

ANNUAL REPORT BY THE PRESIDENT

Delivered at the 6th AGM of the International Zheng He Society held at the Secretariat of the Society, 6 Pioneer Place, Singapore 627705, on 29 March 2008

1. Opening Remarks

In reviewing the work of the Society over the fifth term (from 7 July 2007), I am pleased to say that we have made substantial progress and achievements. We have laid a strong foundation for our Society to enable us to move strongly ahead.

1.2 Changes in Our Society

First, I wish to say that I am saddened by the passing away of our International Advisor, Professor Wu Jin and our close friend, Mr Chuah Tong Hai, during the course of the term. I wish to register our deep appreciation for their contribution in supporting our Society. My wish is that the work of our Society will honour them as staunch supporters of our Society.

During the past term, we welcomed two new young members, Mr. Freddie Tay Kit Poh and Mr Harsono Ng Yong Seng, joining the Committee. Mr Tay served as the Chairman of the Publicity Subcommittee while Mr Harsono took charge of our website. For the retiring committee member, Mr Chen Poh Seng, we wish to thank him for his contributions to our Society and wish him the best in his other endeavours.

Our membership has increased slightly over the past term from 48 members and 14 Associate Members totally 62 members as on 7 July 2007 to 53 Members and 15 Associate Members making a total of 68 as of today. Many of our Associate Members reside outside of Singapore. We have been able to communicate with them by e-mail. We have maintained free membership to all who wish to join our Society.

1.3 Committee Meetings

We held three committee meetings in the course of the past term on 4 August, 19 October 2007, and most recently on 14 December 2007. Several subcommittee meetings were also held during the term to discuss specific proposals such as organizing an Essay Competition on Zheng He and setting up of a Zheng He Dialysis Centre in Malacca.

1.4 Our New Secretariat

I am delighted to report that we have finally established a proper Secretariat for our Society. Towards the end of 2007, our Society moved to new premises at 6, Pioneer Place, in Tuas, occupying two floors of the newly constructed Utraco Building. For

the first time, we have proper office and meeting facilities. The Secretariat is also the home of our newly set up Nanyang Research Centre as well as a first-rate library holding valuable collections of books and papers related to Zheng He (see below). In doing so, we have taken a giant step towards laying a strong foundation for the future growth and development of our Society.

1.5 Establishing Two New Research Centres

1.5.1 The Nanyang Research Centre (Singapore)

The Nanyang Research Centre aims to promote Zheng He, Nanyang Chinese and Southeast Asian studies through research, publication and translation. It will also build up a databank of research materials on the above studies published in the Chinese, Malay and Indonesian languages. Important research materials in vernacular will be translated into English selectively so as to promote greater cultural contact and exchange between nations and ethnic groups.

1.5.2 The Cheng Ho Cultural Museum and Cheng Ho Research Centre (Malacca)

In addition to the Nanyang Research Centre, major efforts had been made to upgrade the Cheng Ho Cultural Museum in Melaka. New exhibits were added to the Museum in part to replace the less attractive exhibits to further enrich the Museum for the benefit of visitors. Our Society also set up the Cheng Ho Research Centre housed in the premises of the Museum in Melaka. The Centre will adopt a global perspective with special reference to Southeast Asia. It will carry out research projects on Cheng Ho's voyages, export wares, entrepot trade, navigation, maritime history as well as Cheng Ho's legacy such as Cheng Ho popular belief, legends, his contributions to culture, politics, economy, and religion in the region.

1.5.3 Appointment of Two Research Staff

A well-known scholar on Zheng He, Prof Zheng Yijun from China was appointed the Director of the Cheng Ho Research Centre (in Malacca) and Mr Lim How Seng the Senior Research Fellow of the Nanyang Research Centre. Both concurrently hold the post of Deputy Director of the Cheng Ho Cultural Museum in Melaka. The biodata of the two research staff can be viewed from our website www.chengho.com. We welcome them to our Society as ex-officio members of our Committee and look forward to their contributions to the work of our Society.

1.5.4 Our New Research Library

In addition to the above, our Society has established a private research library to house materials on Southeast Asia (Nanyang), overseas Chinese and on Zheng He in the Pioneer Place premises. At present, our holdings comprise two important

collections, the Zheng Hesheng collection (on loan to our Society) and my own collection. We now have the largest collection of non-English, mainly Chinese and Malay/Indonesian, research materials on Nanyang, overseas Chinese and Zheng He.

1.6 Activities of our Society

As much effort was expended in the setting up of our new Secretariat and research centres, we could spare little effort on other endeavours. Nevertheless, we are happy to report the following:

1.6.1 Our Society's Website

As at this moment, we are in the process of upgrading and updating our website. In the age of cybernetics, the website is a crucial means to reach out to the public. We decided to make our website a trilingual one with the basic information available in English, Chinese and Bahasa and for selected items in two or all three languages. We also wish to enrich our website to make it more relevant and useful to visitors. For this effort, I wish to thank our young committee member, Mr Harsono, who is manager of the website as well as our Honorary Secretary, Dr Chia Lin Sien for this effort. Encik Jaffar b Mohd Kassim and Mr Lim How Seng contributed toward the work of translation. The task of maintaining the website is a continuous one and I wish to appeal to all who can help to bring relevant and useful material to add our website.

1.6.2 Reaching Out to the Maritime Community

Zheng He represents a hero in maritime navigation and stands historically head and shoulders above such great navigators as Christopher Columbus and Vasco da Gama. His fleet dwarfed those of the latter two both in size and number as well as sophistication of navigational capability and technology. His seven voyages helped to pacify the waters of Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean effectively suppressing rampant piracy in that era and played a decisive role in the development of the Maritime Ceramic Route. This route opened up and bolstered regional as well as Asian-Middle Eastern and European trade.

In the capacity of Chairman of the Publicity Committee, Mr Freddie Tay Kit Poh, made a proposal to promote Zheng He as the focal point for the regional and wider maritime circles. Our Society will make determined efforts to bring this about through our future activities.

1.6.3 Research Activities

In my capacity as President of the Society, I have continued to further efforts to undertake research on the legacy of Zheng He in Southeast Asia and around the rim of

the northern Indian Ocean. Suitable researchers have been identified in many of the cities/countries visited by the mighty Zheng He's fleet. These researchers will be tasked to uncover and analyse evidence of Zheng He's activities and impacts on the locations visited by Zheng He. These reports will then form the basis for a conference to be held in conjunction with the 600th anniversary of the third voyage of Zheng He in 2009.

1.7 Future Activities of Our Society

Now that we have established a solid foundation and put in place greater capacity to work, for the new term of office, we envisage our Society becoming more dynamic and proactive. We will move into an expansion phase based on strategic planning. Apart from on-going house-keeping activities, we will be carrying out a major exercise to catalogue our library collection, We plan also an education-cum-publicity programme to reach out to the young in the region. We have specific plans to launch the following projects:

- (a) To work with the Malacca State Government to construct a Cheng Ho Treasure Ship by the side of the Melaka River across the road from our Cheng Ho Cultural Museum. The Ship will accommodate exhibition halls on Cheng Ho's voyages and the history of Melaka as well as hosting a multi-media show on "Image Melaka";
- (b) To engage prominent artists in countries visited by Cheng Ho to collectively paint a 100-meter-long scroll featuring various aspects of Cheng Ho's voyages; and
- (c) To undertake research on the legacy and impact of Zheng He on countries visited by his fleet and to raise funds to support our research projects.