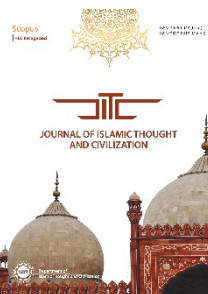
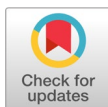


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- Author (s):** Zikwan¹ and Edi Kurniawan^{1,2}
- Affiliation (s):** ¹UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi, Indonesia
²UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, Indonesia
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Department of Islamic Thought and Civilization, School of Social Science and Humanities
University of Management and Technology, Lahore, Pakistan

Revisiting Zheng He's Image in Malay-Muslim Civilization: Political Challenges and Religio-Cultural Opportunities in Southeast Asia

Zikwan*^{ib}

Department of Islamic Political Thought,
UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi,
Indonesia

Edi Kurniawan^{ib}

Graduate School
UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta,
Indonesia
Faculty of Sharia,
UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi,
Indonesia

Abstract

In recent decades, the Chinese government has increasingly promoted Admiral Zheng He – known in Southeast Asia as Cheng Ho - as a symbol of peaceful diplomacy and intercultural harmony, embedding this image within its broader soft power strategy in the Muslim world. However, this diplomatic initiative intersects with complex regional realities in Southeast Asia, where religious identity, historical memory, and cultural sovereignty are deeply rooted. This article revisits Zheng He's image within the context of Malay-Muslim civilization, with particular attention to Indonesia and Malaysia, highlighting its relevance to contemporary political and religio-cultural dynamics. Adopting a multidisciplinary approach that integrates historical analysis, civilizational studies, and regional geopolitics, the article explores how Zheng He's legacy is perceived, reinterpreted, and contested among Malay-Muslim communities. The findings reveal a dual dynamic: on the one hand, Zheng He's legacy offers opportunities to strengthen cultural diplomacy, economic collaboration, and interfaith dialogue in Southeast Asia; on the other hand, it presents challenges related to local political sensitivities, religious identity, and historical contestation. While Zheng He provides a shared historical reference point fostering inter-civilizational dialogue and religious tolerance, his symbolic usage also raises critical questions about political motives, cultural authenticity, and historical appropriation. Ultimately, this article contributes to a more critical understanding of how historical figures are mobilized within modern geopolitical narratives and their implications for identity politics in Muslim-majority regions of Southeast Asia. More broadly, the article offers insights for Chinese policymakers and states engaged in diplomacy with China.

Keyword: cultural identity, political diplomacy, religio-cultural dialogue, Southeast Asia, Zheng He

Introduction

Zheng He¹—known in Southeast Asia, especially in Indonesia and Malaysia as Cheng Ho—has been reinterpreted in China's contemporary diplomatic narrative as a symbol of peaceful

*Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Zikwan, Associate Professor at Department of Islamic Political Thought, UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi, Indonesia at zikwan@uinjambi.ac.id

¹Zheng He (郑和) is his original name in Mandarin Chinese and is internationally recognized in English-language scholarship through the pinyin romanization system. By contrast, the designation Cheng Ho—derived from Hokkien or Cantonese dialects—has been more prevalent in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia, where it was transmitted through the Chinese diaspora.

engagement and intercultural harmony.² This positioning aligns with China's soft power initiatives directed at Muslim-majority countries.³ Through cultural diplomacy and public symbolism, Beijing portrays Zheng He as a symbolic precursor to modern Chinese diplomacy in Southeast Asia.⁴ This is evidenced by the fact that, in recent years, the Chinese government has built museums, hosted festivals, exhibitions, academic activities, and heritage tours to highlight Zheng He's maritime expeditions as an instrument of soft power to legitimize its influence in the eyes of regional partners.⁵ However, acceptance of this narrative varies across the region, especially in areas sensitive to cultural sovereignty. Furthermore, this narrative also intersects with complex regional dynamics shaped by strong religious identities and local historical memories.⁶ Therefore, this article places Zheng He within the context of Malay-Muslim civilization to assess his contemporary political relevance and religio-cultural implications.

Existing literature on Zheng He is generally divided into two strands: historical scholarship on his voyages, and modern political-cultural analyses of his symbolic reinterpretation. Historical works recount his missions to Malacca, Palembang, and Java, among others, as tributary ventures under Ming sovereignty.⁷ Yet his role as a Muslim envoy has been unevenly remembered. Zheng He is praised in Southeast Asia as both a diplomat and a transmitter of Islam, but remains absent in Indonesian school curricula, reflecting selective historiography.⁸ Similarly, the Cheng Ho Mosque in Surabaya functions both as a site of worship and as a mediator of social relations, linking Sino-Muslim identity to wider Chinese diplomacy.⁹ Complementing this, studies of the Cheng Ho Pandaan Mosque, Indonesia, reveal how its red walls, pagoda roof, and *ba gua* ceiling embody Sino-Javanese-Muslim acculturation and symbolize prosperity and hybridity.¹⁰ Beyond Southeast Asia, Zheng He

²Donald E. Weatherbee, *International Relations in Southeast Asia: The Struggle for Autonomy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 145–148.

³Choirul Mahfud, "The Role of Cheng Ho Mosque: The New Silk Road, Indonesia-China Relations in Islamic Cultural Identity," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 8, no. 1 (2014): 23–38.

⁴Tritto, Angela, and Punto Wijayanto. "The Maritime Silk Road: Tourism, Heritage, Symbols and the People-to-People Dimension of Chinas Heritage Diplomacy in Indonesia." In *Heritage Conservation and Chinas Belt and Road Initiative*, edited by Victor C. M. Chan, Yew-Foong Hui, Desmond Hui, and Kazem Vafadari, 160–175. London: Routledge, 2023.

⁵Yunci Cai, "Rethinking Heritage Diplomacy on the Maritime Silk Road," in *The Museum in Asia: Imagining the Cultural Nation*, ed. Yunci Cai and Jack Loh (London: Routledge, 2025), 206–20; Tansen Sen, "Inventing the 'Maritime Silk Road,'" *Modern Asian Studies* 57, no. 4 (2023): 1059–1104, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X22000348>; Wang Gungwu, *The Maritime Silk Road: History, Politics and Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2021), 5–7.

⁶Joshua Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power is Transforming the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 89–112.

⁷Edward L. Dreyer, *Zheng He: China and the Oceans in the Early Ming Dynasty, 1405–1433* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2007), 123–145.

⁸Fitri Rofiyarti, "Popularity and Representation of Zheng Hes Image: Pre-Eliminary Research," *Journal of Integrative International Relations*, 5, no.1 (2020): 29–31.

⁹Eva Putriya Hasanah et al., "Cheng Ho Mosque and Social Status: A Study on the Existence of Chinese Muslim within Sociocultural Relations in Surabaya, Indonesia," *Harmoni* 21, no. 2 (2022): 202–204, <https://doi.org/10.32488/harmoni.v21i2.637>.

¹⁰Tiara Rijayanti Fitriana and Tiara Isfiaty, "Cultural Acculturation in the Interior of Cheng Ho Pandaan Mosque in East Java," *Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on Business, Economics, Social Sciences, and Humanities (ICOBEST)*, vol. 7 (Bandung: Universitas Komputer Indonesia, 2024), 147–156, <https://doi.org/10.34010/3n6k5w09>.

also forged Afro-Asian linkages, connecting maritime Asia to Islamic polities in Africa and Arabia, thus amplifying his stature as a transregional broker of culture and faith.¹¹

Scholars of soft power—such as Nye and Kurlantzick—have demonstrated how states deploy symbolic history to project a benign image abroad.¹² Within Southeast Asia, China's rise following the 1997 economic crisis marked a pivotal moment for its charm offensive.¹³ Since then, Beijing has amplified its presence through Confucius Institutes, cultural showcases, and educational outreach. In Malaysia, for instance, Confucius Institutes form part of China's wider cultural diplomacy—alongside provincial initiatives and the “Chinese Dream”—but remain contested over propaganda, autonomy, and effectiveness.¹⁴ In parallel with these institutional efforts, Zheng He has been increasingly highlighted in festivals and commemorations as a historical figure aligned with China's narrative of peaceful engagement.¹⁵ Mosques dedicated to him in Surabaya and Pandaan, Indonesia, also materialize Sino-Muslim identity, operating as nodes of religio-cultural diplomacy that Beijing symbolically leverages.¹⁶ In the Indonesian case, however, recent scholarship finds that China's cultural soft power strategy—whether through scholarships for Muslim students, Confucius Institutes, or diaspora networks—has only partly succeeded: it influences policy alignment with initiatives like the Belt and Road, but remains ineffective at dispelling public suspicion and historical sensitivities.¹⁷ Yet the resonance of this narrative is shaped by local identity politics, where symbolism may be welcomed as heritage or rejected as imposition.

Beyond the Indonesian context, these cultural strategies intersect with broader geopolitical objectives embedded in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and China-ASEAN frameworks.¹⁸ Heritage institutions such as the Quanzhou Maritime Museum and the Zheng He Cultural Museum in Malacca reframe Zheng He's legacy within BRI discourse, localizing narratives while aligning them with China's global strategy.¹⁹ Similarly, Kong (2021) demonstrates how international exhibitions—ranging from Terracotta Warriors to Ming artifacts—act as instruments of cultural

¹¹John W. Chaffee, *Zheng He and the Afro-Asian World, 1415–2021* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2018), 12–15.

¹²Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004), 78–95; Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power is Transforming the World*, 34–56.

¹³Derek McDougall, *The International Politics of the New Asia Pacific* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2011), 167–189.

¹⁴Ngu Ik Tien and Ngeow Chow Bing, “Soft Power, Confucius Institute and China's Cultural Diplomacy in Malaysia,” *Kajian Malaysia* 39, no. 1 (2021): 55–76.

¹⁵Xinyue Ma, *Cultural Diplomacy and China's Image in Southeast Asia: Managing Bilateral Relations through Soft Power*, *Journal of Political Science Research* 5, no. 2 (2024): 39–42.

¹⁶Hasanah, et al., “Cheng Ho Mosque and Social Status...,” 205–206; Fitriana and Isfiaty, “Cultural Acculturation in the Interior of Cheng Ho Pandaan Mosque in East Java,” 148–151.

¹⁷R. Tuty Nur Mutia, and Reynaldo de Archellie, “Reassessing China's Soft Power in Indonesia: A Critical Overview on China's Cultural Soft Power,” *Cogent Arts and Humanities* 10, no. 1 (2023): 2178585, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2023.2178585>.

¹⁸Emmanuel Chidiebere Edeh, and Cang Cong Zhao, “Cultural Practices as Part of Socioeconomic Development Strategies in One Belt One Road: A Conceptual Insight,” *East Asia* 39, no. 2 (2022): 181–198, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12140-021-09374-x>; Mukesh Shankar Bharti and Suprabha Kumari, “Chinas Belt and Road Initiative in Southeast Asia and Its Implications for ASEAN-China Strategic Partnership,” *Asian Review of Political Economy* 3, no. 1 (2024): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44216-024-00042-4>.

¹⁹Cai, “Rethinking Heritage Diplomacy,” 206–210.

diplomacy, although they are often criticized for propagandistic overtones.²⁰ Parallel studies on mosque interiors highlight how colors and ornamentation, derived from both Chinese wuxing and Javanese cosmology, manifest hybridity into tangible space, reinforcing harmony but also masking contested identities.²¹ Zheng He, thus symbolizes enduring linkages, yet the Chinese narrative frequently simplifies historical complexity for strategic purposes.

However, despite extensive existing scholarship, little attention has been paid to how Malay-Muslim communities themselves negotiate this symbol. This gap allows for a more critical inquiry into both the political challenges and the religio-cultural opportunities arising from his appropriation in China's contemporary diplomacy. This article, therefore, examines the recontextualization of Zheng He within China's modern soft power strategy, specifically in Southeast Asia. It aims to analyze the political and cultural tensions that emerge when his legacy is appropriated for geopolitical objectives. It investigates how the Chinese government's portrayal of Zheng He as a symbol of peace and diplomacy oversimplifies historical complexities and conflicts with local religious identities and cultural sovereignty of Malay-Muslim communities in the region.

This article argues that while Zheng He is promoted by the Chinese government as a symbol of peaceful engagement within its soft power and cultural diplomacy efforts, the narrative oversimplifies history and often clashes with Malay-Muslim cultural sovereignty and religious identity, producing uneven receptions across Southeast Asia. This article contributes to the study of soft power and cultural diplomacy by showing how historical figures—particularly Zheng He—are recontextualized in China's geopolitical strategy. It demonstrates the limits of using symbolic history as a diplomatic tool, revealing that such appropriation can generate tension when it clashes with local identities and cultural sovereignty in Southeast Asia. The study thus highlights the importance of cultural sensitivity in the practice of soft power, offering insights into the delicate balance between projecting influence and respecting local memory.

2. Methodology

This study employs a multidisciplinary qualitative approach that integrates historical, civilizational, and geopolitical perspectives. Such an approach is necessary because Zheng He's legacy functions simultaneously as a multifaceted historical narrative, a religious and cultural symbol, and a tool of cultural diplomacy in Southeast Asia. The analysis is framed by Nye's theory of soft power (2004), which emphasizes the role of culture, values, and foreign policy in generating attraction, complemented by scholarship on cultural and heritage diplomacy. Southeast Asian perspectives on Islam, pluralism, and identity politics provide additional grounding, ensuring a balance between Western and regional scholarship.

Data collection combined three strategies. First, historiographical interpretation engaged primary sources such as Ma Huan's *Ying-Yai Sheng-Lan* record,²² supported by Indonesian scholarship on Zheng He's role within Nusantara identity. Second, political analysis examined state speeches, media, Confucius Institute reports, and cultural exhibitions, contextualized by both Western and Southeast Asian studies of soft power and bilateral diplomacy. Third, religio-cultural reception was examined through field observations, interviews at heritage sites like the Cheng Ho

²⁰Da Kong, *Museums, International Exhibitions and Chinas Cultural Diplomacy* (London: Routledge, 2021), 25–30, 91–100.

²¹Fitriana and Isfiaty, "Cultural Acculturation in the Interior of Cheng Ho Pandaan Mosque in East Java," 152–154.

²²Ma Huan, *Ying-Yai Sheng-Lan: The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores (1433)*, ed. Feng Ch'eng-Chün, trans. J. V. G. Mills (Cambridge: Hakluyt Society, 1970).

Mosque in Palembang, and discourse analysis of Malay-Muslim publications in Indonesia and Malaysia.

To ensure rigor, the study employed triangulation across multiple sources. The analysis proceeded in three layers: (1) historiography and archival re-examination, (2) the embedding of Zheng He in China's soft power discourse, and (3) Malay-Muslims' reception in Indonesia and Malaysia. Data were thematically coded and analyzed using discourse analysis and comparative case study techniques, enabling systematic comparison between top-down narratives and local responses. Although limited by selected case studies and accessible sources, the study adheres to ethical principles through informed consent and anonymization, offering a critical foundation for understanding how historical symbolism intersects with diplomacy.

3. Zheng He in Southeast Asian Civilization: A Historical Critical Study

Zheng He himself left no written records of his voyages, yet the accounts of his journeys were preserved through the writings of his companions. One of them, Ma Huan, a Muslim interpreter who accompanied Zheng He on several expeditions, produced descriptions of the lands they visited, ranging from India, Arabia, and East Africa to Southeast Asia. In Southeast Asia, he recorded visits to Palembang, Bangka, Karimun Island, and Bintan Island, as well as Sumatra more generally; Kedah, Malacca, Kelantan, and the Nine Islands on the Malay Peninsula; Sunda Kelapa (Jakarta) and Tuban in Java; Karimata Island and Brunei in Borneo; and further afield, Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, and the Philippines, including Mindanao.²³ These accounts attest to the remarkable extent of Zheng He's maritime expeditions and underscore the strategic importance of Southeast Asia within the Ming maritime network in the early fifteenth century.

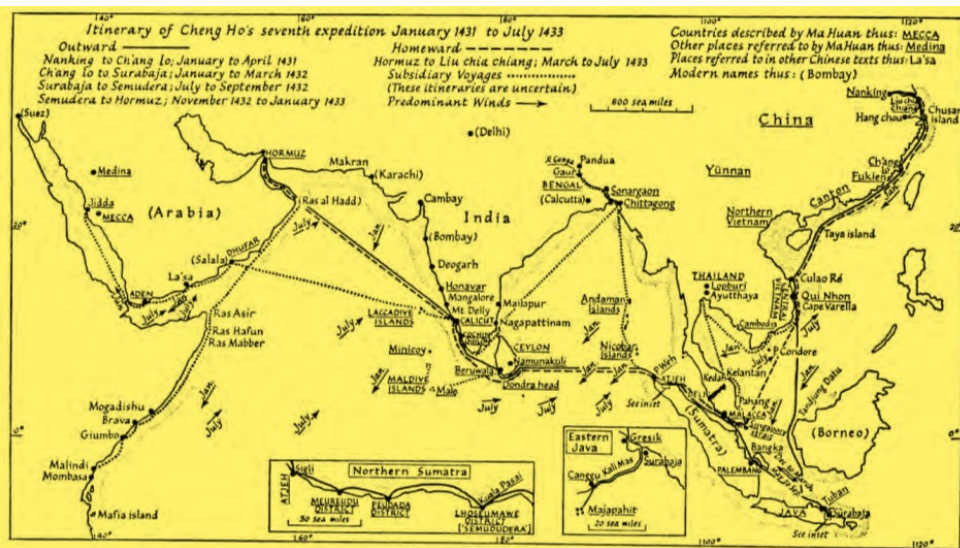


Figure 1. Map of Zheng He's Voyages²⁴

²³Ma Huan, *Ying-Yai Sheng-Lan*..., 185-194.

²⁴J. V. G. Mills, "Introduction and Notes to *Ying-yai Sheng-lan: The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores (1433)*," in *Ying-yai Sheng-lan*, by Ma Huan (Cambridge: Hakluyt Society, 1970), 16.

However, the main issue does not lie in the existence of these travel records, but in how we understand the implications of those visits for local societies. In classical historiography, Zheng He is often portrayed as the pioneer of harmonious relations between China and the Malay-Muslim kingdoms, as well as a tolerant figure who respected local customs and religions.²⁵ However, this image is largely constructed from Chinese sources laden with cultural and political biases. At the same time, local histories from Java, Malacca, Palembang, Karimata Island, Kelantan, Kedah, Mindanao, Brunei Darussalam, Borneo, and elsewhere in Southeast Asia remain rarely explored as counter-narratives. As Geoff Wade has shown, Zheng He's voyages were, in fact, not merely diplomatic missions but part of Ming expansion that often involved coercion and violence.²⁶ Therefore, integrating Southeast Asian local sources becomes crucial to balance the China-centered narrative, and to understand how local societies actually experienced these voyages.

The economic dimension further reinforces this reassessment of Zheng He's maritime expeditions. Beyond the diplomatic façade, his voyages were not merely symbolic but also served economic missions, including the exchange of goods and the expansion of trade networks.²⁷ While these trade relations benefited both sides, the extent to which such benefits were equitably distributed requires careful analysis. In some cases, China's control over maritime trade routes could be interpreted as a form of concealed economic domination.²⁸ Therefore, heroic narratives of peaceful commerce must be revised with attention to the dynamics of control and inequality, in order to preserve historical objectivity and avoid glorification.

Zheng He's expeditions also carried cultural dimensions, often understood as processes of cultural exchange. However, these processes did not always unfold within a framework of equality. Evidence suggests that in certain areas, like Malacca, Zheng He's cultural diplomacy included the erection of temples and inscriptions that projected Ming authority, signalling hierarchical relations and placing subtle pressures on local traditions.²⁹ Viewed through Antonio Gramsci's concept of "cultural hegemony",³⁰ this phenomenon reflects how Ming authority secured consent by projecting its symbols within local settings, masking relations of domination beneath the surface of diplomatic exchange. In this light, Zheng He's role as a cultural agent must be re-evaluated through a critical lens that considers the dynamics of domination and resistance. Such an approach enriches our understanding of cross-cultural relations.

In the religious context, Zheng He is frequently described as a devout Muslim who strengthened Islamic ties in Southeast Asia. This underlies the narrative that his voyages contributed to the spread of Islam in the Malay-Indonesian world.³¹ Yet, strong historical evidence for this claim remains

²⁵Johannes Widodo, "A Celebration of Diversity: Zheng He and the Origin of the Pre-Colonial Coastal Urban Pattern in Southeast Asia," in *Admiral Zheng He and Southeast Asia: China's Maritime Diplomacy*, ed. Leo Suryadinata (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2005), 94–123.

²⁶Geoff Wade, "The Zheng He Voyages: A Reassessment," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 78, no. 1 (2005): 37–58.

²⁷Roderich Ptak, *China and the Asian Seas: Trade, Travel and Visions of the Other (1400–1750)* (London: Routledge, 1998), 21–38.

²⁸Gungwu Wang, *The Chinese Overseas: From Earthbound China to the Quest for Autonomy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 1–38.

²⁹Jakub Hrubý, "Establishing a Common Ground — Admiral Zheng He as an Agent of Cultural Diplomacy in Malaysia," in *Transnational Sites of China's Cultural Diplomacy*, ed. Jarmila Ptáčková and Zdenka Švarcová (Singapore: Springer, 2020), 89–113.

³⁰Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), 12–13.

³¹Tan Ta Sen, *Cheng Ho and Islam in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2009), 155–205.

limited, often relying on oral traditions or local legends. Chinese historical records themselves provide little emphasis on Zheng He's Islamic identity. In the study of religious history, such interpretations are prone to romanticization that obscures historical fact. Hence, a critical religious-historical approach is necessary, rather than one based merely on contemporary symbolic needs.

The figure of Zheng He is also frequently utilized in modern historical narratives to construct specific political legitimacies. In several Southeast Asian countries, including Malaysia and Indonesia, Zheng He is invoked as a symbol of harmony between Chinese and Muslim communities.³² However, such symbolization does not always reflect the complex realities of multiethnic societies. Within the framework of identity politics, Zheng He can serve as an instrument for articulating the identity of Chinese Muslim minorities seeking social legitimacy.³³ Thus, his role must be analyzed not only historically but also in relation to contemporary socio-political constructions. Historical symbols are always vulnerable to manipulation for present-day purposes.

In foreign relations, modern China has also employed the legacy of Zheng He as an instrument of soft power. The Chinese government promotes Zheng He's image as a peaceful envoy to strengthen diplomacy with Muslim-majority countries.³⁴ Yet, this approach is often questioned, as it may constitute a form of "memory diplomacy" not firmly grounded in local historical realities. The use of historical memory for state diplomacy is risky if not accompanied by deep engagement with local understandings. In Southeast Asia, the sensitivities of colonial history and relationships with foreign powers remain crucial. Hence, the promotion of Zheng He must be critically interpreted within contemporary geopolitical frameworks.

At the level of local history, Zheng He's traces are visible in port cities such as Semarang, Malacca, and Palembang. Yet, local narratives surrounding him often blend historical fact, myth, and cultural legitimacy. Many of these legacies are framed as evidence of tolerance and prosperity,³⁵ although their basis in primary historical documentation is not always clear. This indicates that interpretations of Zheng He remain diverse and context-dependent. Historical criticism urges us not to adopt a single narrative as the absolute truth. Rather, we must excavate the multiple narrative layers embedded in local collective memory.

In the historiography of Islam in the Malay-Indonesian world, Zheng He's role as a spreader of Islam remains contested. Some scholars argue that his contribution to Islamization was largely symbolic rather than institutional. Meanwhile, certain communities venerate him as a spiritual figure and saint who contributed to local Islam.³⁶ This tension illustrates that the history of Islamization in Southeast Asia is highly complex and cannot be reduced to a single figure. From a critical historical perspective, narratives of Islamization through prominent figures are often shaped by the demands

³²Sumanto Al Qurtuby, "The Tao of Islam: Cheng Ho and the Legacy of Chinese Muslims in Pre-Modern Java," *Studia Islamika* 16, no. 1 (2009): 51-78; Johannes Widodo, "A Celebration of Diversity: Zheng He and the Origin of the Pre-Colonial Coastal Urban Pattern in Southeast Asia," 94-123.

³³Hasanah et al., "Cheng Ho Mosque and Social Status...", 202-204.

³⁴James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, "Soft Power at Sea: Zheng He and Chinese Maritime Strategy," *Proceedings Magazine*, U.S. Naval Institute, October 2006, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2006/october/soft-power-sea-zheng-he-and-chinese-maritime-strategy?>

³⁵Johannes Widodo, "A Celebration of Diversity: Zheng He and the Origin of the Pre-Colonial Coastal Urban Pattern in Southeast Asia," 94-123.

³⁶Sumanto Al Qurtuby, "The Imprint of Zheng He and Chinese Muslims in Indonesia's Past," in *Zheng He and the Afro-Asian World*, ed. Chia Lin Sien, and Sally K. Church (Melaka: Melaka Museums Corporation (PERZIM), 2012), 171-186.

of identity politics. Thus, a balanced reading is required between local history, mythology, and archaeology.

The symbol of Zheng He has been increasingly “recontextualized” in China’s post-reform cultural diplomacy projects. Museums, statues, and research centers dedicated to his legacy have appeared across Southeast Asia, commemorating historical connections while serving contemporary geopolitical objectives.³⁷ While such projects provide space for dialogue, they also politicize history by embedding it within China’s effort to shape foreign public opinion. This makes it crucial to ask who defines Zheng He’s narrative and for what purposes. These are the questions that resonate strongly amid the Indo-Pacific.

To address these politicized reuses of history, research on Zheng He must adopt interdisciplinary approaches that cut across archaeology, local historiography, international politics, and religious studies. Such an approach not only prevents nationalist or state-centered biases but also situates Zheng He within a more objective and balanced framework. By engaging multilingual sources—Chinese, Arabic, Malay, and Portuguese—scholars can counter reductionist readings and expose how his legacy is selectively mobilized for political ends. In this way, historical criticism moves beyond either glorification or dismissal, providing the analytical depth needed to understand how Zheng He’s image operates in the complex historiography of Southeast Asia.

4. Portraying Zheng He's Opportunities as a Soft Power Instrument in Chinese Diplomacy

Zheng He has emerged as a strategic symbol within China’s comprehensive global soft power framework, representing a sophisticated approach to cultural diplomacy in international relations. The Chinese government actively promotes his image as a Muslim admiral who embodied tolerance, peaceful navigation, and cross-civilizational harmony, particularly targeting Southeast Asian audiences in its diplomatic outreach.³⁸ This historical figure serves as a key instrument for enhancing China’s international image through systematic dissemination via historical exhibitions, maritime museums, and multicultural festivals that celebrate shared heritage.³⁹ Joseph Nye’s conceptualization of soft power emphasizes the critical importance of culture, values, and attractive foreign policy in shaping international perceptions and relationships.⁴⁰ Consequently, history-based soft power operates as both a symbolic and communicative diplomatic channel, effectively counterbalancing China’s hard power image in contemporary geopolitical spheres while fostering cross-cultural understanding.

Building upon this framework, Zheng He is not only presented as a historical figure but is also strategically constructed as a narrative tool within China’s cultural diplomacy. Through exhibitions, maritime museums, and multicultural festivals, his legacy is deliberately mobilized to highlight shared heritage and project an image of tolerance and peaceful navigation toward Southeast Asian

³⁷Cai, “Rethinking Heritage Diplomacy,” 206–220; Sen, “Inventing the ‘Maritime Silk Road,’” 1059–1104, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X22000348>; Gungwu, *The Maritime Silk Road: History, Politics and Heritage*, 5–7.

³⁸Mutia and de Archellie, “Reassessing Chinas Soft Power in Indonesia.”; Siti Aliyuna Pratisti, Deasy Silvy Sari, and Taufik Hidayat, “Zheng Hes Soft Power Discourse in Indonesia: Identity in Power Relation,” *Economics, Politics and Regional Development* 1, no. 1 (2020): 64–71.

³⁹Cai, “Rethinking Heritage Diplomacy,” 206–220; Sen, “Inventing the ‘Maritime Silk Road,’” 1059–1104, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X22000348>; Gungwu, *The Maritime Silk Road: History, Politics and Heritage*, 5–7.

⁴⁰Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World*, 11–15.

societies.⁴¹ Aligned with Joseph Nye's conceptualization of soft power—emphasizing culture, values, and attractive foreign policy—this deployment of history illustrates how symbolic narratives can function as communicative channels.⁴² In this way, China positions Zheng He's memory as a counter-narrative to perceptions of its hard power orientation while simultaneously fostering cross-cultural understanding.

The strategic deployment of Zheng He's narrative thus extends beyond state-driven cultural festivals and museums into localized socio-religious contexts, fundamentally relying on his historical resonance within Malay-Muslim societies, where he is often portrayed as a protector of Muslims and a founder of key religious institutions. The narrative effectively counters negative perceptions concerning China's human rights record and military expansion by presenting an alternative historical model of Chinese engagement with Muslim communities.⁴³ This cultural foundation is reinforced through physical symbols such as the Cheng Ho Mosques in Palembang and Malacca, which serve as tangible connections between historical memory and contemporary diplomatic initiatives. China's deliberate support for preserving these heritage sites reflects a calculated heritage diplomacy strategy that strengthens people-to-people relations while embedding soft power potential within authentic local cultural contexts. Furthermore, within established cultural diplomatic frameworks, Zheng He functions as a symbolic bridge connecting contemporary China with Southeast Asian Muslim communities through carefully orchestrated public engagement, educational initiatives, and cultivated shared historical memory.

Nevertheless, this expansion of Zheng He's symbolic role is not without contention. This Zheng He-centered soft power approach encounters substantial academic criticism from scholars who characterize it cultural appropriation serving contemporary geopolitical interests rather than genuine historical understanding. The singular portrayal of Zheng He as exclusively peaceful obscures the complex historical reality of his expeditions, which encompassed significant military objectives, political negotiations, and imperial power projection alongside cultural exchange.⁴⁴ These scholarly critiques underscore the fundamental necessity for grounding soft power initiatives in rigorous historical scholarship while remaining sensitive to diverse local contexts and interpretations. At the same time, the ongoing popularity of Zheng He as a cultural icon provides China with diplomatic opportunities—ranging from tourism collaborations to heritage tours and cultural festivals—that function as effective channels for soft power engagement.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, sustainable success requires genuine active participation from local partners and communities, as unilateral management approaches risk commodifying invaluable heritage into hollow symbolism that lacks authentic cultural resonance.

Educational initiatives and cross-national academic exchanges represent particularly significant soft power mechanisms that create substantial intellectual diplomacy opportunities through research fellowships, joint scholarly publications, and collaborative historical investigations focused on Zheng

⁴¹Cai, "Rethinking Heritage Diplomacy," 206–220; Sen, "Inventing the 'Maritime Silk Road,'" 1059–1104, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X22000348>; Gungwu, *The Maritime Silk Road: History, Politics and Heritage*, 5–7.

⁴²Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World*, 11–15.

⁴³William A. Callahan, "History, Tradition and the China Dream: Socialist Modernization in the World of Great Harmony," *Journal of Contemporary China* 24, no. 96 (2015): 983–1001, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2015.1030915>.

⁴⁴Geoff Wade, "The Zheng He Voyages: A Reassessment," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 78, no. 1 (2005): 37–58.

⁴⁵Cai, "Rethinking Heritage Diplomacy," 206–220; Sen, "Inventing the 'Maritime Silk Road,'" 1059–1104, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X22000348>; Gungwu, *The Maritime Silk Road: History, Politics and Heritage*, 5–7.

He's maritime expeditions.⁴⁶ These comprehensive initiatives facilitate authoritative dialogues between international historical and cultural institutions while systematically fostering cross-cultural understanding and developing shared historical narratives over extended periods. Media productions and documentary projects play increasingly crucial roles in amplifying Zheng He's soft power narrative, with audiovisual content emphasizing tolerance, pluralism, and peaceful coexistence reaching substantially broader international audiences.⁴⁷ Collaborative development partnerships with local filmmakers significantly enhance cultural relevance and authenticity, while unilateral productions consistently risk dismissal as propaganda lacking legitimate local engagement and community support. Therefore, media-based soft power strategies require sustained creative engagement with local communities, creating valuable opportunities for museological diplomacy and enhanced global cultural visibility.

Thematic tourism diplomacy initiatives related to Zheng He's historical legacy open significant avenues for cultural-economic cooperation, enabling cities associated with his maritime journeys to promote specialized historical tourism and cross-cultural festival programming. Collaboration with local creative industries and emerging technology sectors further enhances the economic dimensions of soft power implementation, creating sustainable revenue streams and employment opportunities for participating communities. However, these promising opportunities must carefully balance meaningful community involvement to ensure equitable local benefits and avoid exploitative tourism models that extract value without reciprocal investment. Zheng He simultaneously serves as an effective medium for interfaith dialogue initiatives, with the Chinese government strategically engaging Southeast Asian Islamic scholars and intellectuals in substantive discussions of Islamic-Chinese values within carefully constructed Zheng He frameworks. This represents a sophisticated religio-cultural soft power approach aimed at strengthening perceptions of Chinese openness to religious diversity and cross-cultural collaboration, though such dialogues must maintain theological balance while scrupulously avoiding Chinese narrative domination.

Educational diplomacy effectively utilizes the Zheng He narrative to strengthen institutional cooperation between Southeast Asian and Chinese universities through comprehensive student exchange programs, collaborative research initiatives, and specialized maritime history academic courses that serve as vital dialogue bridges between cultures. Leading institutions including Xiamen University and Peking University actively facilitate interdisciplinary Zheng He studies, systematically cultivating new generations of cultural elites committed to sustained international dialogue and cross-cultural understanding.⁴⁸ Cultural festivals celebrating Zheng He in strategically important cities including Malacca, Semarang, and Surabaya provide valuable symbolic platforms featuring traditional performances, comprehensive historical exhibitions, and structured intercultural dialogue sessions that engage diverse community participants. These carefully orchestrated events effectively reinforce China's international image as a friendly cultural partner while requiring authentic cultural representation that genuinely reflects local diversity without obscuring necessary critical historical analysis. Festival-based soft power proves most effective when successfully fostering shared community ownership of Zheng He's multifaceted legacy, thereby strengthening symbolic legitimacy at fundamental societal levels.

⁴⁶James R. Holmes, "Soft Power at Sea: Zheng He and Chinas Maritime Diplomacy," *Southeast Review of Asian Studies* 28 (2006): 95–107.

⁴⁷Tonny Dian Effendi, "Zheng He and International Relations: An Asian Cultural Diplomacy Model," *Journal of Integrative International Relations* 4, no. 2 (2019): 124–125. <https://doi.org/10.15642/jiir.2019.4.2.115-128>.

⁴⁸Lim, "The Politics of Heritage: Chinas Maritime Silk Road and the Struggle for Historical Narratives," 129–160.

Zheng He's carefully constructed narrative strategically intersects with China's broader foreign policy initiatives, with Beijing actively employing this historical framework within Belt and Road Initiative implementation across Southeast Asia, presenting his maritime expeditions as symbolic precedents for economic continuity across centuries.⁴⁹ However, this powerful symbolism must be thoughtfully disentangled from contemporary economic ambitions that risk perpetuating hegemonic domination patterns reminiscent of historical imperial relationships. A fundamental challenge lies in avoiding historical simplification, as narratives overemphasizing "peace and tolerance" while systematically neglecting military and political roles risk sterilizing the genuine complexity of historical experience.⁵⁰ Zheng He's Muslim identity is strategically deployed to strengthen China's diplomatic ties with Islamic countries, particularly Indonesia and Malaysia, though this approach must remain appropriately sensitive to local theological diversity since Muslims across different regions do not necessarily share identical historical narratives regarding his religious significance.⁵¹ In the contemporary digital era, social media platforms and digital history initiatives have become increasingly important soft power mediums, with China producing extensive multilingual content about Zheng He that expands narrative reach to younger global generations.⁵²

The ultimate potential of Zheng He as a cultural reconciliation instrument between China and Southeast Asian states includes the possibility of easing persistent tensions surrounding complex South China Sea territorial disputes through shared historical appreciation and cultural understanding.⁵³ However, sustainable success fundamentally depends on maintaining consistency between carefully crafted cultural rhetoric and actual policy implementation in regional diplomatic relations. Without critical reflection and authentic commitment to cooperative behavior, soft power initiatives risk degenerating into diplomatic irony that undermines rather than enhances international relationships and regional stability. Cultural diplomacy must therefore align closely with ethical foreign policy practices, ensuring that Zheng He functions as a genuine bridge fostering mutual understanding rather than a convenient shield obscuring hegemonic interests.

In conclusion, Zheng He represents extraordinary opportunities for constructing authentic soft power grounded in shared cultural heritage, universal tolerance values, and genuinely collaborative historical interpretation that, if managed inclusively and transparently, can significantly strengthen social, economic, and cultural relations in constructive ways that benefit all participating nations and communities.

5. Zheng He and the Soft Power Challenges of Chinese Diplomacy in Southeast Asia

China has positioned the figure of Zheng He as a primary symbol of soft power to strengthen cultural diplomacy in Southeast Asia. However, this endeavor frequently generates skepticism as it is perceived to be heavily politicized.⁵⁴ The portrayal of Zheng He merely as a peaceful emissary, for instance, is viewed as neglecting other dimensions of his expeditions that also reflected imperial authority and coercive political practices.⁵⁵ Consequently, oversimplified historical narratives not only undermine the credibility of cultural diplomacy but also create space for debates regarding claims of ownership over Zheng He's legacy in the region.

⁴⁹Callahan, "History, Tradition and the China Dream," 983–1001.

⁵⁰Wade, "The Zheng He Voyages: A Reassessment," 37–58.

⁵¹Suryadinata, *Admiral Zheng He and Southeast Asia*.

⁵²Li, "Soft Power, Cultural Diplomacy and Digital Memory," 65–75.

⁵³Callahan, "History, Tradition and the China Dream," 983–1001.

⁵⁴Callahan, "History, Tradition and the China Dream, 983–1001.

⁵⁵Geoff Wade, "The Zheng He Voyages: A Reassessment," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 78, no. 1 (2005): 37–58.

Beyond the contestation over cultural ownership claims, another issue emerging from Zheng He's legacy is the substantial number of Muslim communities in Southeast Asia that feel connected to him.⁵⁶ Therefore, when China positions itself as the primary owner of this heritage, segments of Southeast Asian society, particularly Chinese Muslims, interpret this as a source of cultural pride.⁵⁷ This is evident, for example, in the naming of several Cheng Ho mosques, such as those in Palembang, Surabaya, Purbalingga, Semarang, Pekalongan, Banyuwangi, and other regions.⁵⁸ Unilateral claims from China potentially undermine soft power by triggering defensive attitudes from other parties. The situation becomes increasingly complex when the figure of Zheng He is linked to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), or in Choirul Mahfud's terminology, "The New Silk Road."⁵⁹ Indeed, connecting historical heritage with contemporary cooperation can strengthen symbolic continuity; however, it also raises suspicions of hidden agendas.⁶⁰ Consequently, certain quarters view the Zheng He narrative as nothing more than a façade for geopolitical expansion.

The politicization of Zheng He ultimately exacerbates identity dynamics in the highly pluralistic Southeast Asia. While on one hand the symbol of Zheng He is interpreted as cultural and religious pride, on the other hand, it also generates cross-religious and cross-ethnic debates. Some conservative Islamic groups, for instance, reject the presence of symbols deemed foreign, while Chinese-Muslim communities utilize it as a foundation for social legitimacy. In this context, soft power-based diplomacy cannot assume universal acceptance but must be managed inclusively and sensitively toward diversity. This aligns with Islamization processes in Southeast Asia, such as *sogit* practices in Sabah, Malaysia, where customary law and Islam are integrated through the concept of '*urf*' (customary practices or social conventions).⁶¹ This selective integration model affirms that social legitimacy only emerges when local traditions and authorities are respected—an important lesson for cultural diplomacy based on the figure of Zheng He.

This is because, simultaneously, Southeast Asia has become an arena of competition among competing soft power narratives of external powers. For example, India and Arab states alike emphasize their historical ties with this region.⁶² In such circumstances, the narrative regarding Zheng He cannot be imposed as a singular discourse but must be positioned alongside other influences. Exclusive messaging may cause rejection, while cooperative strategies that acknowledge

⁵⁶Khong Yuanzhi, "On the Relationship between Cheng Ho and Islam in Southeast Asia," *Southeast Asian Studies in China: Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia*, no. 10 (2008), <https://kyotoreview.org/issue-10/on-the-relationship-between-cheng-ho-and-islam-in-southeast-asia/>

⁵⁷Al Qurtuby, "The Imprint of Zheng He and Chinese Muslims in Indonesia's Past."

⁵⁸Hasanah et al., "Cheng Ho Mosque and Social Status: A Study on the Existence of Chinese Muslim within Sociocultural Relations in Surabaya, Indonesia", 367–382

⁵⁹Mahfud, "The Role of Cheng Ho Mosque: The New Silk Road, Indonesia-China Relations in Islamic Cultural Identity."23–38.

⁶⁰Callahan, "History, Tradition and the China dream," 983–1001.

⁶¹Siti Adibah Binti Mohamad Jeofrey and M Zaki, "Islamic Law and Customary Law in the Prohibition of Sogit Marriage in Sabah, Malaysia," *Islamic Law and Social Issues in Society* 1, no. 1 (2025): 85–96, <https://doi.org/10.64929/ilsis.v1i1.8>.

⁶²For further details, see for example Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Islam dalam Sejarah dan Kebudayaan Melayu [Islam in Malay History and Culture]* (Kuala Lumpur: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2022). See also, Claudia Chia Yi En and Liao Bo Wen, "A Comparative Study of India and China's Cultural Diplomacy in Southeast Asia," in *India and China in Southeast Asia*, ed. Amit Ranjan, Dhotima Chatteraj, and A K M Ahsan Ullah (Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2024), 91–113, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-6903-2_5.

plurality strengthen legitimacy. Thus, soft power will be more effective when positioned as complementary rather than as an attempt at domination.

Global dynamics also shape acceptance of China's soft power in the region. The US-China trade war, for instance, not only impacts the economic sector but also generates effects on Muslim communities. Studies on the application of Islamic law amid this trade conflict demonstrate that societies respond to global uncertainty by returning to sharia principles as an alternative framework.⁶³ This confirms that the legitimacy of cultural narratives, including the figure of Zheng He, will be assessed by audiences in relation to contemporary economic-political policies, not merely as historical symbols.

Beyond being influenced by global dynamics, the acceptance of China's soft power is also significantly determined by its domestic policies. Allegations of human rights violations, particularly against Muslim communities in Xinjiang,⁶⁴ actually damage China's image in the eyes of the Muslim-majority populations in the region. Consequently, efforts to present Zheng He as a tolerant Muslim figure appear contradictory to China's own practices.⁶⁵ Audiences in Southeast Asia assess soft power holistically, not partially. When assessed partially, suspicions arise that the figure of Zheng He in Southeast Asia is merely historical politicization by China. In fact, societies demand clarity about who funds, curates, and controls the narrative due to lack of transparency.⁶⁶

Furthermore, China's intensified digital strategy also presents similar challenges. Indeed, social media campaigns have the potential to expand the reach of the Zheng He narrative, but simultaneously can be easily perceived as propaganda.⁶⁷ Without the involvement of local actors with credibility, digital content tends to be rejected by audiences and may even strengthen suspicions of hidden agendas. Social media algorithms reinforce bias and obscure messaging, potentially weakening rather than strengthening China's cultural diplomacy.

Beyond the digital realm, educational, artistic, religious, and cultural dimensions also constitute important yet risk-laden arenas for Zheng He-based diplomacy. Integrating Zheng He into curricula and organizing cultural festivals has the potential to enrich historical understanding and expand narrative reach; however, without collaboration with local actors, such steps are easily perceived as indoctrination or appropriation.⁶⁸ Similarly, religious sensitivities demand careful approaches: Zheng He's identity as a Muslim can only be accepted if managed through interfaith dialogue and the involvement of local religious scholars (*ulama*), rather than being positioned as a political instrument.

Moreover, practical dimensions present distinct challenges for the success of Zheng He-based diplomacy. Limitations in infrastructure, institutional capacity, and intellectual property issues frequently hinder efforts to preserve and disseminate cultural heritage. Establishing museums,

⁶³Teguh Luhuringbudi et al., "The Impact of the US-China Trade War on the Application of Islamic Law in Indonesia," *Islamic Law and Social Issues in Society* 1, no. 1 (2025): 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.64929/ilsis.v1i1.12>.

⁶⁴Ross Holder, "On the Interrelatedness of Human Rights, Culture and Religion: Considering the Significance of Cultural Rights in Protecting the Religious Identity of China's Uyghur Minority," *The International Journal of Human Rights* 25, no. 5 (2021): 771–792, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2020.1725487>.

⁶⁵Callahan, "History, Tradition and the China Dream," 983–1001.

⁶⁶Lim, "The Politics of Heritage: China's Maritime Silk Road and the Struggle for Historical Narratives," 129–160.

⁶⁷N. Li, "Soft Power, Cultural Diplomacy and Digital Memory: Cheng Ho Revisited," *Asian Culture and History* 11, no. 2 (2019): 65–75.

⁶⁸Lim, "The Politics of Heritage: China's Maritime Silk Road and the Struggle for Historical Narratives," 129–160.

cultural centers, and managing historical archives requires ethical governance and cross-national cooperation to remain credible.⁶⁹ Additionally, the effectiveness of soft power can only be demonstrated through transparent evaluation, such as through surveys and long-term studies, ensuring that diplomacy does not operate on false assumptions.⁷⁰

Finally, geopolitical dynamics also constitute determining factors in the success of Zheng He-based diplomacy. Tensions in the South China Sea, for instance, can undermine Zheng He's symbolic legitimacy if China's actions contradict its projected peaceful image.⁷¹ Thus, the effectiveness of soft power depends not only on historical narratives but also on the consistency of foreign policy practices. Only through inclusive, transparent, and ethical approaches can the figure of Zheng He truly function as a symbol of cross-civilizational dialogue, rather than merely an instrument of domination.

6. Geopolitical Narratives, Identity Politics, and Foreign Policy in Southeast Asia

Zheng He remains a prominent figure in China's contemporary geopolitical discourse. He is presented within the framework of the Belt and Road project as a continuation of the maritime Silk Road, simultaneously affirming continuity between historical ties and contemporary geopolitical ambitions.⁷² Meanwhile, in Southeast Asia, Zheng He's legacy is also positioned within the foreign policy framework as a symbol of historical connectivity and maritime diplomacy to legitimize China's strategic agenda through the Belt and Road, linking past maritime influence with present ambitions for power.⁷³

However, when Zheng He is considered merely as belonging to Chinese culture without acknowledging the attachment of Southeast Asian societies, such an attitude potentially triggers rejection from local communities. In fact, Cheng Ho Mosques that stand throughout Indonesia function as both religious symbols and icons of Chinese Muslim presence, bridging cultural relations in Indonesia.⁷⁴ Meanwhile, the Zheng He Cultural Museum established in Malacca affirms his maritime legacy through artefacts and narratives about collaboration, peaceful relations, and Malacca's glory as a trading center, which is now interpreted as a symbol of the Maritime Silk Road and non-hegemonic Pan-Asianism ethos.⁷⁵

China's claims and Southeast Asian societies' efforts to revive Zheng He's legacy reveal a tug-of-war of identity politics. On one side, China endeavors to make Zheng He a symbol of maritime

⁶⁹Tritto and Wijayanto, "The Maritime Silk Road: ourism, Heritage, Symbols and the People-to-People Dimension of China's 'Heritage Diplomacy' in Indonesia," 160–75.

⁷⁰Lim, "The Politics of Heritage: China's Maritime Silk Road and the Struggle for Historical Narratives," 129–160.

⁷¹Callahan, "History, Tradition and the China Dream," 983–1001.

⁷²Tim Winter, "Silk Road Diplomacy: Geopolitics and Histories of Connectivity," *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 26, no. 7 (2020): 898–912, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2020.1765164>.

⁷³Mahfud, "The Role of Cheng Ho Mosque: The New Silk Road, Indonesia-China Relations in Islamic Cultural Identity," 23–38.

⁷⁴Suko Susilo, Eva Putriya Hasanah, and Nur Syam, "Motif Pembangunan Masjid Cheng Ho Surabaya [The Motives Behind the Construction of Cheng Ho Mosque in Surabaya]," *Tribakti: Jurnal Pemikiran Keislaman* 32, no. 2 (2021): 367–382.

⁷⁵Tai Wei Lim, "The Cheng Ho (Zheng He) Cultural Museum in Malacca (Melaka): Its Historical Importance and Contemporary Symbolisms," *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 3, no. 3 (2018): 232–245, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2057891117746768>; Cai, "Rethinking Heritage Diplomacy," 206–220.

historical continuity to legitimize its geopolitical influence through the Belt and Road Initiative.⁷⁶ On the other side, Southeast Asian societies, particularly Chinese Muslims, Malays, Javanese and others, reinterpret the figure of Zheng He according to their identity needs, both as evidence of Islamic-Chinese connectivity and as local cultural assets. This dynamic affirms that Zheng He's legacy is not merely a historical matter, but also an arena of contested meanings in cultural diplomacy, political legitimacy, and regional identity formation.

This identity politics becomes more complex because historically, Southeast Asian societies have had relationships not only with China, but also with India and Arabia. India advances its own heritage influence in the region through Hindu and Buddhist religious influences, while Arabia similarly advances Islamic heritage influence.⁷⁷ Consequently, Southeast Asia becomes an arena where various cultural and religious heritages meet, competing and blending in shaping regional identity. Thus, China's diplomatic narrative about Zheng He built around him risks obscuring the region's pluralistic history.

Identity politics is also evident in the various ways local communities interpret Zheng He's legacy. In Malay-Muslim communities, for instance, his Islamic identity is often emphasized, but acceptance is not always uniform. Some choose to embrace the symbol or reinterpret it within local frameworks by combining folklore and history, while others reject it as irrelevant foreign heritage.⁷⁸ This diversity of responses demonstrates identity dilemmas amid external cultural penetration flows and contested meanings over the figure of Zheng He in Southeast Asia.

The foreign policies of Southeast Asian countries also reflect this diversity of perspectives. On one hand, regional governments sometimes support the symbolism of Zheng He's heritage as a means to strengthen diplomatic relations with China. On the other hand, there is also caution to maintain national sovereignty to avoid being trapped in foreign narrative dominance. Diplomatic protocols usually allow this symbol only in historical contexts considered appropriate.⁷⁹ This ambivalent attitude shows how identity dilemmas at the societal level continue into the realm of state policy. Thus, Zheng He's legacy is not only contested culturally but also stands amid the tug-of-war between external influence and domestic interests, as Tan notes, since the early Ming Dynasty, several kingdoms in Southeast Asia were positioned as "states that must not be attacked" within the framework of peaceful tributary relations, though still bound to China.⁸⁰

The dynamics of contested meanings are also clearly evident in media coverage. In Southeast Asia, Chinese media often highlight Zheng He's Chinese-Muslim identity as a symbol of positive cultural bridging. Conversely, national media more frequently frame Zheng He's legacy within the

⁷⁶Mahfud, "The Role of Cheng Ho Mosque: The New Silk Road, Indonesia-China Relations in Islamic Cultural Identity," 23–38.

⁷⁷Regarding this tug-of-war of influences, please read Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Historical Fact and Fiction* (Kuala Lumpur: UTM Press, 2011).

⁷⁸Rahmawati Rahmawati et al., "Chinese Ways of Being Good Muslim: From the Cheng Ho Mosque to Islamic Education and Media Literacy," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 8, no. 2 (2018): 225–52.

⁷⁹For more details, see Abid Rohman, "Chinese Indonesian Cultural and Religious Diplomacy," *Journal of Integrative International Relations* 4, no. 1 (2019): 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.15642/jiir.2019.4.1.1-21>; Ngu Ik Tien and Ngeow Chow Bing, "Soft Power, Confucius Institute and China's Cultural Diplomacy in Malaysia," *Kajian Malaysia: Journal of Malaysian Studies* 39, no. 1 (2021): 66; Mahfud, "The Role of Cheng Ho Mosque: The New Silk Road, Indonesia-China Relations in Islamic Cultural Identity," 23–38; Effendi, "Zheng He and International Relations," 115–128, <https://doi.org/10.15642/jiir.2019.4.2.115-128>.

⁸⁰Tan, *Cheng Ho and Islam in Southeast Asia*, 32–33.

context of Islamic identity or broader nationalist narratives.⁸¹ These framing differences reveal competing representational authorities that influence public perception. Misalignment between media narratives and state policies can lead to misinterpretation or even resistance. Therefore, governments are required to navigate this media diversity so that cultural diplomacy remains effective.

This narrative competition appears not only in the media but is also utilized by political elites for domestic interests. Zheng He's legacy is sometimes used as a heritage diplomacy tool to demonstrate closeness with China, especially when economic or strategic interests need to be highlighted.⁸² However, at other times, this narrative is deliberately reduced or even ignored when waves of nationalism demand distance from China. Such selective utilization patterns show that cultural symbols can be easily politicized according to needs. Consequently, foreign policy directions are often situational, adapting to domestic political contexts. In this context, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) becomes a concrete example of how historical narratives are combined with strategic interests: on one side, viewed as an opportunity to strengthen China's influence in the region, but on the other side, its effectiveness and Beijing's capacity to fulfill its promises remain questioned.⁸³ As a result, BRI's influence in Southeast Asia—including Indonesia—cannot be viewed as absolutely dominant, but rather negotiated within regional diplomatic space and competition from alternative infrastructure initiatives from other great powers.

Cultural diplomacy based on Zheng He's heritage is not only played in formal political realms, but also manifested through more grounded cultural practices, one of which is religious tourism. Cheng Ho Mosques in Surabaya and various other cities, for instance, are not merely worship spaces, but also tourism destinations frequently visited across ethnic and religious lines. Architecture that combines Chinese, Arab, and Javanese elements makes these mosques icons of acculturation as well as symbols of cultural diplomacy accessible to the wider public. Religious tourism activities at these mosques not only provide spiritual experiences but also build spaces for cross-cultural dialogue that reinforce their role as part of the modern "New Silk Road."⁸⁴ In this way, cultural diplomacy through tourism also contributes to strengthening Indonesia-China bilateral relations, as well as building positive images of both countries within the framework of social, religious, and Islamic cultural identity cooperation.

In conclusion, examining geopolitical narratives, identity politics, and foreign policy in Southeast Asia, Zheng He's legacy presents both opportunities and challenges for China's diplomacy in Southeast Asia. On one side, his figure can serve as a means to strengthen cross-national relations and build China's positive image. However, on the other side, narratives too centered on China potentially generate identity conflicts if not aligned with local conditions. The success of cultural diplomacy, therefore, heavily depends on alignment between Zheng He's historical symbols and contemporary political behavior. Inclusive and transparent narratives, built through collaboration

⁸¹Rofiyarti, "Popularity and Representation of Zheng He's Image: Pre-Eliminary Research," 27–36, <https://doi.org/10.15642/jiir.2020.5.1.27-36>; Eva Putriya Hasanah et al., "Cheng Ho Mosque and Social Status: A Study on the Existence of Chinese Muslim within Sociocultural Relations in Surabaya, Indonesia," *Harmoni* 21, no. 2 (2022): 201–16.

⁸²Effendi, "Zheng He and International Relations: An Asian Cultural Diplomacy Model," 115–28.

⁸³Xue Gong, "The Belt & Road Initiative and China's Influence in Southeast Asia," *The Pacific Review* 32, no. 4 (2019): 635–665, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2018.1513950>.

⁸⁴Mahfud, "The Role of Cheng Ho Mosque: The New Silk Road, Indonesia-China Relations in Islamic Cultural Identity," 23–38.

with local communities, are essential. In this manner, Zheng He can be positioned as a unifying symbol that is respected, not as a source of division.

7. Conclusion

The article reveals that Zheng He is not only a symbol of peace and maritime diplomacy but also is a significant figure in both geopolitics and cultural identity in Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia and Malaysia. Through a more critical approach, this article demonstrates how interpretations of Zheng He are shaped by the region's political dynamics and local identities. Although he is remembered as an agent of peace, Zheng He's legacy is often linked to China's political and economic interests during the Ming Dynasty. These findings contribute to theories of cultural diplomacy and soft power by demonstrating how historical narratives can be politicized in the context of international relations. Historical symbolism, such as that of Zheng He, can strengthen international relations but also create tensions if applied without sensitivity to local contexts. Therefore, interpretations of Zheng He must be approached inclusively, considering diverse perspectives.

This article also emphasizes the importance of policy implications for building a cultural diplomacy that is more sensitive to local identities in Southeast Asia. Policies that encourage intercultural dialogue and respect for local history can strengthen relations without causing injustice and homogenization. However, the use of historical symbols in diplomacy must be applied carefully to avoid political manipulation and distrust. Practically, cultural diplomacy should consider local historical and religious diversity when introducing symbols such as Zheng He. A more critical approach will enhance the effectiveness of soft power in strengthening interstate relations. Therefore, diverse perspectives and local involvement in historical interpretation are essential for more authentic and sustainable diplomacy.

Authors' Contribution

Zikwan: writing – original draft. **Edi Kurniawan:** writing – review & editing.

Conflict of Interest

The authors of the manuscript have no financial or non-financial conflict of interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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