

Book Reviews

Discovered but Forgotten: The Maldives in Chinese History, c. 1100–1620.

By Bin Yang. New York: Columbia University Press, 2025. Pp. xvii + 368, with figures, maps, and tables. \$140.00 hardcover, \$35.00 paperback, \$34.99 e-book.

Yang Bin's interest in the Maldives and maritime history has complex roots. In 2009, he published a monograph on the history of Yunnan. Among other things, this book deals with cowry shells, which were used as currency in Southwest China. Their distribution became the central theme of a second monograph printed in 2019. Most of these shells originated in the Maldives. Ships and boats brought them to India, Africa, Southeast Asia, and other areas. Large quantities reached the coasts of today's Myanmar and were taken from there to Yunnan. Apparently, the circulation of cowries to various ports fascinated the author so much that he decided to plunge into the history of Indian Ocean trade and to explore what Chinese sources have to say about the Maldives. This leads to the present book. In terms of geography, it also includes the island called Minicoy and the Laccadives (Lakshadweep), albeit only at random. Not included are the Chagos Islands, known for the American military base on Diego Garcia. They probably remained completely uninhabited in the period covered by the present book; therefore, they are only mentioned once or twice and in very limited contexts.

Right from the start, the author explains that Sino-Maldivian relations were "asymmetrical." Indeed, compared to China's vast territory and population, the Maldives are a dwarf. However, this group of atolls with almost 1200 islands stretches from north to south over 870 kilometres and occupies what one may call a strategic position. In the olden days it was right on the direct sailing corridor from Sri Lanka to the East African coast, particularly to Somalia and Kenya. Ships crossing the island zone from east to west or in the other direction had to rely on local pilots or navigate the One-and-a-Half Degree Channel north of Huvadhu Atoll. By contrast, proceeding from Cape Comorin to Soqotra and the southern shore of the Arabian Peninsula was much easier; there were no major obstacles on the way. Occasionally such an itinerary also involved the Maldives, because the most direct route to West Asia passed these

islands at their northern end. In sum, due to its location, this “dwarf” played a central role in Indian Ocean traffic.

An almost infinite supply of cowry shells, demanded as currency in distant markets, gave the Maldivian world additional weight. There was no mint; “money” was simply collected from the sea. Coconut palm trees generated additional income. Local producers exported large quantities of coir needed for the construction of ships. The Maldives also offered dried fish and ambergris. Based on the import of raw materials, they even produced various kinds of textiles for export. China was a chief importer of ambergris and cowries, and it demanded both these products over long periods. Besides that, some trade goods not originating from the islands themselves passed through them or were exchanged there and reached China in late medieval and early modern times. All this leads Yang to believe that the Maldives exerted a calm and steady influence on the Chinese world.

Several entries in the *Ming shilu* 明實錄 refer to Maldivian tribute envoys who submitted gifts to the Ming court. This information also appears in later works, but historical accounts from the Song to Ming periods contain no references to other Maldivians staying in China, nor do Maldivian documents attest the presence of Chinese on the islands, as Yang explains. Yet, Chinese travellers and geographers provided brief descriptions of the Maldives, and it is very likely that some of them spent some time in the archipelago’s central location, known as Male, and perhaps even on other atolls. Indeed, Wang Dayuan’s 汪大淵 (n.d.) famous *Daoyi zhilüe* 島夷誌(志)略 (earliest preface 1349) and sources related to the voyages of Zheng He 鄭和 (c. 1371–c. 1433) suggest that Chinese merchants and ships reached the Maldives. The relevant material has been translated and examined in modern studies; it also forms a significant part of Yang’s book. Noting the lack of local Maldivian news on the arrival of Chinese ships, Yang also emphasizes that despite its size and influence, China left few traces on the island—quite in contrast to the long-lasting influence of Maldivian products in China. The Chinese traces consist mainly of ceramics unearthed by archaeologists, but there is little else.

If I am not mistaken, Yang seems inclined to view the asymmetric relationship between the two sides a special phenomenon. However, there are parallels in China’s maritime history. Many coastal states in Southeast Asia and along the shores of the Indian Ocean were small—and less “developed” than the ports and cities of the Far East. From the Song dynasty to the early Ming period Chinese ships or fleets went to dozens of distant locations, leaving

behind porcelains and silk almost everywhere, and bringing local products back to China. Undoubtedly, the flow of certain products was a *longue durée* phenomenon. Chinese textual sources mention these products over several centuries and often provide accurate details of foreign locations. In contrast, local records, as in the case of the Maldives, say very little to nothing about Chinese travellers. Finally, we should not underestimate the influence of copper coins, porcelains, and other Chinese-manufactured goods on the domestic economy and daily life in the seaports of Asia. Viewed from all these perspectives, the Maldivian archipelago may not have been so special.

Yang is certainly familiar with theories and models, but his account is not loaded with abstract ballast. Nevertheless, he supports the idea that the structure of maritime trade in Song, Yuan, and early Ming days differed from the panorama of later periods. Initially, ships from the Islamic world sailed to China; later, Chinese ships travelled in the other direction to West Asia. In other words, long-distance networks extended across various segments of Southeast Asia and the northern half of the Indian Ocean. From the late fifteenth century onward, this picture changed. The total space was now divided into separate trading zones, and different networks dominated each entity. The Portuguese as newcomers were the only ones active in all zones, while the role of the Chinese was limited to the regions east of Melaka. Early on, structural changes of this type were described by K. N. Chaudhuri and other scholars, and not infrequently historians also linked them to the Mediterranean model. Yang avoids these theoretical debates but appears to have profited from them in one way or the other.

While theory seems not very important to Yang, other characteristics can be attributed to this work. First, it is a careful selection of broad aspects related to one distinct period of Asian maritime history and its Sino-Maldivian components. Indeed, several parts of the book delve more deeply into the general setting—i.e., trade and exchange across the Asian seas in a general sense—than into the Maldivian and Chinese spheres. Second, this means that certain chapters can be read individually, almost like separate articles, as they are only loosely connected by vague references to the Sino-Maldivian leitmotiv. Third, while the book's title suggests a Chinese perspective, the author does not neglect the possible views of the opposing side and, through numerous quotations from Islamic and early European sources, also reveals the perspectives of third parties. Fourth, the message of the sequence “Discovered, but Forgotten” can certainly be applied to other asymmetric cases.

Yang Bin's study is divided into four parts with a total of seventeen chapters. The headings of the four parts are short, concise, and to the point: (1) The Stage, (2) A Destination, (3) The Cargo, and (4) Reminiscences. Below I shall make some notes on things that caught my attention while reading through Yang's work. My first point concerns the sources. The author consulted all important texts on the Maldives from the period he is dealing with. Most of this material is available in English translation, especially in the old collection by Albert Gray and H. C. P. Bell and the well-known monograph by Clarence Maloney, which are frequently cited. Needless to state, the accounts by Ibn Battuta and François Pyrard de Laval are especially rich in content, and Yang makes abundant use of them throughout his book. Portuguese documents are less easy to get by. Chandra R. de Silva's collection does not appear in the bibliography, but Yang refers to João de Barros, Duarte Barbosa, Garcia de Orta, and others. In addition, there are numerous studies on issues related to both the Malabar coast and the Maldives. One example is Geneviève Bouchon's "classic" on Mamale of Cannanore. Perhaps the English version that book should have been mentioned, but admittedly, this might be beside the point. The Chinese material is very different. It forms the core of those segments that focus on the period prior to the mid-fifteenth century. Some texts also appear in Part IV, which mostly looks at later periods. Usually, Yang cites both the Chinese editions and their English versions. However, several Chinese texts are not available in English; in such cases one may refer to French, German, Russian, or Japanese translations. Regrettably, Yang rarely follows this fine Sinological tradition. Items that could be added to the bibliography include Michel Didier's French translation of the *Xiyang fanguo zhi* 西洋番國志 (1434) and Klaus Sonnendecker's German version of the *Xiyang chaogong dianlu* 西洋朝貢典錄 (1520). Another book frequently mentioned by Yang, the *Lingwai dai da* 嶺外代答 (1178), exists in a German version by Almut Netolitzky and a Russian one by Mark Yuryevich Ulyanov (Марк Юрьевич Ульянов). There is now also an English monograph by Victoria Almonte on that work. All these titles contain rich annotation and are very helpful for the study of "small issues," toponyms, trade in specific commodities, and details concerning the culture of individual locations. Finally, there is the Islamic dimension. This leads readers to the Arabic material beyond the account of Ibn Battuta. Here one may consult the old collection by Gabriel Ferrand and other translations into various European languages.

The first chapter of Part I mentions representative Chinese texts of different periods, including the well-known Sino-Jesuit sources by Matteo Ricci (1552–

1610) and others. Thereafter, Yang turns to the history of Quanzhou 泉州 and the merchants of Fujian who were active in overseas trade. He mentions various individuals including members of the Pu 蒲 clan, the essential structure of trade, the Maritime Customs Office (*Shibosi* 市舶司), certain commodities that one also encounters in other parts of the present book, Marco Polo's account, life on board, Chinese designations for crew members with specific tasks, and the physical characteristics of ships sailing through the Indian Ocean. Details drawn from archaeological reports matter as well—Yang refers to various wrecks. The chapter ends with some notes on the so-called China Pagoda at Nagapattinam.

Part II moves to the Yuan period. It deals with Mongol diplomats sent to South India, a list of toponyms in the fragmentary *Nanhai zhi* 南海志 (conventionally dated 1304), and again with the *Daoyi zhilüe*. Its entry on Beiliu 北溜 is the oldest extant Chinese description of the Maldives (and/or Laccadives?). However, whether Wang himself ever reached this place is hard to tell. Whichever applies, Yang suggests that Wang invented the name Beiliu. This raises a fundamental question: Can we really attribute the entry on these islands to the early fourteenth century? According to recent research, some parts of the *Daoyi zhilüe* were included in local chronicles which are now lost. It also seems that this material had the collective title *Daoyi zhi* (without *lüe*). Scholars disagree on the details, but if there existed an entry on Beiliu in these early texts, then Wang could not have been the inventor of the name Beiliu.¹

¹ For studies on the editorial history of the *Daoyi zhilüe* and its predecessors, see Liao Dake 廖大珂, “*Daoyi zhi* fei Wang Dayuan zhuan *Daoyi zhilüe* bian” 《島夷志》非汪大淵撰《島夷志略》辨, *Zhongguo shi yanjiu* 中國史研究 4 (2001): 135–42; Xiong Cheng 熊程 and Xia Ronglin 夏榮林, “*Daoyi zhilüe* banben shulüe” 《島夷志略》版本述略, *Mudanjiang shifan xueyuan xuebao* (*Zhexue shehui kexue ban*) 牡丹江師範學院學報 (哲學社會科學版) 185 (2015): 76–79; Yang Xiaochun 楊曉春, “Zai lun Wang Dayuan yu *Daoyi zhi*” 再論汪大淵與《島夷志》, *Silu wenhua yanjiu* 絲路文化研究 7 (2022): 155–96; the same, “Wang Dayuan chuyang shishi yu *Daoyi zhi* de chengshu ji chukan wenti zai yanjiu” 汪大淵出洋史實與《島夷志》的成書及出刊問題再研究, *Yuanshi ji minzu yu bianjiang yanjiu jikan* 元史及民族與邊疆研究季刊 45 (2023): 291–302. There is also a critical edition of the text. This book came out too late to be considered by Yang Bin: Wang Dayuan, *Daoyi zhilüe xinjiao* 島夷誌略新校, ed. Yang Xiaochun and Zhang Pingfeng 張平鳳 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2024).

Ming texts lead to further questions. Ma Huan 馬歡, Fei Xin 費信 and Gong Zhen 鞏珍 accompanied Zheng He on his voyages to the Indian Ocean. They visited numerous countries described in their accounts, including the Maldives (and Laccadives?). Several editions of the texts by Ma and Fei have survived. Yang used the annotated version by Wan Ming 萬明 which came out in 2005, but not the more recent one published in 2018.² Both editions provide different versions of Ma's text. As for Fei Xin's book, a detailed English monograph on its editorial history remains a desideratum. I mention this because different editions of these and other key sources could alter some of the findings in Yang Bin's book.

Part II also looks at several very early texts. One source of the Tang period refers to an island location called Naluojiluzhou 那羅稽羅洲. Perhaps this name stands for the Maldives, but it may as well point to another location, as Yang vaguely suggests. If it were the Maldives, then it could be the earliest Chinese name for that place. A further feature is the number of Maldivian islands. Yang provides a useful table with various estimates of which the one by Fei Xin is by far the highest—38,000 islands in all. Notably as well, Ricci used the name Wandao 萬島, literally “Ten Thousand Islands,” on his world map. Giulio Aleni (1582–1649) called them Ma'erdiwa 馬兒地襪 in his *Zhifang waiji* 職方外紀 (1623), but on the Asia map in his book one finds the name used by Ricci.³

Yang provides further details on the Chinese names, particularly on Beiliu, Liushan 溜山, Liuyanguo 溜洋國, and Diegan 牒幹. Following a suggestion by Su Jiqing 蘇繼頤 (1891–1973), one of the *Daoyi zhilüe* editors, he argues that the combination Tiaoji 條培 in the *Nanhai zhi* should perhaps be corrected to Tiaopei 條培. The corrected sequence is phonetically close to the Sanskrit term

² Ma Huan, *Ming ben “Yingya shenglan” jiaozhu* 明本《瀛涯勝覽》校注, ed. Wan Ming (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 2018).

³ There is a full Italian translation of the *Zhifang waiji*. See Giulio Aleni, *Geografia dei paesi stranieri alla Cina. Zhifang waiji 職方外紀. Traduzione . . . , introduzione e noti di Paolo De Troia, Fuori testo Mappa dei diecimila paesi Wanguo quantu 萬國全圖* (Brescia: Fondazione Civiltà Bresciana, Centro Giulio Aleni, 2009), see esp. p. 77. One of Aleni's sources was Giovanni Antonio Magini's (1555–1617) *Moderne tavole di geografia . . .* (Venice: appresso Gio. Battista & Giorgio Galignani Fratelli, 1597–1598). For the Maldives see there, ch. XXXII (Descrittione dell'India Orientale), pp. 184a (map) and 192a (text).

dvipa, or “island” (which is still present in the current toponym “Maldives”), and could be older than Wang’s Beiliu. Diegan—when adjusted to Diewo 牒幹—may also stand for *dvipa*. The same seems true for the syllable *liu* frequently found in Ming sources. One may add: Since *shan* in Liushan(guo) can mean “island” as well, the insular component would be represented twice in this name.

Another important source is the so-called Zheng He map, or *Zheng He hanghai tu* 鄭和航海圖. It shows nine *liu*, or islands. Yang lists their names, but as so many other scholars, he is not sure about earlier identifications of the place called Silongliu 已龍溜. On the map, Silongliu forms the southernmost and largest location in the group. The name element *si* seems to indicate a southern direction (as on the Chinese compass). This and the relative size of Silongliu could be arguments for equating it with the Chagos Islands or another archipelago in the Indian Ocean; nevertheless, it could also support Yang’s suggestion that it is the southernmost atoll of the Maldivian group itself. The atoll called Guanliu 官溜 poses no such problems. This name must be referring to the central location of the Maldives, i.e., Male. The fact that it appears a bit too far south may not matter; more important is the syllable *guan*. Although Yang touches on the issue, he avoids discussing the many open questions associated with that term. Finally, the figure nine might have a symbolic weight, when connected to the old theories by Zou Yan 鄒 (騶) 衍, but this goes beyond Yang’s analysis.

There are also some notes on the term or name Ruoshui 弱水, literally “Weak Water.” Several sources present this place in their entries on the Maldives; other works mention it in purely fictional contexts. Examples are found in the *Xiyou ji* 西游記 and its maritime “sister” novel, the *Xiyang ji* 西洋記 (preface 1597), to which we shall return below. Another item carefully analysed by Yang is the category *shimen* 石門, literally “stone gate” or perhaps “channel [between/full of] stones.” Evidently, this term marks the entrances or access routes to major atolls. The element “stone” seems to indicate different kinds of reef structures. Related expressions appear in the *Daoyi zhilüe* and other sources.

A further chapter in Part II deals with monsoons and currents. Other segments look at Zheng He’s last voyage and the tribute gifts offered by Maldivian envoys. Here, Yang cites a reference to two envoys who allegedly arrived in 1445 and 1459. This comes from the “encyclopedia,” *Qinding Gujin tushu jicheng* 欽定古今圖書集成, which gives the *Guangdong tongzhi* 廣東

通志 as its source. Yang rightly suspects that something is wrong with the entry in question, but he has failed to consult the various editions of the Guangdong chronicle to verify the details. Both envoys were, in fact, sent by Xilanshan 錫蘭山, i.e., Sri Lanka. The *chugao* 初稿 version by Dai Jing 戴璟 (preface 1535), to mention just one of the extant Guangdong gazetteers, associates them with that country.⁴

Part III deals with coconut palm trees in the Maldives, the production of coir, again with stitched ships, and with “magnetic rocks,” or *cishi* 磁石. Many works mention these magic stones. One source cited by Yang places them in the Zhanghai 漲海. He notes that this toponym points to the South China Sea, but it was also used for an unspecified oceanic space near the shores of West Asia. Clearly, all this fuels the temptation to search for literary links between the *cishi*, *shimen*, coral, Ruoshui, and Liushan—in Chinese lore and in related folk tales across the maritime world of Asia. Cowry shells fill another long chapter in which Yang reiterates his views from previous studies. He argues that these shells possessed certain properties which enabled their use as a means of payment; this was the case in Yunnan, but the quantities imported into northern China were insufficient to fulfill a monetary function. Since I have reviewed Yang’s book on cowries elsewhere, it is not necessary to go into detail here.⁵ The segments on dried bonito fish (*majiaoyu* 馬鮫魚 and *hailiuyu* 海溜魚), the discussion of various terms related to locally produced and other textiles, and the fantastic stories surrounding the origin of ambergris make good reading as well. The latter has been an endless topic addressed in hundreds of books, articles, dictionaries, and bibliographical tools. Apparently, Yang was so fascinated by it that he even includes some remarks about a location called Longxianyu 龍涎嶼 (“Dragon Spittle Island” or “Ambergris Islet”), usually

⁴ See *juan* 30, 17a, in that source. See also the entries in the Academia Sinica edition of the *Ming shilu*, vol. XXVIII, p. 2523 (28 March 1445), and vol. XXXVII, p. 6439 (18 August 1459), translated in Geoff Wade’s online study, *Southeast Asia in the Ming Shi-lu: An Open Access Resource* (Singapore: Asia Research Institute and the Singapore E-Press, National University of Singapore), <https://epress.nus.edu.sg/msl/> (accessed 31 July 2025).

⁵ See my review of his *Cowrie Shells and Cowrie Money: A Global History*, *Journal of Asian History* 54.1 (2020): 191–96.

identified as Pulau Rondo. He also mentions different uses of ambergris in China, for example, as a strength-enhancing agent. That leads to yet another story: Ambergris was rare and expensive. The Portuguese were able to supply it to the court of the Jiajing 嘉靖 Emperor (r. 1522–1566), where it was needed in the imperial bed chambers. Evidently, the imperial court felt satisfied, and Macau was born. Whether the story is true, no one can tell, but it is an amusing tale that nevertheless takes readers far away from the main thread of the present study.

Part IV looks at the Buddhist past of the Maldives. It also sheds light on a very different topic: so-called port marriages. Yang is certainly right: Ibn Battuta greatly enjoyed temporary relationships with local women. In Chinese eyes such customs were incompatible with traditional ideas rooted in Confucian morality. Yuan and Ming texts do not mention the liberal behaviour of Maldivian women but refer to similar practices in other contexts, as we shall see below.

The next chapter of Part IV introduces the role of Liushan in *Xiyang ji*. Neither N. E. Borevskaya's (Н. Е. Бореvская) Russian translation of this novel nor Barbara Witt's most useful English bibliography of related secondary sources are listed in the present study. Also, Yang has not been too interested in the structural similarities between *Xiyang ji* and *Xiyou ji*. The philosophical dimensions of both works are very complex and qualify them as novels of quest. Yang refers to the "Weak Water" (called Ruanshuiyang 軟水洋 in *Xiyang ji*) and the "Magnetic Rock" (called Xitieling 吸鐵嶺) but ignores their function as thresholds within a quest theme. However, he mentions the loose behaviour of women on Timor Island, the dragon king's gifts, the subordination of Liushan, and other details.

The very last chapter quotes Pyrrard's reference to a "bird from China." The Maldivian ruler wonders how this creature, trained to catch fish, had come to his kingdom. Yang then switches to the Chinese practice of using cormorants for fishing. He cites numerous examples from various sources which describe this art. Simply put, the present chapter, entitled "An Echo: The 'China Bird'," attempts to establish a final connection between the Maldives and the Ming empire—as a symbol of the dwindling relations between both sides. Clearly, some late Ming works such as the *Xian bin lu* 咸賓錄 (1591) continue to remind readers of the past, especially of Zheng He's activities, but they provide nothing new on these islands. In a way, the old Liushan are falling

into oblivion. Even Qing texts such as the *Hai lu* 海錄 (1820) cannot fill the gap.⁶

To repeat, the final chapter of the present book guides readers to very distant horizons. However, it also contains some minor errors. Here are three trivial examples: The *Shunfeng xiangsong* 順風相送, a navigational text of uncertain date and origin, does not centre on the Indian Ocean (p. 277); its focus is Southeast Asia. Galeote Pereira and Gaspar da Cruz were Portuguese (p. 268) and not Spanish travellers (p. 269). Huang Xingzeng 黃省曾 did not visit the Maldives at the same time as the Portuguese and other Europeans (p. 263); in fact, he never went to these islands.

What can one say in conclusion: My critical remarks do not carry much weight. Yang Bin's book is a balanced and clearly structured overview, easy to read, easy to digest. It does not become entangled in useless models or excessive philological ballast, but it often transcends the narrow confines of Sino-Maldivian "exchange," indulging in far-reaching images and stories. While this may displease some readers, others will certainly embrace Yang Bin's approach with great enthusiasm. Finally, most books contain some typos; the present one is no exception. Nevertheless, its many notes, bibliography, and index are reliable and helpful. In sum, one ought to congratulate the author on this courageous work.

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⁶ Two more additions to Yang's bibliography: For late Ming works on maritime Asia, one may consult Elke Papelitzky, *Writing World History in Late Ming China and the Perception of Maritime Asia* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2020). There is an annotated translation of the *Hai lu*: Rainer Schwarz, trans. and intro., *Aufzeichnungen über die Meere (Hailu 海錄). Niedergeschrieben von Yang Bingnan 楊炳南, nach dem mündlichen Bericht von Xie Qinggao 謝清高*, ed. Martin Hanke, preface by Hartmut Walravens (Gossenberg: Ostasien Verlag, 2020).