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# Regimes of Diplomacy and Law: Bengal-China Encounters in the Early Fifteenth Century

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## Abstract

This article examines the Bengal–China connections between the Ilyās Shāhī and Ming dynasties in the early fifteenth century across the Bay of Bengal and South China Sea. It traces how law played a central role in the cultural geography and diplomatic vocabulary between individuals and communities in foreign lands, with their shared understanding of two nodal points of law. Diplomatic missions explicate how customary, regional and transregional laws were entangled in inter-imperial etiquette. Then there were the religious orders of Islam that constituted an inner circle of imperial exchanges. Between the Ilyās Shāhī rule in Bengal and the Ming Empire in China, certain dimensions of Islamic law provided a common language for the circulation of people and ideas. Stretching between cities and across oceans the interpolity legal exchanges expose interesting aspects of the histories of China and Bengal.

## Keywords

Bengal-China connections – Ming dynasty – Ilyās Shāhī dynasty – interpolity laws – diplomacy – Islam – Indian Ocean

## Introduction

More than a decade ago *JESHO* published a special issue (49/4), edited by Kenneth R. Hall, on the transregional cultural and economic exchanges and diasporic mobility between South, Southeast and East Asia, an area usually

identified with the Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea. Since then the relevant literature has grown significantly, enriching our understanding of this geopolitical and cultural realm as an interconnected and shared space in the premodern period. By giving special attention to the moments of legal interfacing, and on the basis of a few extra, sometimes new, pieces of evidence, I shall revisit some of the arguments raised in that issue of *JESHO* and engage with the latest literature in the field, in order to show how law was a central element in the premodern transregional circulations of people, commodities and practices. It provided, maintained and advanced a workable framework in the imperial and regional exchanges between Bengal and China.

Premodern Bengal and China were significantly connected through socio-political and economic exchanges in which both regions reciprocated movements of traders, travellers, diplomats with commodities and ideas. Scholars have explored the nuances of such transoceanic and overland interactions in the broader frameworks of tribute systems, diplomatic relations, and guest rituals, but the role of law and religion has been overlooked. In fact, transregional notions of “interpolity law” and diplomacy are elements which fostered smooth interactions between regions, empires, dynasties and communities.<sup>1</sup> Religion often arose as an additional component to facilitate the aims of participating agents and masters. While interpolity law provided an overarching umbrella for political entities, the actors themselves made use of the probabilistic outlooks of their religion and its laws as they made their way across borders. I shall investigate how and why law and religion, particularly Islam, stood at the crossroads of exchanges between Bengal and China in the early fifteenth century, during the Ilyās Shāhī (1342-1486) and early Ming (1368-1644) dynasties.

In the expanding field of Indian Ocean studies, some scholars have paid attention to the premodern Bay of Bengal in general, or to the Bengal-China connections more specifically. They have made passing references to the role of law, but without much elaboration on the importance of legal regimes for enabling actual interactions. How those ensured a safe crossing of borders between oceans and lands is left aside. K.N. Chaudhuri, the stalwart in the field, wrote that law protected maritime itinerants when commercial contracts were concluded between members of communities in all the trading centres of the Indian Ocean, and the “reputation of a port of trade turned on the fairness

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1 L. Benton and A. Clulow, “Legal Encounters and the Origins of Global Law.” In *The Cambridge World History*, volume 6: *The Construction of a Global World, 1400-1800 CE, Part 2: Patterns of Change*, ed. J.H. Bentley, S. Subrahmanyam and M.E. Wiesner-Hanks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015): 80-100.

of its legal traditions.”<sup>2</sup> A few years afterwards, Janet Abu Lughod observed that particular notions of protection, law and order enabled the coexistence of a parallel cultural, geopolitical and mercantile circulatory system across the Indian Ocean.<sup>3</sup> Recently, Lauren Benton and Adam Clulow have analysed diplomatic missions as an occasion when legal negotiations between the imperial entities since the fifteenth century took place. They argued that protocol, jurisdiction and protection were the main “categories or rubrics of legal practices” in such avenues.<sup>4</sup>

Within the historiography of premodern interactions there is a disproportionate balance of emphasis. China has received unprecedented attention lately due to its increased interest in the Indian Ocean through the multi-billion Belt and Road Initiative. This in turn has motivated scholars to explore the old connections of the country in the oceanic littoral, especially with a focus on the Ming admiral Zheng He (1371-1433), and it has made China's overseas involvements in the early fifteenth century a well-trodden area with some attention to legal implications. Premodern Bengal—as distinct from the Bay of Bengal—on the other hand continues to be ignored as a maritime region.<sup>5</sup> Most studies we have on the region focus mainly on the political-economic history and internal dynamics of the sultanate period in the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, with less attention to the wider interactions and their potential juridical ramifications.<sup>6</sup> A group of studies that does engage with the

2 K.N. Choudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985): 12.

3 J. Abu Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989): Part III, *passim*.

4 Benton and Clulow, “Legal Encounters”: 82.

5 For a very recent critical engagement on the contributions of the Bay of Bengal at large see R. Mukherjee, “Ambivalent Engagements: The Bay of Bengal in the Indian Ocean World.” *The International Journal of Maritime History* 29/1 (2017): 96-110. Compare this with two recent works on transoceanic connections of the Bay: S. Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The Furies of Nature and the Fortunes of Migrants* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); L. Ghosh, ed. *Eastern Indian Ocean: Historical Links to Contemporary Convergences* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011).

6 R.C. Majumdar, *History of Medieval Bengal* (Calcutta: G. Bharadwaj & Co., 1973); *idem*, *History of Bengal*. 2d ed. Dacca: University of Dacca, 1963; M.A. Rahim, *Social and Cultural History of Bengal*. Vol. 1, 1201-1576. Vol. 2, 1576-1757 (Karachi: Pakistan Publishing House, 1963, 1967); J. Sarkar, ed. *History of Bengal*. Vol. 2, *Muslim Period, 1200-1757* (Patna: Janaki Prakashan, 1977); J.N. Sarkar, *Hindu-Muslim Relations in Bengal (Medieval Period)* (Delhi: Idarah-i Adabiyat-i Delli, 1985); M.R. Tarafdar, *Husain Shahi Bengal, 1494-1538 A.D.: A Socio-Political Study* (Dacca: Asiatic Society of Pakistan, 1965); M.M. Ali, *History of the Muslims in Bengal*. Vol. 1A-B (Riyadh: Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, 1985).

region's global connections deal with a period after the European arrival with some examinations of transregional law.<sup>7</sup>

Some literature has been bridging this gap through analyses of economic and political themes in Bengal's connections with China.<sup>8</sup> In this group, Haraprasad Ray's work on the political and mercantile interactions between the two regions is noteworthy for his demonstration of the routes and manners of sending and receiving missions along with the implications of exchanges in communities and commodities.<sup>9</sup> However, he hardly discusses the premodern role of law and Islam. He also overlooks the socio-political attitudes to foreigners and foreign missions, despite much of the region being multi-ethnic and multi-religious in the fifteenth century.<sup>10</sup> As for discussions of Islam, most standard texts on Bengal do go beyond the internal dynamics, yet they limit themselves to the region's 'western' connections and rarely discuss the 'eastern' counterparts.<sup>11</sup> The recent works of Rishad Choudhury and Thibaut d'Hubert pay attention to Bengal's eastern and western maritime connections in the so-called 'early modern period', after the arrival of the Mughals and Europeans on the scene, an area that has been well explored in studies on the companies

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- 7 J.J.A. Campos, *History of the Portuguese in Bengal* (New York: AMS Press, 1975 [originally published in 1919]); A. Chatterjee, *Bengal in the Reign of Aurangzeb, 1658-1707* (Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, 1967); S. Subrahmanyam, *Improvising Empire: Portuguese Trade and Settlement in the Bay of Bengal, 1500-1700* (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1990); S. Chaudhury, "Merchants, Companies and Rulers: Bengal in the Eighteenth Century." *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 31/1 (1988): 74-109; idem, *Trade and Commercial Organization in Bengal, 1650-1720* (Calcutta: Firma K.L.M., 1975).
- 8 S.E. Hussain, "Silver Flow and Horse Supply to Sultanate Bengal with Special Reference to Trans-Himalayan Trade (13th-16th Centuries)." *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 56 (2013) 264-308; J.S. Deyell. "The China Connection: Problems of Silver Supply in Medieval Bengal." In *Precious Metals in the Later Medieval and Early Modern Worlds*, ed. J.F. Richards, (Durham, N. C.: Carolina Academic Press, 1983): 207-24; P.C. Bagchi, "Political Relations between Bengal and China in the Pathan Period." *Visva-Bharati Annals* 1 (1945): 96-134; T. Yamamoto, "International Relations between China and the Countries along the Ganga in the Early Ming Period." *Indian Historical Review* 4/. 1 (1977): 13-19.
- 9 H. Ray, *Trade and Diplomacy in India-China Relations: A Study of Bengal during the Fifteenth Century* (New Delhi: Radiant Publishers; London, Sangam Books, 1993): especially ch. 3.
- 10 For example, see M.I. Borah, "An Account of the Immigration of Persian Poets into Bengal." *Dacca University Studies* 1 (1935): 141-50.
- 11 A. Karim, *Social History of the Muslims in Bengal (Down to A.D. 1538)* (Dacca: The Asiatic Society of Pakistan, 1959): 47-51; M.E. Haq, *A History of Sufi-ism in Bengal* (Dacca: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1975); Rahim, *Social and Cultural History of Bengal*: vol. 1; J. Sarkar, *History of Bengal*, vol. 2; Ali, *History of the Muslims in Bengal*, vol. 1A-B.

and on Calcutta.<sup>12</sup> One significant exception in this regard is the dated and controversial work of S.Q. Fatimi, who explored the arguable role of Bengal in introducing Islam into Southeast Asia. Although his conclusions have been questioned as most of his evidence was speculative, the larger premise of his research on Bengal's role in the Islamic networks of the 'eastern' world awaits further attention.

Against this background I shall explore the role of Bengal in such 'eastern' connections. In exchanges with unfamiliar imperial environments such as China, cultural and social differences were overcome through existing channels of law and diplomacy. I shall argue that although Bengal had long mercantile connections with China, it was mainly in the early fifteenth century that the imperial state began to notice their significance because of missions constantly being sent from Bengal to the Ming court. In the increasing connections between China and Bengal Islam played a significant part. The overall notions of law (not necessarily religious, rather transregional, interpolity laws and diplomacy based on ideas of legibility, uniformity, predictability, etc.) provided an umbrella frame of exchanges between the kingdoms, while Islam and its laws provided a shared vocabulary for the diplomats on the frontline of these exchanges. These layered legal realms enabled and strengthened the exchanges. As much as China aspired for global exposure through its expeditions across the ocean, Bengal also had similar ambitions, by which it explored its own potential for transregional recognition and legitimacy on the international stage.<sup>13</sup> In this regard, I shall focus mainly on the early fifteenth century, the peak of such connections. Eventually this interconnectedness was to waver because of internal conflicts in Bengal and, for different reasons, the withdrawal of the Chinese imperial state from the ocean. Our sources are mainly published and translated records of the Ming period and published and unpublished primary sources in Arabic and Persian related to the Ilyās Shāhī dynasty, with a few accounts of travellers in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

12 T. d'Hubert, "India beyond the Ganges: Defining Arakanese Buddhism in Persianate colonial Bengal." *Indian Economic & Social History Review* 56/1 (2019): 1-39; R. Choudhury, "An Eventful Politics of Difference and its Afterlife: Chittagong Frontier, Bengal, c. 1657-1757." *Indian Economic & Social History Review* 52/3 (2015): 271-296; cf. S. Subrahmanyam, "'Persianization' and 'Mercantilism' in Bay of Bengal History, 1400-1700." In idem, *Explorations in Connected History: From the Tagus to the Ganges* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005): 45-79.

13 On this latter aspect, I have explored such aspirations of A'zam Shāh in M. Kooria, "Un agent abyssinien et deux rois indiens à La Mecque. Interactions autour du droit islamique au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle." *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 74, no. 1 (2019): 75-103.

I shall start with a description of the context and volume of the exchanges during the reign of the Ilyās Shāhīs in Bengal and the early Ming period in China. Only in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century did Bengal receive the formal attention of the Chinese state. Even though the Bay of Bengal had been a significant arena for Chinese and Bengali traders and envoys for some centuries, the imperial connections were disrupted in the early centuries of the sultanate in Bengal and during the Yuan Mongol period (1279-1368) in China. Constant diplomatic missions were initiated by the Ilyās Shāhī rulers so that official connections were established and Bengal as such was recognised in the early fifteenth century. In the following sections, I shall examine the role of law in this diplomatic interaction, focusing on the role of Islam and Islamic law. I shall show how the rise of Bengal diplomacy in the Bay of Bengal—South China Sea corridor enabled a particular form of an interpolity juridical and religious framework.

## 1 The Settings and Frequency of the Exchanges

By the end of the fourteenth century both China and Bengal had established themselves as stable economies and polities after decades of internal conflicts and power struggles. The imperial regimes in both places had also nurtured a significant interest in overseas ventures after realising the potentials of Indian Ocean trade. The Yongle Emperor (r. 1402-24) from Ming China and Aʿzam Shāh (r. 1390-c.1412) from Bengal, the two most outstanding rulers in this period, initiated diplomatic contacts across the Bay of Bengal through several political, economic and social exchanges. Their immediate successors in the following decades contributed to advancing the relations they had started.

The Ming Empire, after it succeeded the Mongol-led Yuan dynasty in 1368, was initially reluctant to engage in oceanic enterprises. Reacting against a period of foreign domination, it once again adopted “the Confucian rhetoric of the Sinocentric world order”.<sup>14</sup> When it had to engage with the external world, the Empire chose to deal with the oceanic communities of the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean rather than encounter the Mongols to the North, remembering the bloody war that drove the latter out.<sup>15</sup> The Hongwu Emperor

14 T. Sen, “The Formation of Chinese Maritime Networks to Southern Asia, 1200-1450.” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 49/4 (2006): 435-37; on the Chinese maritime trade policies and mercantile activities in the Bay of Bengal before the Ming period, see W.W. Rockhill, “Notes on the Relations and Trade of China with the Eastern Archipelago and the Coast of the Indian Ocean during the Fourteenth Century.” *T'oung pao* 15/3 (1914): 419-447 and *T'oung pao* 16/1 (1915): 61-159.

15 I am thankful to one of the four anonymous reviewers for this comment.

(r. 1368-98) had aimed during his reign for a self-sufficient rural community and had suppressed peasant revolts along with social welfare initiatives with the help of strong military might. Then there was 'an oceanic turn' in the early fifteenth century during the reign of the Yongle Emperor, with more emphasis on naval expeditions and maintaining a permanent navy of at least 3500 warships and 250 treasure ships.<sup>16</sup> His successor was the Xuande Emperor (r. 1425-35), who was crowned after an interregnum of less than a year after the short reign of his father, the Hongxi Emperor (r. 1424-25). He furthered the movement in opposition to his father, who had been against the maritime expeditions of Zheng He and is reputed to have burned the ships and restricted overseas mercantile activities. Xuande gave compensation for those losses and advanced the oceanic expeditions with much higher investments for the seventh and last voyage of Zheng He. This expedition involved more than a hundred large ships and thousands of crew. The fleet docked in about twenty countries including Bengal which they had already visited in their expeditions in 1415, 1422-23 and 1432-33. From Chittagong the Chinese officials reached the Bengali capitals of Pandua and Gaur by river or road via Sonargaon.

In Bengal the Ilyās Shāhī dynasty had ousted the governors of the Tughlaq Sultanate of Delhi (1321-1398) and they had established the first locally-based Turkic kingdom in the region by the mid fourteenth century.<sup>17</sup> Through a series of conquests and expeditions, the eponymous founder of the dynasty, Shams al-Dīn Ilyās Shāh (r. 1342-1357), had defeated not only the Delhi Sultanate but also several other minor kingdoms in the region. His grandson, Ghiyāth al-Dīn A'zam Shāh, followed his reign after his father was killed in battle in 1390. After some initial internal conflicts, he managed to stabilise the kingdom and then aspired to expand his economy, authority and patronage beyond his empire. He sent embassies to Persia, the Hijaz (Mecca and Medina) and China. His missions to Persia and the Hijaz were designed with specific cultural concerns. He requested poems from the famous Persian poet Ḥāfeẓ Shīrāzī (1315-1390), who is supposed to have responded with a couplet. He also sent an African agent to establish Islamic law colleges (madrasas) in the Hejaz. By contrast, his missions

16 Out of 3500 warships, 2700 were combat vessels and patrol boats at coastal guard stations, 400 were based at Xinjiang Kou, and 400 were an armed fleet transporting grain. Each treasure ship (*bao chuan*) could carry about 500 men; see J. Lo, "The Decline of the Early Ming Navy." *Oriens Extremus* 5/2 (1958): 149-51. For the larger picture of Yongle's initiatives and trajectories, see S.H. Tsai, *Perpetual Happiness: The Ming Emperor Yongle* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2001), chapter 9.

17 Ghulam Ḥusain Salim, *Riyāzu-s-Salāṭīn: A History of Bengal*, trans. Maulavi Abdus Salam (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1902): 94-95; A.H. Dani, "Shamsuddīn Ilyās Shāh, Shāh-i Bangālah". In *Essays Presented to Sir Jadunath Sarkar*, ed. H.R. Gupta (Hoshiarpur: Punjab University, 1958): vol. 2, 50-58.



to China were motivated mainly by economic and political interests, for his kingdom had yet to be recognised as a major commercial and diplomatic partner. The Ming emperor Yongle and his successors reciprocated the visits through several ambassadors and agents, including the ones led by Zheng He.

The rise of Chittagong as an entrepôt and emporium of transoceanic trade had a significant role in drawing the attention of the rulers to the prospects of further connections with Bengal. It had functioned as a port in the fourteenth century according to descriptions of the Moroccan traveller Ibn Baṭūṭa (1304-1369 or 1377) and the Chinese traveller Wang Dayuan (*fl.* 1311-1350), who had both visited the city then.<sup>18</sup> The city was on one of the three major routes which facilitated exchanges between Bengal and China at this time; Kamarupa in the northeast and Tripura-Sylhet in the east were the other two routes.<sup>19</sup> The latter two were prominent as landroutes, but Chittagong and Arakan in the southeast grew as major maritime hubs in the fourteenth century, welcoming traders, sailors, travellers, and representatives of regional and global states from North Africa to East Asia into its heart.<sup>20</sup> The Ilyās Shāhī rulers put in extra effort to make Chittagong friendlier for economic, cultural and religious transactions, for they realised that control over the city “ensured a secure and regular flow of silver to Bengal through maritime trade.”<sup>21</sup> To this end, Ghiyāth al-Dīn Aʿẓam Shāh established a mint in Chittagong in 1398, and he and several of his successors struck coins there until 1448 in order to meet the constant demands of coastal and maritime commercial traffic.

For the mobility of diplomats using specific aspects of law and Islam, the rise of Chittagong and the related sea route is a major historical moment for Bengal. The port and its kingdom were noticed by the Ming polity, whereas it had been ignored by the Yuan dynasty in the late-thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries during some diplomatic and official missions into the Bay of Bengal. Several traders and officials from the Yuan Empire had frequented adjacent ports, such as Pulicat, Kanjimedu, Naguru, Masulipatnam, Mrauk U and Pegu. The western and eastern coasts of southern India were favourite destinations of Chinese traders in this period, whereas the port towns of Bengal as such were not recognised by the Yuan and early Ming courts.<sup>22</sup> The Southwestern

18 Wang Dayuan, *Dǎo Yì Zhì*; Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad bin ‘Abd Allāh Ibn Baṭūṭa, *Riḥlat Ibn Baṭūṭa: Tuḥfat al-nuẓẓār fī gharā’ib al-amṣār wa-‘ajā’ib al-asfār*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Mun‘im al-‘Uryān and Mustafā al-Qaṣṣās (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-‘Ulūm, 1987): 623-24.

19 Deyell, “China Connection”: 125.

20 The land routes were significant in their own right and served different purposes, called for different legal and religious realms, and therefore require a different approach.

21 Hussain, “Silver Flow and Horse Supply”: 287.

22 Sen, “Formation of Chinese Maritime Networks”; J. Gommans and J. Leider, eds, *The Maritime Frontier of Burma: Exploring Political, Cultural, and Commercial Interaction in*



Silk Route (in addition to the prominent overland Silk Route and maritime Silk Route) was an important channel for overland mercantile connections between Yunnan in the far southwest of China and Bengal before and during the Yuan period. This was especially true for the trade in silver, horses and cowries.<sup>23</sup> But because Bengal was only a province of the Delhi Sultanate at that time, the Chinese empires did not have to engage with a provincial state, nor did they send any imperial missions to the region as they did to Delhi.<sup>24</sup> The situation changed when the Ilyās Shāhī sultanate was established in Bengal. New energy now flowed into their ports, linked with the initiatives of the Ilyās Shāhī rulers from Ghiyāth al-Dīn onwards, and this attracted the attention of the Ming authorities. Once it became recognised, we see the Ming court using Bengal not only to reach out to the sultanate itself but also as a route through which to send a mission to Delhi.<sup>25</sup> Although the Bengal-China connections were interrupted briefly during internal conflicts and political aspirations on both sides, the missions were sustained despite the interregnums.

By the beginning of the fifteenth century, Bengal and China had begun to maintain a good reciprocal diplomatic relationship, facilitating further circulation of communities, commodities and customs between both regions. Through such exchanges the economy of the regions flourished, especially as Bengal imported large amounts of silver from China and minted a significant number of coins. During the premodern history of Bengal in the era of the Ilyās Shāhī dynasty the large minting boom is attested by as many as twenty mints functioning simultaneously. Under the Ilyās Shāhīs it increased steadfastly in the following decades despite several ups and downs. A rise in overseas commerce had created a high demand for money from both traders as well as the state. The rulers opened new mints and even mint-towns, and “Bengal is the only region in medieval India where two or three mints were in operation simultaneously in a single city. This was equally rare in Safavid Persia, the Ottoman Empire, and even Europe during this period.”<sup>26</sup> A major source of silver for these mints was the silver mines of the northern Shan state or Yunnan in China, and the silver was imported overland and by ship.

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*the Indian Ocean World, 1200-1800* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2002): *passim*.

- 23 B. Yang, “Horses, Silver, and Cowries: Yunnan in Global Perspective” *Journal of World History* 15/3 (2004): 281-322.
- 24 One telling example is the mission from the Yuan court to the Delhi sultanate, as mentioned by Ibn Baṭūṭa, *Rihla*, 541-2.
- 25 Yamamoto, “International Relations”; Bagchi, “Political Relations”; Sen, “Formation of Chinese Maritime Networks”; the mission disembarked at Chittagong and took boats along the Ganges and its tributaries in order to reach Delhi.
- 26 This quote and the details in this paragraph are from Hussain, “Silver Flow and Horse Supply”: 276.

Bullion was not the only commodity that moved between China and Bengal in what was a strong mercantile and cultural circuit. The fifteenth century witnessed a revival of the long-existing maritime and overland exchanges, and Bengal, a confluence of the overland silk route and the maritime route, led this resumption of importing and exporting a vast range of commodities as well as minting enormous amounts of coins to satisfy the market. Commercial transactions involved horses, textiles, ceramics, swords, spices, rice and sugar.<sup>27</sup> In the socio-cultural realm several scholars, mystics and monks travelled across borders to further their religious, spiritual and cultural initiatives.<sup>28</sup> In commerce and culture both polities had played mainly indirect roles through using intermediary merchants and regulations pertinent to their specific ports. There were significant regulations promoting or restricting overseas trade. For example, the founder of the Ming, the Emperor Hongwu, had strictly prohibited his subjects from any form of maritime trade or travel.<sup>29</sup> Such indirect involvement eased in the early fifteenth century, when Hongwu's successors Yongle and Xuande in China, and Ghiyāth al-Dīn A'ẓam Shāh and his later successors such as Jalāl al-Dīn Muhammad (r. 1415-1432) in Bengal, promoted oceanic enterprises by exchanging ambassadors and agents in their courts. In such initiatives the role of ambassadors in extending their respective political and economic aspirations, and how the regimes and their agents navigated the cultural differences of their hosts requires examination. I shall turn to these questions now, with close attention to interpolity law.

## 2 Notions of Law, Nations of Diplomacy

The diplomatic missions between China and Bengal attested in the historical sources are numerous for that period. Different sources show Bengali emissaries arriving in the Ming court on more than a dozen occasions. This is significant because there were hardly any ambassadors before this from Bengal to China. Ray mentions that there were fourteen embassies from Bengal to China between 1404 and 1440.<sup>30</sup> Later sources provide additional information

27 Ray, *Trade and Diplomacy*: 131 mentions that Bengal may have exported up to sixty commodities to China.

28 For example, see Ibn Baṭūṭa's reference to a few scholars from Bengal working in China, etc. Ibn Baṭūṭa, *Riḥlat Ibn Baṭūṭa*: 626-27, 655; cf. S.Q. Fatimi, *Islam Comes to Malaysia* (Singapore: Malaysian Sociological Research Institute, 1963).

29 R. von Glahn, *Fountain of Fortune: Money and Monetary Policy in China, 1000-1700* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996): 54, 90.

30 The Bengali missions visited the Ming courts in 1404, 1405, 1408-09, 1410, 1411, 1412, 1414, 1418, 1420, 1421, 1423, 1429, 1438 and 1439, according to Ray, *Trade and Diplomacy*: 70. He

on the Bengali missions, such as the sixteenth-century accounts *Xiyang chaogong dianlu* (西洋朝貢典錄, compiled in 1520) and the *Shuyu Zhouzhi lu* (殊域周咨錄, compiled in 1574). The former records four missions, two sent by king Ngai-ya-sse-ting (Ghiyāth al-Dīn) in 1408 and 1409, and two by others in 1414 and 1438, while the latter text mentions an additional visit in 1405 but does not mention the one in 1438.<sup>31</sup> The *Ming shi* (明史) says that the Bengali ambassadors came every year since their first arrival in 1405, but we do not have further evidence to substantiate this.<sup>32</sup>

For Chinese visits to Bengal we have five different Chinese accounts describing five or six visits. That is also remarkable for the period, as we have no account of royal missions before.<sup>33</sup> We do have some earlier records from traders who visited the place. Chao Ju-kua, a twelfth- and thirteenth-century Customs Officer of Fu-kien, wrote in his *Zhu fan zhi* (諸蕃志) about *P'eng-kie-lo* (鵬茄囉) and its capital *Ch'a-na-ki* 茶那咭 [(Pen)-ch'a-na-ki-(lo) (奔) 茶那咭(羅), identified as Punḍanagara or Padua].<sup>34</sup> Chao Ju-kua did not visit the place himself but he wrote on the basis of details he gathered from sailors and merchants. In the fourteenth-century account *Tao yi zhi lue* (島夷志略), Wang Dayuan says he visited the place. He provides accurate descriptions of the region and its people, commodities and customs. But once we come to the fifteenth century we have direct accounts from the royal ambassadors themselves.

The first Ming mission to Bengal was probably in 1409 after Yongle had initiated contacts with foreign countries, according to the *Ming-she*. The text says that the king sent royal representatives for a second time in 1413 in order to attend the coronation of the Bengali prince Sai-wu-ting 賽勿丁 (Sayf al-Dīn), after the former had learned from the Bengali ambassador about the death of the king Ghiyāth al-Dīn in 1412.<sup>35</sup> Acknowledging their visit to the kingdom and participation in the coronation ceremony, Sayf al-Dīn sent a mission

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rejects (p. 12) the existing claims of only three, four or eleven missions, made by such scholars as E.O. Reischauer, J.K. Fairbank and P.C. Bagchi. He also says that Bagchi had confused the dates (1409, 1412-13 and 1415); the correct dates are 1412-13, 1415-16, 1420-21 and 1422-23. He thus excludes 1409 and adds a few other years.

31 Bagchi, "Political Relations": 112.

32 *Ibid.*, referring to *Ming shi* 明史 (History of the Ming dynasty).

33 The Chinese court sent missions to Bengal in 1409 (?), 1412, 1415, 1420, 1422-23 and 1432-33.

34 Chao Ju-kua, *His Work on the Chinese and Arab Trade in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries, Entitled Chu-fan-chi*, trans. and annot. F. Hirth and W.W. Rockhill (St. Petersburg: Printing Office of the Imperial Academy of Sciences, 1911).

35 Ray, *Trade and Diplomacy*: 62 says that Sayf al-Dīn in this quote is mistaken because Shihāb al-Dīn Bāyazīd Shāh was the ruler from 1412 to 1415. This argument cannot be taken at its face value, because dates of death of many Bengali sultans are so mangled in the existing historiography. For example, historians provide the year of death for the most celebrated ruler of this period, Ghiyāth al-Dīn, as 1409, 1410, 1411, and even 1412.

in 1414, for which the Yongle Emperor reciprocated with another mission under the command of the Grand Eunuch Hou Xian (侯顯) in 1415, with “presents to the king, his consort and chiefs.”<sup>36</sup> According to the *Ming shi* and *Xu tong dian* (續通典), the Yongle Emperor, “wishing to communicate with Bengal and other countries”, asked Hou Xian in 1415 to go to these places with a navy. Again in 1420 Yongle ordered Hou Xian to go to Bengal, when its ruler complained that the sultan of Jaunpur had attacked his territory.<sup>37</sup>

Out of the five or six Chinese royal missions to Bengal, three missions (of 1415, 1422-23 and 1432-33) were part of Zheng He's expeditions and these were part of his fourth, sixth and seventh sailings. Historians have long debated and confused the Zheng He expeditions to Bengal. For example, Richard Eaton says that they visited Bengal only in 1413 and 1415.<sup>38</sup> In a comprehensive study on the topic, Haraprasad Ray also confuses and contradicts himself. In a table of Zheng He's seven voyages and the places the crew had visited he mentions Bengal only in the sixth voyage (that of 1422-23), whereas he himself acknowledges that the Chinese mission to Bengal in 1415 was part of Zhen He's voyages, according to its leading participant, Fei Xin.<sup>39</sup> It is generally agreed that Zheng He himself did not visit several of the countries listed in the crew's itinerary, but assigned his associates and assistants to visit on his and the state's behalf. Bengal was one of those places. He himself did not visit, but his associates did on three occasions.

Bengal initiated diplomatic missions to China in 1404, which motivated the Ming Empire to reciprocate with a mission to Bengal. It was hardly a year before Zheng He started his first expedition. We do not know whether the Bengali mission had an opportunity to meet the Ming expedition as the exact date of its arrival at the Ming court is not given. The imperial order for Zheng

36 Fei Xin, *Xingcha shenglan* 星槎勝覽, trans. [The Overall Survey of the Star Raft] J.V.G. Mills, ed. R. Ptak (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1996), 73; Bagchi, “Political Relations”: 124-26 at 125; Rockhill, “Notes on the Relations and Trade”: 440-444.

37 *Ming shi*, chapters 326 and 340, and *Xu tong dian* (續通典), ch. 140 as cited in Bagchi, “Political Relations”: 112-16; For a Persian take on this tussle between Bengal and Jaunpur and Bengal's dependence on the diplomatic missions eastwards, see ‘Abd-al-Razzāq Samarqandī, *Mattla’-e Sa’dāyān va Majma’-e Bahrayn*, trans. W.M. Thackston in his *A Century of Princes: Sources on Timurid History and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture, 1989), 299-321.

38 R.M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011): 49.

39 Ray's dismissal of the seventh voyage visiting Bengal is flawed. His explanations on the basis of travel dates and distances are not convincing, especially once he admits that Zheng He himself did not visit several of these countries, but instead assigned his associates and assistants. Ray, *Trade and Diplomacy*: 40, 66-68.

He was issued on 11 July 1405 and the Bengali mission may not have had the chance to be introduced and invited to the kingdom. In their second and third voyages the region was also bypassed, but in the fourth voyage Yongle asked the admiral to include Bengal in his voyage chart and sent his associate Hou Xian on his behalf. In the sixth and seventh expeditions the fleet ventured to Bengal, and there were additional missions from the Ming court to the region. At the same time, the Bengali missions are said to have arrived annually at the Chinese court.<sup>40</sup> As an aside, the name Bangla (or Bengal) appears in the Ming documents for first time after the 1404 mission, in *Shuyu Zhouzi lu* in 1405 and in the *Ming shilu* in 1408. This would mean that the region itself did not attract Chinese imperial attention until then, even if the traders and people from both regions had travelled there and traded.<sup>41</sup>

In all these exchanges diverse norms and customs of premodern international diplomacy played a central role. The nuances of diplomatic exchange in the fifteenth century is a well-researched area, especially for Ming China if not for Bengal, so further detailed discussion would be superfluous. The distinction between norm and law in the premodern transregional context is rather fluid, for what seems a norm in a country may be rather an unbreakable law or a cause for offence in the courts. Contravention by international diplomatic missions would have an immediate and unsympathetic response. We know, for example, of a Muslim mission refusing to bow before the Tang emperor in the eighth century, an offensive act that enraged the courtiers to contemplate his murder.<sup>42</sup> There were obvious cultural differences but we also find some shared understanding of diplomatic procedures, especially when a minister intervened and stopped the rage. Such understandings facilitated transimperial norms in the period and smoothed cross-cultural exchange.

The interpolity law between Bengal and China emerged from the performance of a set of routine customs, ceremonies and exchanges, in which the political actors shared a common understanding borrowed from or lent to imperial diplomatic missions. Accounts of visits to other royal courts describe how those performed the “duties” expected from them, even if the other party had not stipulated them in advance. This happened first at the appearance of the delegates at the border, and then at the royal court. In both Bengal and

40 Bagchi, “Political Relations”: 112 referring to *Ming shi* 明史.

41 Such earlier Chinese names for the region as “Pengqie lo” and “Pengjiala” were mentioned by Zhao Rugua in 1225 and Wang Dayuan in 1350 respectively. A potential third name is *Bang-ha-ala*, but it is doubtful if that term referred to Bengal itself. Bagchi, “Political Relations”: 98; Ray, *Trade and Diplomacy*: 59-61.

42 E. Bretschneider, *On the Knowledge Possessed by the Ancient Chinese on the Arabs and Arabian Colonies* (London: Trubner & Co., 1871): 8.

China the representatives of the ruler met the delegates at the port, because that was what was expected on the Indian Ocean littoral: a formal welcome of a foreign mission by royal officials or even the ruler himself. In Bengal, this was usually at Chittagong, and we have descriptions of royal deputies waiting there to receive Chinese missions and take them on to the capital.<sup>43</sup> In China, the emperor also followed the pattern, sending ministers to Zhenjiang or Guangzhou to welcome Bengali ambassadors.<sup>44</sup>

This first meeting at the port was the point that often defined the course for procedures until the mission was completed and embarked. A failure to observe the protocol could have serious consequences. It was considered a sign of belittling the visiting nation and an open invitation for conflict. If both parties were unfamiliar with each other's prime intentions and all went well, the preliminary exchange of information and expectations at the border became the focus of interpolity juridical manoeuvring. For example, the Bengali ambassadors of 1412 arrived in China with news of the death of Ghiyāth al-Dīn A'zam Shāh. This changed the ways in which the mission went on to be received by the Ming court. An immediate mission was sent from China to Bengal to convey condolence and to participate in the coronation ceremony of the next king. The ambassadors also described their diplomatically precarious situation after their long journeys, and they sought support and protection from the host country for accomplishing their mission. Song Yun, who represented the Bengali kingdom to the Ming court in 1439, made a request for repair to his damaged ship and for a guarantee of protection for his return journey.<sup>45</sup>

The audience with the king had similar juridical characteristics, for it defined the overall interpolity relationship between the kingdoms. More significant legalistically than what was exchanged in gifts, deeds and words, was a 'heterarchical exchange', when the interacting polities acknowledged the political status and independence of one another through specific acts, appearances, words and silences, and a 'hierarchical exchange,' when the perception of one another was unequal. The Ilyās Shāhī dynasty was often received as a tributary of the Ming emperor, because the gifts from Ghiyāth al-Dīn and others were taken as tributes. But that was not the perception of the Bengali rulers.

43 Fei Xin, *Xingcha shenglan*, 74; *Xiyang chaogong dianlu* (西洋朝貢典錄, compiled in 1520) and the *Shuyu zhouzi lu* (殊域周咨錄).

44 Bagchi, "Political Relations": 132 referring to *Shuyu zhouzi lu* and *Ming shi*.

45 Yun, *Yingzong shilu* 英宗實錄 (*Veritable Records of [Emperor] Yingzong*) 54-7b; *Ming shilu*: 24: 1046, trans. G. Wade, *Southeast Asia in the Ming Shi-lu: An Open Access Resource* (Singapore: Asia Research Institute and the Singapore E-Press, National University of Singapore) <http://epress.nus.edu.sg/msl/reign/yong-le/year-6-month-9-day-11>, accessed October 09, 2019.



That is why on one occasion the emperor Yongle rejected congratulations from officials after the visit of a Bengali ambassador with “presents” (meaning “tribute”) in 1414. When the Minister of the Rites handed over a memento of the congratulatory speech, the Emperor said: “You only help me day and night in the administration of the affairs and the country is benefited by it. If the country is benefited it does not matter if there is K'i-lin or not. There is no need of congratulation.”<sup>46</sup> Because of this hierarchical exchange from the Chinese side, instead of a heterarchical one that Bengal might have wished, the Bengali rulers appeared to have showed their splendour to the Chinese missions without necessarily crossing the expectations of interpolity laws. With a clear tone of surprise and shock, the Chinese accounts thus provide a dazzling description of the way the Bengali king welcomed the Ming ambassadors, officials and military personnel.<sup>47</sup>

Eventually the dynamics of exchanges changed when the Ming Empire had to intervene in the region more than before and mediate between the regional polities. The Bengali ruler Sayf al-Dīn (according to the source, but the king at this time was Jalal al-Dīn) desperately sought Chinese support in 1420 against the neighbouring country Jaunpur, which had attacked Bengal several times.<sup>48</sup> In response the Ming emperor sent the eunuch Hou Xian to resolve the conflict, not to lead an army against Jaunpur, but bearing gold, silk and money from the Emperor. He had ordered him to tell the warring ruler of Jaunpur that “by being good to a neighbour he could protect his own [country]”.<sup>49</sup> This episode demonstrates the interpolity laws that the Chinese empire maintained in its intervention in the Bengal region before directly engaging in wars.<sup>50</sup> Awarding gifts to a rebelling country along with a warning hierarchized the role of the Mings in the region, and it showed a specific pattern of conflict resolution and pacification, which closely followed the shared imperial laws of the time.

46 *Shu yu chou tseu lu*, cited by Bagchi, “Political Relations”: 130.

47 Fei Xin, *Xingcha shenglan*, 74-75; *Sing ch'a sheng lan*; *Shu yu chou tseu lu*; and *Si yang ch'ao kung tien lu*.

48 *Ming shi*, ch. 340, liezhuan 196—“the Biography of Hou Xian”. Historians identify him as Jalal al-Dīn who requested help from Yongle along with the Timurid ruler Shāh Rukh. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*: 50-63; Hussain, *The Bengal Sultanate: Politics, Economy and Coins (AD 1205-1576)* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2003): 104-115; Sen, “Formation of Chinese Maritime Networks”: 443.

49 *Ming shi*, ch. 326; Xu tong dian 續通典, ch. 140; *Ming shilu* 14: 2226, trans. Wade, *Southeast Asia in the Ming Shi-lu* <http://epress.nus.edu.sg/msl/reign/yong-le/year-18-month-9-day-10>, accessed October 09, 2019. On motivations behind these conflicts from Bengal side, see Salim, *Riyāzu-s-Salāṭīn*: 114-7.

50 This approach emerged from its “Great Unified [Empire]” doctrine, according to Sen, “Formation of Chinese Maritime Networks”: 443-4.



In these cross-border exchanges with distant lands the ambassadors were the actual players who navigated different forms and modes of legalistic frameworks without offending the existing laws of their own countries of their origin, being hosts as well as guests. They were not passive receivers of the prevailing laws. In the course of their journeys they even participated in the process of law-making, setting patterns for others to follow. They sometimes acted on behalf of their rulers as makers and executors of law and justice in lands beyond the territorial sovereignty of the ruler while maintaining a cosmopolitan framework as long as it suited them. Zheng He gives us the best examples of making and executing law in the Bay of Bengal by Chinese ambassadors. After capturing a famous pirate Chen Zuyi (陳祖義) in Palembang in the Straits of Malacca he handed him over to the Ming emperor, who executed him publicly in the capital Nanjing. Similarly Zheng He confronted the rulers or officials in Sumatra, Java and Sri Lanka, who did not recognise the sovereignty of China or had offended the diplomatic mission. In the case of Sri Lanka, he had actually come to the island country to support regional attempts to eliminate piracy that was wrecking the shipping line to the Tanjavur region on the Coromandel coast. That was what the local ruler Parākramabāhu VI (1412-67) had claimed in at least five diplomatic missions to the Ming court in the early fifteenth century.<sup>51</sup> As a commemoration of his execution of law, or what he considered to be justice, in Sri Lanka itself, Zheng He installed a trilingual inscription in Chinese, Persian and Tamil to demonstrate his eclectic view of law and justice. On it the Ming emperor dominates the scene of metaphysical worldviews of Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam.<sup>52</sup>

How did the actors or ambassadors function as legal entities and makers of law in the diplomatic exchanges between China and Bengal? Beyond the frameworks of state laws what else facilitated their diplomatic endeavours and how did those frameworks impact the premodern Bay of Bengal and South China Sea as a shared space of socio-cultural, political and juridical networks? To these questions we now turn.

51 K.R. Hall, "Ports-of-Trade, Maritime Diasporas, and Networks of Trade and Cultural Integration in the Bay of Bengal Region of the Indian Ocean: c. 1300-1500." *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 53/1 (2010): 112.

52 S. Devendra, "The Galle Tri-Lingual Slab Inscription". In *Sri Lanka and the Silk Road of the Sea*, ed. Senake Bandaranayake, *et al* (Colombo: The Sri Lanka National Commission for UNESCO and The Central Cultural Fund, 1990): 217-219.

### 3 Shared Frameworks of Religion and Law

In the transimperial exchanges between Bengal and China in the early fifteenth century shared notions of religion and law played significant roles. Across the Bay of Bengal, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam were important religions that provided common vocabularies and norms for interactions between the major proponents and actors. Zheng He's inscription in Sri Lanka is just one example of this shared sacred pool of knowledge. Tansen Sen, for example, has demonstrated the role of the Buddhist networks in the second half of the first millennium in Indian-Chinese and South Asian-East Asian connections until those waned after the tenth century.<sup>53</sup> By the eleventh century, the Hindu networks somewhat filled this position following the Chola conquests of Srivijaya, a move that was primarily motivated by a quest for direct mercantile and political relations with China by undercutting the Southeast Asian intermediaries.<sup>54</sup> In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries Islam and Muslims became prominent along the oceanic littoral through their extensive mercantile, missionary and political networks.<sup>55</sup> The religion and its followers hence took the roles of their Buddhist and Hindu predecessors in relations about trade and diplomacy between Bengal and China.

For the Bengal side the role of religion was obvious in the early fifteenth century, for there a hybrid Islamic rule had been maintained in association with the majority Hindu population and the religious difference had been a catalyst in some social and political upheavals in the region between the 1410s and 1430s.<sup>56</sup> The rulers often expressed their religiosity through different Islamic platforms. The Ilyās Shāhīs had a considerable interest in Islam and

53 This does not mean that Buddhism and Hinduism had completely disappeared from the networks. In fact, we can see Buddhism still playing a role in the Ming-China exchanges. The best example is Hou Xian's investiture to Bengal and Jaunpur, which is being coupled with Buddhist interests. T. Sen, *India, China, and the World: A Connected History* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017); idem, *Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade: The Realignment of India-China Relations, 600-1400* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press and the Association for Asian Studies, 2003).

54 H. Kulke, "The Naval Expeditions of the Cholas in the Context of Asian History." In *Nagapattinam to Suvarnadwipa: Reflections on the Chola Naval Expeditions to Southeast Asia*, ed. Hermann Kulke, K. Kesavapany and Vijay Sakhuja (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2009): 1-19.

55 R.H. Major, ed. *India in the Fifteenth Century: Being a Collection of Narratives of Voyages to India* (London: Haklyut Soceity, 1857), lix, lxxviii.

56 For example, see Salim, *Riyāzu-s-Salāṭīn*: 112-9; S.H. Askari, "New Light on Rajah Ganesh and Sultan Ibrahim Sharqi of Jaunpur from Contemporary Correspondence of Two Muslim Saints: Letters of Shaikh Nur Qutb-i Alam and Ashraf Jahangir Simnani." *Bengal Past and Present* 57 (1948): 32-9.

its laws. They supported several Islam-related projects internally and externally, such as the establishment of mosques and madrasas in various parts of Bengal as well as in Mecca and Medina. The early Ming emperors had a close affiliation with the religion, although not as much as during the reign of the Mongols in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Both the founding ruler Hongwu and then later Yongle had ordered the establishment and maintenance of several mosques across southern parts of the kingdom. Hongwu wrote a poem in praise of the Islamic faith. Arguments by some scholars that his wife and empress Lady Ma had been brought up as a Muslim and that her son Yongle was a Muslim are fanciful statements with no solid historical support.<sup>57</sup> These rulers did maintain amicable relationships with Muslims, whom they appointed to several key positions of the Empire. Yongle in particular had issued a proclamation in 1407 against ongoing violence against Muslims in the country: “No official, military or civilian personnel shall despise, insult or bully [Muslims] and whoever disobeys this order by doing so shall bear the consequences.”<sup>58</sup> At times there were affirmative legal decisions to integrate Muslims into the Chinese social realm and family structures.<sup>59</sup>

In the context of diplomacy we notice how Islam and Islamic vocabulary played a significant role in exchanges between the Ming Empire and Muslim kingdoms. It did not happen just because a lingua franca was needed for royal letters and diplomatic conversations, nor as an effect of the earlier establishment of a Muslim Imperial College or of the later Persian College in the Siyiguan Translation College at the Hanlin Academy in 1407.<sup>60</sup> Rather, Islam played a persistent role during the Yongle Emperor’s reign on several other fronts. For example, in their diplomatic exchanges the Timurid ruler Shāh Rukh

57 Ray, *Trade and Diplomacy*: 32; J. Fletcher, “China and Central Asia, 1368–1884.” In *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China’s Foreign Relations*, ed. John K. Fairbank (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968): 206–24.

58 Chen Dasheng 陳達生, *Quanzhou Yisilan jiao shike* 泉州伊斯蘭教石刻 (Fuzhou: Fujian renmin chubanshe, 1984): 11–13—as cited by G. Wade, “Islam Across the Indian Ocean to 1500 CE.” In *Early Global Interconnectivity across the Indian Ocean World*, vol. 2: *Exchange of Ideas, Religions, and Technologies*, ed. Angela Schottenhammer (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019): 136. For the shifts in the Ming policies towards Muslims, see J.N. Lipman, *Familiar Strangers: A History of Muslims in Northwest China* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1997): 38–57.

59 The best example in this regard is a Ming decree allowing, or rather requiring, Mongols and Central Asians (Semu people) to marry Chinese persons while exempting certain Muslim groups if the Chinese persons do not wish to marry them. *The Great Ming Code: Da Ming lii*, trans. Jiang Yonglin (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005), 88.

60 G. Ford, “The Uses of Persian in Imperial China: The Translation Practices of the Great Ming.” In *The Persianate World: The Frontiers of a Eurasian Lingua Franca*, ed. Nile Green (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019), 113–129.

(r. 1405-1447) advised Yongle to put aside his infidel ways and to adopt Islam because the faith (*īmān*) and submission to the will of God (*islām*) would bring “sovereignty and power” (*salṭanat wa dawlat*) and would encourage him to “live in justice, equity and fairness towards [his] subjects.”<sup>61</sup> In one of his responses, Yongle himself invoked Islam with terms such as *mamlakat-i Islām* (“Islamic state”), *jāy-i Islām* (“abode of Islam”) and *khudāvand ta’ālā* (“God Most High”). He praised Shāh Rukh’s rule in Islamic terms by placing him as a model for and ruler of all Muslims. This letter from Yongle has survived in the chronicle of the Timurid court historian Ḥāfiẓ Abrū (d. 1429), and it provides a rare glimpse of the stamp of Islam in diplomatic exchanges.<sup>62</sup> Closer to the Ming court itself was one Ghiyāth al-Dīn Naqqāsh, who spent five months there as part of another diplomatic mission. In his detailed diary of his expedition he talks about Qāḍī (Mawlānā Ḥāji Yūsuf al-Qāḍī) who was very influential at the court of the Yongle Emperor. Mawlānā al-Qāḍī, as Naqqāsh identifies him, mediated between the Emperor and the diplomatic missions from abroad, including the one in which Naqqāsh was involved.<sup>63</sup> Qāḍī intervened when a punishment was ordered by the Emperor for two Muslim diplomats, and he managed to spare them from execution. To the diplomats Qāḍī said: “God Most High has showed His mercy and greatness upon all the poor Muslims by putting leniency into the heart of the Emperor.”<sup>64</sup> His mediation shows interconnections of Islam, law and diplomacy in the Ming court and how it enabled a shared vocabulary, at least as used among the Muslim ambassadors from Bengal.

In the transoceanic ventures of China and Bengal Muslim officials stood at the forefront. It is difficult to say whether this was an intentional choice, but it must have seemed a common-sense decision, for that association with Islam enabled officials to connect with the larger Indian Ocean littoral that was dominated by the Arab-Persian merchants in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In addition to the prospect of access to such prominent maritime networks, Muslim officials were also known to be fluent or conversant with “foreign” languages. Many other non-Muslim kingdoms in the littoral similarly appointed Muslim diplomats, even to deal with non-Islamic countries. A telling example is the first ruler of Malacca Parameswara (d. c. 1413), who had sent ‘Abd Allāh Ḥasan as an envoy to the Ming court in 1408. It was just one of many

61 Fletcher, “China and Central Asia”: 211.

62 Ḥ. Abrū, *Zubdat al-tavārikh*, ed. S.K. Ḥājj Sayyid Javādī (Tehran: Sāzmān-i Chāp va Intishārāt, Vizārat-i Farhang va Irshād-i Islāmī, 2001[1993]), 4: 697-699.

63 Abrū, *Zubdat al-tavārikh*, vol. 4: 839-40, 843, 850, 857-59.

64 Abrū, *Zubdat al-tavārikh*, vol. 4: 858.

missions he had sent led by his Muslim diplomats.<sup>65</sup> Their religious identity and familiarity with Islam gave the diplomats a better social presence religiously, linguistically and juridically. Islam gave added value to their personal interests when undertaking such risky and arduous journeys. Many of them communicated with their coreligionists, supported religious activities, and even undertook their own projects in different parts of Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East and East Africa. That Zheng He's entourage had a remarkable number of Muslims in high ranking positions, and that one of his fleet members Hong Bao [洪保] led seven of them on a visit to Mecca, demonstrate this entanglement of religion with formal state appointments as well as with their personal interests.<sup>66</sup> These missions never comprised just small group of diplomats, but instead constituted communities of several hundred people at a time. Their grandeur stood out for the sheer number of members present.<sup>67</sup> A'zam Shah's diplomatic mission to China in 1409 had 234 members, and the Chinese mission to Bengal in 1423 headed by the Assistant Commissioner-in-Chief, Zhou Ding, returned home with 992 members.<sup>68</sup>

The dialogue of state missions and personal affiliations and interests help us understand the juridical frameworks and their implications for interpolity laws. Islam and its laws certainly played a crucial role in the interests of the ambassadors who represented both countries in diplomatic missions. We do not have names and biographical details for all the ambassadors, but from the available information we can infer their religious identities and thus the potential contributions that they could have made to the advancement of interpolity laws. Ma Huan (d. *circa* 1460) and some other leading members of Zheng He's entourage, who arrived in Bengal on different occasions, were Muslims. Zheng He himself came from Yunnan, a place known for

65 C.H. Wake, "Melaka in the Fifteenth Century." In *Melaka: The Transformation of a Malay Capital c. 1400-1980*, ed. Kernial Singh Sandhu and Paul Wheatley (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1983), vol. 1: 128-161.

66 On the visit to Mecca, see Ma Huan, 瀛涯勝覽 *Ying-yai Sheng-lan: The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores* [1433], trans. and ed. J.V.G. Mills (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press): 173-77; Fei Xin, *Xingcha shenglan*, 104-105; Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalāni, *Inbā' al-Ghumr bi anbā' al-'umr*, ed. Ḥasan Ḥabshi (Cairo: al-Majlis al-'Alī li al-Shu'un al-Islāmiyya, 1972), vol. 3: 472. For a list of Muslim officials who accompanied Zheng He, see T.T. Sen, *Cheng Ho and Islam in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009): 171-72.

67 S.K. Church, "The Giraffe of Bengal: A Medieval Encounter in Ming China." *Medieval History Journal* 7/1 (2004): 1-37.

68 *Ming Shilu*: vol. 11: 1168; *Ming Tai-zong shi-lu* 明太祖實錄 (Veritable Records of the Ming: Tai-zong [Yong-le] Reign) (Taipei: Zhong-yang yan-jiu-yuan series, 1962-67): 1168 (88.4b), as cited by Church, "Giraffe of Bengal": 10-11; Ray, *Trade and Diplomacy*: 63.

its involvement in Islamic networks in the Yuan period, and he belonged to the Muslim scholarly-aristocratic family of Sayyid Ajall Shams al-Dīn ‘Umar 赛典赤·赡思丁 (Saidianchi) (d. 1279), “one of the most important military and administrative leaders in the Yuan dynasty, the first civilian governor of Yunnan and one of the most influential individuals in the history of Islam in China.”<sup>69</sup> The family was at the forefront of Islamic networks in and around Yunnan as patrons of several Muslim institutions, individuals and initiatives.<sup>70</sup> Zheng He was clearly the recipient of Islamic teaching from an early age and was equipped with the bureaucratic, linguistic and social skills that he could, and did, utilise for his diplomatic missions.

Ma Huan, the interpreter and translator in the group, whose accounts of the voyages have been a great source of information for historians, left somewhat detailed notes on Islam and its followers in the oceanic littoral in general and in Bengal in particular. He describes Muslim settlements and kingdoms all across the South China Sea and the Bay of Bengal, including Java, Malacca, Aru and Lambri in Sumatra. His descriptions reveal the ways in which he saw himself in the eyes of his coreligionists in the region and of other members of the Ming navy. Their transimperial exchanges demonstrated general expectations of legalistic procedures and etiquette. He writes, in the context of Bengal: “As to the dress worn by the king of the country and the chiefs, they all observe the ordinances of the Muslim religion, [and] their hats and clothes are very neat and elegant. [...] The ceremonies observed by them on their coming of age, their funerals, sacrifices, and marriages are like those of the Muhammadans. [...] Their punishments for breaking the law are beating and the bastinado, and transportation to near and far countries. You find there, as with us, officers of various grades, with their public residences, their seals and system of official correspondence.”<sup>71</sup>

There were also Chinese Muslims residing in Bengal, who themselves must have contributed to a cross-cultural and religious understanding between both polities. According to Ma Huan, the king sends men “to travel on board ship to the various foreign countries to trade; and he procures and buys local products, pearls, and precious stones, which are presented as tribute to the central

69 J.M. Armijo-Hussein, “Sayyid ‘Ajall Shams Al-Din: A Muslim from Central Asia, Serving the Mongols in China, and Bringing ‘civilization’ to Yunnan” (PhD dissertation, Harvard University, 1996): 1.

70 Armijo-Hussein, “Sayyid ‘Ajall Shams Al-Din”: 237-43; R. Israeli, *Islam in China: Religion, Ethnicity, Culture, and Politics* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2002): 284-5.

71 Ma Huan, *Ying-yai Sheng-lan*: 160-62; cf. G. Phillips, “Mahuan’s Account of the Kingdom of Bengala (Bengal).” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1895): 523-535.



country [China].<sup>72</sup> This connection between Bengal and China through trade and tribute offered opportunities for the Chinese Muslims in Bengal and Bengali Muslims in China for mediation. There was a trader called Song Yun 宋允, who visited the Ming court in 1439 as the deputy envoy of a mission from Bengal.<sup>73</sup> He must have belonged to a larger network of Chinese traders who were staying temporarily in Bengal but frequently engaged in trade and sometimes represented the Bengali kingdom to the Ming court.

We also have fragmentary evidence about Bengali Muslim ambassadors to China. The longest serving diplomat from Bengal to China seems to be Sayyid (or Sidi) Muhammad, who represented the sultanate at the Ming court from 1408 to 1420.<sup>74</sup> In 1421 the mission was led by a certain Wuduman ('Uthmān) and some argued that one Bayazīd led on two other occasions but Haraprasad Ray rejects this claim and says that the latter in fact was one of the Bengal rulers.<sup>75</sup> Whatever their position they were all Muslim aristocrats in the Ilyās Shāhī dynasty, one which cultivated a cosmopolitan outlook with people from African, Persian, Arab, Chinese and Turkic backgrounds. With several skills gained through repeated peregrinations between Bengal and China, people like Sidi Muhammad could cross borders of juridical, religious, cultural and imperial norms. He spoke Arabic and Persian, and possibly also Bengali and Chinese, for he was often sent to the Ming court.<sup>76</sup> His potentials were derived not only from the socio-political and imperial norms of Bengal, but Islamic juridical vocabulary that provided him with a set of behavioural codes for socialising and conversing.

The diplomats functioned as part of the larger commercial enterprises in which traders, sailors, investors and ship-owners with similar aspirations and

72 Ma Huan, *Ying-yai Sheng-lan*: 165.

73 *Yingzong shilu* 英宗實錄 (*Veritable Records of [Emperor] Yingzong*) 54.7b; *Ming shilu*: 24: 1046, trans. Wade, *Southeast Asia in the Ming Shi-lu*, <http://epress.nus.edu.sg/msl/reign/zheng-tong/year-4-month-4-day-27>, accessed October 09, 2019.

74 His name appears as *Sai-yi Ma-ha-mie* for the years 1408 and 1409, as *Sai-yi Ma-ha* for the year 1411, and as *Sai-yi-de Ma-ha-ma* for 1420. *Ming Shi-lu*: vol. 11: 1112, 1168; vol. 12: 1480; vol. 14: 2229.

75 Ray, *Trade and Diplomacy*: 65, 69.

76 From the later sources, we learn that the Chinese merchant sojourners who resided in or frequented Bengal also accompanied the Bengal missions to the Ming courts. We know of one Song Yun, who was the deputy envoy in 1439, and the interpreter Chen Deqing 陳得清 and others in 1438, all of whom accompanied the Bengal mission, and they must have acted as translators and mediators for both courts. For Yun, see *Yingzong shilu* 54.7b; *Ming shilu*: 24: 1046, trans. Wade, *Southeast Asia in the Ming Shi-lu*, <http://epress.nus.edu.sg/msl/reign/zheng-tong/year-4-month-4-day-27>, accessed October 09, 2019; for Deqing, see *Ming shilu*: 24: 916.



affiliations negotiated with the existing legal frameworks in general as well as specific juridical concerns.<sup>77</sup> The official merchant of Jalāl al-Dīn Muhammad Shāh was named Sulaymān, who had imported cotton, pepper and thoroughbred horses to China in Bengal ships. Bengal in particular with the transoceanic littoral across the Bay and the South China Sea assembled various groups, not only Arabs and Persians but also South Asian Muslims such as Gujaratis, Tamils and Malabari, those who shared religious legalistic sentiments in the pursuit of trade and diplomacy across vast territories. They themselves functioned in collaboration with several other interested groups, such as Syrian Christians, Egyptian and Yemeni Jews, Chinese from Fukian, and Sri Lankan, Burmese, Thai, and Mon Buddhists, thus furthering the shared understandings of trans-regional and interpolity laws.<sup>78</sup> In several contexts the religious identities and affiliations of Chinese diplomats seem to have been instrumental in making and weakening local polities and their internal politics in the Bay of Bengal. The equivocations in Indic and Islamic titles of the rulers in Malacca in the early fifteenth century led Geoff Wade to posit that there was probable rivalry between Islamic and non-Islamic contenders for the power there, and in the midst of this the Ming diplomatic forces underwrote the Islamic control when they maintained a base in the city. Wade argues that when the Ming withdrew from Southeast Asia in the late 1430s, the power of those local Muslim elites who had been supported by the Ming also declined, until they managed to re-emerge in the late-fifteenth century.<sup>79</sup> Such formidable influence of Ming diplomats is clearer in the Ming-installed Chinese rulers of Palembang.

In all these exchanges involving contributions from Islamic vocabulary, power and polity, the crucial juridical influence to have played a role was that of the Ḥanafī school of Islamic law. It had a considerable influence in the Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea in the fifteenth century, whereas the Shāfiʿī school dominated from the sixteenth century onward across the Indian Ocean littoral. They are two of the four prominent Sunni legal schools (usually identified as *madhhabs*) that evolved in the Middle East between the eighth and ninth centuries and enjoyed wide support in the Islamic world. These

77 For example, consider the legal discussions in Mecca and Cairo in the early fifteenth century on the validity of taxations on Chinese and Indian traders, in Aḥmad bin ʿAlī al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk li maʿrifāt duwal al-mulūk*, ed. Muhammad ʿAbd al-Qādir id ʿAtā (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1997), vol. 7: 449-50.

78 For a brief description of these diasporic communities in the Indian Ocean between 1000 and 1500, see K.R. Hall, "Multi-Dimensional Networking: Fifteenth-Century Indian Ocean Maritime Diaspora in Southeast Asian Perspective." *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 49/4 (2006): 454-481.

79 Wade, "Islam across the Indian Ocean": 114-15.

juridical methods were founded by two of the most prominent jurists to analyse the early Islamic scriptures and traditions. The Ḥanafī school was named after Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 767), and the Shāfiʿī school after Idrīs al-Shāfiʿī (d. 820).

Contextual evidence suggests that the Ḥanafī school provided a conversational framework for diplomats and agents from both Bengal and China, but conclusive arguments are elusive. Until recently the historians and philologists believed that Zheng He had an important role in spreading the Ḥanafī school in the Malay world. He was said to have established several Ḥanafī mosques in Sunda Kelapa, Cirebon, Lasem, Tuban, Gresik, Jiaotong and Cangki and used the school to unite the Chinese Muslim diaspora in the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea.<sup>80</sup> The major sources cited for support were two Chinese chronicles from Semarang and Cirebon, perhaps discovered by a Dutch official and published by an Indonesian historian under the title *Peranan orang2 Tionghwa/ Islam/Ḥanafī didalam perkembangan agama Islam di pulau Djawa, 1411-1564* (The role of Chinese Ḥanafī Muslims in the spread of Islam in Java, 1411-1564).<sup>81</sup> Three leading scholars of Indonesian history, H.J. de Graaf, T.G. Pigeaud, and M.C. Ricklefs, later edited and translated these chronicles.<sup>82</sup> However, questions have now been raised about their authenticity: “it is perhaps prudent to remain cautious and assume both texts are forgeries.”<sup>83</sup>

Whether or not Zheng He promoted the Ḥanafī school in Southeast Asia, as the Chinese chronicles want us believe, the school certainly provided the overarching framework for Muslim traditions and praxis in China in the Ming period. It had a significant following in the Empire, and classical Chinese Islamic literature repeatedly identified the school as “the core foundation of local Muslim legal thought,” according to Roberta Tontini.<sup>84</sup> Central Asian Ḥanafī texts in Arabic and Persian, such as the *Hidāya*, *Wiqāya* and their

80 This argument goes back to the 1960s, after the publications of S. Muljana, *Runtuhnya kerajaan Hindu-Jawa dan timbulnya negara-negara Islam di Nusantara* (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2012 [1965]) and idem, *A Story of Majapahit* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1976). For a recent restatement of the argument, see Sen, *Cheng Ho and Islam*.

81 M.O. Parlindungan, *Pongkinangolngolan Sinambela gelar Tuanku Rao: Terror agama Islam mazhab Hambali di Tanah Batak 1816-1833* [Pongkinangolngolan Sinambela known as Tuanku Rao: Hanbali Islamic terror in the Batak region 1816-1833] (Jakarta: Tandjung Pengharapan, 1964): 650-72.

82 H.J. de Graaf and T.G. Pigeaud, *Chinese Muslims in Java in the 15th and 16th centuries: The Malay Annals of Semarang and Cerbon*, ed. M.C. Ricklefs (Clayton: Monash University, 1984).

83 A. Wain, “The two *Kronik Tionghua* of Semarang and Cirebon: A Note on Provenance and Reliability.” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 48/2 (2017): 194.

84 R. Tontini, *Muslim Sanzijing: Shifts and Continuities in the Definition of Islam in China* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2016): 13.

commentaries and abridgements, were circulated before and after religious education was institutionalised by the *jingtang jiaoyu* or the scripture hall.<sup>85</sup> In fact, a “Ḥanafī regionalism” had evolved in China. The school would gain further dominance under the Qing in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when the Hui Muslims started to produce and circulate locally written texts in Chinese, collectively known as the Han Kitab.<sup>86</sup> Most Muslim students learned many Islamic texts early on and became familiar with the school’s directives. They must have provided a natural reference point and juridical basis for such educated Muslims as Zheng He and Ma Huan, and also other voyagers.

The affiliation with Ḥanafism mattered much in the Bengal context, though less in Southeast Asia, for Bengal was the most celebrated centre of the school in the area. The Ilyās Shāhī dynasty mainly followed and supported Ḥanafism through the madrasas and mosques they established in their kingdom.<sup>87</sup> Aʿzam Shāh himself promoted the school, while also supporting the other three schools, through his remarkable despatch of an Abyssinian agent to Mecca bearing an endowment for the largest law college ever to be established in the sacred city.<sup>88</sup> This particular initiative in the heartland of Islam was motivated by his own cosmopolitan aspirations and it was materialised by negotiating with the prominent Shāfiʿī school in Mecca. In his everyday juridical engagements he favoured the school and followed its rulings, as confirmed by contemporary Arabic sources.<sup>89</sup> One of his successors, Jalāl al-Dīn, continued

85 D. Leslie and M. Wessel. “Arabic and Persian Sources Used by Liu Chih.” *Central Asiatic Journal* 26 (1982): 78-104; R. Tontini, “Tianfang Dianli: A Chinese Perspective on Islamic Law and Its Legal Reasoning.” In *Asia Orientale: Ming Qing Studies*, ed. Paolo Santangelo (Rome: Raffaele Garofalo, 2011): 487-528.

86 Tontini, *Muslim Sanzijing*: 13-19; James D. Frankel, *Rectifying God's Name: Liu Zhi's Confucian Translation of Monotheism and Islamic Law* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016); Z.B. Benite, *The Dao of Muhammad: A Cultural History of Muslims in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005). There is a patchy reference to some Xinjiang Muslims following Shāfiʿism around this time in Sen, *Cheng Ho and Islam*: 196 citing S. Mi and Y. Jia, *Islam in China* (Beijing: China Intercontinental Press, 2004): 66.

87 Possibly the earliest Islamic legal text to be written in Bengal, *Nām-i Haqq*, was in accord with the Ḥanafī school and authored in 1293 by a disciple of Sharaf al-Dīn Abu Tawāma (fl. thirteenth century), who himself was a Ḥanafī jurist and mystic. Karim, *Social History*, 7, 73-76, 81. However, its ascription to Bengal has been questioned by other historians. See Tarafdar, *Husain Shahi Bengal*, 14.

88 Kooria, “Un agent abyssin”.

89 Taqī al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Fāsī, *Shifāʾ al-gharām bi akhbār balad al-ḥarām*, ed. ‘Alī ‘Umar (Cairo: Maktabat al-Thaqāfat al-Dīniyya, 2008), vol. 1: 539-542; Maqrīzī, *Sulūk li maʿrifā*, vol. 7: 174; Muḥammad bin ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sakhāwī, *al-Dawʾ al-lāmiʿ li ahl al-qarn al-tāsiʿ* (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1992), vol. 2: 393.

with Ḥanafism after his conversion to Islam in order to gain wider legitimacy in the kingdom and he executed Islamic laws according to the school.<sup>90</sup> Their successors also might have followed the school, as we do not have evidence to believe otherwise. For the likes of Zheng He and other Muslim ambassadors from the Ming Empire this situation provided an immediate connecting point. Within the governing bureau for Overseas Chinese, the Ḥanafī Chinese Muslims were given special attention during Zheng He's voyages with several financial, cultural, philanthropic and commercial favours. With its headquarters in Champa and branches in Manila and later Tuban in Java, the bureau was run by his trusted fellow Hui Muslims from Yunnan whom he handpicked and appointed to key positions. Tan Ta Sen writes that generous financial aid was channeled through this bureau to support the Ḥanafī Chinese Muslims.<sup>91</sup>

But we must not forget the local religious, ideological and mystical orientations adopted by Zheng He and many people in his entourage. For example, he was a great admirer of Tianfei (the Daoist patron goddess of seafarers) whose temple was located at the port of Liujia. There he had placated a stele in the courtyard in 1431 before starting his seventh mission. Such local manifestations of faith, similar to counterparts in Hindu traditions in the Bengal context, were not necessarily communicated transregionally. Islamic and interpolity laws required a common ground to enable them to do so. In that sense, Islam played a significant role in the geopolitical space of the premodern Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea through its peculiar forms and contents as that of the Ḥanafī school.

### Conclusion

We have seen how from the early fifteenth century new interests and connections were initiated by the dynasties of Bengal and China, and how the Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea functioned as a renewed geopolitical space for transimperial exchange. Although both regions had already had direct or indirect commercial and social connections for several centuries, through overseas or overland silk routes, frequent diplomatic missions were a new phenomenon. Both dynasties began to be directly involved in maritime trade and transoceanic foreign relations. This process followed an oceanic

90 Maqrīzī, *Sulūk li ma'rifā*, vol. 7: 174, 274, 311-312, 318; Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, *Inbā' al-ghumr bi-abnā' al-'umar*, ed. Ḥasan Ḥabshi (Cairo: al-Majlis al-'Alā li al-Shu'un al-Islāmiyya, 1969-1998), vol. 2: 496-7, vol. 3: 532. Cf. Eaton, *Rise of Islam*, 57.

91 Sen, *Cheng Ho and Islam*: 212.

development in both regions (similar to many other minor kingdoms of South and East Asia), after interruptions in the fourteenth century. Then the birth of two new kingdoms in Bengal and China had precipitated attempts in both regions to suppress internal conflicts and revolts. Most of these had been put to rest by the turn of the fifteenth century, which gave more opportunities for rulers such as Yongle and Aʿzam Shāh to explore the possibilities of making wider connections. For external relations the Ming Empire preferred the maritime spheres to the south and west to the Mongols to the north, while the Ilyās Shāhīs were trying to locate themselves on a larger socio-cultural and economic map now drawn by recurrent interventions. Their initiatives made the South China Sea and the Bay of Bengal a well-connected vista of transimperial relations in which norms and traditions of interpolity laws defined the characteristics of exchanges with immediate consequences.

Law was at the heart of the global norms of diplomacy, and provided both kingdoms with a framework for interactions when they were unfamiliar with the manners and customs of their partner. Accounts of the period show how the rulers and their agents overcame unfamiliar aspects of diplomacy and transregional cultural variations. Those directly involved in the exchanges found that Islam and its laws offered added value to exchange. For the Ming Empire Islam as such was of marginal concern, but for its agents and admirals such as Zheng He and Ma Huan the religion was an important element in their networking processes. For Bengal, however, Islam and its laws connected the contemporary political and economic elites and their associates in administration, trade and diplomacy in the external networks. The entanglements of official missions with personal interests thus created a new window for understanding the interpolity laws of the premodern world. In these exchanges we can see how Islam palimpsested Buddhist and Hindu webs that had once dominated India-China and South Asia-East Asia connections and how Islamic polities such as Bengal utilised the prospects of the new networks in relations about trade and diplomacy.<sup>92</sup>

These aspects of law and religion complement what we know about China's role in the Bay of Bengal and Bengal's role in South China Sea. The political entities and agents active in those interconnections shared some basic

92 This does not mean that Buddhism had completely disappeared from the networks. In fact, we can see Buddhism still playing a role in the Ming-China exchanges. The best example is Hou Xian's investiture to Bengal and Jaunpur, which is being coupled with Buddhist interests. T. Sen, *India, China, and the World: A Connected History* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017); idem, *Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade: The Realignment of India-China Relations, 600-1400* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press and the Association for Asian Studies, 2003).

characteristics, including elements of Islam and the Ḥanafī school of Islamic law that allowed legal actors to rely on analogies in order “to communicate and to some degree predict others’ actions and motivations”.<sup>93</sup> Thus they could smooth transimperial contacts while maintaining the regional and transregional legal order in the Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea. The norms and laws for protocol, jurisdiction and protection were maintained and respected in each other’s borderlands, ports and royal courts. While heterarchical exchanges were the expected norm for transimperial interactions, eventually they became more hierarchical when the Ming Empire was invited by the Ilyās Shāhīs to mediate in regional disputes in Bengal. This strengthened their interaction and established expected norms for extra-territorial jurisdiction and protection.

The links between Bengal and China were to increase later in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, with wider involvements of commercial, political and religious communities from both regions, as more intermediary regional states in the Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea took part. A Ming list written in the 1520s has more than two hundred Bengali words in Chinese transcription, for juridical, commercial and customary terms. It shows that the Bengal-China corridor was an intensely shared commercial, legalistic and linguistic geopolitical arena.<sup>94</sup> Commercial and diplomatic exchanges depended on language, so every effort was being made to define the most frequently used words necessary. This motivated the literati to become engaged in these geo-cultural and social networks even further. Despite much political turmoil Bengal experienced in the late-fifteenth to eighteenth centuries, its ports remained crucial to the Sino-Bengal exchanges as part of its global networks.

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93 Benton and Clulow, “Legal Encounters”: 82.

94 This list is part of *Siyi Guangji* 四夷廣記 (*Extensive Record of the Four Barbarian [Regions]*) compiled by Shen Maoshang 慎懋賞. N.C. Sen, “Accounts of Bengal in Extensive Records on Four Foreign Lands.” In *Hawai’i Reader in Traditional Chinese Culture*, ed. V.H. Mair *et al.* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2005): 505-13.



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