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Maritime Ethos Across Civilizations: A Comparative Study of *The Old Man and the Sea, The Classic of the Mountains and Seas,* and the Narratives of Zheng He's Voyages

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Abstract: This paper examines *The Old Man and the Sea*, *The Classic of the Mountains and Seas*, and the narratives of Zheng He's voyages through Blue Humanities lens and a cross civilizational comparative framework. While Hemingway's novella embodies Western maritime values centered on individual struggle, existential confrontation, and the solitary hero, Chinese maritime traditions present a contrasting worldview grounded in harmony between man and nature, the collective unconsciousness, and the ocean as a medium for peaceful exchange. *The Classic of the Mountains and Seas* creates a maritime mythology in which the sea functions as a boundary of order and a realm of divine presence, whereas the narratives of Zheng He's voyages exemplify the ethos of openness, diplomacy, and cultural integration along the Maritime Silk Road. This paper created a three-dimensional comparative model of "spatial meaning construction—subject-object interaction patterns—metaphorical material media" by juxtaposing *The Old Man and the Sea* with the two Chinese texts. By analyzing these texts through Blue Humanities and civilizational dialogue theory, the study reveals both the divergences and shared concerns that shape Chinese and Western maritime imaginations. Despite their differences, all three traditions engage with the sea as a space of uncertainty, vulnerability, and aspiration. This paper argues that these convergences provide valuable literary foundations for contemporary discussions on intercultural understanding and the construction of a maritime community with a shared future.

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题目：跨文明的海洋精神：《老人与海》《山海经》与郑和下西洋叙事的比较研究

摘要：在全球文明交流互鉴的时代背景下，海洋文学作为跨文化叙事的重要载体，呈现出不同文明对自然、命运、历史与人类精神的独特理解。海明威的《老人与海》以其极简而深邃的海洋叙事，展现了西方个人主义传统中的抗争精神、存在主义伦理与个人英雄主义；而中国海洋文学则在历史上形成了以“天人合一”、“和平共生”、“群体记忆”与“文明交流”为核心的海洋观。《山海经》作为中国最早的海洋叙事文本之一，以神话方式构建了海洋的宇宙观与和平交流精神。本文以蓝色人文视角用跨文明比较方法，将《老人与海》与《山海经》海洋叙事、郑和下西洋叙事三个中西异质性文本并置于“空间意义建构—主客体互动模式对比—物质媒介隐喻”的三维比较模型中，探讨其海洋精神、人与自然关系、文化价值与文明交流意义。中西海洋文学虽存在显著差异，但在面对海洋的未知性、生命的脆弱性与人类精神的坚韧性方面具有深刻共通性，为构建“海洋命运共同体”提供了文学层面的启示。

关键词：海洋文学研究；蓝色人文；跨文明比较研究

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1.0 Introduction: Intercultural Maritime Studies within the Horizon of the Blue Humanities

For centuries, Western and Eastern critical theories operated under a profound terracentric bias, viewing the ocean as an empty, sometimes terrifying void—a smooth space to be crossed rather than a site of cultural production. However, the emergence of the Blue Humanities has radically reoriented the humanities studies and social sciences. By manifesting a critical “spatial turn” from solid land to fluid sea, scholars have begun to unpack the ocean not merely as a geographic barrier, but as a dynamic cultural, political, and philosophical arena. The sea is an active agent that shapes human subjectivity, linguistic structures, and socio-political frameworks.

This comparative analysis of *The Old Man and the Sea*, *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, and the travelogues of Zheng He’s voyages demonstrates how Blue Humanities and civilizational dialogue theory can expand our critical horizons beyond traditional, land-centric paradigms. By contextualizing these texts within Steve Mentz’s framework of “Blue Cultural Studies” (997), this paper has challenged the dominant terrestrial bias in literary scholarship, deconstructing the fixed certainties of the soil.

The core value of cross-cultural ocean studies lies in revealing, through the heterogeneous portrayals of the ocean by different historical periods and civilizations, the psychological defenses, cosmic visions and civilizational aspirations of humankind when facing the boundless, unknown and ever-changing fluid space. To explore this topic comprehensively and deeply, this paper selects three classic texts and historical documents that present sharp contrasts in terms of temporal and spatial span, civilizational forms, and philosophical underpinnings for intertextual and intercultural critical verification: First, Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, a milestone in modern Western literature, represents the extreme exploration and self-redemption of the deep sea by Western modern individualism and existentialism; second, *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, a collective unconscious memory of ancient Chinese civilization, which embodies the early agricultural civilization's transformation of fear into mythological and magical worldview construction when facing the unknown; and third, the accompanying texts of Zheng He's voyages such as Ma Huan's *The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores* (《瀛涯胜览》), Fei Xin's *The Overall Survey of the Star Raft* (《星槎胜览》), and Gong Zhen's *the Records of Foreign States of the West Sea* (《西洋番国志》), which documented how Ming Dynasty China transferred the inland order to the sea, constructing a fluid political network centered on tributary regulations, ceremonial rituals, and technological rationality.

These three correspond to three original and modern forms of human experience with the ocean: the modern individual deep sea as a testing ground for Western existentialism; the ancient, hazy sea as the boundary of Chinese mythology; and the sea of the world as the political network order of the Ming Dynasty.

By comparing the similarities and differences of these three types of texts in three dimensions—spatial construction, interaction patterns, and metaphorical material media—this paper attempts to outline a three-dimensional picture of the evolution of human maritime civilization. This paper attempts to reveal how, under the perspective of Blue Humanities, the ocean has transformed from ancient China's mythical abyss defying human reasoning into Hemingway's core stage for the existentialist solitary hero, and further into material and spiritual space for extending the political will of great power of Ming empire building interactive trade networks. This not only helps to broaden the maritime frontier of comparative literature and comparative cultural studies, but also provides profound historical and philosophical insights for us to re-examine the symbiotic relationship between humanity and nature, and between civilization and the ocean in the globalized and multipolar 21st century.

Traditional research on *The Old Man and the Sea* has focused on three aspects: existentialist ethics, minimalist style, and ocean symbolism. Early critics, such as Baker, interpreted Santiago as an existential hero, arguing that his dignity is revealed through constant struggle (295). Scholars like Bloom emphasized Hemingway's "iceberg theory," pointing out that the novel's minimalist ocean descriptions conceal deeper symbolic structures (52). Recent "ocean-centric" interpretations emphasize the ocean as an active force shaping Santiago's identity and dramatically presenting the tension between human will and natural indifference (Mentz 1002). However, most of these studies remain within the framework of Western literature,

rarely placing Hemingway's ocean vision within a cross-cultural dialogue outside of Western traditions.

Research on *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* primarily focuses on its mythological-geographical worldview. For example, the author of *Annotated Classic of Mountains and Seas* (《山海经校注》), Mr. Yuan Ke holds such a view (2). Another common interpretation holds that the book constructs a cosmic order with the ocean as its boundary and link: the interior of the sea is the central civilization, and the exterior is the world of others. Other academic viewpoints emphasize the ecological and cosmological significance of its ocean chapters. In fact, the oceans described in *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* are not waterways for navigation and exploration, or trade routes, but rather represent the limits of ancient people's rational understanding, the extremes of geography, the edge of civilization, and more of a distant imagination and psychological projection. However, these studies rarely engage in cross-cultural dialogue with modern maritime literature.

Most experts, such as Wang Tianyou, Xu Kai, and Wan Ming, primarily analyze Zheng He's voyages from a historical perspective. Other experts, such as Shi Ping, focus on the diplomatic purposes, technological achievements, and role of the voyages in the formation of the Maritime Silk Road (61). These studies emphasize the spirit of peaceful exchange and open civilization, but generally treat the voyages as historical events rather than literary narratives. Regarding the texts accompanying Zheng He's voyages, such as the writings of Ma Huan, Fei Xin, and Gong Zhen, domestic and international research, such as the annotations by Feng Chengjun and Xiang Da, as well as overseas sinological studies, such as Joseph Needham's research on Ming Dynasty shipbuilding, have long focused on route verification and chronological construction, rather than literary criticism.

World literary theorists such as Damoroche (112) and Casanova (84), as well as maritime historians such as Braudel (23), have provided theoretical frameworks for understanding the ocean as a cultural and historical force. However, few studies have integrated Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, and the travelogues of Zheng He's voyages into a unified cross-civilizational dialogue framework. This research gap allows this study to propose a new comparative model that connects Western existentialist maritime writing with Chinese maritime cosmology and diplomatic maritime traditions.

2.0 Different Meanings of the Sea

In Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, the Gulf Stream is constructed as an existentialist liminal space. Far from the terrestrial support systems of the Cuban coast, the deep sea serves as a blank canvas where the human ego undergoes ultimate testing. This maritime space operates under Victor Turner's definition of liminality (Turner 94–6) —a site of anti-structure where conventional social hierarchies dissolve. Santiago's journey into the mar (the sea in Spanish conceptualized as a feminine, unpredictable force) isolates him within a cosmic void. In this deep-sea space, the absence of land strips away superficial social identities, forcing the lone individual into a direct, unmediated confrontation with mortality, suffering, and the absurdity of existence.

For the old fisherman Santiago, the predicament of going eighty-four days without catching a fish marginalized him from his coastal fishing village, reducing him to the socially perceived "Salao" (Hemingway 9) —the epitome of bad luck. To prove his worth and reconstruct his dignity as a fisherman, he had to cut his material and sociological ties with land-based society and sail into the "Far Out" (28), a place most dared not venture. This deep sea, changing its function as a mere economic fishing ground, transformed into a purely existential stage, stripped of all social support systems, where individual life, fate, and nature engaged in an ultimate struggle.

Within this existential limen (threshold) in Victor Turner's terminology, the deep sea reveals a sense of loneliness and indifference. Hemingway, through his restrained and refined stoic style, depicted the boundless horizon and the terrifying underwater world Santiago faced from his small skiff (boat). The deep sea is a vacuum, devoid of human laws, social moral judgment, and the aid of others. Here, the scale of time is stretched into the cycle of sunrise and sunset, and the scale of space is simplified to a lone boat, a long line, and an invisible underwater chaos. The deep sea, as a testing ground, is harsh not only in the physical aspects of raging waves or deadly sharks, but also in its role as a giant mirror, forcing individuals to confront their own insignificance, aging, and death in absolute solitude. Yet, it is precisely in this deep-sea threshold, which totally negates the hypocritical social order of the land, that Santiago, through a struggle that transcends physical limits, embodies the supreme existentialist credo: "a man can be destroyed but not defeated! (103)"

Conversely, the ocean in *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* is configured as a mythological boundary that separates the known world from the chaotic unknown. Within the ancient Chinese perception, the four seas (四海) represent the ultimate boundary of civilization. This maritime space is not a site for individual psychological testing, but a zone of imagination. Here the ocean acts as a cosmic shoreline where the laws of the central kingdom terminate. It functions as a fluid space that contains bizarre monsters, immortal lands, and chaotic forces. It marks the edge of human reasoning and the intelligible universe.

Moreover, *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* documents a mythical Sea on the periphery of the ancient Chinese worldview compared to the deep sea in Western modern novels, which serves as an arena for individual existentialism, the ocean presented in the ancient Chinese classic text *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* (especially the Seas section) carries a strong spatial imagination rooted in the early agricultural civilization's encounter with the unknown nature. In the layered spatial structure of *The Classic of Mountains and Seas,* the construction of geography follows a Sinocentric logic from the inside out: from the geographical core area represented by the "Five Treasured Mountains Classic (《五藏山经》)", it extends outward to the "Overseas Classic (《海外经》)", ultimately reaching the boundary between the "Great Wilderness Classic (《大荒经》)" filled with mist and strange phenomena and the "Inner/Outer Classics of the Seas (《海内经》与《海外经》)."

Here, the ocean is not merely a physical body of water for navigation, exploration, and trade routes, but rather the absolute end point of the physical footprints and rational perception of the ancient Chinese

civilization. The ocean represents the geographical extremes, the edge of civilization, and an unknowable and uncontrollable abyss of chaos. This spatial construction of the mythical sea is essentially a distant psychological projection of fear and awe that ancient people, living under a land-based agricultural mode, had of the ocean.

Lacking material media like advanced shipbuilding and long-distance navigation technology and the practical need for transoceanic communication, the ancient Chinese people's understanding of the ocean could not be filled through empirical science, and thus could only be occupied by belief in mysticism. Therefore, the ocean in *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* became a gathering place for all kinds of bizarre and fantastical creatures and deities, where humans and gods coexisted. The boundaries of the ocean were the boundaries of human reasoning and the boundaries of the Chinese order. The ocean was imagined to be a vast, cold, damp, and pervasive marginal space filled with the dangers and mystics in the cosmos. The oceans were in fact the ancient Chinese people's initial imagination of the boundaries of the external world.

In contrast to both Hemingway's empty void and *The Classic of Mountains and Seas'* monstrous margins, the maritime travelogues of the Ming Dynasty fleets project a highly organized, bureaucratic network onto the ocean. Through works like Ma Huan's *the Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores* and Fei Xin's *The Overall Survey of the Star Raft* (94) and Gong Zhen's *The Records on the Foreign States of the Western Sea* (33), the Ocean is spatialized as an extension of the imperial system. The sea becomes a maritime highway for geopolitical operation. The spaces of the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean were systematically mapped, cleared of pirates, and integrated into a fluid, multi-centered tributary network. Wild ocean space here was configured through the lens of imperial discipline and transformed into political pathways that validate the legitimacy of the Ming Emperor.

Entering the 15th century, the great maritime practice of Zheng He's seven voyages to the Western Ocean during the Ming Dynasty, through the above mentioned official and accompanying literary records (such as Ma Huan's *the Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shore*, Fei Xin's *The Overall Survey of the Star Raft*, and Gong Zhen's *The Records on the Foreign States of the Western Sea*), constructed a completely different maritime space. In this set of political and geopolitical texts, the ocean completely shed the mythical imagination of *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, and was no longer the battlefield of Hemingway's solitary individual either. The ocean of the Ming Dynasty was transformed by an unprecedentedly large national task force into an international fluid channel full of political rationality, economic order and diplomacy. Through sophisticated compass navigation, astronomical observation, and a keen understanding of monsoon predictions, Ming Dynasty fleets connected the fragmented and vast Indian and Pacific Oceans, weaving them into a network of world order centered on the Ming Empire.

In the travelogues of these voyages, maritime space was highly politicized and ritualized. Whenever the fleet arrived at a foreign country (such as Siam, Malacca, Mecca etc.), the focus of the records was often on reading the Ming emperor's edicts, gifting silk and porcelain, conferring the title of king upon the local chiefs,

and establishing regular tributary relations. At this moment, the ocean was no longer an obstacle separating civilizations, but rather an extension of the Ming Empire's ideal of pacifying distant peoples and sharing peace. The writings of Ma Huan and others were orderly and objective. They meticulously recorded the geographical locations, customs, products, weights and measures, and religious practices of various countries. This documented categorization of foreign lands at sea was essentially a technical manifestation of imperial power—by transforming the unknown maritime world into clearly categorized and manageable written records, the Ming Dynasty effectively disciplined this vast blue space. The ocean became a fluid domain through which the Ming Empire influenced the world amicably by building a vast tributary network.

3.0 Insights on Different Interaction Patterns

The interaction pattern between human and non-human actors at sea reveals distinct civilizational epistemologies. Santiago's engagement with the giant marlin transcends simple hunter-prey relation. Instead, it represents a modern existential model of spiritual symbiosis. The interaction oscillates between violent conflict and deep empathy. By addressing the marlin as "brother" (92), Santiago collapses the intellectual divide between them. The struggle becomes a mutual validation of life, where the dignity of the human being is directly contingent upon the majesty and resistance of the non-human adversary.

Throughout his long voyage, Santiago consistently referred to the ocean as "La Mar" (a feminine and affectionate Spanish term for the sea), rather than the masculine "El Mar" used by other young fishermen driven by greed and competition (Hemingway 28–9). In Santiago's mind, the ocean was a generous yet unpredictable mother, and all the creatures within it—from flying fish to the giant marlin he battled in the deep—were his brothers, and reflections of his own life.

This relationship of "struggle and reconciliation" between subject and object reached its climax in Santiago's three-day, three-night life-or-death confrontation with the marlin. In this extreme tug-of-war of strength and will, Santiago did not merely see the marlin as a target for monetary gain, but elevated it to a formidable yet dignified adversary. As his hands were repeatedly cut by fishing line and his body teetered on the brink of collapse, the old man spoke in his mind to the marlin, calling it "my brother," "my dear friend" (Hemingway 75) and sincerely praising its beauty, nobility, and resilience. This was a battle without hatred, but a mutual test of life between two noble souls in the arena of the ocean. Santiago had to kill the marlin to prove his duty and worth as a top fisherman. Yet at the same time, the marlin's tenacious resistance activated dormant memories of youth and heroism within Santiago. In the process of finally slaying the giant fish and then witnessing its body being devoured by sharks on the return journey, Santiago reached the highest reconciliation with nature and with his own aging. Even though he experienced with the material failure by bringing back only a bare fish backbone, he achieved definitive spiritual victory.

In *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, interaction with the sea is defined by the symbolism and mystic domestication of fear. The marine entities—such as the human-faced fish (Yuan 5) or the multi-headed deities

(344) of the great wilderness (大荒)—are not adversaries to be conquered in a display of individual willpower like in *The Old Man and the Sea*. Instead, they are omens and ecological creatures within a cosmos. Human interaction with these creatures relies on mystic knowledge: recognizing their names, understanding their meat's medicinal properties, and performing proper rituals. By categorizing their bizarre anatomy, the ancient Chinese people's imagination tames the terrifying creatures. This transforms a threatening monster into an integrated element of a holistic and ecological cosmos.

In the eyes of the ancient people, all things in nature were not external objects to humankind. Humans and non-humans, even humans and strange deities, shared the same cosmos. Therefore, the interactions between humans and strange marine creatures recorded in *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* are neither modern scientific specimen collection nor existentialist individual combats shown in Hemingway's *The Old man and the Sea,* but rather an ecological coexistence filled with mystic participation.

The interactions between humans and marine life and natural phenomena in *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* are permeated with animism. Faced with the unpredictable destructive power of the ocean such as storms and floods, lacking modern technological support, the behavior of these ancient people was not direct physical confrontation, but a spiritual and symbolic mystic domestication.

The text is filled with numerous sea monsters with human faces and fish bodies possessing supernatural abilities such as a kind of fish resembling a magpie with ten wings (Yuan 59) or powerful sea gods like the North Sea god Yu Qiang (禺彊) (Yuan 210) and the East Sea god Yu Hao (禺貜) (Yuan 286). Humanity's behavior towards these marine entities involves just documenting their forms, proclaiming their effects, and endowing them with mistic power. For example, the myth of "Jingwei filling the sea" (精卫填海) is a tragic form of spiritual resistance against the objective reality of the cruel ocean devouring life (Yuan 79).

In this interaction pattern, humans and marine life are not separated into subject and object, but exist within a continuum of humanity and nature. By making the objects of fear to be symbols and totems, the ancient people achieved a psychological balance with the ocean.

When history turned to Zheng He's voyages to the Western Ocean during the Ming Dynasty, a fundamental paradigm shift occurred in the interaction between humanity and the sea—from the mystics of *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* to a highly developed system of classification, naming, and ritual. The Ming fleet constructed a world order in the exotic maritime landscapes. Relying on the world-leading shipbuilding technology, sophisticated nautical charts, and a vast bureaucratic coordination system of the Yongle (永乐，1403 年–1424 年) and Xuande (宣德，1426 年–1435 年) periods of time, the Ming fleet, when facing the vast Western Ocean (present-day Indian Ocean and parts of the South China Sea), displayed a certain confidence and certainty supported by strong national and technological rationality. The ocean was no longer a terrifying abyss to be filled with fantastical imagination, but a grand object that could be precisely calculated, measured, classified, and incorporated into the Chinese ritual and order.

The interaction pattern reflected in Zheng He travelogues contains no existential crisis nor mysticism,

replacing them with technical and ritual rationality. The records of Zheng He's officers demonstrated an obsessive drive toward taxonomic documentation. As the fleet encountered unfamiliar oceanic phenomena, foreign cultures, and exotic fauna, they applied strict bureaucratic classification and linguistic naming to tame the environment. This behavioral pattern manifests in both navigational mapping and diplomatic ritual. They conduct navigational mapping by fixing erratic currents and winds onto the Zheng He Navigation Map (郑和航海图). As for the aspect of diplomatic ritual, they performed imperial investitures and stated sacrifices to the sea goddess Mazu (妈祖), which imposed state-sanctioned moral order over chaotic waters.

This interactive pattern of order construction manifested itself on three levels: First, an extremely rigorous "geographical and cultural classification." In texts such as *The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores*, Ma Huan and his colleagues objectively and rationally recorded the local territory, climate, punishments, customs, languages, and exotic animals such as the "Qilin" (麒麟) of Hormuz, recorded as Ormuz (Feng 2), which was actually a giraffe, and the peculiar fruits and vegetables of Campa (占城国). This encyclopedic record extracted the exotic maritime landscapes from their primitive irrational state and reorganized them into the knowledge classification system of Chinese civilization. Secondly, there was the authoritative naming system. The Ming Dynasty fleet renamed a large number of islands, reefs, ports, and mountains along the way (such as Malacca). This right of naming was essentially a discourse of sovereignty and cultural leadership. Finally, there was the ritual interaction. By establishing official factories along the coast, erecting stone tablets such as those in Campa (part of today's Vietnam), Malaka (Malacca, a city in Malaysia) and Calicut (a city in India), and holding grand investiture ceremonies, the fleet transformed the originally disordered foreign coastlines into political nodes that respected the legitimacy of the Ming Dynasty. Through this integrated practice of classification, naming, etiquette, and ritual, Ming Dynasty Chinese civilization established a blue geopolitical order across its vast coastal borders.

4.0 Metaphors of Material Media

In humanities studies, matter is not only a tool for human behavior but also a generator of thought and metaphor. This part focuses on the most central material medium metaphor in three texts—the lone boat, the invisible sea, and the giant treasure ship. These three distinct material carriers not only determine the physical depth of human exploration of the sea but also profoundly and metaphorically represent the underlying civilizational characteristics of each.

In Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, the nameless, extremely simple Skiff (boat) becomes the ultimate technological symbol of individualistic material minimalism in modern Western civilization. This small boat has no mechanical power, no radio communication, no shelter from the wind and rain, and even the sail on the mast has been patched multiple times, making it "looked like the flag of permanent defeat" (Hemingway 9).

This fragile skiff can be seen as an extension of Santiago's own weathering body. It provides the bare

minimum structural protection against the vast expanse of the Atlantic. This simplistic material setting strips away the insulating technologies of modern society. It forces the individual into physical vulnerability. The skiff acts as a literary amplifier, highlighting the tragic nobility of human effort against inevitable decay and loss.

The extreme stripping away of material resources and minimalist design, on a narratological and philosophical level, achieves a superb artistic effect of amplifying the tragedy of the modern solitary hero. On the boundless, deep, and deadly sea, this lone boat is Santiago's only material support, the last barrier for his fragile body in the face of nature. The small, simple boat contrasts sharply with the enormous marlin two feet longer than the boat (Hemingway 63) and the boundless ocean, creating a breathtaking visual contrast.

Hemingway deliberately strips Santiago of all the material protection of modern industrial civilization, placing him in a state of material minimalism. On this small boat, every physical action—rowing, holding the fishing line, grabbing the limited fresh water, retaliating against sharks with a notched harpoon—is presented with dramatic tension. This lone boat metaphorically represents the tragic situation of modern Westerners, after losing traditional faith in God and the protection of community, as absolutely isolated atomized individuals, seeking self-affirmation on the empty sea of the universe. The more minimalist the material life, the more tragic the individual. The boat's bad condition under the shark attack is a perfect symbol of the inevitable physical destruction and unconquerable spiritual myth of the modern existentialist hero.

Remarkably, *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* exhibits a distinct lack of physical ships. As a product of the early agrarian period of time, the authors of the classic might have been looking outward from the Yellow River Basin, and the text's engagement with the ocean relies on a long-distance gaze. The vessel (boat) here might not be very elaborately made, but symbolic and metaphorical in oral tradition. The text navigates the outer seas through imagination. The absence of physical maritime technology emphasizes the land-bound or terracentric perspective of Chinese society during the Warring States period of time (475 BC to 221 BC). As mentioned above, for the ancient Chinese, the sea was more of a conceptual boundary line, rather than a material element to be physically navigated or along which to do trade with the outside world.

The metaphorical vessel (boat) is more of a symbolic medium in early Chinese thought that served as a connection between heaven and earth, or a means of communication between the divine and the common people. From the perspective of the early agrarian Chinese civilization, the earth was solid, definite, and its production order controllable, while the ocean was fluid and unknown realm. Therefore, the boats in *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* often lacked actual ocean-going capabilities, but were elevated to a magical tool that transcended life and death, communicating with the divine realm. For example, the shipbuilding by inventors like "Panyu (番禺)" (Yuan 374) or "Qiao Chui (巧倕)" (Yuan 370) recorded in the text was not essentially for establishing a maritime trade network, but rather for establishing a symbolic control of the water realm on a cosmological level.

Simultaneously, this metaphorical vessel (boat) reliant on oral literature, carries a strong tendency

towards dematerialization. In the oral transmission and textual solidification of *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, the ancient Chinese people's imagination of the ocean did not originate from direct physical contact, but rather from a mythological gaze looking outward from the inland edge. The immortals' mountains at sea (such as Penglai (蓬莱), Fangzhang (方丈), and Yingzhou (瀛洲) in *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*) were not merely sights seen by sailors on their routes, but rather spiritual projections of inland mystic culture onto the sea horizon. In this sense, boats became the last spiritual bridge for the outward extension of agrarian civilization's rationality. Their symbolic existence in texts proves that even in the earliest stages of civilization, the ancient Chinese people never abandoned the attempts to explore the boundaries of space at least in the minds.

If the "boats" in *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* are a mystic projection of agrarian civilization onto the sea horizon, the giant treasure ships recorded in Zheng He's voyages during the Ming Dynasty (*The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores* (《瀛涯胜览》), *The Overall Survey of the Star Raft* (《星槎胜览》), *The Records on the Foreign States of the Western Sea* (《西洋番国志》) represent the Ming empire's political power and social order across the sea. According to these records, Zheng He's treasure ships were "the largest being 440 feet long and 180 feet wide," possessing immense size and meticulously divided cabins. This giant vessel was not only the pinnacle of 15th-century shipbuilding technology but also a highly mobile political space and floating maritime territory.

In modern Western maritime narratives, ships often signify the failure and disintegration of land-based order. Ships, as depicted by Hemingway, are often seen as lawless lands far removed from social contracts or arks where individuals face the divine in solitude. However, the Ming dynasty treasure ships were quite the opposite. They were a perfect maritime replication of Confucian rites, bureaucratic systems, and imperial hierarchical order. Inside, from the chief eunuch, deputy envoys, commanders, to the accompanying officials, physicians, interpreters, soldiers, and craftsmen, the entire social hierarchy was seamlessly integrated into the physical space of the ship's cabins. Living arrangements, food, etiquette, and punishments on board strictly adhered to the laws and regulations prescribed in the Code of the Great Ming Empire (大明律). The fluidity and turmoil of the sea were thoroughly disciplined and formatted within the treasure ships by this strict "land-based rationality" and bureaucratic hierarchy.

Therefore, in terms of material metaphor, the Ming dynasty treasure ships embody a kind of technological rational assembly as a miniature empire. The treasure ships were not created to confront the sea, but to proclaim the majesty of the Ming emperor and the strong Ming Empire to the maritime order. When the treasure ships sailed on the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, wherever they went, they became an extension of the world order. This practice of transferring the land-based social order across the sea transformed the ocean from Deleuze's so-called "smooth space" into a "striated space" deeply encoded by imperial political power (474–500). The immense material presence of the treasure ships was not only a visual shock and military deterrent to foreign vassal states, but also a great cultural practice of the Chinese Ming

dynasty attempting to infuse the land-based political ideal of "bearing all things with virtue" (厚德载物). It successfully constructed a stable, orderly, hierarchical, Chinese political community on the ever-flowing ocean.

All in all, the Zheng He travelogues presented the legendary treasure ships as the utmost expression of maritime material maximalism. These multi-decked, multi-masted mega-vessels were floating cities. They did not adapt to the sea; they conquered it. Materially, the Treasure Ships functioned as a sea-surface transposition of the terrestrial Ming social order. They carried complex ecosystems of bureaucrats, soldiers, astrologers, and medical personnel, along with massive stockpiles of silk, porcelain, and calendar scrolls. The vessels were a mobile piece of sovereign imperial territory. By launching these heavy architectures onto the waves, the Ming empire effectively flattened the fluid, volatile ocean and transformed it into a stable, highly predictable representation of statecraft and diplomacy. The sea became a pathway to extend the Ming empire's friendly communication with the nations along the Maritime Silk Road.

5.0 Conclusion

This comparative analysis of *The Old Man and the Sea*, *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, and the narratives of Zheng He's voyages within the framework of the Blue Humanities reveals that the ocean is never a neutral, natural space. Instead, it serves as an ideological mirror reflecting the foundational anxieties, desires, and political structures of the societies that write it.

Hemingway's deep sea isolates the modern Western individual, turning the ocean into an arena for tragic heroism and existential self-definition and individuation. *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* projects ancient Chinese civilization's peripheral fears onto the outer seas, conceptualizing the ocean as a mythic borderland populated by monsters that define the boundaries of human space. The narratives of Zhenghe's voyages deploy technological scale and institutional ritual to transform the ocean into an extension of the imperial state, creating a networked empire across the waves.

As a matter of fact, this cross-cultural matrix demonstrates how human societies navigate between land and sea, using language and material culture to convert the formless, chaotic ocean into an intelligible human landscape.

By analyzing *The Old Man and the Sea*, *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, and the historical narratives of Zheng He's expeditions through the lenses of Blue Humanities and civilizational dialogue, this study charts the complex topography of Chinese and Western maritime imaginations. While the texts might differ in various aspects as discussed in this paper, their core thematic concerns converge. Each tradition confronts the ocean as a profound realm of human vulnerability, existential uncertainty, and ultimate aspiration. These literary and historical convergences, as this paper manifests, do not merely bridge past cultural divides; they serve as important foundations for modern intercultural understanding and the collaborative building of a contemporary maritime community with a shared future.

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