

Thucydides' Trap and Online Readers' Reviews of Two Books on Zheng He's Voyages

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This article analyzes 458 online readers' reviews of two books on Zheng He's seven voyages. Under the theoretical guidance of reader response criticism and via the research methods of website observation and purposive selection and textual and thematic analyses, this study has found: influenced by such dominant Chinese cultural values as harmony, benevolence, and mutual benefits, Zheng He's voyages were non-aggressive exchanges of trade and culture, showing basically no evidence of hostile attitudes, offensive actions, or beclouded emotions of fear, hubris, and honor. Instead of supporting the trustworthiness of Thucydides' trap, the online readers' reviews call on tapping the complementary aspects between China and the United States and drawing invaluable lessons from the past for mutually-beneficial bilateral relationship.

Keywords: Thucydides' trap, U.S.–China case, readers' reviews, Zheng He's voyages

It is well-known that "no relationship will matter more when it comes to define the 21st century than the one between the United States and China" (Blackwill & Tellis, 2015, p. vii). While cooperating in international trade, environmental protection, cultural exchange programs, and more, the United States and China are also challenged with conflicts over human rights, cybersecurity, and China's territorial sovereignty claims over the East and South China Seas.

After applying the concept of Thucydides' trap for the U.S.–China situation repeatedly in 2012 and 2015, Allison (2017) recently predicted that, with Chinese President Xi Jinping and his new counterpart President Donald Trump, "the nations they lead are on a collision course for war" (para. 1). Criticism from several scholars (e.g., Art, 2010; Chong & Hall, 2014; Friedberg, 2005; Krause, 2014; Mearsheimer, 2014; Mitchell, 2015; Rudd, 2015) has already poured in. Whereas other scholars have focused mostly on current affairs and future predictions pertaining to the U.S.–China relationship, we have, by turning back to history, made a purposive selection of readers' reviews of two books on Zheng He's voyages during China's Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) on the renowned online platform Amazon.com.

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Date submitted: 2016–11–03

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The relevance of Zheng He's¹ voyages to Thucydides' trap lies first in that Zheng He's seven voyages (1405–1433) occurred during the Ming Dynasty, when "China was far more powerful than any of its neighbors" (Y. K. Wang, 2012, p. 135). To clarify its long-term goal of "peaceful rise" to realize the "Chinese Dream," the Chinese government took advantage of the 600th anniversary of Zheng He's voyages in 2005 and continues to tap the potential roles of the voyages. Second, the two books selected for this study were written by two Euro-American authors and functioned as eye-openers to many Western readers who might have either known little about Zheng He's maritime explorations in the 15th century or become aware of them "explained away via the lens of Euro-centrism" (Roxas-Lim, 2003, p. 25). Finally, Allison (2012, 2015, 2017) applied Thucydides' trap to the U.S.–China case based on the overwhelming number of wars between rising powers and established ones in human history. Whether the U.S.–China case ends in war or peace matters to all human beings, and Zheng He's seven voyages provide "a good vehicle for examining the Chinese strategic behavior" (Y. K. Wang, 2012, p. 129).

Therefore, online readers' reviews are selected as the firsthand data for our study because they are representative of various opinions of readers in all walks of life and from all parts of the world. Not only do they indicate the readers' interests in and knowledge of Zheng He's voyages, but they also reveal the readers' understanding of China's roles in the world yesterday, today, and probably tomorrow. The emerged themes of the online readers' reviews should shed light on an understanding of China and the Chinese people, the evaluation of the trustworthiness of Thucydides' trap, and valuable lessons for the U.S.–China relationship.

Literature Review

Our review of literature draws from and contributes to the following three categories of existing scholarship.

Major Studies on Zheng He's Voyages

According to relevant research findings within and beyond China (e.g., Dreyer, 2007; Roxas-Lim, 2003; Shi, 2003; Viviano, 2005; J. Wang, 2005; Y. K. Wang, 2012), studies on Zheng He and his voyages have undergone four phases. First is the pioneer phase from 1905 to 1934, followed by the second phase of new data explorations from 1935 to 1949, the third phase of special topic investigations from 1950 to 1984, and the final phase of publications in much broader scope and more profound depth for the 600th anniversary celebrations of Zheng He's voyages in 2005 and continuing to the present day.

¹ Zheng He (1371–1435), also called Cheng Ho in Wade-Giles romanization, was captured from a Muslim family at 10 in Yunnan, castrated, and sent to Prince Zhu Di, who became Emperor Yongle in 1402. The emperor awarded him the new surname "Zheng" and appointed him the commander-in-chief of naval missions. Zheng proved himself a great admiral, diplomat, and explorer, helping extend the Chinese maritime and commercial influence on seven voyages across the regions bordering the Indian Ocean from 1405 to 1433, during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) (Levathes, 1997).

Briefly, about 600 relevant treatises and academic papers have been published in Chinese, English, Japanese, and Russian. Their main features are, first, earlier studies are mainly based on folktales, secondary literature, and archaeological findings. Second, subsequent studies are meant to reveal patriotism and national character through displays of national might, establishment of alliances, implementation of cultural exchanges, and achievement of economic prosperity and political dominance. Under the imperial mandate, all seven voyages were to showcase the power and wealth of Ming China and to implement the tributary system to countries around the Indian Ocean and beyond. Together with his crew members, Zheng He as the admiral of the fleet followed the imperial mandate and completed the missions. Although China was "the strongest, wealthiest, and most populous country on earth at that time" (Dreyer, 2007, p. 105) and "his fleet was equipped with advanced weapons and staffed by well-trained soldiers," Zheng He "refrained from using force indiscriminately" (Roxas-Lim, 2003, p. 55). Third, many other studies looked into the reasons, nature, functions, impact, significance, and termination of Zheng He's seven voyages. According to Tang (2005), from 1405 to 1433, Zheng He led more than 300 oceangoing vessels and a crew of nearly 30,000 men on seven voyages from China to Southeast Asia, Ceylon, India, Saudi Arabia, and the east coast of Africa. As both an explorer and a trader, Zheng He and his crew opened up trade routes.

As for the motives behind Zheng He's voyages, Wade (2005) argued that the voyages were meant to "create legitimacy for the usurping emperor, display the might of Ming, and bring the known polities to demonstrate submission to the Ming" to "achieve a pax Ming throughout the known world" (p. 45). Viviano (2005) counterargued that "in the end no general explanation for the voyages seems more convincing than the yearning for order . . . against a backdrop of worldwide chaos" (p. 4). Citing the diary of Fei Xin, a sailor of Zheng He's Treasure Fleet, Viviano (2005) continued, "the imperial mandate was to bring order to the four quarters of the earth . . . as far as ships and carts would go and power of men would reach" (p. 4).

Thus, Zheng He's fleet of treasure boats took with them enormous stores of riches to present as gifts wherever they set foot and brought back many kinds of foreign goods and valuable information about alien lands. However, as a result of some increasingly sharp conflicts among court officials over Zheng He's costly voyages, especially with the impending threat from the Mongolians in the northern part of China, the Confucian scholars seized control of the top administration of the Ming Dynasty, who managed to reorient the country's policy to look completely inward. Consequently, they ended Zheng He's voyages, dismantled his navy, and destroyed his navigation journals.

Finally, recent trends of the relevant research are shifting from a specific historical or economic perspective to multidisciplinary, multiperspective, and comprehensive orientations. Meanwhile, Zheng He's voyages are also compared and contrasted with other voyages in Western countries in terms of their historical significance and implications. As recorded, many of Zheng He's ships were 400 feet long and 160 feet wide with nine red silk sails, several decks, and luxurious accommodations for up to 28,000 crew members. In contrast, the longest ship among the three ships of Christopher Columbus's voyage in 1492 was 85 feet long, and Columbus had 90 sailors in total under his command (Wen, 1984). Dwinells (2008) believed that Zheng He's vessels outsized and carried more cargo tonnage than the largest ships in Europe at the time.

The Trustworthiness of Thucydides' Trap for the U.S.–China Case

According to Allison (2012), when explaining the origins of the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE), Thucydides claimed that “it was the rise of Athens and the fear that this inspired in Sparta that made war inevitable” (as cited in para. 5). Allison (2012) found that “in 11 of 15 cases since 1500 where a rising power emerged to challenge a ruling power, war occurred” (para. 7). Allison thus coined the term “Thucydides’ trap” and applied it to today’s U.S.–China case to indicate his concern:

Can China and the U.S. escape the Thucydides’ trap? The historian’s metaphor reminds U.S. of the dangers two parties face when a rising power rivals a ruling power—Athens did in the 5th century BCE and Germany did at the end of the 19th century. Most such challenges have ended in war. Peaceful cases required huge adjustments in the attitudes and actions of the governments and the societies of both countries involved. (para. 2)

Although Allison began the above quote with a question, he explicitly expressed his worry that China, as Athens and Germany did in history, will fight the United States in the present day. In 2017, he reiterated his concern about the possibility of war with Xi Jinping as the president of China and Donald Trump as the new president of the United States. The only hope to avoid a war hinges on “huge adjustments in the attitudes and actions of the governments” (Allison, 2015, para. 4). To Allison, Thucydides’ trap offers the best lens through which to clarify the dynamics of the relationship between the United States and China today.

This theory has both proponents and opponents. Representing the proponents (e.g., Art, 2010; Friedberg, 2005; Mearsheimer, 2014; Mitchell, 2015), Art (2010) remarked, “the country best positioned to challenge America’s preeminence, first in East Asia, and then perhaps later globally, is China” (p. 359). First, China’s future intentions and goals are not transparent, and second, the United States cannot stop China’s rise. Mitchell (2015) showed skepticism in the Chinese proposal of “a new model of major country relations” (p. 105) because U.S. policy makers are concerned about the associated language regarding “respects for core interests” (p. 105), and the United States holds that pragmatic, concrete cooperation should come before rhetorical slogans. Mearsheimer (2014) speculated that although China is currently too weak to challenge the United States, it will eventually pursue regional hegemony in Asia.

In contrast, Krause (2014) found that Thucydides’ trap “does not provide us with a reliable instrument to understand the relevant structural analogies between Europe in 1914 and Asia in 2014, in particular the probability of the outbreak of a major war” (p. 1423). Chong and Hall (2014) also found that Allison’s application and the 1914/2014 analogy “anachronistic and fatalistic at best, if not outright misleading and confusing” because they “attempt to equate the situation of contemporary actors with that of key players prior to World War I regardless of contextual differences” (p. 42). They warned that the application encourages observers “to be on the lookout for possible signs of dissatisfaction in P.R. China, to question whether it is seeking to dethrone the United States or contest the existing global order in ways similar to Germany a century ago” (p. 8). Rudd (2015) concluded in a report that the likelihood of a U.S.–China conflict in the dynamics of Thucydides’ trap “remains remote” (p. 21) and that the U.S.–China relationship “remains in decidedly positive territory” (p. 24).

Moreover, McKinney (2015) found that Allison conceived of Thucydides' trap based on "one mistranslated passage from the *History of the Peloponnesian War*" (para. 16). The true Thucydides trap refers to "countries going into, and continuing, war clouded by passions like fear, hubris, and honor" (Whyte, 2015, para. 1). Thus, while appreciating Allison for making the connection between shifting powers and conflicts, we need to realize that transition of power itself is much less likely to lead to wars than the beclouded emotions of hubris, fear, and honor.

The Future Relationship Between the United States and China

The future relationship between the United States and China depends a great deal on the "huge adjustments in the attitudes and actions of the governments" (Allison, 2015, para. 4) in accordance with their respective grand strategies. A *grand strategy* is "the use of power to secure the state" (Hooker, 2014, p. 1). Specifically, it is "the art of controlling and utilizing the resources of a nation . . . to the end that its vital interests shall be effectively promoted and secured against enemies, actual, potential, or merely presumed" (Earle, 1943, p. viii). Facing China's rise, the United States launched its "Asia-Pacific Rebalance" strategy in 2014 by prioritizing the Indo-Asia-Pacific (IAP) region including China in its foreign and security policies. Security alliances with Japan, South Korea, and other Asian countries have been strengthened to "sustain U.S. leadership, secure its economic and national interests, and advance its values" (Misalucha, 2015, p. 120). Zheng (2015) noted that "the Thucydides Trap is already a reality in Asia" and that "how China will react, to a large extent, will decide whether the Asia-Pacific region will remain peaceful or witness a war" (para. 1).

Then, what are the attitudes and actions of China in the implementation of the country's grand strategy? As a major global economic power for decades, China is now "the world's largest economy (on a purchasing power parity basis), manufacturer, merchandise trader, and holder of foreign exchange reserves" (Morrison, 2015, p. 1). Blackwill and Tellis (2015) saw it as part of China's grand strategy "to replace the United States as the most important power in Asia" (p. vii). Regarding China as the most significant competitor, they suggested that Washington "center on balancing the rise of the Chinese power rather than continuing to assist its ascendancy" (p. 4). The U.S. opposition to Chinese territorial moves in the East and South China Seas "can be seen as an attempt to counter the rise of China in a manner consistent with the longstanding U.S. grand strategy" (Hooker, 2014, p. 16).

In June 2013, President Xi Jinping proposed the "new model of major country relationship" (Glaser & Vitello, 2013, p. 3). In response, U.S. President Obama said that "the United States and China should avoid the historical phenomenon of a rising power and an existing power going to war, and agreed to build a new model of relations between great powers" (p. 3). The Obama administration also assured China that the U.S. policy of rebalancing toward the Asia-Pacific region was not to contain China or to prevent China's reemergence as a great power because the United States "welcomes a strong, prosperous, and successful China that plays a greater role in world affairs" (Lawrence, 2013, p. ii). So far, the U.S. government, even with Donald Trump as the new president, has generally continued with its traditional grand strategy in the IAP region. Verbally and officially, the two countries have not treated each other as hostile rivals. China acknowledges U.S. predominance, and the United States welcomes a more powerful China to shoulder greater international responsibilities.

In the academic world, D. Wang (2015) found that China bases its foreign policy on the overarching peaceful development strategy, which “helps minimize strategic risks . . . and shape the preferences and behaviors of the United States” (p. 59). Other scholars (e.g., Glaser & Vitello, 2013; Kaplan, 2010; Krause, 2014; Luttwak, 2012) seconded D. Wang and believed that China can rise peacefully and will avoid confrontational relations with the United States. Their main arguments are, first, China can lessen the fears of the United States and its neighboring countries about its rise by clarifying that it is taking the path of peaceful development and will not use force to change the balance of power. Second, as a benign country, China should build only defensive military forces to avoid confrontation. Finally, major nonaggressive behaviors, best illustrated by Zheng He’s seven voyages during China’s most powerful moments, toward other countries in Chinese history provide indicators that China may not confront the United States or other countries.

Nevertheless, Mearsheimer (2010) believed, “China will try to dominate the Asia-Pacific region as much as the United States dominates the Western Hemisphere” (p. 398). Still others (e.g., Copeland, 2000; Hale & Hale, 2003; Kristof, 1993; Rosecrance, 2006) echoed Mearsheimer and believed that China is likely to imitate the United States to become a regional hegemon. Kristof (1993) noted that China is an ambitious nation as a behemoth in the neighborhood. Instability is inevitable, and the scale of China’s displacement of the world balance calls for a new balance that “will be one of the most important—and perhaps dangerous—tasks in international relations in the coming decades” (p. 74). Therefore, Blackwill and Tellis (2015) recommended that the United States should replace its strategy of “integrating Beijing into the international system with that of consciously balancing its rise” (p. 18).

In the above, we read both optimistic and pessimistic scholarship concerning the U.S.–China relationship in the future, and each sounds reasonable in its own right. Similarly, there is no definite answer to the trustworthiness of Thucydides’ trap for the U.S.–China case based on the governmental declarations and scholarly opinions of the moment. Therefore, an analysis of online readers’ reviews concerning what China did at the most prosperous moment in history as compared with other nations at the time may enliven the ongoing discussion and facilitate better understanding.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for the present study is reader response criticism. Emerged in the 1970s, reader response criticism is focused on finding meanings in the act of reading itself and examining the ways individual readers or communities of readers experience texts. According to Freund (1987) and Tucker (2000), the advocates of reader response criticism include Kenneth Burke, Wayne Booth, Stanley Fish, Louise Rosenblatt, and Walker Gibson. They posit that reader response criticism should combine the areas of psychology, history, and sociology, making reading an interdisciplinary activity. The theory operates on the following premises: (a) texts affect readers in unique and subjective ways; (b) readers participate in determining the meaning of texts; (c) an individual’s social class, racial background, ethnicity, gender, nationality, age, physical condition, employment, and vocational interests greatly influence how a reader sees and understands the world.

Individually, the reader is guided by the ideas and words that the author laid out; however, it is each individual reader's experience that actually gives meaning to the reading of the work. Because each reader brings unique experience to the reading transaction, the text produces different meanings to different readers. The reader's meaning should be emphasized and evaluated instead of solely looking at the author's text in a vacuum. Meanwhile, groups of readers share beliefs and values as interpretive communities. They may use particular strategies that affect both the text and their reading behaviors. It is the group that determines what an acceptable interpretation of the text is. Readers are expected to combine their understanding of the text with their knowledge of the world and support their interpretations with sound references and inferences.

Through this theoretical lens, we analyze and interpret online readers' reviews by emphasizing the three premises of the theory to clarify the interrelationships between texts and readers, readers and their respective backgrounds, and efforts of individual readers and those of a group or community. Meanwhile, we also take into consideration of the impacts of the subjectivity and backgrounds of individual readers and the roles of the group or community upon the interpretation of meanings.

Research Methods

The present study has adopted the research methods of website observation and purposive selection for data collection and textual and thematic analyses for data analysis. To be specific, we take the following steps.

Text Selection

For the primary data of this study, we searched extensively for available hard copies in the library and digital files online. Finally, we focused on such social media websites as Amazon, Google, Goodreads, Bookwire, Bookreporter, Kirkus, and Barnes and Noble. We found more than 12 books on Zheng He's voyages, but only Amazon provided us with two books with online readers' reviews worth studying because of the quantity and quality of the available review entries.

In *1421: The Year China Discovered the World*, Menzies (2003) described that the Chinese were able to calculate longitude long before Western explorers. They not only sailed to India, East Africa, and West Africa but also set foot on the American continents, Australia, and even Antarctica decades before European explorers reached those same shores. Magellan, Dias, da Gama, Cabral, and Cook sailed with maps drawn from Chinese charts and discovered lands that the Chinese had already visited. With 50,000 copies sold in the first year of its publication, the book got on *The New York Times* best seller list in 2003 and is now hailed as a classic.

In *When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1405–1433*, Levathes (1997) wrote about the seven voyages of Zheng He and his crew sailing from Korea and Japan through the Malay archipelago and India to East Africa, and probably to Australia. They took porcelain, silk, and fine-art objects and brought back spices, elephants, and even eyeglasses from Venice. When Gaozhi succeeded his father, Emperor Zhu Di, after his death, Gaozhi banned all naval voyages to the effect that

any Chinese caught sailing on the high seas would be put to death. Although both books are now must reads concerning Zheng He's voyages, they have received both positive and critical reviews.

Data Collection

For data collection, we thoroughly checked the Amazon website for information related to the two books and downloaded all 502 readers' reviews for the first book from February 18, 2003, to October 14, 2016, and 73 reviews for the second during the same time period. After close reading and screening, 117 reviews were deleted because of repetitions and meaningless feedback. Finally, 458 readers' reviews were selected and coded as readers' reviews of the two books, and nine representative samples were purposively selected for textual and thematic analyses. For the convenience of discussion, we use S1 to stand for the author of Sample 1 (Benjamin J. Foberton on September 30, 1999), S2 for the author of Sample 2 (Tony Watson, June 16, 2002), S3 for the author of Sample 3 (Water W. Koon, June 18, 2008), S4 for the author of Sample 4 (A Customer, January 14, 2003), S5 for the author of Sample 5 (Mudge, October 25, 2007), S6 for the author of Sample 6 (Matikin, January 17, 2003), S7 for the author of Sample 7 (Got Book, June 3, 2012), S8 for the author of Sample 8 (J. Jingoian, December 25, 2012), and S9 for the author of Sample 9 (Walter W. Koon, April 26, 2011).

Data Analyses

To analyze the 458 readers' reviews, we adopted the research methods of textual and thematic analyses. First, the term *text* refers to both the traditional written literary or historical sources and other sociocultural artifacts such as films, pieces of music, and even group behaviors. In our case, *text* refers to the 458 readers' reviews of the two books, the action of posting their reviews on the Amazon website, and the interactions via comments and responses on the same Amazon platform. According to Burnett (1995), "the aims of textual analysis are to isolate a set of discrete units," which "are visual traits, syntax, sentences, diction, imagery, figures of speech, structure, and points of view" (pp. 72–79). This format allows the researchers to understand not only what meaning the text holds but also how those meanings are produced, what purposes they serve, what effects they have, and what the text "hides." In short, without textual analysis, social research would not find out the "underlying ideologies" and implied meanings of texts.

Thematic analysis is "a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes within qualitative data" (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 79). During the process of analyzing the data, we independently coded the 458 selected reviews and analyzed them comparatively in accordance with Taylor and Bogdan's (1989) definition of themes and Owen's (1984) three criteria for the generation of a theme. By categorizing whether the reviews contained positive or critical content and stances, we further divided the two broad categories of the readers' reviews into subcategories, with our intercoder reliability calculated in accordance with Cohen's (1960) kappa coefficient at the GraphPad website (<http://graphpad.com/quickcalcs/kappa1/>). Finally, by referring back to the literature review and theoretical framework, and through constant comparison and contrast between us as coders, we made every endeavor to build a valid argument for the themes.

Findings and Discussion

Of the 458 readers' reviews, 265, or 57.86%, are positive, and 193, or 42.14%, are critical. Upon further analysis of the two broad categories and through constant comparison and contrast between us as coders, we have achieved the following three subcategories of emerging themes, with .923, .891, and .862 as our intercoder kappa coefficient values, respectively. Each theme was further segmented for illustration and discussion based on the nine representative samples. Below are the themes, further segments, and elaborate discussions.

Understanding China and the Chinese People

More than 80% of the online readers shared relevant content, and most of them regard the two books as eye-openers for more and better understanding of China and the Chinese people in the following four aspects.

Open to Other Viewpoints

Interactively, online readers join authors to further explain the significance and aesthetic value of the books under discussion. Of the nine samples, seven have provided relevant supporting details. On the one hand, S4 insisted that "this idea that China 'discovered America' reflects a new nationalism in China." S7 suspected that the authors of the two books must have been paid by the Chinese government to rewrite the Chinese history of discoveries for the construction of the "the pretext to force occupy" others' lands. On the other hand, S1 was surprised to find that "my own knowledge of China has been slighted, but examples from the past are opening my mind to other viewpoints." S2 seconded that "there is an incredible amount of history here, most of it unknown in the West." To provide reasons, S5 and S6 explained that publications departing from "Eurocentric leanings" and "Western supremacy" might be dismissed. So the books opened their eyes and minds. S5 voiced further support by saying, "dismissing this book out of hand is reckless and short sighted." Because Western mass media are often negative or otherwise biased in their reports about non-Western countries (Graber, 1989; Huang & McAdams, 2000; J. Wang, 2008), the online readers' reviews themselves are eye- and mind-opening while providing alternative perspectives to understand China, the Chinese people, and more importantly, themselves and their own world.

Impressed by the Advanced Naval Technology

With its emphasis on Western supremacy, the Western world "has written history to suit its own purposes—and not tell the whole truth" (S8). Zheng He's voyages have awakened the readers' awareness of the great feats of non-Western people. S9 described China's Ming Dynasty as "an economic, political, scientific and technological leader." S2 provided an example: "At least one type of ships was 400 feet long at the time when Columbus's ships were under 100—about 50 times the capacity." S3 continued: "With compass, sun dial and the guide of the stars, the Chinese fleet set up observatories in making calculation and charting maps with amazing accuracy." As noted in the literature review, J. Wang (2005) also mentioned that it was with the maps drawn from Chinese charts that Magellan, Dias, da Gama, Cabral,

and Cook sailed and discovered lands that the Chinese had already visited. Dwinells (2008) added that Zheng He's ships were superior to their European contemporaries in "the technical feats of off-center mast emplacement, watertight multiple bulkheads, the first use of a compass, and a reinforced hull with internal bulwarks" (p. 130). Unfortunately, most of "the great naval feats and amazing voyages made by these competent sea-farers" "were not known in the West," in the words of S1 and S2. Even if some reviewers had heard of the Chinese naval technology, they were informed that the Chinese were able to build boats fit for China's inland lakes and rivers. Thus, the two books awakened their readers to the fact that non-Western people were by no means inferior, because they had made advanced achievements like those of the Chinese naval technology. Unfortunately, many of these non-Western technological achievements had been excluded from the Euro-American education.

Accounts Critical of Menzies' Concerning Zheng He's Voyages

Reader response criticism emphasizes that reading is both an internal, reflective and an external, communal activity. Through individualized self-reflections and communal interactions, readers responded to Menzies' (2003) findings critically as follows.

First of all, S4 regarded Menzies' (2003) book as a fiction rather than a reliable book of Chinese history and said that it was probably a sponsored project to advocate the theme of China's discovering America in the past to get ready for more expansion in the future. Such an argument is in line with the idea that Zheng He's voyages indicated "a form of proto-colonialism and military expeditions to achieve a pax Ming throughout Southeast Asia" (Wade, 2005, p. 37). On the one hand, S7 supported S4 by elaborating that the fake history was written by someone "that probably got paid to spread the Chinese government propaganda so that they can use this history to occupy islands belonging to smaller countries around China to get oil and gas," noting that the Chinese "had never mastered the skills and knowledge to build ships for ocean traveling."—S2 answered back by commenting on S7's review. S2 commented that, following Levathes' (1997) ground-breaking work, Menzies (2003) devoted 15 years to research and produced a hefty book that expanded our knowledge of Chinese explorations immensely with his own material, his nautical and navigational skills, and archaeological evidence.

There are more reviews with some supporting S4 and S7 and others supporting S2. For example, when Dickieon (February 2, 2007) said, "This book is a shameless mishmash of speculation and misdirection that only obscures the extraordinary voyages of the Chinese 15th century mariners," Independent Thinker (February 3, 2007) responded, "Menzies has done an enormous amount of research, and I would not categorize his book as a mishmash. He backs up his findings with facts that Mr. Dickie does not bother to refute." Although neither could convince the other side, these sharp reviews do enliven the ongoing discussions and motivate the readers to work out their own reviews and responses to others' reviews more carefully and meaningfully.

Interested in Learning About China

Regardless of the criticism, Menzies' (2003) and Levathes' (1997) books were regarded as eye-and mind-openers. Just because of the criticism, many online readers have become all the more

interested in learning more about China. S1 said that "China has come alive for me through reading this book. Examples from the past are . . . helping me understand new cultures, ideas, and concepts." To S3, "this book helps review the history," so it "is meaningful and significant in our annual celebration of Columbus Day in America." S4 felt confident that this book "will stimulate an interest among people to learn more about China," and S5 said that it "can give us important insights into the Chinese character which can help us decipher how China will work in the world today." Finally, S6 summarized that the book "is quite stimulating and extremely interesting," and it "will leave you with much to reconsider."

Therefore, the call for more and better understanding between China and the United States, and between China and the rest of the Western world in general, becomes urgent. Western education and media reports of China tend to be negative or otherwise biased, partially accounting for the surprises and complaints in the readers' reviews. Meanwhile, the Chinese government needs to realize that transparency is essential in its national strategies, such as the realization of the Chinese Dream for national rejuvenation, which may be misinterpreted as the revival of the Sinocentric tributary system.

Evaluating the Trustworthiness of Thucydides' Trap

Almost 30% of the online reviews have directly or indirectly touched upon or responded to Thucydides' trap, and most of them have been critical about the analogy, as can be seen from the following two aspects.

Nonaggressive, Political, Commercial, and Cultural Explorations

Although scholars disagree on the motives of Zheng He's voyages, online readers mostly expressed positive feedback. To S3, Zheng He and his fleet "brought and shared the well-developed civilization and technology to people around the world without conquest, conversion or discrimination." S8 and S9 agreed, saying that the voyages were meant to "develop a world wide culture of trade and knowledge" because Zheng He's treasure ships "brought not only porcelains and calendars but also goodwill and friendship with no intention and desire to dominate and colonize."

S1 summarized, "learning about China's success in trading and travel has opened my mind to new ideas and concepts. As I continue to learn more about the traditions of ancient civilizations, I understand the modern philosophies they presently maintain." Thus, to most online readers, Zheng He's voyages were nonaggressive in nature and mainly served to display national might, expand the tributary system, and carry out exchanges of trade and culture.

Understanding Pertinent Confucian Values and the Roles of Rising China

According to Tu (2001), Confucian values advocate "the creation of harmonious societies and benevolent governments through the self-cultivation of all members of the human community" (p. 259). In other words, it is characteristic of Confucian values to emphasize harmony, benevolence, and reciprocity, or mutual benefit. In the case of Zheng He's voyages, S3 observed the expressions of the relevant Confucian values in "loving your neighbor as yourself" and "among the four seas, all are brothers

and sisters." More specifically, S8 found "what the Chinese tried to do hundreds of years ago—that is—develop a world wide culture of trade and knowledge . . . looks interestingly like what they're doing now." S9 continued, as "an economic, political, scientific and technological leader," China's Ming Dynasty "fostered harmony and peace around the world . . . with no intention and desire to dominate and colonize" by means of Zheng He's seven voyages.

Regarding Allison's (2012, 2015) "attitudes and actions," Zheng He's voyages demonstrated a pacifist preference for harmony, equality, and exchanges of trade and culture for mutual benefit. Besides, neither scholars nor online readers have criticized Zheng He's voyages on the basis of "fear, hubris, and honor" (Whyte, 2015, para. 1). In brief, the online readers' reviews are by no means definitive but are sufficiently suggestive that the trustworthiness of Thucydides' trap for the U.S.–China case can hardly be supported.

Drawing Lessons for the U.S.–China Relationship

Because of its significance and complexity, the U.S.–China relationship is one of the major concerns in more than half of the readers' reviews. Most of the readers underwent the reflective and interactive processes of online discussion by referring to the reviews of others and revising their own when sharing their important messages, as the following examples show.

Awakening to Both Eurocentrism and Sinocentrism

Although Thucydides' trap involves the responsibilities of two sides, it seems that only China should be watched. The United States takes its stance as the only superpower and its global supremacy for granted. In the past several decades, it has taken all necessary preemptive actions against a rising China. The scenario of being replaced by any real or imaginary rival goes against the pride of its supremacy and the heritage of Eurocentrism. Similarly, a rising China may be blinded by nationalist momentum, attempts at reviving the past grandeur of the Sinocentric tributary system, and revenge for its century-old history of humiliation from foreign powers. Following are some urgent concerns from the online reviewers.

For fear that a rising China may threaten the U.S. status quo of supremacy, there have been overwhelming reports about the "China threat" in the West. S3 found that "this book is an eye and mind opener especially for American hawks who currently cry 'China Threat'." S5 and S6 felt that the reasons for this fear in relation to the two books under discussion lie in the fact that "academics are quick to criticize Menzies mainly because he has departed from their own developed theories" of "Eurocentric learning" and "learned notions of Western supremacy." Thus, S8 noted that traditionally, "the Western world has written history to suit its own purposes—and not tell the whole truth."

Likewise, China's long history of cultural grandeur may serve as the seed of extreme patriotism. S3 and S5 observed: "With compass, sun dial and the guide of the stars, the Chinese fleet set up observatories in making calculation and charting maps with amazing accuracy" that "were used in the European discoveries of America." S8 even advised the United States to be aware of the fact that "the

Chinese have been around for a lot longer—we will become a footnote in comparison to what they will accomplish in the next 50 years." Moreover, China's political orientation and nationalism have raised the caution of online readers. S4 thought that "this idea that China 'discovered America' reflects some new nationalism in China," which may be a "project enjoying support from political circles within China."

Thus, both the United States and China are responsible for preventing Thucydides' trap. Meanwhile, both ought to be on guard against any extreme actions out of fear, hubris, or honor. By looking back at the mutually beneficial results from cooperation during the past decades, both countries should continue engaging each other and genuinely start learning from each other.

Learning Lessons from Zheng He's Voyages

Roxas-Lim (2003) said that those who see the world through the Eurocentric lens have taken European superiority for granted for so long that any civilizations that cannot be straitjacketed into a reductionist discourse of technologism are either excluded or treated as minor. This is why Zheng He's voyages have been treated as "a case of irrational decision-making, of an inability to resist the gratification of whims and desires of the voyager's Chinese masters" (p. 25). Besides, the Chinese maritime expedition has been presented as "an expendable luxury" whose sudden stopping serves as proof "that the Chinese are backward looking and ignorant, had no desire for new knowledge and were run by a load of high bound bureaucrats" (Cao, 2006, p. 9).

Nonetheless, S6 realized that it was not just the West that "was responsible for most human achievements." Non-Western peoples, "who were capable of great feats," "did not merely wait for the Europeans to come along and 'civilize or modernize' them." To S9, "Zheng He was remembered and honored in temples in South East Asia as Sam Bao Gong for protection in prayer." S3 explained, "China earned respect, trust and honor without shock and awe nor establishment of a Chinese Empire even though she was capable of [them]." Zheng He's voyages indicate that China is able to "undertake global diplomacy, trade, commercial and cultural cooperation peacefully and for the benefit of the people" (Roxas-Lim, 2003, p. 55).

To sum up, S8 remarked, "the United States should take a lesson from the Chinese in regards to how to establish trade, how to treat foreign peoples, and how not to dominate purely from a militaristic standpoint." It is worthwhile to point out here that both positive and critical reviews of the two books offer valuable and constructive comments and suggestions. Some are direct, personal, and even sentimental because they are heavily shaped by the individual reviewers' social class, racial background, ethnicity, gender, nationality, age, physical condition, employment, and vocational interests. Others go beyond the interests and emotions of individuals and reveal more collective concerns about the catastrophic consequences should the Thucydides trap prophecy become true. Thus, it is essential for both China and the United States to be fully alert to any potential risks related to either Eurocentrism or Sinocentrism and to bring the many complementary aspects in each other into full play.

Conclusion

By analyzing online readers' reviews of Menzies' (2003) *1421: The Year China Discovered America* and Levathes' (1997) *When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1405-1433*, the present study aimed to find themes regarding and to shed light on the understanding of China and the Chinese people, the trustworthiness of Thucydides' trap, and lessons for the U.S.-China relationship. Under the theoretical guidance of reader response criticism and via the research methods of website observation and textual and thematic analyses, this study has achieved the following findings.

First, regarding the understanding of China and the Chinese people, the online readers emphasized that it was necessary to be alert to the new nationalism and paid propaganda in and from China and that it was also advisable for the West to stop excluding or distorting the great achievements of non-Western peoples. Zheng He's seven epic voyages showcased both impressive navigation technologies and generally accepted Chinese cultural values of harmony, benevolence, and mutual benefit. However, any overgeneralization such as Menzies' (2003) accounts of Zheng He and his crew's reaching almost all continents except Europe naturally met suspicions and criticism. One side effect of the overgeneralization is that readers were stimulated and became all the more interested in the true stories about China.

Next, to evaluate the trustworthiness of Thucydides' trap for the U.S.-China case, it is important to note that both sides bear the responsibilities. However, perhaps because Allison neglected to clarify which side was responsible for how many of the 11 cases in which wars broke out, people assume that the United States is, if not the victim, the target of attack and replacement and thus entitled to take any preemptive actions. Nevertheless, the online readers' reviews indicated no substantial evidence or signs of hostile attitudes, offensive actions, or emotions of fear, hubris, or honor. Instead, based on the relevant Chinese cultural values and the non-aggressive trading and cultural exchanges during Zheng He's seven voyages, many online readers have come to understand the philosophy and nature of the Chinese character today and national strategies for tomorrow.

Finally, at least three lessons can be drawn for the U.S.-China relationship. First, non-Western peoples can also achieve great or even greater progress. Second, Zheng He's seven voyages not only established and promoted cross-border exchanges of trade and culture but also popularized some fundamental Confucian values. Finally, exchanges between peoples and among nations are to be conducted for mutual benefit on equal footing.

The limitations of this study are that, first, we have not included the voices of Chinese readers' reviews of the two books mainly because we could not identify them among other online readers and put them into a separate category. Second, both authors are from Chinese cultural backgrounds. We made all efforts to be objective at each phase of our research, but we may be subjective here and there in our writing. For future research, more online platforms can be targeted, and authors from other cultural backgrounds may be triangulated.

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