

AN INSCRIPTION IN MEMORY OF SAYYID BIN ABU ALI

*A Study of Relations between China and Oman
from the Eleventh to the Fifteenth Century*

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The history of relations between China and Oman has been the focus of the work of Hirth and Rockhill in their studies on Zhao Rukua's work *Chu-Fan-Chi*,¹ particularly in regard to geographical place-names in Oman. We know that Wong Man was no doubt Oman, while Wu Ba was probably Mirbat, and Nu Fa was Zufar. Later in the 1930s, Chinese scholars like Zhang Xingliang and Feng Chengjun accepted some of the ideas of Hirth and Rockhill and made contributions of their own to this subject.² The Japanese scholar, Yajima Hikoichi, in an excellent article, identified some Omani place-names mentioned in Chinese literature and related them to those in Muslim geographical works.³ Furthermore, recent publications of Chinese geographical works from the early Ming period contain some valuable studies on this topic.⁴

Only a few Omanis such as Sinbad, known as Obaidah Abdullah bin Al-Qasim and who visited China, have left their names in the historical literature. I propose to reexamine an inscription of the Mongol-Yuan period relating to an Omani in China, and to give a description of his life.

The name of this Omani in Chinese is Bu A Li (Abu'Ali). There are three different sources regarding his life. The first is a chapter about Ma Ba Er (that is Ma'abar/Cola in India) and Ju Lan (Quilon in India), in *Yuan Shi* (A History of the Yuan Dynasty). The text reads:

In A.D. 1281 the envoys of the Mongol-Yuan Government started their mission to *Ju Lan* [Quilon] from *Quan Zhou* [Zaytun]. After three months at sea, they reached Seng Jia Yie [a mistake in transcription for *Seng Jia Na*, which derives from Simhala, that is Sri Lanka]. As they no longer had the monsoon winds and were in need of supplies, they sailed to Ma'abar. Instead of sailing they wanted to travel through Ma'abar to Quilon. A minister of Ma'abar called Bu A Li [Abu'Ali] told them that he himself would like to serve Qubilai Qaghan and be his servant. He had sent an envoy called Zha Ma La Ding [Jamal al-Din] to China. The *Da Bi Zhe Chi* [a mixed Chinese-Mongolian word, meaning great secretary] had reported this news to the Sultan of Ma'abar. The Sultan had become angry on hearing this. He had confiscated Abu'Ali's money, property and slaves, and had even wanted to kill him.⁵

The second text is a paragraph from a chapter in *Gao Li Shi* (History of Korea) written by the Korean historian Zhe Linzhi in 1451, which says "a prince of Ma Ba Er [Ma'abar] called Bo Ha Li had come into conflict with his king and escaped to the Mongol-Yuan Empire. The Emperor [namely Yuan Cheng Zhong] married him to a Korean girl."⁶ This description was copied in other Korean sources. It was the Japanese scholar, Jitsuzō Kuwabara, who connected the two references, and identified Bu A Li (Abu'Ali) of Yuan Shi with Bo Ha Li of the Korean source.⁷ But he was mistaken in continuing to identify Bo Ha Li (Abu'Ali) with a prince of Kish called Fakhr-al-Din Ahmad, who was sent to visit China by the Mongol prince in Iran, Li-Khan Qazan. Another Japanese scholar, Karashima Noboru, recently made the same mistake.⁸

The third source concerning Abu'Ali is an inscription in memory of Sayyid bin Abu'Ali. The inscription is no longer extant but fortunately it was recorded by its author, Liu Minzhong, in his collected works *Zhong An Ji*:

The real name of Bu A Li [Abu'Ali] in Chinese was Sa Yi Di [Sayyid]. His home town was a city called *Ha La Ha Di* in Chinese. His forefathers had emigrated to a coastal territory called Xi Yang [Western Ocean] in Chinese where they settled as merchants. The father of Sayyid called Bu A Li [Abu'Ali] had enjoyed the trust of the king of that territory. The king was one of five brothers, and Abu'Ali had been called the sixth brother, and had been ordered to rule over some tribes. So he became very rich and had a hundred servants and concubines. His bed was made of ivory and he owned a lot of gold ornaments. When Abu'Ali died, he was succeeded by Sayyid. The King called him by his father's name Abu'Ali. So only a few people knew that his name was Sayyid.⁹

Ten years ago, the Chinese scholar Chen Gaohua correctly proved that “Xi Yang,” where Abu’Ali’s forefathers had settled, was Ma’abar of India.¹⁰ Consequently, these three sources concern the same person. But where was the hometown of this Abu’Ali? Chen Gaohua said that he was unable to answer that question.

According to my own research, the name of the hometown of Abu’Ali’s family, “Ha La Ha Di,” was the Chinese transcription of the ancient Omani port city, Qalhāt.¹¹

The name of Qalhāt appears many times in medieval classical Chinese literature but, of course, in various forms. For example, in Zhao Rukua’s *Zhu Fan Zhi*, a lot of Arabic place names are mentioned. One of them is called “Jia Li Ji.” Peliot thought that it was a Chinese transcription of Qalhāt,¹² a thesis with which I agree. Again in *Da De Na Hai Zhi* (A Regional Description of Hai Nan Island compiled in the Da De Period), there is a list of countries from whence ships came to Hai Nan for trade. In this list, next to the name “Kuo Li Mo Si” (that is no doubt Hormuz), there is a place called Jia La Du.¹³ It is clear that this Jia La Du is another Chinese transcription in the Mongol Yuan period of Qalhāt. Phonetically it is very close to Marco Polo’s Calatu. In the fifteenth century, Qalhāt was called “Jia La Ha” by Chinese sailors. In the famous navigational chart of Zheng He, four shipping lines from different places on the west coast of India were drawn to Jia La Ha, together with their courses and compass directions.¹⁴ From this chart we can also find a series of place names near Muscat, such as Tiwi, Quliqat, and Turtle Island. But the editor of the chart put Jia La Ha (Qalhāt) in the wrong place on his map.

So now we know that these three sources not only referred to the same person, but that person was an Omani. On the basis of this material, a short account of his life can now be given.

Sayyid was born in Ma’abar (Cola) on the east coast of India in A.D. 1251. The date of his family’s move from Qalhāt to India is not known. His forebears worked in Ma’abar as middlemen and traders with both the Gulf countries and China, and kept in frequent contact with both areas. So they were well aware of political changes in China and Western Asia. The Mongol conquest in the east and the west gave his family and other Moslem merchants in India an opportunity to extend their trade. Their ships were well received in Quan Zhou (Zaytun) by the local Mongol-Yuan officers. Although his mission to China before 1281 displeased the King of Ma’abar, Sayyid continued to send envoys to Qubilai Qaghan every year, and also to the Mongolian princes such as Abaqa and Qazan in Persia. When the envoys of Mongolian governments in China and Iran stopped in Ma’abar, Sayyid always prepared ships for them beforehand, and provided them with supplies. But his mercantile

interests and the demands of his social position in Ma'abar conflicted with each other, and he was to lose the King's confidence.

Realizing Sayyid's position to be in danger, Qubilai Qaghan sent a minister by the name of A Li Bie (Ali Beg) as head of a group of envoys to Ma'abar in 1291, and brought a letter inviting him to China. Sayyid left his wives, children, relatives and property in Ma'abar, and with a hundred servants and the Mongol-Yuan envoys he escaped to China (rather than his hometown of Qalhāt). He probably arrived in Dai Du (Beijing) the following year, 1292. Qubilai Qaghan received him with respect, granted him clothes made from brocade, allowed him to marry a young Korean lady, and gave him a house in which to live. In this way, he was also able to keep in contact with the Korean royal family.

When Temur succeeded to the throne in 1294, Sayyid was given the titles of Zi De Dai Fu (Qualified and Moral Minister of the Mongol-Yuan empire), Zhong Shu Yu Cheng (Right Minister of the Central Government), and Sheng Yi Fu Jian Deng Chu Xing Zhong Shu Sheng Shi (Consultant of the Government of Fu Jian Province). On several occasions, the new emperor granted him large sums of money. When his Korean wife died in 1298, Temur Qaghan married him to another girl.

In the winter of 1299, Sayyid died in Beijing at the age of forty-nine. He had a son and two daughters in China. When the news of Sayyid's death reached Temur Qaghan, he ordered the Government to meet the costs of his funeral arrangements and issued another imperial edict to protect Sayyid's family. His body was transported to Quan Zhou (Zaytun) through official post stations and buried there. The inscription on his tomb was written by the most famous scholar of that time, namely Liu Minzhong. He wrote the text in accordance with an imperial edict from Temur Qaghan.

This is my contribution to the history of relations between the Chinese and the Omanis.

Notes

1. F. Hirth and W. W. Rockhill, *Chao Ju-Kua, His Work on Chinese Arab Trade in the 12th-13th Centuries, Entitled Chu-Fan-Chi*. Studies on Zhao Rukua's work (St. Petersburg, 1911). See Feng Chengjun, ed., *Zhu Fan Zhi Jiao Zhu* (Description of Various Countries) (Shanghai, 1956).
2. Zhang Xingliang, *Zhong Xi Jiao Tong Shi Liao Hui Bian* (Sources on Communications between China and Western Countries), vol. 2 (Beijing, 1977; reprint), p. 273; Feng Chengjun, *Zhu Fan Zhi Jiao Zhu*, p. 59.
3. Yajima Hikoichi, "The Ports of South Arabia as named in the Sailing Route Book by Kia Tan." *Oriental Studies*, vol. 31 (1935): pp. 34-49.
4. Gong Zhen, *Xi Yang Fan Guo Zhi* (Description of Western Lands). Edited with notes by Xiang Da (Beijing, 1982; reprint), pp. 33-5; Huang Shengzeng, *Xi Yang Chao Gong Dian Lu*. (Description of Tributes Paid from Western Countries to the Chinese Court), edited with notes by Xie Fang (Beijing, 1982), pp. 103-5.
5. Yuan Shi, chap. 210, pp. 4660-70.
6. Zheng Linzhi, *Zheng He Hang Hai Tu* (The Chart of Zheng He), drawn by Mao Yaunyi in the late Ming Dynasty, edited with notes by Xiang Da (Beijing, 1957; reprint), pp. 514-15.
7. Jitsuzō Kuwabara, *Hojuko no jiseki* (Achievements of Pu Shougeng) (Tokyo, 1935); and *Pu Shougeng Kao*, Chinese translation by Chen Yujing (Beijing, 1954), pp. 88-9.
8. Karashima Noboru, "Trade Relations between South India and China during the 13th and 14th centuries," in *East-West Maritime Relations*, vol. 1 (Tokyo: Study Group for East-West Maritime Relations, the Middle Eastern Cultural Center in Japan, 1989), p. 74.
9. Liu Minzhong, *Zhong An Zian Sheng Liu Wen Jian Gong Wen Ji* (published in the late Yuan period), chap. 4. The claim by Liu Minzhong that five brothers ruled Ma'abar was supported by Marco Polo.
10. Chen Gaohua, "Ying Du Ma Er Wang Zhi Bo Ha Li Lai Hua Xin Kao (A New Study of the Visit of Prince Bo Ha Li of Ma'abar of India to China)." In: *Nan Kai Da Xue Bao* (Academic Journal of Nan Kai University, 1980): 4.
11. Peliot, *Notes on Marco Polo* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1959), p. 138.
12. Ibid.
13. The fragment of *Da De Nan Hai Zhi* is kept in Beijing Library, see Chapter 7, p. 21; *Da De* is one of the titles of the sixth Mongol Emperor Temur who reigned, from A.D. 1297 to 1307 (he was the grandson of Qubilai Qaghan).
14. Zheng He, *Zheng He Hang Hai Tu* (The Chart of Zheng He), drawn by Mao Yaunyi in the late Ming Dynasty Edited with notes by Xiang Da (Beijing, 1982; reprint), Chart No. 20. Some other Omani place-names located between Zuo Fa Er (Zufar) and Ma Shi Ji (Muscat) are given on this chart.