

Neither Cham inscriptions nor Chinese or Vietnamese records reveal additional information regarding the role of Cham shipping in relation to other parts of Southeast Asia; their trade relationship with China is clearer. From the earliest period of their ascendancy in Viet Nam, the Cham sent tribute missions to China: "Champa shows in Chinese records as the most faithful sender of tribute missions whenever the state was well enough organized to do so. . . . About twenty missions were sent in the seventh century, and a similar number in the ninth—far more than other Southeast Asian states of much larger population."<sup>49</sup> The number of trade missions in the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries was much higher. The Cham sent eighty-five trade missions between 1369 and 1509—fifty-eight between 1369 and 1430, and twenty-seven between 1430 and 1509—more than any of the Southeast Asian ports. The Thai state of Ayutthaya, with eighty-one missions, was next highest.<sup>50</sup>

At the same time that the Southeast Asian states were sending tribute missions to China, the Chinese Ming (1368–1644) emperors, in search of alliances and luxury goods, sent exploratory missions to Southeast Asia. A recent article points out that the early Ming emperors also sought control of the trade in the Eastern Ocean, as the twenty thousand military men accompanying some of these missions suggest.<sup>51</sup> The third Ming Emperor, Yongle (1403–1424), sent nine missions to Champa. The most famous missions sent to the south (though numerous other eunuch-led missions were sent) were the spectacular journeys of Zheng He, who traveled with fleets of more than a hundred ships and tens of thousands of soldiers.<sup>52</sup> While these missions stimulated state-controlled trade and the Chinese desire for Southeast Asian goods, they also familiarized the Chinese with trade routes and gave them an opportunity to establish their own networks of trade, which would have adversely affected the business of Southeast Asian traders.

From as early as the fifth century, Chinese histories report Champa piracy, a problem that probably arose when ports found themselves making insufficient profit from the merchants who did—or did not—come ashore. The geography of the coastline, like that of the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra (another region with many passing trade ships), provided the pirates with good business opportunities and ample places to hide among the islands and in the river mouths along the coast.<sup>53</sup> When the various polities were able to draw the taxes and otherwise benefit from the trade taking place in their ports, the kings would have been able to concentrate on other aspects of rule.

Unfortunately, the Vietnamese chronicles that regale us with tales of Champa concentrate on wars, plunder, and piracy, rather than on periods of good relations and economic stability, while the Chinese sources are most thorough in describing what affected them—the tribute missions. The inscriptions dedicating temples also give few details of royal activity during times of peace, but they do provide clues to regions that were thriving, since the very act of constructing or refurbishing a temple suggests some degree of economic stability. Until the end of the twentieth century, scholars viewed Champa as a single kingdom and regarded the inscriptions from the region as a record of a continuum. Recent scholarship, with its new understanding of separate polities that existed in different geographic areas at different times, has begun to reassess the Cham and Sanskrit inscriptions, though a great deal of work remains to be done to acquire a clearer history of the area.<sup>54</sup>