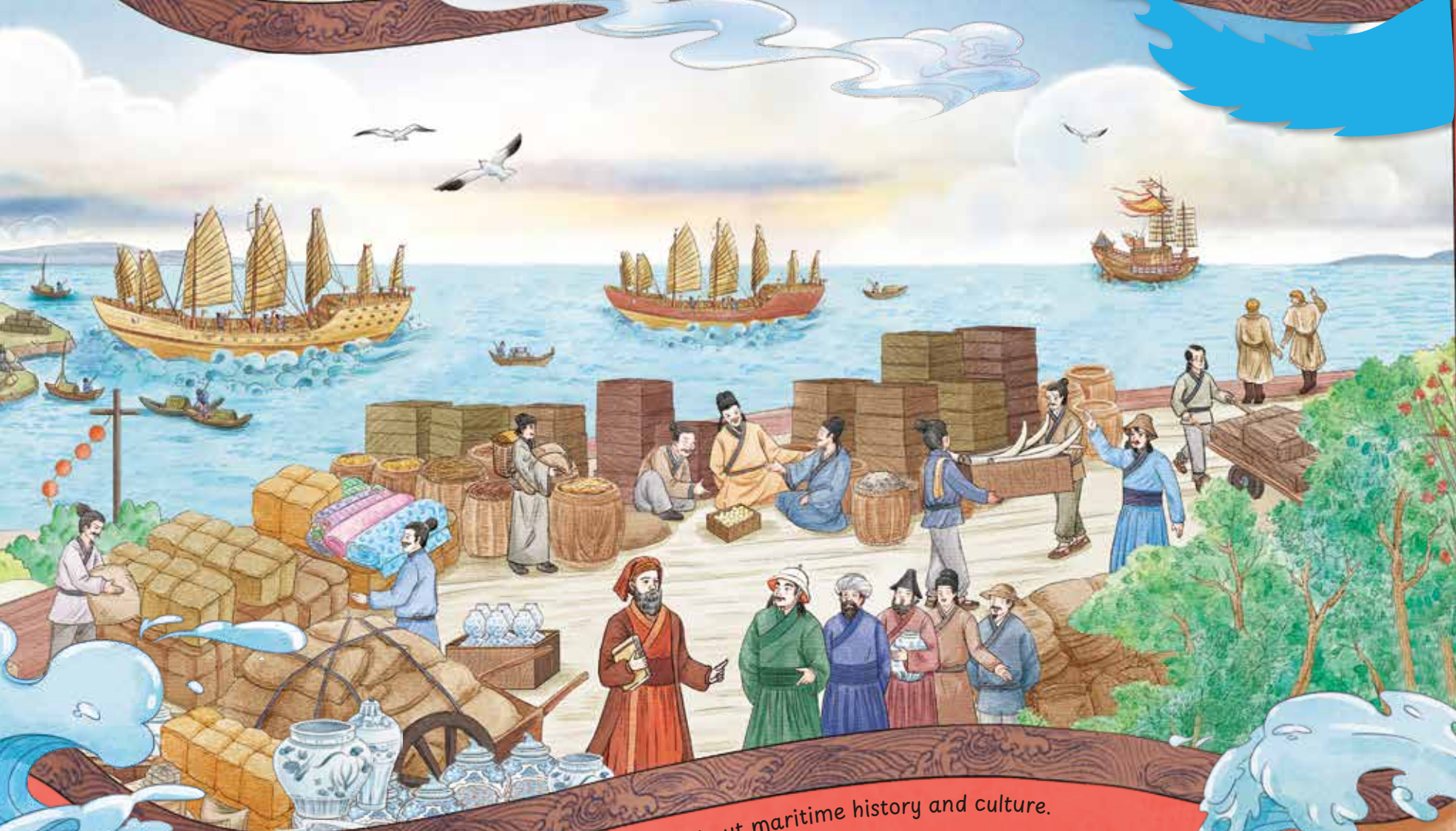




The Story of Ships Across a Thousand Years on the Maritime Silk Road

Tales of China and the World



An illustrated encyclopedia for children about maritime history and culture.

Copyright — Across the Seas Tales of China and the World
Cataloging-in-Publication (CIP) Data
Chronicles of Exchanges Between China and the World / Chief Editor: China Maritime
Museum, Shanghai; Compiled by Tongqu Publishing Co., Ltd. — Beijing: Posts &
Telecom Press, 2025.
(A Thousand Years of “Ship” Stories Along the Maritime Silk Road: An Illustrated
Children’s Encyclopedia of Maritime History and Culture)
ISBN: 978-614-495-741-7

Chief Editor: China Maritime Museum, Shanghai
Responsible Editor: Guo Dandan
Printing Supervisor: Shao Chao
Cover Designer: Han Muhua
Layout and Typesetting: Gu’an Zhuoyiyuan Culture and Media Co., Ltd.

Compiled by: Tongqu Publishing Co., Ltd.
Published by: Posts & Telecom Press

All rights reserved. Any infringement will be prosecuted. If you discover any quality issues, please contact the Reader Services Department directly at 010-81054177.

Editorial Board

Consultant: Gao Menghe
Chair: Zhao Feng
Vice Chairs: Cong Jianguo, Wang Yu, Lu Wei, Fu Xiao
Editorial Board Members: Zeng Lingsong, Qi Yuguo, Shen Qiang, Huang Qianwei

Authors

Yu Yanyan, Zhou Shu, Zhou Tian, Wang Lingling, Chen Xueping,
Song Kai, Pan Dongyan, Liu Dandan, Yang Yang, Xiao Jie,
Lu Jiayu, Zhang Duoduo, Jiang Boren, Zhou Yinying, Jiang Xiaohan,
Zhou Min, Dong Ni, Du Liye.

Publishing Committee

Chair: Li Wen
Vice Chairs: Ma Jia, Shi Yan, Liu Youyi
Members:
Zhou Xiu, Dai Dongmei, Qi Jie, Zhao Qian, Song Fei, Ren Lixin,
Guo Dandan, Zhao Xiaona, Shen Zhenyi, Zheng Mengyu, Wang He, Hu Hui,
Li Yao, Wang Ying, Zhang Fang, Shang Xuemin, Song Juan, Wu Min,
Shao Jiannan, Ye Mengjia, Zhao Yuhua, Wang Chuize, Wang Yuejing.

Acknowledgements

The Cultural Heritage Publishing Committee of the Chinese Cultural Relics Society.
China COSCO Shipping Corporation Limited.



Preface



Covering about 70 percent of the Earth's surface, the ocean is not only the cradle of life but also a vital channel through which civilizations have expanded and connected. China's relationship with the sea reaches far into antiquity. For thousands of years, its shipbuilding traditions have reflected remarkable ingenuity and legendary feats.

Let's travel back eight millennia to the rich wetlands of the lower Yangtze River—home to the unique Kuahuqiao culture. Among the fascinating relics left by this society, one discovery stands out: a perfectly preserved dugout canoe. This vessel represents one of the earliest examples of human maritime activity, silently witnessing our ancestors' curiosity and exploration of rivers, lakes, and seas.

From the Qin and Han dynasties onward, China's shipbuilding industry flourished. Advancements continued through the Sui, Tang, Song, and Yuan dynasties, reaching an apex during the Ming dynasty. By then, Chinese shipbuilding was globally unparalleled, supported by a rigorous and efficient administrative system. Techniques and craftsmanship achieved unprecedented sophistication. It was in this context that Zheng He set sail with his massive fleets, undertaking seven legendary voyages that left an enduring legacy in China's maritime history.

In honor of Zheng He's achievements and with approval from the State Council, the Ministry of Transport and the Shanghai Municipal Government established the China Maritime Museum—the country's first national museum dedicated to maritime heritage. Its mission is to celebrate China's maritime civilization, provide a platform for international exchange, support Shanghai's development as a global shipping hub, and inspire young people to engage with maritime culture. Here, visitors can trace the evolution of Chinese seafaring and navigational technology from ancient times to the present, witnessing the ongoing story of China's maritime development.

The year 2025 marks the 620th anniversary of Zheng He's voyage. To commemorate this milestone, A Children's Encyclopedia of the Thousand-Year History of the Maritime Silk Road was published. Consisting of four volumes, this book 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. Each volume opens a window onto nautical wonders, inviting young readers to set sail through history.

Special thanks are due to the authors and illustrators whose vibrant storytelling brings these ancient adventures to life. We invite young readers to embark on this journey with open eyes and curious hearts.

May every child who opens these books become a little navigator—discovering wonders and joy along the way, gathering courage for life's journey, and sailing boldly into the world's vast horizons!

China Maritime Museum

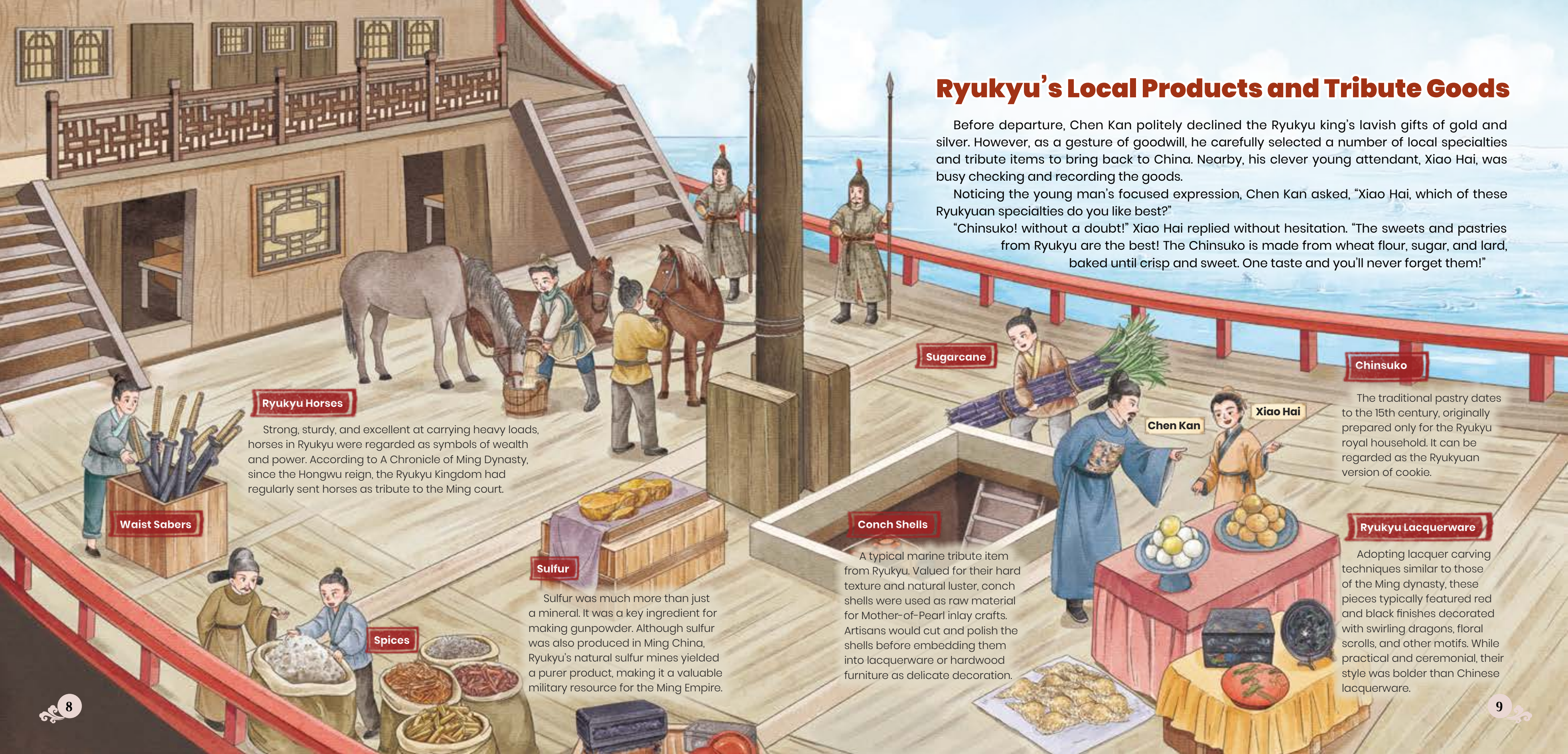




The Investiture Ship Returns

During the Ming dynasty, Chinese shipbuilding and navigation technology ranked among the most advanced in the world. In addition to the well-known Zheng He's expedition, the Ming court established a systematic tributary 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 deepening cultural and commercial ties with countries overseas.

In the 13th year of the Jiajing reign (1534 AD), 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.



Ryukyu's Local Products and Tribute Goods

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

Noticing the young man's focused expression, Chen Kan asked, "Xiao Hai, which of these Ryukyuan specialties do you like best?"

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

Ryukyu Horses

Strong, sturdy, and excellent at carrying heavy loads, horses in Ryukyu were regarded as symbols of wealth and power. According to A Chronicle of Ming Dynasty, since the Hongwu reign, the Ryukyu Kingdom had regularly sent horses as tribute to the Ming court.

Waist Sabers

Sulfur

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

Spices

Sugarcane

Conch Shells

A typical marine tribute item from Ryukyu. Valued for their hard texture and natural luster, conch shells were used as raw material for Mother-of-Pearl inlay crafts. Artisans would cut and polish the shells before embedding them into lacquerware or hardwood furniture as delicate decoration.

Chinsuko

The traditional pastry dates to the 15th century, originally prepared only for the Ryukyu royal household. It can be regarded as the Ryukyuan version of cookie.

Chen Kan

Xiao Hai

Ryukyu Lacquerware

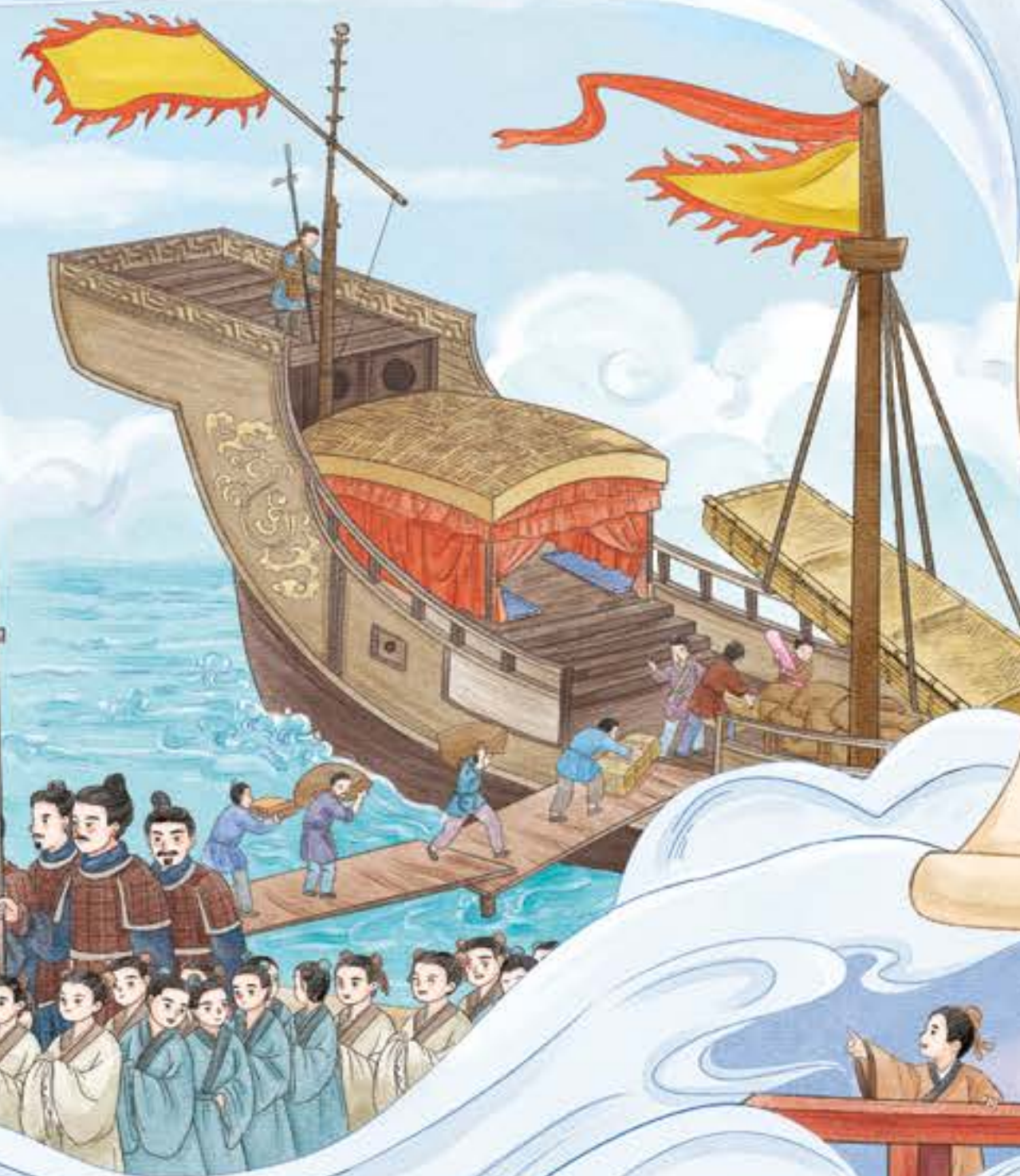
Adopting lacquer carving techniques similar to those of the Ming dynasty, these pieces typically featured red and black finishes decorated with swirling dragons, floral scrolls, and other motifs. While practical and ceremonial, their style was bolder than Chinese lacquerware.

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

The investiture ship sailed steadily across 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 a mountain of immortals! Do you think immortals live there?"

Chen Kan laughed. "That's a mirage. But speaking of immortal mountains at 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 Chinese First Emperor, sought immortality. An alchemist named Xu Fu told him that far out at sea lay three mystical mountains—Penglai, Fangzhang, and Yingzhou—where 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 techniques there..."

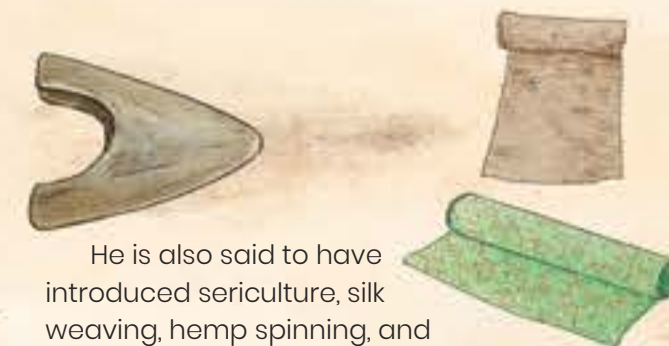


Do You Know?

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.

One story claims Xu Fu brought rice cultivation technology to Japan, along with improved farming tools and irrigation methods, greatly increasing grain yields and helping end famine.



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



Another story claims that Xu Fu shared medical knowledge that helped combat disease and improve public health, leaving a lasting mark on Japanese medicine.



Silk and the Roman Empire

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

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

That was just 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 water—silk. The nobles of Rome were captivated by it. So they sent envoys on a long, difficult journey across mountains and seas, all the way to the Han Dynasty..."

"Your robe is mended, Mr. Chen!"

Do You Know? How Is Silk Made?

1. Silkworms Munching on Mulberry Leaves

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

2. Spinning Silk and Forming Cocoons

The mature silkworms will find a quiet spot and begins spinning a fine silk thread from its mouth, wrapping themselves layer by layer into oval 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 up to 1,000 meters long.

4. Weaving Beautiful 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 up to 1,000 meters long.



That's even older than my grandfather! Remarkable!

The Earliest “Voyage Log” — A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms

As Xiao Hai daydreamed about shimmering silk, he noticed Chen Kan was writing something. Curious, he moved closer and asked, “Sir, what do you write 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 AD, Faxian and his companions set out westward 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 time, he met other monks, finished their Vassa retreat for the rainy season, and planned the next stage of his journey.

● Reaching Qianguiguo (now Lanzhou, Gansu)

● Writing A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms

Back in China, Faxian compiled his travels into the celebrated work A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms, which included systematic notes on Indian Ocean monsoons and long-distance sailing—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, stopped for five months at the Kingdom of Yepoti. Then he embarked on another vessel that finally brought him to Changguang Commandery (now Laoshan District, Qingdao, Shandong Province).

● Finally Reaching Tianzhu

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

● Traveling to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka)

After Tianzhu, he sailed to Ceylon, where he stayed two years gathering more Buddhist scriptures before planning his return by sea.

Xiao Hai looked puzzled. “But Mr. Chen, didn’t Faxian travel to India by land? Why did he write a voyage log?” Chen Kan smiled, “you have a good ear for details! Faxian did go west by land, but after 14 years traveling through 30 countries, he returned by sea”. Xiao Hai’s face lit up for this satisfying explanation.

● Crossing the Congling Mountains, (now Pamir Plateau and its surrounding ranges)

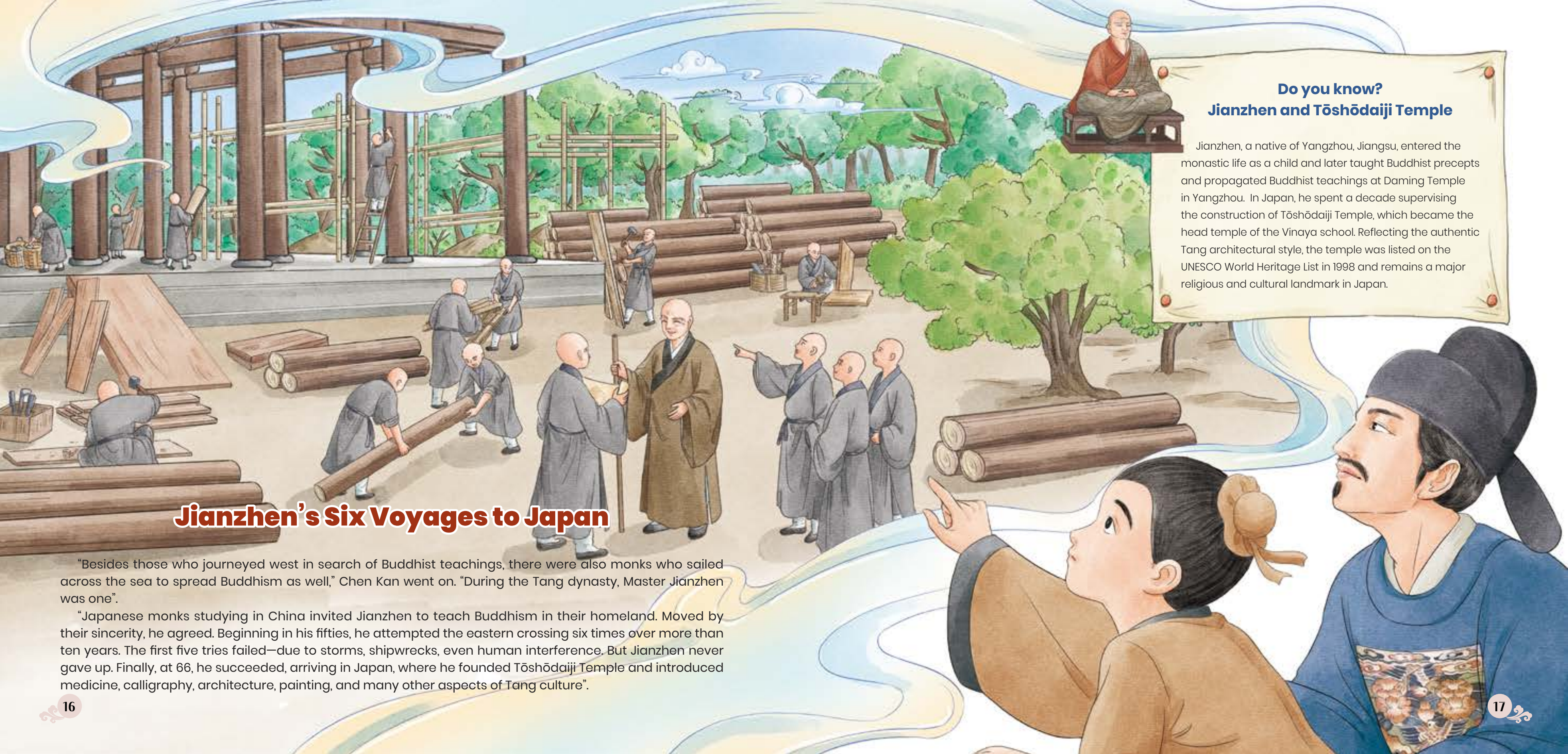
● Reaching Khotan Khotan Kingdom (now Hotan, Xinjiang)

● Passing through Shanshan Kingdom (now Ruoqiang, Xinjiang)

● Entering Dunhuang

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

● Crossing the Taklamakan Desert



Do you know? Jianzhen and Tōshōdaiji Temple

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

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 as well,” Chen Kan went on. “During the Tang dynasty, Master Jianzhen was one”.

“Japanese monks studying in China invited Jianzhen to teach Buddhism in their homeland. Moved by their sincerity, he agreed. Beginning in his fifties, he attempted the eastern crossing six times over more than ten years. The first five tries failed—due to storms, shipwrecks, even human interference. But Jianzhen never gave up. Finally, at 66, he succeeded, arriving in Japan, where he founded Tōshōdaiji Temple and introduced medicine, calligraphy, architecture, painting, and many other aspects of Tang culture”.

Du Huan's Captivity and Return via the Red Sea

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

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

"In the 10th year of Tang Dynasty's Tianbao reign (751 AD), Du Huan joined General Gao Xianzhi's army on a westward expedition. At the Battle of Talas (now Kazakhstan), they fought Arab forces and were defeated. Du Huan was captured, but his knowledge earned him good treatment. He traveled widely, learned Arabic, and even taught Chinese papermaking to local craftsmen".

About eleven years later, Du Huan was released. He boarded a merchant ship sailing from the Red Sea in Egypt, and returned home safe.

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



Do you know?

The Wonder of Ancient Papermaking

Papermaking is one of China's Four Great Inventions. By the Western Han dynasty, the basic process was known. During the Eastern Han, Cai Lun improved it by using achievable and cost-effective materials like tree bark, hemp, rags, and old fishing nets, lowering costs and raising quality. By the Tang dynasty, papermaking had advanced further, with bamboo paper coming into use.

Du Huan



Foreign Guests in Tang China — Abe no Nakamaro

As sunset colored the horizon, Xiao Hai leaned on the railing, reflecting on all he had heard. Then he asked curiously, “Sir, during the Tang dynasty, did people from other countries come to China, too?”

“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 traveled to China with a Kentōshi mission. He admired Tang culture so much that he took a Chinese name—Chao Heng. He passed the imperial exams, became an official, and won favor at court. Learned and well-liked, Chao Heng made friends with famous poets like 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...”

“Though the ship was wrecked and many people died or got injured, Chao Heng survived and found his way back to Chang’an, where he lived for the rest of his life”.

“Did he survive?”

Just as Xiao Hai was lost in the story—WHOOSH!—a violent typhoon struck without warning, and the tribute ship began to pitch and roll...

When Li Bai heard rumors that Chao Heng had perished at sea, with great grief, he wrote this poem:

Mourning Chao Heng

By Li Bai (Tang Dynasty)

“Japan’s Chao Heng departs the royal town,
His lone sail fades past islands’ crown.
The bright moon sinks into the sea so blue,
While white clouds mourn over Cangwu’s view”.

The Watertight Bulkheads to the Rescue!

Suddenly, the mast groaned as fierce winds whipped it. The pilot gripped the tiller with full strength and shouted, “Reef the sails! Be quick! 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 pilot. The captain, pale and breathless, reported, “Sir, the waves are too strong! The planks have cracked—water is coming in!” “Inspect it at once! Do everything you can to make repairs!” Chen Kan ordered with a stern tone.

Soon a sailor rushed in: “Two compartments are leaking!” The captain acted decisively: “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 followed the sound of rushing water to locate the leaks. They quickly stuffed rags and old cotton into the gaps to slow the inflow.



“Yes,” Chen Kan nodded. “The watertight compartment is a brilliant invention. If one section floods, the others stay dry, keeping the ship afloat”.

“Sir, that was terrifying! Thank goodness for watertight bulkheads!” Xiao Hai exclaimed.

Meanwhile, three helmsmen strained at the rudder, struggling to keep the ship on course as they awaited the captain's orders to change course.



Nearby, artisans hammered caulking material—made from ramie fiber, 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 continued, “Storms were common at sea, but the ancients had clever ways to cope. Beyond shipbuilding skills, we also had advanced navigation tools—like 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 (now the Korea). His fleet also encountered a terrible storm—so violent that the rudder broke!

Luckily, their ships were strong 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.



Do you know?

The “Shenzhou Ships” and “Guest Ships”

Xu Jing’s fleet was sizable, including two shenzhou ships (“divine vessels”) and six “guest ships”. The shenzhou ships were grand official ships for envoys, lavishly decorated. Guest ships were privately owned merchant vessels requisitioned by the government—smaller than the shenzhou ships but well-designed.

According to the book *Account of the Mission to Goryeo* in the Xuanhe Era, the Layout of a guest ship is scientifically planned. The front cabin housed a stove and water tanks, with soldiers living below, while the midsection has been divided into four compartments for more efficient space management.

The rear cabin is where officials rested. It was richly decorated, with bamboo awnings that could be opened during rainy days.

The shenzhou ships shared a similar layout with the guest ships but three times larger than it —so massive they looked like floating mountains, drawing crowds wherever they docked.



Marco Polo and Yuan Dynasty Adventures

Xiao Hai had been caught in wondering and finally asked eagerly, “Mr. Chen, our navigation skills were so advanced—how about other countries?”

Chen Kan smiled. “Other nations had their own strengths. Exchange between China and the wider world never stopped. One good example is Marco Polo. Born in a Venetian merchant family, he grew up hearing tales of the East’s wealth and mystery. At 17, he set off with his father and uncle, traveling four years before reaching the capital of Yuan dynasty Shangdu (now Plain Blue Banner, Inner Mongolia.) He later visited many Chinese cities, leaving his footprints in bustling capitals and the scenic Jiangnan region. When he returned home, he spoke endlessly about the wonders of the East, sparking European fascination with China”.

Xiao Hai agreed, “Thanks to people like Marco Polo, we were able to increase our interaction with other countries”.

Do You Know? The Travels of Marco Polo

During the 17 years that Marco Polo stayed in China, he travelled to many different places. Fine porcelain made from plain clay, paper and even print money produced from tree bark, “black stones” (coal) used as fuel for multiple use, and a fast, efficient courier system based on relay stations...Marco Polo shared those remarkable observations with people who later compiled them into a journal, *The Travels of Marco Polo*. The book became a window for Europe into the mysterious Eastern World.

Wang Dayuan's Adventures

"I want to be like Marco Polo," Xiao Hai said eagerly, "to sail across oceans and write a book full of sea stories!"

Chen Kan chuckled. "Then you have a perfect model to follow! During the Yuan dynasty, a legendary civilian navigator named Wang Dayuan set out to see the world. He was born in Nanchang, a city bustling with merchant ships. From a young age, he yearned for the sea. At 19, he joined a trading ship as a crew member and embarked on his first voyage. While others focused on selling porcelain and silk, Wang paid close attention to local customs and curious sights. In his book *Brief Records of Island Barbarians*, he described exotic peoples and places — A land where people bound wooden boards to their children's heads, to shape their heads into a square. Another place where men and women shaved their heads, ate banana plants, boiled seawater for salt, and traded it for grain".

Xiao Hai was spellbound, as if sailing alongside Wang Dayuan on his voyages and marveling at one strange custom after another.

● Examples from Wang Dayuan's Travels

Longxianyu (now near Sumatra, possibly Belas Island):

A flat, square island with no inhabitants. It produced ambergris, a fragrant whale secretion. In clear weather, pods of sperm whales could be seen spouting nearby. Local fishermen paddled canoes to collect ambergris for trade.

● Zhenla (now Cambodia):

He marveled at the luxury of the aristocracy: palaces adorned with golden walls, chairs inlaid with jewels. The fertile land yielded rhino horns, peacocks, and many other treasures.



● Manali (possibly East Africa or Northern Australia):

An island covered in trees, surrounded by sea, with oyster mounds piled like hills, strange birds (which Wang called "immortal cranes") danced when people clapped. And camels were raised here for transporting heavy goods.

Do you know? Wang Dayuan's Adventures Overseas

Wang Dayuan has lived a life of legends and wonders, all these adventures have been documented in his book *Brief Records of Island Barbarians*.



Treasure ship

Known as “the ship carrying treasures” it was primarily used to transport trade goods, tributary items, and imperial gifts. The largest of these treasure ships, serving as the flagship of Zheng He’s fleet, accommodated commanders, diplomatic envoys, and foreign ambassadors.

The main fleet of Zheng He

The fleet comprised the following vessel types besides the flagship treasure ships:



Combat Command Ship

The primary, large escort warship of the fleet, serving as the vessel for military commanders and their staff.



Combat Ship

smaller than the combat command ship, its main duties were fleet escort and maritime combat.



Horse Ship

a multi-purpose transport. Primarily used for carrying warhorses and armaments, it featured a long, narrow hull for greater speed and also served roles in reconnaissance, communications, and combat support.



Grain Ship

responsible for transporting food and logistical supplies to ensure the fleet’s provisions along the voyage.

Logistics Detachment



Water Ship

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



Mid-sized Coastal Transport Vessels



Double-Eight-Oar Vessel: A mid-sized transport vessel



Six-Oar Vessel: A small transport vessel

Zheng He's Legendary Voyages to the Western Seas

"Look ahead—it's our Ming harbor!" Xiao Hai cried joyfully. Sailors rushed to the deck, cheering. Chen Kan walked out of the cabin, gazing at his homeland with deep emotion. He began to speak about the greatest maritime legend of their dynasty: "In the early Ming, Lord Zheng He commanded more than 200 ships and 20,000 crew members on seven voyages to the Western Seas. His fleets were awe-inspiring, featuring enormous treasure ships as flagships, supported by escort vessels, horse transports, grain carriers, water ships, and troop ships. The crew included envoys, soldiers, navigators, cooks, interpreters, traders, craftsmen, and more".

The fleet led by Lord Zheng He carried all kinds of our treasures," Chen Kan continued to explain, "with high-quality silk, imperial porcelain, classical texts, top-quality tea, medicine and lacquerware, as well as chests of gold and silver, they traveled to over 30 different lands".

The "Qilin" (Giraffe) Tribute

Wherever they went, Zheng He's fleet generously presented gifts to show goodwill and imperial prestige. They also engaged in trade and brought back exotic treasures—including Huafu deers (zebras), coral, jewels, and an animal the locals called "Qilin".

"What's a Qilin, Mr. Chen?"

"It was a rare creature with an extraordinarily long neck. When Zheng He's fleet reached Malindi (in modern Kenya), they saw this animal and learned locals called it 'Girin.' Once our envoys saw its unique appearance, they immediately believed it was the mythical Qilin in Chinese folk tales, so they brought it to the emperor as tribute", said Chen Kan.

Later, envoys from Bengal (now Bangladesh and West Bengal in India) also sent a "Qilin"(giraffe) to China! This story became one of the most famous tales of cultural exchange".

After many days at sea, the investiture mission finally returned safely to a Ming port. Chen Kan had fulfilled his duty to the Ryukyu Kingdom, written a beautiful new chapter to the friendship between China and Ryukyu.

For thousands of years, countless navigators used their lives as vessels and their faith as sails, opening sea routes where civilizations met. Their indomitable spirit shines like an eternal lighthouse, inspiring generation after generation to set sail and explore the world.



Great Pioneers Who Linked East and West

Zhang Qian

A famous military leader and diplomat of the Eastern Han Dynasty. He left his writing career to join the army and led campaigns in Central Asia. He spent 31 years there, helping restore Han control, reopen the Silk Road, and strengthen trade and cultural exchanges between China and the West.

Ban Chao

Pei Ju

Xuanzang

An outstanding diplomat and explorer of the Western Han Dynasty. Commissioned by Emperor Wu, he undertook two perilous missions to the Western Regions, pioneering the world-renowned Silk Road. His journeys opened the door to exchanges between China and the regions of Central Asia, West Asia, and Europe, fostering the integration of Eastern and Western politics, economics, and culture.

Yijing

A famous Buddhist monk of the Tang Dynasty and an important figure on the Maritime Silk Road. In 671 CE, he sailed from Guangzhou to India, traveling through more than 30 countries over 20 years. He later returned to China with about 400 Buddhist manuscripts in Sanskrit.

A prominent diplomat and politician of the Sui and Tang dynasties. He managed affairs in Central Asia and supervised border trade from Zhangye. He also gathered information about the region and wrote an illustrated account describing the main routes from Dunhuang to Central Asia, helping strengthen trade between the Sui Dynasty and the region.

Yang Liangyao

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

Yang Tingbi

A famous navigator and diplomat of the Sui Dynasty. In 607 CE, he was sent on a diplomatic mission to the Kingdom of Chitu, in present-day Southeast Asia. His mission began official relations and helped promote political and trade exchanges along the Maritime Silk Road.

Chang Jun

Tales of China and the World

Promoting maritime culture and sharing Chinese civilization

