Ma Huan, a Muslim interpreter, took part in three of Zheng He’s seven voyages, in 1413, 1421, and 1431. He wrote his commentary in 1433, shortly after the voyages ended.

The Country of Guli [Calicut]

This is the great country of the Western Ocean. Setting sail from the anchorage in the country of Gezhi, you travel northwest, and arrive here after three days. The country lies beside the sea. Travelling east from the mountains for five hundred, or seven hundred, li, you make a long journey through to the country of Kanpayi. On the west the country of Guli abuts on the great sea; on the south it joins the boundary of the country of Gezhi; and on the north side it adjoins the territory of the country of Hennu’er.

‘The great country of the Western Ocean’ is precisely this country.

In [1407] . . . the court ordered the principal envoy the grand eunuch Zheng He and others to deliver an imperial mandate to the king of this country and to bestow on him a patent conferring a title of honour, and the grant [gift] of silver seal, also to promote all the chiefs and award them hats and girdles of various grades.

So Zheng He went there in command of a large fleet of treasure-ships, and he erected a tablet with a pavilion over it and set up a stone which said “Though the journey from this country to the Middle Kingdom [China] is more than a hundred thousand li, yet the people are very similar, happy and prosperous, with identical customs. We have here engraved a stone, a perpetual declaration for ten thousand ages.”

The king of the country is a Nan-k’un man; he is a firm believer in the Buddhist religion; and he venerates the elephant and the ox.

The population of the country includes five classes, the Muslim people, the Nankun people, the Zhedi people, the Geling people, and the Mugua people.

The king of the country and the people of the country all refrain from eating the flesh of the ox. The great chiefs are Muslim people; and they all refrain from eating the flesh of the pig. Formerly there was a king who made a sworn compact with the Muslim people, saying “You do not eat the ox; I do not eat the pig; we will reciprocally respect the taboo;” and this compact has been honoured right down to the present day.

The king has cast an image of Buddha in brass; it is named Naina’er; he has erected a temple of Buddha and has cast tiles of brass and covered the dais of Buddha with them; and beside the dais a well has been dug. Every day at dawn the king goes to
the well, draws water, and washes the image of Buddha; after worshipping, he orders
men to collect the pure dung of yellow oxen; this is stirred with water in a brass basin
until it is like paste; then it is smeared all over the surface of the ground and walls inside
the temple. Moreover, he has given orders that the chiefs and wealthy personages shall
also smear and scour themselves with ox-dung every morning.

He also takes ox-dung, burns it till it is reduced to a white ash, and grinds it to a
fine powder; using a fair cloth as a small bag, he fills it with the ash, and regularly carries
it on his person. Every day at dawn, after he has finished washing his face, he takes the
ox-dung ash, stirs it up with water, and smears it on his forehead and between his two
thighs—thrice in each place. This denotes his sincerity in venerating Buddha and in
venerating the ox.

There is a traditional story that in olden times there was a holy man named
Mouxie [Moses], who established a religious cult; the people knew that he was a true
man of Heaven, and all men revered and followed him. Later the holy man went away
with others to another place, and ordered his younger brother named Samoli to govern
and teach the people.

But his younger brother began to have depraved ideas; he made a casting of a
golden calf and said “This is the holy lord; everyone who worships it will have his
expectations fulfilled.” He taught the people to listen to his bidding and to adore the
golden ox, saying “It always excretes gold.” The people got the gold, and their hearts
rejoiced; and they forgot the way of Heaven; all took the ox to be the true lord.

Later Mouxie the holy man returned; he saw that the multitude, misled by his
younger brother Samoli, were corrupting the holy way; thereupon he destroyed the ox
and wished to punish his younger brother; and his younger brother mounted a large
elephant and vanished.

Afterwards, the people thought of him and hoped anxiously for his return.
Moreover, if it was the beginning of the moon, they would say “In the middle of the
moon he will certainly come,” and when the middle of the moon arrived, they would say
once more “At the end of the moon he will certainly come;” right down to the present day
they have never ceased to hope for his return.

This is the reason why the Nankun people venerate the elephant and the ox.

The king has two great chiefs who administer the affairs of the country; both are
Muslims.

The majority of the people in the country all profess the Muslim religion. There
are twenty or thirty temples of worship, and once in seven days they go to worship. When
the day arrives, the whole family fast and bathe, and attend to nothing else. In the si and
wu periods, the men folk, old and young go to the temples to worship. When the wei
period arrives, they disperse and return home; thereupon they carry on with their trading and transact their household affairs.

The people are very honest and trustworthy. Their appearance is smart, fine, and distinguished.

Their two great chiefs received promotion and awards from the court of the Central Country.

If a treasure-ship goes there, it is left entirely to the two men to supervise the buying and selling; the king sends a chief and a Zhedi Weinuozhi to examine the account books in the official bureau; a broker comes and joins them; and a high officer who commands the ships discusses the choice of a certain date for fixing prices. When the day arrives, they first of all take the silk embroideries and the open-work silks, and other such goods which have been brought there, and discuss the price of them one by one; and when the price has been fixed, they write out an agreement stating the amount of the price; this agreement is retained by these persons.

The chief and the Zhedi, with his excellency the eunuch, all join hands together, and the broker then says “In such and such a moon on such and such a day, we have all joined hands and sealed our agreement with a hand-clasp; whether the price be dear or cheap, we will never repudiate it or change it.”

After that, the Zhedi and the men of wealth then come bringing precious stones, pearls, corals, and other such things, so that they may be examined and the price discussed; this cannot be settled in a day; if done quickly, it takes one moon [month]; if done slowly, it takes two or three moons.

Once the money-price has been fixed after examination and discussion, if a pearl or other such article is purchased, the price which must be paid for it is calculated by the chief and the Weinuozhi who carried out the original transaction; and as to the quantity of the hemp-silk or other such article which must be given in exchange for it, goods are given in exchange according to the price fixed by the original hand-clasp—there is not the slightest deviation.

In their method of calculation, they do not use a calculating-plate; for calculating, they use only the two hands and two feet and the twenty digits on them; and they do not make the slightest mistake; this is very extraordinary.

The king uses gold of sixty per cent purity to cast a coin for current use; it is named a *banan*; the diameter of the face of each coin is three *fen* eight *li* in terms of our official steelyard. He also makes a coin of silver; it is named a *da’er*; each coin weighs about three *li*; and this coin is used for petty transactions. . . .

“Western Ocean” cloth, named *cheli* cloth in this country, comes from the neighboring districts of Kanbayi and other such places; each roll is four *chi* five *cun*
broad, and two chang five ch’ih long; and it is sold for eight or ten of their local gold coins.

The people of the country also take the silk of the silk-worm, soften it by boiling, dye it in all colours, and weave it into kerchiefs with decorative stripes at intervals; the breadth is four or five ch’ih, and the length one chang two or three ch’ih; and each length is sold for one hundred gold coins.

As to the pepper: the inhabitants of the mountainous countryside have established gardens, and it is extensively cultivated. When the period of the tenth moon arrives, the pepper ripens; and it is collected, dried in the sun and sold. Of course, big pepper-collectors come and collect it, and take it up to the official storehouse to be stored; if there is a buyer, an official gives permission for the sale; the duty [tax] is calculated according to the amount of the purchase price and is paid in to the authorities. Each one bohe of pepper is sold for two hundred gold coins.

The Zhedi mostly purchases all kinds of precious stones and pearls, and they manufacture coral beads and other such things.

Foreign ships from every place come there; and the king of the country also sends a chief and a writer and others to watch the sales; thereupon they collect the duty and pay it in to the authorities.

The wealthy people mostly cultivate coconut trees—sometimes a thousand trees, sometimes two thousand or three thousand; this constitutes their property.

The coconut has ten different uses. The young tree has a syrup, very sweet, and good to drink; and it can be made into wine by fermentation. The old coconut has flesh, from which they express oil, and make sugar, and make a foodstuff for eating. From the fibre which envelops the outside of the nut they make ropes for ship-building. The shell of the coconut makes bowls and makes cups; it is also good for burning to ash for the delicate operation of inlaying gold or silver. The trees are good for building houses, and the leaves are good for roofing houses.

For vegetables they have mustard plants, green ginger, turnips, caraway seeds, onions, garlic, bottle-gourds, eggplants, cucumbers, and gourd-melons—all these they have in all the four seasons of the year. They also have a kind of small gourd which is as large as one’s finger, about two cun long, and tastes like a green cucumber. Their onions have a purple skin; they resemble garlic; they have a large head and small leaves; and they are sold by the jin weight.

The mupiezi tree is more than ten chang high; it forms a fruit, which resembles a green persimmon and contains thirty or forty seeds; it falls of its own accord when ripe; and the bats, as large as hawks, all hang upside-down and rest on this tree.
They have both red and white rice, but barley and wheat are both absent; and their wheat-flour all comes from other places as merchandise for sale here.

Fowls and ducks exist in profusion, but there are no geese. Their goats have tall legs and ashen hue; they resemble donkey-foals. The water-buffaloes are not very large. Some of the yellow oxen weigh three or four hundred jin; the people do not eat their flesh; but consume only the milk and cream. The people never eat rice without butter. Their oxen are cared for until they are old; and when they die, they are buried. The price of all kinds of sea-fish is very cheap. Deer and hares from up in the mountains are also for sale.

Many people rear peafowl. As to their other birds: they have crows, green hawks, egrets, and swallows; but of other kinds of birds besides these they have not a single one, great or small. The people of the country can also play and sing; they use the shell of a calabash to make a musical instrument, and copper wires to make the strings; and they play this instrument to accompany the singing of their foreign songs; the melodies are worth hearing.

As to the popular customs and the marriage- and funeral-rites, the Suoli people and the Muslim people each follow the ritual forms of their own class, and these are different.

The king’s throne does not descend to his son, but descends to his sister’s son; descent is to the sister’s son because they consider that the offspring of the woman’s body alone constitutes the legal family. If the king has no elder or younger sister, the throne descends to his younger brother; and if he has no younger brother, the throne is yielded up to some man of merit. Such is the succession from one generation to another.

The king’s laws do not include the punishment of flogging with the bamboo. If the offence is slight, they cut off a hand or a foot; if it is serious, they impose a money-fine or put the offender to death; and if it is very heinous, they confiscate his property and exterminate his family. A person who offends against the law is taken under arrest to an official, whereupon he accepts his punishment.

If there is perhaps something unjust about the circumstances and he does not admit the offence, then he is taken before the king or before a great chief; there they set up an iron cooking-pot, fill it with four or five jin of oil and cook it to the boil; first they throw in some tree-leaves to test whether they make a crackling noise; then they make the man take two fingers of his right hand and scald them in the oil for a short time; he waits till they are burnt and then takes them out; they are wrapped in a cloth on which a seal is affixed; and he is kept in prison at the office.

Two or three days later, before the assembled crowd, they break open the seal and examine him; if the hand has a burst abscess, then there is nothing unjust about the matter and a punishment is imposed; but if the hand is undamaged, just as it had been before, then he is released.
The chief and other men, with drums and music, ceremonially escort this man back to his family; all his relations, neighbours, and friends give him presents and there are mutual congratulations; and they drink wine; and play music by way of mutual celebration. This is a very extraordinary matter.

On the day when the envoy returned, the king of the country wished to send tribute; so he took fifty liang of fine red gold and ordered the foreign craftsmen to draw it out into gold threads as fine as a hair; these were strung together to form a ribbon, which was made into a jewelled girdle with incrustations of all kinds of precious stones and large pearls; and the king sent a chief, Nai-pang, to present it as tribute to the Central Country.