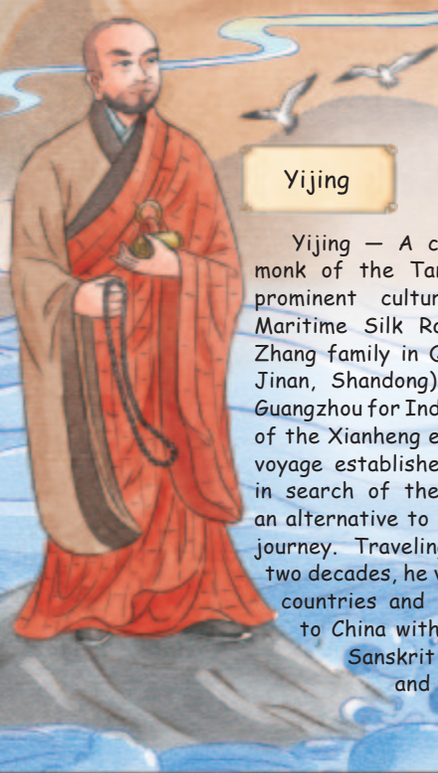


Ban Chao



Chang Jun

Chang Jun — A renowned navigator and diplomatic envoy of the Sui Dynasty. In the third year of the Daye era (607 AD), he was dispatched on a mission to the Kingdom of Chitu (possibly on the southern Malay Peninsula and Sumatra). This mission marked the beginning of formal diplomatic relations between the Sui and Chitu. It led to the exchange of envoys and fostered the political and trade ties between the Sui and various states of the South China Sea, contributing significantly to the development of the Maritime Silk Road.



Yijing

Yijing — A celebrated Buddhist monk of the Tang Dynasty and an prominent cultural envoy of the Maritime Silk Road. Born into the Zhang family in Qizhou (present-day Jinan, Shandong), he set sail from Guangzhou for India in the second year of the Xianheng era on a journey. His voyage established a maritime route in search of the Dharma, providing an alternative to Xuanzang's overland journey. Traveling abroad for over two decades, he visited more than 30 countries and eventually returned to China with approximately 400 Sanskrit Buddhist scriptures and treatises.

A prominent diplomat and statesman of the Sui and Tang dynasties. During the reign of Emperor Yang of the Sui Dynasty, he was entrusted with overseeing the Western Regions, was stationed in Zhangye and managed mutual trade markets. He extensively gathered intelligence on the Western Regions and compiled the *Illustrated Record of the Western Regions*. This work detailed the northern, central and southern routes through the Western Regions, all starting from Dunhuang, and greatly facilitated commercial exchanges between the Sui Dynasty and the Western Regions.

Pei Ju

Xuanzang — An eminent Buddhist monk of the Tang Dynasty and a prominent figure in Silk Road cultural exchange. Traveling westward along the overland Silk Road in search of Buddhist teachings, he spent approximately 17 years and journeyed through more than 100 countries and regions. Throughout his travels, he promoted Tang culture and Buddhist teachings, and he brought back numerous Buddhist scriptures, which significantly enhanced cultural exchange between China and foreign lands. He was also the historical inspiration for the beloved character Tang Sanzang in the *Journey to the West*.

Xuanzang

Yang Liangyao — A Tang Dynasty navigator and diplomatic envoy. In 785 AD, by order of Emperor Dezong, he led the first official maritime diplomatic mission from the Tang court. Setting sail from Guangzhou, the mission passed through the South China Sea and the Strait of Malacca before following the coast of the Indian Ocean to Heiyi Dashi (the Abbasid Caliphate). This pioneering voyage promoted maritime exchange between East and West some 620 years before Zheng He's expeditions.

Yang Liangyao

Yang Tingbi

Yang Tingbi — A diplomat and navigator of the Yuan Dynasty. By order of Kublai Khan, he led multiple maritime expeditions to various states in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. His diplomatic missions persuaded several states to send tribute envoys to the Yuan court, strengthened political and trade ties between the Yuan Dynasty and regions of South and Southeast Asia, and contributed significantly to the prosperity of the Maritime Silk Road.



Special Thanks

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