

## The Ming Voyages



---

The Voyages of Zheng He  
The Emperor and His Ambition  
The Trusted Admiral  
Preparing the Fleet  
The Voyages  
The Fateful Decision  
Discussion Questions  
Activities  
Resources and Web Sites

---

### The Voyages of Zheng He

From 1405 until 1433, the Chinese imperial eunuch Zheng He led seven ocean expeditions for the Ming emperor that are unmatched in world history. These missions were astonishing as much for their distance as for their size: during the first ones, Zheng He travelled all the way from China to Southeast Asia and then on to India, all the way to major trading sites on India's southwest coast. In his fourth voyage, he travelled to the Persian Gulf. But for the three last voyages, Zheng went even further, all the way to the east coast of Africa. This was impressive enough, but Chinese merchants had travelled this far before. What was even more impressive about these voyages was that they were done with hundreds of huge ships and tens of thousands of sailors and other passengers. Over sixty of the three hundred seventeen ships on the first voyage were enormous "Treasure Ships," sailing vessels over 400 hundred feet long, 160 feet wide, with several stories, nine masts and twelve sails, and luxurious staterooms complete with balconies. The likes of these ships had never before been seen in the world, and it would not be until World War I that such an armada would be assembled again. The story of how these flotillas came to be assembled, where they went, and what happened to them is one of the great sagas—and puzzles—in world history.

### The Emperor and His Ambition

The Ming dynasty (1368-1644) was a Chinese dynasty, a Chinese imperial family, as distinct from the dynasty that came before it (the Mongol, or Yuan, dynasty of Chenghis and Kubilai Khan—see the Marco Polo unit) or the one that followed it (the Manchu, or Qing, dynasty—see the Macartney unit). To demonstrate Ming power, the first emperors initiated campaigns to decisively defeat any domestic or foreign threat. The third emperor of the Ming Dynasty, Zhu Di or the Yongle Emperor, was particularly aggressive and personally led major campaigns against Mongolian tribes to the north and west. He also wanted those in other countries to be aware of China's power, and to perceive it as the strong country he believed it had been in earlier Chinese dynasties, such as the Han and the Song; he thus revived the traditional tribute system. In the traditional tributary arrangement, countries on China's borders agreed to recognize China as their superior and its emperor as lord of "all under Heaven." These countries regularly gave gifts of tribute in exchange for certain benefits, like military posts and trade treaties. In this system, all benefitted, with both peace and trade assured. Because the Yongle emperor realized that the major threats to China in this period were from the north, particularly the Mongols, he saved many of those military excursions for himself. He sent his most trusted generals to deal with the Manchurian people to the north, the Koreans and Japanese to the east, and the Vietnamese in the south. For ocean expeditions to the south and west, however, he decided that this time China should make use of its extremely advanced technology and all the riches the state had to offer. Lavish expeditions should be mounted in order to overwhelm foreign peoples and convince them beyond any doubt about Ming power. For this special purpose, he chose one of his most trusted generals, a man he had known since he was young, Zheng He.

### The Trusted Admiral

Zheng He was born Ma He to a Muslim family in the far southwest, in today's Yunnan province. At ten years old he was captured by soldiers sent there by the first Ming emperor intent on subduing the south. He was sent to the capital to be trained in military ways. Growing up to be a burly, imposing man, over six feet tall with a chest contemporaries said measured over five feet around, he was also extremely talented and intelligent. He received both literary and military training, then made his way up the military ladder with ease, making important allies at court in the process. When the emperor needed a trustworthy ambassador familiar with Islam and the ways of the south to head his splendid armada to the "Western Oceans," he naturally picked the talented court eunuch, Ma He, whom he renamed Zheng.

### Preparing the Fleet

China had been extending its power out to sea for 300 years. To satisfy growing Chinese demand for special spices, medicinal herbs, and raw materials, Chinese merchants cooperated with Moslem and Indian traders to develop a rich network of trade that reached beyond island southeast Asia to the fringes of the Indian Ocean. Into the ports of eastern China came ginseng, lacquerware, celadons, gold and silver, horses and oxen from Korea and Japan. Into the ports of southern China came hardwoods and other tree products, ivory, rhinoceros horn, brilliant kingfisher feathers, ginger, sulfur and tin from Vietnam and Siam in mainland southeast Asia; cloves, nutmeg, batik fabrics, pearls, tree resins, and bird plumes from Sumatra, Java, and the Moluccas in island southeast Asia. Trade winds across the Indian Ocean brought ships carrying cardamon, cinnamon, ginger, tumeric, and especially pepper from Calicut on the southwestern coast of India, gemstones from Ceylon (Sri Lanka), as well as woollens, carpets, and more precious stones from ports as far away as Hormuz on the Persian Gulf and Aden on the Red Sea. Agricultural products from north and east Africa also made their way to China, although little was known about those regions.

By the beginning of the Ming Dynasty, China had reached a peak of naval technology unsurpassed in the world. While using many technologies of Chinese invention, Chinese shipbuilders also combined technologies they borrowed and adapted from seafarers of the South China seas and the Indian Ocean. For centuries, China was the preeminent maritime power in the region, with advances in navigation, naval architecture, and propulsion. From the ninth century on, the Chinese had taken their magnetic compasses (see the unit on Chinese inventions) aboard ships to use for navigating (two centuries before Europe). In addition to compasses, Chinese could navigate by the stars when skies were clear, using printed manuals with star charts and compass bearings that had been available since the thirteenth century. Star charts had been produced from at least the eleventh century, reflecting China's concern with heavenly events (unmatched until the Renaissance in Europe).

An important advance in shipbuilding used since the second century in China was the construction of double hulls divided into separate watertight compartments. This saved ships from sinking if rammed, but it also offered a method of carrying water for passengers and animals, as well as tanks for keeping fish catches fresh. Crucial to navigation was another Chinese invention of the first century, the sternpost rudder, fastened to the outside rear of a ship which could be raised and lowered according to the depth of the water, and used to navigate close to shore, in crowded harbors and narrow channels. Both these inventions were commonplace in China 1,000 years before their introduction to Europe.

Chinese ships were also noted for their advances in sail design and rigging. Bypassing the need for banks of rowers, by the third and fourth centuries the Chinese were building three and four masted ships (1000 years before Europe) of wind-efficient design. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries they added lug and then lanteen sails from the Arabs to help sail against the prevailing winds.

By the eighth century, ships 200 feet long capable of carrying 500 men were being built in China (the size of Columbus' ships eight centuries later!). By the Song Dynasty (960-1279), these stout and stable ships with their private cabins for travellers and fresh water for drinking and bathing were the ships of choice for Arab and Persian traders in the Indian Ocean. The Mongol Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368) encouraged commercial activity and maritime trade, so the succeeding Ming Dynasty inherited large shipyards, many skilled shipyard workers, and finely tuned naval technology from the dynasty that preceded it.

Because the Yongle emperor wanted to impress Ming power upon the world and show off China's resources and importance, he gave orders to build even larger ships than were necessary for the voyages. Thus the word went out to construct special "Treasure Ships," ships over 400 feet long, 160 feet wide, with nine masts, twelve sails, and four decks, large enough to carry 2,500 tons of cargo each and armed with dozens of small cannons. Accompanying those ships were to be hundreds of smaller ships, some filled only with water, others carrying troops or horses or cannon, still others with gifts of silks and brocades, porcelains, lacquerware, tea, and ironworks that would impress leaders of farflung civilizations.

## **The Voyages**

The first expedition of this mighty armada (1405-07) was composed of 317 ships, including perhaps as many as sixty huge Treasure Ships, and nearly 28,000 men. In addition to thousands of sailors, builders and repairmen for the trip, there were soldiers, diplomatic specialists, medical personnel, astronomers, and scholars of foreign ways, especially Islam. The fleet stopped in Champa (central Vietnam) and Siam (today's Thailand) and then on to island Java, to points along the Straits of Malacca, and then proceeded to its main destination of Cochin and the kingdom of Calicut on the southwestern coast of India. On his return, Zheng He put down a pirate uprising in Sumatra, bringing the pirate chief, an overseas Chinese, back to Nanjing for punishment.

The second expedition (1407-1409) took 68 ships to the court of Calicut to attend the inauguration of a new king. Zheng He organized this expedition but did not actually lead it in person.

Zheng He did command the third voyage (1409-1411) with 48 large ships and 30,000 troops, visiting many of the same places as on the first voyage but also travelling to Malacca on the Malay peninsula and Ceylon (Sri Lanka). When fighting broke out there between his forces and those of a small kingdom, Zheng put down the fighting, captured the king and brought him back to China where he was released by the emperor and returned home duly impressed.

The fourth voyage (1413-15) extended the scope of the expeditions even further. This time in addition to visiting many of the same sites, Zheng He commandeered his 63 ships and over 28,000 men to Hormuz on the Persian Gulf. The main chronicler of the voyages, the twenty-five year old Muslim translator Ma Huan, joined Zheng He on this trip. On the way, Zheng He stopped in Sumatra to fight on the side of a deposed sultan, bringing the usurper back to Nanjing for execution.

The fifth voyage (1417-1419) was primarily a return trip for seventeen heads of state from South Asia. They had made their way to China after Zheng He's visits to their homelands in order to present their tribute at the Ming Court. On this trip Zheng He ventured even further, first to Aden at the mouth of the Red Sea, and then on to the east coast of Africa, stopping at the city states of Mogadishu and Brawa (in today's Somalia), and Malindi (in present day Kenya). He was frequently met with hostility but this was easily subdued. Many ambassadors from the countries visited came back to China with him.

The sixth expedition (1421-1422) of 41 ships sailed to many of the previously visited Southeast Asian and Indian courts and stops in the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, and the coast of Africa, principally in order to return nineteen ambassadors to their homelands. Zheng He returned to China after less than a year, having sent his fleet onward to pursue several separate itineraries, with some ships going perhaps as far south as Sofala in present day Mozambique.

The seventh and final voyage (1431-33) was sent out by the Yongle emperor's successor, his grandson the Xuande emperor. This expedition had more than one hundred large ships and over 27,000 men, and it visited all the important ports in the South China Sea and Indian Ocean as well as Aden and Hormuz. One auxiliary voyage travelled up the Red Sea to Jidda, only a few hundred miles from the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. It was on the return trip in 1433 that Zheng He died and was buried at sea, although his official grave still stands in Nanjing, China. Nearly forgotten in China until recently, he was immortalized among Chinese communities abroad, particularly in Southeast Asia where to this day he is celebrated and revered as a god.

## The Fateful Decision

Factions at court had long been critical of the Yongle emperor's extravagant ways. Not only had he sent seven missions of the enormous Treasure Ships over the western seas, he had ordered overseas missions northeast and east, had sent envoys multiple times across desert and grassland to the mountains of Tibet and Nepal and on to Bengal and Siam, and had many times raised armies against fragmented but still troublesome Mongolian tribes to the north. He had embroiled China in a losing battle with Annam (northern Vietnam) for decades (most latterly due to exorbitant demands for timber to build his palace). In addition to these foreign exploits, he had further depleted the treasury by moving the capital from Nanjing to Beijing and, with a grandeur on land to match that on sea, by ordering the construction of the magnificent Forbidden City. This project involved over a million laborers. To further fortifying the north of his empire, he pledged his administration to the enormous task of reviving and extending the Grand Canal. This made it possible to transport grain and other foodstuffs from the rich southern provinces to the northern capital by barge, rather than by ships along the coast.

Causing further hardship were natural disasters, severe famines in Shantung and Hunan, epidemics in Fujian, plus lightning strikes that destroyed part of the newly constructed Forbidden City. In 1448, flooding of the Yellow River left millions homeless and thousands of acres unproductive. As a result of these disasters coupled with corruption and nonpayment of taxes by wealthy elite, China's tax base shrank by almost half over the course of the century.

Furthermore the fortuitous fragmentation of the Mongol threat along China's northern borders did not last. By 1449 several tribes unified and their raids and counterattacks were to haunt the Ming Dynasty for the next two centuries until its fall, forcing military attention to be focused on the north. But the situation in the south was not much better. Without continual diplomatic attention, pirates and smugglers again were active in the South China Sea.

The Ming court was divided into many factions, most sharply into the pro-expansionist voices led by the powerful eunuch factions that had been responsible for the policies supporting Zheng He's voyages, and more traditional conservative Confucian court advisers who argued for frugality. When another seafaring voyage was suggested to the court in 1477, the vice president of the Ministry of War confiscated all of Zheng He's records in the archives, damning them as "deceitful exaggerations of bizarre things far removed from the testimony of people's eyes and ears." He argued that "the expeditions of San Bao [meaning "Three Jewels," as Zheng He was called] to the West Ocean wasted tens of myriads of money and grain and moreover the people who met their deaths may be counted in the myriads. Although he returned with wonderful precious things, what benefit was it to the state?"

Linked to eunuch politics and wasteful policies, the voyages were over. By the century's end, ships could not be built with more than two masts, and in 1525 the government ordered the destruction of all oceangoing ships. The greatest navy in history, which once had 3,500 ships (the U.S. Navy today has only 324), was gone.

---

### Discussion Questions

1. Describe the many projects of the Yongle emperor to proclaim Ming power. Why do you think that the voyages to the west were the most grand?
2. Why has the Yongle emperor been called one of the most active of the Ming emperors, both militarily and politically?
3. Why has the role of the Mediterranean Sea for Europe been compared to that of the Indian Ocean for Asia?
4. Why did the Ming court rely so heavily on imperial eunuchs like Zheng He to carry out its policies rather than on traditional Confucian officials?
5. Compare China's maritime power in the fifteenth century with Europe's at that time. What was the basis for China's naval power?
6. Why do you think that the overseas voyages were halted? Just as important, why do you think that the Yongle emperor's attempt to reinstate the traditional tributary system was abandoned? What were some of the implications of these decisions?

---

### Recommended Activities

1. Divide the class into seven groups. Have each group research one of Zheng He's voyages, detailing the itinerary, the exchange of tribute and trade, and the reactions of the Chinese to the regions visited.
2. Imagine you were a resident or a leader of one of the sites visited by Zheng He. Write journal entries or letters to the Yongle emperor to be sent with Zheng He about your impressions of the Chinese and the problems and possibilities of more contact with them.
3. Make a map of the trade and tribute routes of Ming China, with a key that indicates all the products that were exchanged at its borders: northeast, north, northwest, west, south, southeast, and east.
4. Role play the discussions at the Ming court. Select a student to be the Chinese emperor. Divide the rest of the class into pro-expansionist advisers and anti-expansionist advocates. Write memorials to the emperor detailing your position and then role play discussions at court. You might hold several of these discussions for different periods in Ming history, for example, one at the beginning of Yongle's reign, another after the Forbidden City was built, a third after the Mongol threat was renewed.
5. Make a model or diagram of one of the Treasure Ships, carefully making to scale the important features of fifteenth century Chinese naval technology.
6. The Chinese were not the only peoples to go on ocean voyages in the fifteenth century. Research Muslim, Malayo-Polynesian, West and East African, and South American expansion pre-1450. Then place Iberian expansion of this period in this context.
7. Use the student reading and the image of a sixteenth century Iberian ship superimposed on one of Zheng He's Treasure Ships to compare the Chinese fifteenth century Treasure Ships with the ships used in Portuguese and Spanish maritime voyages. (See the following Web site: [www.chinapage.org/chengho.html](http://www.chinapage.org/chengho.html).)

## Recommended Resources

### Texts:

"The World of the Yongle Emperor," *Calliope* May-June, 1995 (selections from later issues on the Web at [www.cobblestonepub.com](http://www.cobblestonepub.com).)

Nicholas Kristof, "1492: the Prequel," *The New York Times* June 6, 1999, pp. 80-87.

Louise Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1405-1433*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

F.W. Mote, "China in the Age of Columbus" in *Circa 1492: Art in the Age of Exploration*. edited by Jay Levenson, New Haven and Washington D.C.: Yale University Press and the National Gallery of Art, 1991, pp. 337-350.

### Web sites:

- [www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/1999/millennium/](http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/1999/millennium/)  
Select the 15th century, then the Profiles icon, then Zheng He
- <http://www.askasia.org/frclasrm/lessplan/1000069.htm>  
See "Should the Ming End the 'Treasure Ship' Voyages"
- <http://members.tripod.com/khle0/chengho.htm>  
The Admiral Of the Western Seas – Cheng Ho (Zheng He)
- <http://marauder.millersv.edu/~columbus/data/art/WILSON09.ART>  
"The Emperor's Giraffe," by Samuel M. Wilson, in *Natural History* (Vol. 101, No. 12, December 1992)
- <http://chinapage.org/chengho.html>  
The Great Chinese Mariner Zheng He [Cheng Ho] (includes map and illustrations)