CHAPTER ONE

FACING THE SEAS

Xu Fu [徐福] from the country of Qi wrote to the First Emperor to say that there were ‘Three Celestial Islands’ [三仙岛] in the sea and they are Penglai [蓬莱], Fangzhang [方丈] and Yingzhou [瀛州] where the immortals live. The First Emperor dispatched Xu and several thousand men and women, some children, with provisions and weapons to the sea (BC 219) to look for the celestial islands and the immortals.¹

The First Emperor arrived at Langya (BC 210). This was a few years after Xu had gone to the sea where he did not find the celestial islands. Xu was afraid because the trip was costly. He told the First Emperor that he was held up by a big shark in the sea and asked the Emperor to find someone to kill it. The Emperor ordered a slayer who shot the shark several times.²

Then the First Emperor dispatched three thousand men and women with five hundred kinds of professionals and sent Xu on his way again. Xu Fu came upon a place called ‘Big Plain Wide Field’. He stayed, declared himself King and did not return.³

“Xu Fu enters the East (China) Sea” is a tale which has fascinated scholars for over two thousand years.⁴ The story is also familiar to ordinary Chinese and to their neighbours in East Asia, especially the Japanese, many of whom believe that the land Xu discovered and settled was the island of Kyūshū in southern Japan, although it could have been Korea, Okinawa, Taiwan or—as recent scholarship has suggested—the Philippines.⁵ A statue of Xu Fu stands in the city


² Sima Qian, *Shi Ji: Shi Huang Ben Ji*, vol. 6, p. 263.


of Ichikikushikino in Japan today. The place where Xu is believed to have set sail was Penglai, a city on the northern tip of the Shandong peninsula. It faces the Liaodong and Korean peninsulas, and sits between the Bohai [渤海] and Yellow Sea. The Penglai Pavilion and Penglai Celestial Site, built during the Song dynasty, have attracted pilgrims ever since, as the region became a centre of trade and cultural exchange with Northeast Asia.

The First Emperor became obsessed with immortality after he conquered six other larger kingdoms to found the Qin dynasty, or the Middle Kingdom, in BC 221. He sought the secret of longevity, and he believed—or was led to believe—that it could be found over the sea; thus he commissioned the two epic voyages. It is unclear as to how the First Emperor came to learn about immortality, although it is possible that his knowledge was gleaned from Buddhism, which had recently been introduced to the Qin. Xu Fu, sent by the emperor to discover the secret of immortality, knew that he would be dead should he return to China without the recipe for longevity; what he did not know was that the First Emperor died shortly after he set sail for the second time. Xu Fu’s voyages are significant because they set the precedent for further voyages in the two millennia to come, and mark the beginning of the imperial search for the three celestial islands which would continue into the Qing dynasty (1644–1911).

Xu’s voyages highlight three recurring themes in the history of China’s engagement with the sea. First of all, the Qin court and elite, if not the ordinary people, believed that the immortals resided in the seas and that the oceans held hidden secrets and treasures. This was not a belief limited to the Qin court; later dynasties commissioned voyages that sought many such things, from the East China Sea to the Indian Ocean. Secondly, the unpredictability, danger and challenge posed by the seas meant that long-distance seafaring was not an individual undertaking; Xu Fu was accompanied by a large fleet with sufficient provision of food, medicine and munitions to sustain him and his crew on the journey. In other words, only the court could afford sea voyages, whose purpose was naturally to serve the needs of the Son of Heaven. Long-distance seafaring was to remain the preserve of the court from the time of the Qin to the Ming. Thirdly, the land Xu discovered was not a land of barbarians, but a kind of Promised Land

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⁶ Liu Fengming, *Shandong Bandao yu Dongfang Haishang Sichou zhi Lu*. 