

Soft power on the high seas

One pillar of China's program is research that sheds light on the Zheng He era. Roughly a decade ago, China marked the 600-year anniversary of Zheng He's first voyage with a slew of cultural events, including conferences, commemorative stamps, comics, and a musical stage show. Scientists took part as well. In 2003, archaeologists in Nanjing excavated the shipyard where Zheng He's boats were built. They unearthed two rudders that have shed light on Ming-era shipbuilding techniques. The knowledge is now being used to create a replica of one of the admiral's treasure ships, which later this year will set sail along an old Maritime Silk Road route.

The holy grail would be the discovery of a wreck from Zheng He's fleet. To that end, China is looking farther afield and brokering partnerships with countries whose coastal waters the admiral's fleet reached. In 2012, researchers from the Chinese Academy of Sciences' Institute of Acoustics spent 2 weeks using side-scan sonar on a mostly fruitless search for wrecks in the Gulf of Oman. The first round of an even more ambitious project recently concluded in Kenya, where archaeologists from NMC and Peking University in Beijing worked with counterparts from the National Museums of Kenya (NMK) in Nairobi to excavate sites near the route traversed by Zheng He's fleet in 1418, some 80 years before Vasco da Gama rounded the Cape of Good Hope. The \$3.2 million, 3-year project searched both underwater and on land. "We have found a lot of areas that have potential," says NMK's Caesar Bitu, one of two underwater archaeologists in the country.

The effort in Kenya has its roots in unsubstantiated reports published by Western journalists in the 1990s, says Qin Dashu, who headed up the project's land excavations. Reporters visiting islands in the Lamu Archipelago, off the coast of Kenya, met locals who claimed to have Chinese heritage. One of Zheng He's ships had sunk nearby, the theory went, and sailors swam ashore, eventually marrying local women. Ming dynasty texts state that the admiral's

fleet reached the kingdom of Malindi, in what is now Kenya, but they do not mention a shipwreck. In 2005, however, the Chinese government sponsored a young woman from Lamu claiming to be of Chinese descent to study in Nanjing. (Her DNA has not been tested to prove this claim, Qin notes.) The prospect of finding concrete evidence of Zheng He's voyages to Africa intrigued the wife of a member of China's vaunted State Council, Qin says, and the government greenlighted the archaeological project.

The team uncovered intriguing material—though not entirely what officials had in

of porcelain bearing the mark of Zhu Di's imperial kiln. Alone, the coins might simply have meant that smugglers had reached Malindi. But the porcelain suggested something more, Qin says: "It's very unusual to find an [imperial] shard in an African site. It proves that there was some official relationship" between the kingdom and China at the time.

China hopes to broker a similar project with Sri Lanka, the site of the only known inscription referring to Zheng He outside of China. Several years ago, Sri Lanka's culture minister met with administrators from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences' Institute of Archaeology to discuss collaborating in underwater archaeology. But the talks have apparently stalled. Officials on both sides may be wary of exploring a dark period for Sri Lanka. In 1411, Zheng He's armada invaded Sri Lanka and hauled a local ruler back to the Ming court, replacing him with a puppet ruler.

Geoffrey Wade, a maritime historian at Australian National University in Canberra, notes that Chinese officials cast Zheng He's exploits as "nonexpansionist and nonaggressive, completely unlike the European colonialists." He and others demur, citing historical accounts of Zheng He's fleet using military force, meddling in civil wars, and imposing unequal trading terms. The armada's intervention in Sri Lanka, Wade says, is "one of the most obvious examples of nonpeace and nonfriendship" from the era.

Political aims?

At the Indo-Pacific Prehistory Association Congress in Hanoi in 2009, Staniforth attended several presentations by Chinese researchers affiliated with mainland government institutions and museums. Some researchers reported on archaeological efforts in the Paracel and Spratly islands, contested archipelagos in the South China Sea. The Paracels are separately claimed by China, Taiwan, and Vietnam, and the Spratlys by Brunei, China, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam. Chinese underwater archaeologists are now searching for wrecks in both areas—and the tone of their



Wealth of a nation. Among the relics from the *Nanhai 1* wreck uncovered by archaeologist Cui Yong's team are a pitcher and a celadon bowl from an imperial kiln.



mind. Searching the waters around Lamu, the archaeologists found a local shipwreck laden with pottery. Based on a preliminary analysis of a single shard of Chinese porcelain, the archaeologists believe the wreck to be from the 14th century, too early to say anything about the Zheng He era. At a second underwater site about 40 kilometers from Malindi, they unearthed another red herring: a remnant of a vessel with the telltale triangular sail shape common to local ships.

The notion of a Zheng He shipwreck remains "just a tale," Qin says. But excavating onshore in Mamburi, a coastal site north of Malindi, his team found other evidence of China's influence in Africa: coins from the time of the Yongle Emperor Zhu Di, who was Zheng He's patron, along with shards