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The “in-between” man who would be king

From a remark and two comparisons to a hypothesis

I will try to focus on the terminologies which were used to explain three phases of Zheng Zhilong’s life, but always raised questions in my mind: two poorly known periods and an event which entered the political imagination of this family. I will successively deal first with his family environment; then his youth between Macao, Hirado, Taiwan and Penghu; and finally the adoption of his son by the emperor. My considerations will therefore cover them, in order either to go beyond the limitations of the sources, or to reinterpret certain facts which have been construed to this day in an overly unequivocal fashion. For this purpose, I will propose one remark and two comparisons. The prism of hypotheses thus constructed makes you the judges of an original approach and analysis’ relevance. I set it before you, you tell me what you think holds up.

### The son of a grain-storage clerk

We know little about Zheng Zhilong’s family on the paternal side, beyond that fact it probably belonged to an inferior social class, possessed few resources and had a rudimentary level of education. Among other things; we know that his father held a low-level administrative job as a grain-storage clerk.<sup>1</sup> Without more information, it is not possible to determine whether his father’s professional culture and networks had an influence on his son and therefore on his future career. Nevertheless it is conceivable that the paternal professional practice impregnated or even structured the family environment. This professional practice can be described based on what we know more generally about grain-storage clerks.

In his 1962 book entitled *Local government in China under the Ch’ing*<sup>2</sup>, Ch’ü T’ung-tsu (Qu Tongzu 瞿同祖) offers an interesting typology of the various trades plied around the yamen (衙門), the territorial administrative seat of government. I hold to his conclusions even though his study concerns a later period than the one in which we are interested – the Manchu dynasty --, since it is quite likely that their daily operations evolved only marginally. The

<sup>1</sup> Hang Xing (2016), *Conflict and Commerce in Maritime East Asia The Zheng Family and the Shaping of the Modern World, c. 1620–1720*, p. 42.

<sup>2</sup> Ch’ü T’ung-tsu (Qu Tongzu 瞿同祖) (1962). *Local government in China under the Ch’ing*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press.

book therefore enables us to construct a scheme of everyday life as it applied to the Zheng family, through what it tells us about grain-storage clerks.

According to professor Ch'ü T'ung-tsu, *clerks* (*li* 吏 or *shuli* 書吏) assisted the magistrates of the yamen. Unlike the magistrates, though, they were recruited locally. They therefore spoke the one or several regional languages that their hierarchic leader did not master, since the latter were most often assigned outside their native region. Despite being subject to their authority, the clerks enjoyed a real margin of maneuver for two reasons : first, their linguistic abilities made them subordinates whose everyday activities were difficult to control. Second, their statutory function as intermediates between the local authority and society endowed them with a degree of autonomous action. In this two-fold scheme, it was easy for them at once to fool the magistrates on the matter of transactions, bargaining and arrangements between the governed and the imperial bureaucracy, and to abuse their parcel of institutional power at the expense of the governed.

Often rooted in the propertyless class, their schooling was elementary. Not only were they not remunerated, but they had to acquire their tools (ink, paintbrushes, paper...) at their own expense. The search for personal profit was therefore a necessity, if only to be able to exercise their assignment and live from one day to the next. Under these circumstances, they frequently engaged in illegal activities on their own account.

In theory they are appointed for a five-year term, but they often keep their position by changing their name or having one of their relatives stand in for them. The longer they keep their function, the more gainfully they can profit from the system, particularly through and for their family and professional network.

Their main source of income is similar to the assessment levied by the magistrates for the exercise of their activity, the “customary fee” (*lougui* 陋規), but at a far less formal level. Some deeds are specific to the clerks, such as “money for pens and paper” (*zhibifei* 紙幣費), but they also need other resources to pay the lower-level staff who assist them, the “runners” (*yayi* 衙役). Certain runners appear frequently among the subaltern professionals of these “granaries” (*cangfang* 倉房): the guards, the messengers, the “grain measurers” (*douji* 斗級), the “granary janitors” (*cangfu* 倉夫). To make sure they perform their duty and do so loyally, sums are levied during the process of collection, counting, storage and surveillance, along with various other charges for tasks performed.

Concerning such accepted informal practices, one often observes that the clerks enjoy privileged relations with rice shop owners and “lodging house owner-guarantors” (*baoxie* 保歇), who act as substitutes for the payment of taxes. These merchants represent an indispensable auxiliary for granary clerks as “usually there were a number of rice shops near the granary. Taxpayers sometimes found it is more convenient to buy grain from the shops than to transport it from their homes”. Thus, they allow the process of collection to be bypassed within tolerated bounds, and probably also serve as partners for the clerk for any other type of arrangement, on the fringes of legality, notably in the counting, diversion and redistribution/smuggling of the rice.

This sort of subversion of procedure requires the passive corruption of the clerks, so that they will turn a blind eye to the breaches of delays, amounts deposited, bypassing of bureaucratic controls or disappearance of stocks. As well as on the active corruption of other civil servants, and the swindling of taxpayers through various threats of bureaucratic annoyance and other punishments.

Ch'ü T'ung-tsu concludes on this matter by stating that: "It was generally agreed that clerks were extremely dishonest"<sup>3</sup>. So it is not inconceivable Zheng Zhilong's father may have had this profile and conducted his business according to such methods. His informal role may have been all the more substantial in that "Minnan was difficult to rule because of its economic dependence on the overseas trade which largely took place outside the control of the imperial bureaucracy"<sup>4</sup>.

Since it is believed that the Zheng family had exercised the profession of yamen clerks for several generations in its native region, it is possible that it may have created a web of economic relations for the collection and resale of rice, with important ramifications and relays. It is also quite conceivable that the network reached out and opened on the Fujianese coast or even some zones in Guangdong, and that it cultivated direct or indirect relations with the various protagonists of all sorts of maritime trade since "a keeper of grain stores would be especially useful for trading with offshore outlaws some rice to go with their fish"<sup>5</sup>.

It is possible that young Zheng Zhilong circulated among this half-way house culture, this "in-between": the formal and the informal, built on submission to a leader at the same time as subversion of the hierarchic chain, on the legal economy as well on the ways to get around it. This opens perspectives on possible links between the activities of the paternal side and those of the maternal side, or at least on possible similarities between them. The mastery of this dual family culture could explain the ease with which young Zheng Zhilong moved in the international mix and his capacity to make his own as well as his partners' business prosper; by using his protectors, paying off the intermediaries and subordinates, so as to undermine his rivals.

### The interpreter

The next stage of young Zheng Zhilong's trail, from his arrival in Macao to the death of Li Dan and Yan Siqi, remains equally in the dark. We know that in Macao, he was taken onboard by his sisters and maternal uncle, which enabled him to circulate in the local Lusitanian world and to practice commercial transport to Hirado. We know he plied this trade in the name of his uncle, that he learned Portuguese and was baptized. We also know that his conversion gave him access to the Catholic network of the Philippines, that he was seen in a good light by the Hirado authorities, those in charge of the various Dutch trading stations and the major Chinese merchants-smugglers who operated in the zone.

In this plural geographic context, Zheng Zhilong appeared endowed at once with the virtues of loyalty, fidelity and piety, and the vices of impiety and duplicity. Unexpectedly, these apparently contradictory qualities, which are difficult to expand upon or to confirm because of gaps in the sources, may delineate the contours of a profile that is quite complex yet relatively coherent. Indeed, such personal characteristics are often detected in aggregation among individuals who operate in spaces where distinct, and most often impenetrable, cultural spheres intersect. They are the characteristics of those who serve as intercessors, as intermediaries between the various actors who live in very dissimilar worlds but are forced to

<sup>3</sup> Ch'ü T'ung-tsu, p. 53.

<sup>4</sup> Leonard Blussé (1990). "Minnan-jen or Cosmopolitan? The Rise of Cheng Chih-lung Alias Nicolas Iquan", in E. B. Vermeer, *Development and Decline of Fukien Province in the 17th and 18th Centuries*, ed. Leiden, Brill, p. 246.

<sup>5</sup> John E. Wills Jr. (2016). "Yiguan's Origins, Clues from Chinese, Japanese, Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese, and Latin Sources", In Tonio Andrade, Xing Hang, Anand A. Yang, Kieko Matteson (ed), *Sea Rovers, Silver, and Samurai, Maritime East Asia in Global History, 1550–1700*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, p. 116.

meet in a given geographic setting, because of their economic and political ambitions, at once as rivals and seekers of alliances, readjusting as they encounter shifting opportunities and threats.

This intermediary is the interpreter. Transmitting words, he acts on behalf of his contractor, whom he compels to trust him that he will express, beyond the latter's strictly translated message, his own ambition. Since Portuguese was a kind of lingua franca used by the actors of the region dominated by Fujianese merchants, Zheng Zhilong's linguistic knowledge made him a useful and available interpreter. Thus, in light of what has been said, we have a Zheng Zhilong who can be considered as having grown up amid the usages and mechanisms of a cultural, social, linguistic and professional half-way house, with the ambition of seeking profit for himself and his family, by implementing tasks and functions assigned to him by an authority superior to him on the planes of law, economics and violence.

I have placed the interpreter's characteristics in perspective based on the research work of people like Jean-Pierre Bat<sup>6</sup> and Małgorzata Tryuk<sup>7</sup>, who studied the interpreters of colonial Africa in the nineteenth century; and drawn on the indispensable book on the subject *L'étrange destin de Wangrin ou les roueries d'un interprète africain (The Fortunes of Wangrin)* by Amadou Hampaté Bâ (1973). The purpose of this comparison is not to seek a straight decal to be transferred from one distinct epoch and geography to another, despite a very different colonial context, but to ponder the properties attributed by researchers to the bearer of this precise function. Moreover, I borrow the term "in-between" from Małgorzata Tryuk, and apply it here in order to overcome, as she recommends, any Manichean perception concerning interpreters, and escape the philosophical chasm between the ideas of heteronomy and autonomy.

With respect to heteronomy, the interpreter is indeed, as are all domestics and other subalterns, subject to the law by which his employers abide, by being and existing as their devoted subordinate. Nevertheless, the function of the interpreter endows him with a space of freedom through an informal delegation of power, since it consists in reaching towards the outside to serve as an interface with social spheres that are autonomous with respect to his contractor. These autonomous groups represent for the interpreter's employer either allies or adversaries, and therefore either opportunities or constraints for the interpreter's own ambitions, and therefore again both vectors and targets of his own action, which coincides only partly with the interests and ambitions of those who hired him for his linguistic talents.

This double level of interaction lies at the core of the position where this intermediary finds himself. For an effective interpreter will be the person who is able not only to transmit a message, but also to explain and decipher the behavior of the various actors involved, or even anticipate them, so that the contractor may guard against them. At the same time, the interpreter must also himself guard against them in order to guarantee his own status and advance or preserve his business, by diluting or truncating the information available to him. Those who succeed best at this pursuit are the ones who experience and live among the mechanisms, blockages and inexpressible thoughts that are born of the encounter of these worlds, and therefore among the opportunities they produce and from which they seek themselves to profit.

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<sup>6</sup> Notably the series of articles by Jean-Pierre Bat published on-line at <http://libeafrica4.blogs.liberation.fr/> between 2017 and 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Tryuk, Małgorzata (2013), « L'interprète en Afrique coloniale. Intermédiaire culturel et linguistique ou traître ? » [The interpreter in colonial Africa. Cultural and linguistic intermediary or traitor ?], *Synergies Pologne*, n° 10, pp. 215-224.

Starting from these considerations described for colonial Africa, we should see in the interpreter not a mere translator or faithful and submissive agent, but, quite the contrary, an in-between who finds his relevance in his capacity to make himself useful in all lands, while watching out for his own interests. To achieve this, he must be the reflecting mirror of the projections of all who call on him for help: faithful, devoted... and willing to deliver proofs of this commitment. To be relevant, this “in-between”, must be a facilitator who knows how to become irreplaceable for many interlocutors, all of which believe he is at their service, in accordance with their perspectives, derived from their local and/or strategic preoccupations, depending on cartographies that are specific to them and do not correspond to the extent of his own activity.

Unfortunately for historians, in the seventeenth-century China sea as in nineteenth-century Africa, this figure escapes our scrutiny because official archives that could help to fully characterize the action of these interpreters who live in the shadow of expansionist local powers, are often lacking. Because of this, Jean-Pierre Bat defines the interpreter as the forgotten figure of history even though he turns out to be at the forefront of contacts between societies. He is therefore an essential actor of history, history which arises out of the confrontation of worlds, at the intersection of political, military, territorial and economic expansionism. Indeed his function is crucial because the interpreter often serves as a technical, linguistic, commercial and politico-diplomatic intermediary. He is the “clever agent or mediator whose main task is to bridge the linguistic and cultural gap”<sup>8</sup>. As a result, he evades mention in the grand histories written by those who make history, since, due to his function as “in-between”, he operates between two worlds, in a very fluid and informal space, in which a high level of uncertainty prevails, featuring a great many threats and opportunities.

In this context, the interpreter often appears only on the margins of the official life of one his employers, even though his function places him at the heart of their service. Of course, he is seldom or never invited to integrate fully, as an equal, the intimate sphere of his employers, although he knows its nooks and crannies well since he is their servant and his prime asset is to make himself indispensable to them. A good interpreter is the one who knows how to gain the confidence of his masters or protectors in order to walk in their shadow, the only space that is open to him for as long as he is not in a position to challenge them. His margin of maneuver and his nuisance value depend on his ability to behave as an ideal, because efficient, informer, while transmitting information that most often targets his most direct rivals. This way of doing things makes his employers useful to him, while delighting them with the ability to intercept smugglers or merchants and/or seize their goods, unwittingly applying their means of coercion at the moment he chooses to further his own goals.

This comparatism offers a set of references that can be transposed to Zheng Zhilong, down to his individual characteristics. In the aforementioned book, Wangrin, the interpreter, embodies more generally a kind of archetypal interpreter that can be partially applied to Zheng. Wangrin is described as possessing contradictory gifts and flaws that are so intertwined that, at first sight, it is not possible to define, not to mention situate, him.<sup>9</sup> Wangrin uses many aliases.<sup>10</sup> He is described as highly intelligent, superlatively lively, imperviously confident, incredibly daring and very cheeky.

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<sup>8</sup> Tryuk, Małgorzata, *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Amadou Hampaté Bâ, p 9.

<sup>10</sup> Amadou Hampaté Bâ, p 8.

His talents are deployed at the expense of merchants which whom he mingles, local chiefs and the powers that be of the day.<sup>11</sup> His role as intermediary in all spaces of action and interaction confers upon him a broad field of maneuver that he puts to good use by developing his own business. Wangrin, following in the footsteps of other great interpreters, also engages in commerce and accumulates, at certain moments of his career, huge amounts of capital,<sup>12</sup> way beyond what a simple servant could assemble from payments for services rendered.

In the case of this type of interpreter, the moral standing of the individual is measured on the one hand in light of the magnitude of the assistance he delivered to the colonial powers, and on the other hand, of the geographical situation of his native country.<sup>13</sup> To strengthen his status as an irreplaceable source and apply it to his own business, he sets up a two-fold intelligence network. The first segment is conceived to channel information towards him, and the second to spread far and wide bits of information that have been filtered and flavored to meet his appetites.<sup>14</sup> To this end, he tries to control social gathering places attended by the local authorities and accommodate them for spies working on his behalf.<sup>15</sup> He also tends to push young women into the arms of key personalities, winning their good graces while using the women to watch and report on the deeds and dispositions of these figures.<sup>16</sup> When he obtains the blind confidence of some of them, he tries to put their complicity, or at least their culpable negligence, to profitable use.<sup>17</sup> He organizes campaigns to seduce his masters and intimidate his rivals.<sup>18</sup> He abuses the trust of his protectors, and when caught red-handed, contends that he is merely an agent carrying out orders.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, the status of this “in-between” remains fragile as it rests solely on his own person. He is subject to geographical transfers<sup>20</sup>, at the whim of his employers, decisions over which he has no control. A toy of their goodwill, he is forced at all times to seek and outwit any risk of being ousted, particularly by discovering who the other informers of his chief are, that is those who could enable the chief to bypass him. He is compelled to control or get rid of all persons who could enable the authority in question to cross-check the information he delivered independently.<sup>21</sup> The name of the game is to weasel around his rivals’ networks, not only to learn their intentions, but also to nudge them into getting tangled up in serious blunders,<sup>22</sup> or disrupt the operation of their money-making activities.

All such stratagems are concocted with no concern for moral considerations<sup>23</sup> and designed to make money.<sup>24</sup> To carry them out, he relies on concentric circles of trustworthy people, the inner ring being composed of close family members. Particularly to set up a business, he positions his brothers and cousins to deal with interlocutors or rivals. Assembling this mesh means creating alliances and entities in light of the expectations of his interlocutors<sup>25</sup> to profit from their business and mask his own illegal operations.<sup>26</sup> To do so,

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<sup>11</sup> Amadou Hampaté Bâ, p 9.

<sup>12</sup> Amadou Hampaté Bâ, p 7.

<sup>13</sup> Amadou Hampaté Bâ, p 45.

<sup>14</sup> Amadou Hampaté Bâ, p 52.

<sup>15</sup> Amadou Hampaté Bâ, pp.53-54.

<sup>16</sup> Amadou Hampaté Bâ, p 56.

<sup>17</sup> Amadou Hampaté Bâ, p 64.

<sup>18</sup> Amadou Hampaté Bâ, p 90.

<sup>19</sup> Amadou Hampaté Bâ, p 95.

<sup>20</sup> Amadou Hampaté Bâ, p 98.

<sup>21</sup> Amadou Hampaté Bâ, p 118 and 129.

<sup>22</sup> Amadou Hampaté Bâ, p 132.

<sup>23</sup> Amadou Hampaté Bâ, p 119.

<sup>24</sup> Amadou Hampaté Bâ, p 142.

<sup>25</sup> Amadou Hampaté Bâ, p 235.

he sets up and leads, in his own name or under cover, trading posts, companies or ships, that will be conveniently available for partnership and profit-sharing with his allies of the moment.<sup>27</sup>

To summarize, it seems necessary to set aside the notions of loyalty and treason to characterize this “in-between” figure, with his dual nature, ambivalent yet never false.<sup>28</sup> It appears to me that this approach can be applied to the deeds and whereabouts of young Zheng Zhilong about which we have some knowledge. It makes possible a coherent treatment of the variegated bits of information about his life in many locations, interacting with many interlocutors. It enables us to encompass Macao as well as Hirado or Manilla in the same logic. It also can be projected on the complex interplay which emerges around the establishment, then forced departure, of the Dutch in Penghu. More generally, this approach suits a possible characterization of his trajectory which, although not well known in detail, does enable him to become more and more powerful until the death of Li Dan and Yan Siqi ; otherwise, he could not have been recognized so easily as their successor when the time came. Before that event, we may conjecture that his discreet rise was based potentially on taking advantage of all the dominant actors of the time to counter the direct rivals of the Zheng family, by providing information to all his masters so that they would struggle unwittingly on his behalf, by targetting specifically their ships and cargo. When Zheng Zhilong became a lord of the sea, we can still perceive the spirit of these multiple combination practices in the fierce attempts of smugglers to gain the good graces of the Ming power to channel their striking power so as to coincide with their needs.

### Imperial Adoption

In this third part, I deal no longer with periods of the life of young Iquan that are not well known, but with a fact, embedded in collective imaginary representations, the adoption of his son by the Ming Emperor in Fujian, while the Manchu forces have begun their invasion of China. The common story sees in this act a symbol of loyalty to the Emperor resisting the invaders, in a logic of orthodox obedience. Such an interpretation, however, runs afoul of the subsequent adhesion of Zheng Zhilong to the enemy. But the aporia finds a solution if we accept the in-between logic proposed earlier in this paper.

Despite his status as admiral of the fleet, Zheng Zhilong never fully integrated the Chinese military apparatus. What he did was rather to transform and present his commercial power as a regalian force. The method had its limitations, namely that it rested entirely on his person, and therefore remained quite fragile. Following this insight further, the collapse of Ming power can be seen as the ideal opportunity to institutionalize his personal authority and make it permanent to the benefit of his family. In this configuration, he acquires a two-fold domination over the Emperor whom he welcomed on his lands : he is the master of the only credible military force at his disposal, and seems to have sufficient funds to finance the armed legitimist resistance.

Indeed, the Imperial House seems to have been infiltrated quite rapidly by several members of the Zheng clan. Observers at the time considered that Zheng Zhilong appeared

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<sup>26</sup> Amadou Hampaté Bâ, p 236.

<sup>27</sup> Amadou Hampaté Bâ, p 245.

<sup>28</sup> Tryuk, Małgorzata (2013), « L'interprète en Afrique coloniale. Intermédiaire culturel et linguistique ou traître ? », *Synergies Pologne*, n° 10, pp. 215-224

more as an emperor than the Emperor himself,<sup>29</sup> even though his authority remained irksome for the various members of the Imperial Court that he has pushed aside. The more the Emperor depended on him, the more Zheng could use him to serve his own cause in the name of the dynastic interest. Making his son Zheng Sen 鄭森 available for the *triumphal service* “Chenggong 成功” of the Emperor through his adoption, at a time when the latter has no children, would be the demonstration of the extent of his power.

This adoption echoes a similar process observed in Europe in the Middle Ages. I have expanded on this point in an article fully demonstrating the comparison between these two periods by applying it to the entire Zheng family<sup>30</sup>. Here, I can only summarize it by presenting its conclusions and limiting myself to Zheng Zhilong’s case.

At the end of the Merovingian dynasty (fifth century to mid-eighth century), while legitimate authority, *auctoritas*, remained quite definitely in the king’s hands, executive power, *potestas*, was wielded in reality more and more by those who actually controlled the civilian and military apparatus, in the name of royal power. Several generations will be needed for the family who held this *potestas* to substitute itself to the Merovingians without appearing usurpacious. The difficulty resides in taking over that *auctoritas* without being considered impostors. One of the methods chosen in the mid-seventh century was adoption. Here too, there are gaps in the archives and contradictory versions. It is not clear whether it is the dying king who wants to have his son adopted by his servant to preserve his child from a succession war, or whether it is the king’s servant who has his own son adopted by the king. Although neither of these two versions gained credence in the end, they are instructive for what they reveal, according to historians who specialize in this period, that is “an attempt that was audacious, because premature”<sup>31</sup> to stage a “coup d’État”<sup>32</sup>, “a revolution”,<sup>33</sup> or “an antidynastic palace revolution”<sup>34</sup> based on the law. That is confirms the high rank of the real holder of executive power ; who is considered institutionally as the only person who could stand against the rest of the royal family.<sup>35</sup> These conclusions could apply well to Zheng Zhilong’s maneuver inasmuch as they describe an adoption which also turned out to have no future, but did cause the contenders for power to backtrack.

In this way of thinking, the adoption of Zheng Zhilong’s son by the Ming Emperor would reveal the real power of the Zheng family, through its ability to instrumentalize Imperial Power. The adoption would then be understood not as proof of the ostentatious allegiance of a devoted military leader, but as a maneuver allowing the institutional recognition of the Zhengs. And Zheng Zhilong’s switch of allegiance to the Manchus after the adoption of his son by the Ming Emperor, would underline the limited gains which he

<sup>29</sup> Ho, Dahpon David (2011). *Sealords live in vain : Fujian and the making of a maritime frontier in seventeenth-century China*, p. 120, note 183 and p. 121, quoting Victorio Riccio, *Hechos de la Orden de Predicadores en el Imperio de China* (1673).

<sup>30</sup> Jourda, Emmanuel (2017). « Les Koxingans. Légitimistes Ming en mers de Chine ou Pippinides thalassocratiques ? » [“The Koxingans. Ming Legitimists in the China Seas our Thalassocratic Pipinids ? ”], *Études chinoises*, XXXVI-2.

<sup>31</sup> Levillain, Léon (1946). « Encore la succession d’Austrasie au VIIe siècle » [« More on the Austrasian succession in the VIIth century »], *Bibliothèque de l’école des chartes*, tome 106, livraison 2, p. 297.

<sup>32</sup> Bühner-Thierry, Geneviève, Meriaux, Charles (ed) (2010). *La France avant la France (481-888)* [« France before France (481-888) ], Paris, Belin, p. 269.

<sup>33</sup> Guérard, Benjamin (1851), « De la formation de l’état social, politique et administratif de la France » [« On the formation of the social, political and administrative state of France »], *Bibliothèque de l’école des chartes*, , tome 12, p. 10.

<sup>34</sup> Levillain, Léon (ibid). p. 302.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Santinelli, Emmanuelle (1998), « Continuité ou rupture ? L’adoption dans le droit mérovingien » [« Continuity or Rupture ? The adoption of Merovingian law »], *Médiévales*, n°35, pp. 16-17.

expected from this symbolic triumph. This could also explain, at least in part, his quest in the enemy camp for a hypothetical recognition as King of Fujian.

## Conclusion

Let us sum up in a few words the avenues of research open to better characterize Zheng Zhilong's trajectory, despite the many zones of obscurity which remain. Our atypical perspective at least has the merit of offering a single interpretative grid for all the various stages of his life. The course of an "in-between" man who thought he could become king. I submit to you the hypothesis and step by step demonstration as a topic for debate, hoping that the approach will arouse your interest and be useful to your research. It is up to you to evaluate its relevance.