

How Not to (Re)Write World History: Gavin Menzies and the Chinese Discovery of America

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IN *1421: The Year China Discovered America* (2002), Gavin Menzies aspires to rewrite world history on a grand scale. He maintains that four Chinese fleets, comprising twenty-five to thirty ships and at least 7,000 persons each, visited every part of the world except Europe between 1421 and 1423. Trained by Zheng He, the famous eunuch-admiral, Chinese captains carried out the orders of Zhu Di (r. 1402–1424), the third Ming emperor, to map coastlines, settle new territories, and establish a global maritime empire. According to Menzies, proof of the passage of the Ming fleets to the Americas, Australia, New Zealand, and Polynesia is overwhelming and indisputable. His “index of supporting evidence” (pp. 429–462) includes thousands of items from the fields of archaeology, cartography, astronomy, and anthropology; his footnotes and bibliography include publications in Chinese, French, Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, German, Arabic, and Hebrew.

Menzies claims that Chinese mariners explored the islands of Cape Verde, the Azores, the Bahamas, and the Falklands; they established colonies in Australia, New Zealand, British Columbia, California, Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Rhode Island; they introduced horses to the Americas, rice to California, chickens to South America, coffee to Puerto Rico, South American sloths to Australia, sea otters to New Zealand, and maize to the Philippines. In addition, Chinese seamen toured the temples and palaces of the Maya center of Palenque in Mexico, hunted walrus and smelted copper in Greenland, mined for lead and saltpeter in northern Australia, and established trading posts for diamonds along the Amazon and its tributaries.

Inasmuch as Menzies believes that he has collected a veritable mountain of evidence, he is not disheartened by skepticism about some of his astonishing assertions. As he told *People Magazine* (24 February 2003) after *1421* hit the New York Times bestseller list, “[t]here’s not one chance in a hundred million that I’m wrong!” He regards his investigation as an ongoing project: a website (www.1421.tv) provides yet more evidence, further revelations will appear in the forthcoming paperback edition, and a team of researchers currently is assisting him in combing medieval Spanish and Portuguese documents for added proof of his contentions. *1421*, he informs the reader, will be published in more than sixteen countries, a PBS series is in production, and television rights have been sold around the world.

Menzies is contemptuous of professional historians who ignore evidence of Chinese influence in the Americas, “presumably because it contradicts the accepted wisdom on which not a few careers have been based” (p. 232). He explains that he has uncovered information that has eluded many eminent historians of China, even though it was right before their eyes, “only because I knew how to interpret the extraordinary maps and charts that reveal the course and the extent of the voyages of the great Chinese fleets between 1421 and 1423” (pp. 11–12). A former submarine commander in the British Royal Navy, he has sailed in the wake of Christopher Columbus, Ferdinand Magellan, and James Cook, hence he recognizes that those mariners, who navigated with copies of Chinese maps in hand, were themselves merely sailing in the backwash of Zheng He’s fleets (pp. 9, 12).

Menzies intends his work for the general reader, and his style is vigorous, clear, and informal. Most strikingly, he makes his own search for evidence of the Ming fleets the narrative framework for recounting their achievements. He describes his frustrations and triumphs as he travels everywhere following “an elusive trail of evidence,” sometimes discouraged but never defeated (p. 83). He also brings his narrative to life by recounting his own experiences in places visited by the fleets of Zheng He, including savoring rum toddies and roast lobster on Guadeloupe beaches, braving the dangers of the Great Barrier Reef of Australia, and rounding the Cape of Good Hope into the South Atlantic. The underlying message of these frequent vignettes is that the author’s astonishing conclusions are validated by the unique personal experience he brings to his research as well as by his transparent account of how he struggled toward those conclusions. This approach makes for a lively, engaging work that surely will attract many readers who otherwise would never open a 500-page tome on Chinese maritime enterprise and European exploration.

The good news conveyed by *1421* is that there are big bucks in world history: Menzies received an advance of £500,000 (\$825,000) from his British publisher, whose initial printing runs to 100,000 copies. The bad news is that reaping such largesse evidently requires producing a book as outrageous as *1421*. Menzies flouts the basic rules of both historical study and elementary logic. He misrepresents the scholarship of others, and he frequently fails to cite those from whom he borrows.¹ He misconstrues Chinese imperial policy, especially as seen in the expeditions of Zheng He, and his extensive discussion of Western cartography reads like a parody of scholarship. His allegations regarding Nicolò di Conti (c. 1385–1469), the only figure in *1421* who links the Ming voyages with European events, are the stuff of historical fiction, the product of an obstinate misrepresentation of sources. The author's misunderstanding of the technology of Zheng He's ships impels him to depict voyages no captain would attempt and no mariner could survive, including a 4,000-mile excursion along the Arctic circle and circumnavigation of the Pacific after having already sailed more than 42,000 miles from China to West Africa, South America, Australia, New Zealand, and the Philippines (pp. 199–209, 311).²

Portraying himself as an innocent abroad, forthrightly seeking

¹ For example, although Judith A. Carney (*Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* [Cambridge, Mass: 2000]) regards rice as part of the Columbian Exchange and argues that sub-Saharan Africans were the principal agents in bringing rice cultivation to the Americas after 1492, Menzies cites her in support of the notion that Zheng He's mariners introduced the grain to the New World (pp. 206, 506, n. 4). He also appropriates a quotation from a Chinese novel discussed by J. J. L. Duyvendak ("Desultory notes on the Hsi-Yang Chi," *T'oung Pao* 42 [1954]: 26–35) to declare that Persian pottery given to Zheng He actually was "eggshell-thin" porcelain made by the Maya of Mexico (pp. 162, 214). Menzies continues this practice in the paperback edition (2002) of his book. He credits the present writer with providing him with evidence that da Gama reported a Chinese "fleet of 800 sail" in India at the time of Zheng He (pp. 512, 547, 552). This assertion is based on a publication—not correctly cited by Menzies—that makes no such claim about a da Gama report, a Chinese fleet, or an armada of 800 ships. See Robert Finlay, "The Treasure-Ships of Zheng He: Chinese Maritime Imperialism in the Age of Discovery," *Terrae Incognitae: The Journal for the History of Discoveries* 23 (1991): 1–12.

² There is no space here to discuss how Menzies's characterization of Zheng He's vessels as lumbering, broad-beamed tubs equipped with square-rigged sails—and therefore "constrained to sail before the wind" (pp. 64, 65, 96, 109, 161, 163, 181, 209, 240)—is integral to his claim that he can track the global course of the voyages by focusing on prevailing winds and currents (see p. 83). As Needham makes clear, however, Chinese ships employed a balanced lug-sail, a highly aerodynamic device that allows a ship to make headway at 45° to windward (compared to 34° for a modern yacht) (*Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 4, pt. 3, pp. 594–599); see also Christian J. Buys and Sheli O. Smith, "Chinese Batten Lug Sails," *The Mariner's Mirror* 66 (1980): 233–246. Despite its relevance to his argument, Menzies apparently did not consult any of the literature that has corrected earlier, exaggerated estimates of the dimensions of Zheng He's vessels. See especially Richard A.

truths the academic establishment has disregarded or suppressed, Menzies in fact is less an “unlettered Ishmael” than a Captain Ahab, gripped by a mania to bend everything to his purposes. His *White Whale* is Eurocentric historiography, which celebrates Columbus (a thief and fraud, pp. 382–383) and Vasco da Gama (a terrorist, p. 406) without realizing they merely aped the epic deeds of the Chinese. More generally, Menzies, in an unacknowledged echo of Joseph Needham, laments that China did not become “mistress of the world,” with Confucian harmony and Buddhist benevolence uniting humankind. Instead, the cruel, barbaric West, secretly and fraudulently capitalizing on Chinese achievements, imposed its dominion around the globe (pp. 405–406).³

The wounded leviathan of Eurocentricism no doubt deserves another harpoon, but *1421* is too leaky a vessel to deliver it. Examination of the book’s central claims reveals they are uniformly without substance: first, that the 1421–1423 voyages Menzies describes could not have taken place; second, that Conti played no role in transmitting knowledge of Chinese exploration to European cartographers; and third, that all Menzies’s evidence for the presence of the Chinese fleets abroad is baseless.

1421 concentrates on what Menzies terms “the missing years” of the sixth voyage of Zheng He, that is, the two and a half years between March 1421 and October 1423, during which the fleets of Zheng He supposedly roamed the globe. Menzies is not interested in the well-known, much-studied voyages of Zheng He, and he ignores the extensive literature on them.⁴ He dispenses with six of the seven expeditions

Gould, *Archaeology and the Social History of the Ship* (Cambridge, U.K.: 2000), pp. 193–198; André Wegener Sleeswyk, “The Liao and the Displacement of Ships in the Ming Navy,” *The Mariner’s Mirror* 82 (1996): 3–13; Richard Barker, “The Size of the ‘Treasure Ships’ and Other Chinese Vessels,” *The Mariner’s Mirror* 75 (1989): 273–275; Donald H. Keith and Christian J. Buys, “New light on Medieval Chinese seagoing ship construction,” *The International Journal of Nautical Archaeology and Underwater Exploration* 10 (1981): 119–32.

³ On the same theme shaping Needham’s view of the achievements of Chinese civilization in general and the fleets of Zheng He in particular, see Robert Finlay, “China, the West, and World History in Joseph Needham’s *Science and Civilisation in China*,” *Journal of World History* 11 (2000): 265–303. While Menzies cites Needham a number of times, he fails to do so on a number of matters, including on contrasts between China and Europe as reflected in the voyages of Zheng He and those of Europeans (pp. 33, 40), the scientific motives for the Ming voyages (p. 40), and Europeans illegitimately wresting trade from Asians (p. 376). On these topics, see Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 4, pt. 3: *Civil Engineering and Nautics* (Cambridge, U.K.: 1971), pp. 389, 499, 514–517, 522, 533–534.

⁴ Menzies did not consult the outstanding work on the voyages: *Zheng He xia xiyang yangzi liao huibian* [Collected sources on Zheng He’s voyages], ed. Zheng Hesheng and Zheng Yijun, 2 vols. (Jinan, 1980–1983). Much of the material in these volumes is compiled from

(between 1405 and 1433) in one page (pp. 54–55). He singles out the sixth voyage because it was the only one in which Zheng He returned to China early, leaving his subordinate eunuch-captains to carry out their mission of returning tribute envoys to their kingdoms. This circumstance offers Menzies a window of opportunity to imagine that the armada left the Indian Ocean to seek new lands in the Atlantic and Pacific. Since he claims that the mariners sailed about 40,000 miles in their world-girdling odysseys, two and a half years is just barely enough time for them to journey such a vast distance while also charting coasts, mining ore, meeting alien peoples, and founding colonies.

In addition, Menzies feels free to speculate about “missing years” because of a presumed dearth of sources. He casually dismisses the principal source of information on Zheng He’s voyages, Ma Huan’s *Ying-Yai Sheng-Lan* [The overall survey of the ocean’s shores], by declaring that its author, an official translator on the staff of Zheng He in 1421, “left the treasure fleets at Calicut” (a port on the Malabar coast in south-western India), hence he did not take part in the global exploration (p. 87). Menzies provides no evidence for his assertion, which, in any case, mistakes the nature of Ma’s account. The author sailed on three of the Ming expeditions, and his book is a protoethnographic survey of the places visited by the fleets over several decades, not “diaries” (p. 229) of his participation in a specific voyage.⁵ He incorporated information on countries he did not visit, and he apparently continued making revisions to his book until it was published about thirty years after the last expedition. Menzies does not address the awkward question of why Ma, a stickler for detail and an aficionado of novelties, never mentions the wondrous excursion of his comrades to the Americas and Australia.

Throughout 1421, Menzies places great emphasis on imperial officials in 1477 destroying many of the documents regarding the Ming expeditions in order to prevent a renewal of the project. In a manner of speaking, the author sails the ships of Zheng He through that sup-

the *Ming shi* [History of the Ming dynasty]. Menzies refers to the *Ming shi* as a source that proves his contentions (p. 438), but he cites nothing from that massive work. Nor does he cite any of the essays in two major collections: *Zhenghe yanjiu zilao xuanbian* [Selected essays on Zheng He], ed. Research Association of Chinese Navigational History (Beijing: 1985); and *Zhenghe xia xiyang lunwenji* [Essays on Zheng He’s voyages], ed. Research Association of Chinese Navigational History (Beijing: 1985). I would like to thank Professor Jin Jiang of Vassar College for her assistance in dealing with Chinese-language materials.

⁵ See Ma Huan, *Ying-yai Sheng-lan: The Overall Survey of the Ocean’s Shores* [1433], edited by J. V. G. Mills and translated by Feng Ch’eng-chün (Cambridge, U.K.: 1970), pp. 34–44.

posed evidentiary void. There are plentiful surviving documents on the expeditions, however, that prove there were no “missing years.” The sources indicate that an imperial order for the sixth voyage was issued in March 1421, although the flotilla did not leave China until the turn of the year. It reached Sumatra around July 1422, after many stops in Southeast Asia; Zheng He returned home to Nanjing by September 1422, leaving his subordinates to sail on to thirty-six ports in Ceylon, India (both Bengal and the Malabar coast), the Persian Gulf, and East Africa. The last of the squadrons returned to China on 8 October 1423, having completed their journey of some 11,000 miles in the expected time, about one year and three months after departing Sumatra.⁶ Thus there are no “missing years” for the Ming fleets, no time for even a portion of the extraordinary exploits narrated in 1421.

Even taking Menzies’s account at face value, however, it is far-fetched. The author asserts that Zheng He arrived home in November 1421 and that his captains completed their errands in the Indian Ocean in July of the same year, a mere three months after departing Sumatra. After rendezvousing at Sofala (across from Mozambique on the East African coast), they doubled the Cape of Good Hope in August and headed north to the Cape Verde Islands, reaching them in late September; a month later, they made landfall off the Orinoco River in Brazil, and by November they were approaching Cape Horn in the South Atlantic (pp. 83, 99–100, 113–116). In other words, Menzies proposes that Zheng He’s captains completed a voyage of some 17,000 miles in mainly unknown seas in seven months, including dozens of stops in the Indian Ocean, while Zheng He took the same amount of time to journey about 3,500 miles from Sumatra to Nanjing.

By this account, then, Zheng He sailed sluggishly but his captains made spectacularly rapid progress. Menzies claims that the average speed of Zheng He’s vessels over their seven voyages in the Indian Ocean was 4.8 knots (or 132 miles per day) (p. 100). Menzies has no basis for this estimate since an average speed can be calculated only for the 1431–1433 expedition, for which a detailed itinerary survives. Naturally, speeds differed considerably, depending on the time of year and the passage being traversed. In the seventh voyage, distances covered varied from a high of 106 miles per day (3.8 knots) to a low of 37.5 miles per day (1.4 knots), with an average of 69 miles per day (or 2.5

⁶ On dates for the voyages, see *Zheng He xia xiyang yangzi liao huijian*, 2: 926–30; Haraprasad Ray, *Trade and Diplomacy in India-China Relations* (New Delhi: 1993), pp. 37–44. Duyvendak’s fundamental essay, “The true dates of the Chinese maritime expeditions in the early fifteenth century,” *T’oung Pao* 34 (1938): 341–412, is cited by Menzies (p. 82), but he ignores it in his reconstruction of the sixth voyage.

knots).⁷ Menzies assumes, however, that his undocumented estimate of 4.8 knots for the Indian Ocean voyages holds as well for the global cruises of the Ming fleets.⁸ His calculation helps him narrowly fit the agenda of the fleets into the alleged “missing years”: having doubled the time the junks actually were away from China (from fifteen months to thirty), he also hurries the ships along by granting them an average speed 52 percent higher than what they generally achieved in the steady, familiar monsoon winds of the southern seas. On its own terms, then, Menzies’s scenario is highly implausible. Taking into account the surviving evidence for the timetable of the sixth expedition, it is impossible.

Menzies’s evidence for the role of Conti in transmitting Chinese geographical knowledge to European cartographers is even flimsier than his argument for “missing years.” A native of Venice, Conti lived in Asia for some thirty-five years, and when he returned to Europe around 1441, he sought absolution from Pope Eugenius IV (r. 1431–1447) for having converted to Islam. As instructed by the pope, Conti told the story of his travels to the humanist Poggio Bracciolini (1380–1459), who incorporated it into his *De Varietate Fortunae*, completed in 1448. His account was widely read, for Conti provided the best source of information on the East, especially India and Southeast Asia, that Europe had received since Marco Polo’s *Travels* (c. 1298).⁹

⁷ On measuring distances traveled by Zheng He’s junks, see Zhou Juseng, *Zheng He hanglu gao* [The routes of Zheng He’s voyages] (Taipei: 1959), pp. 97–101. On distances covered during the seventh voyage, see Ma Huan, *Ying-Yai Sheng-Lan*, pp. 26–27, 308, n. 14. Based upon a debatable interpretation of Chinese nautical watches, Needham comes up with an average speed between 6 knots (166 miles per day) and 10 knots (276 miles per day), estimates far higher than any speed achieved on the seventh voyage and implausible in their own right (*Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 4, pt. 3, p. 564, n. e).

⁸ This leads to some unlikely assertions. Thus Menzies proposes that one Ming squadron, at 4.8 knots, made a round-trip Pacific voyage of 16,000 miles in only four months, including time spent establishing colonies along the western coast of America (p. 199). From 1565 to 1815, however, the average duration of a voyage from Manila to Acapulco by Spanish galleons was close to six months, with four months for that leg of the round-trip journey alone being regarded as a rapid crossing (William Lytle Schurtz, *The Manila Galleon* [New York: 1939], p. 263).

⁹ See “The Travels of Nicolò Conti . . . as related by Poggio Bracciolini in his work entitled *Historia de varietate fortunae, Lib. IV*,” in *India in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. and trans. R. H. Major (London: 1857), pp. 3–39. On Conti, see the biographical note in Pero Tafur, *Andanças e viagens de un hidalgo español*, ed. Marcos Jiménez de la Espada (reprint, Barcelona: 1982), pp. 412–415. On reception of Conti’s story, see Waldemar Sensburg, “Poggio Bracciolini und Nicolo de’ Conti in ihrer Bedeutung für die Geografie des Renaissance-Zeitalters,” *Mitteilungen der K. K. Geographischen Gesellschaft in Wien* 49 (1906): 261. Polo’s and Conti’s accounts of Asia sometimes were published together, as in a 1502 Lisbon edition (Henry Vignaud, *Toscanelli and Columbus: The Letter and Chart of Toscanelli* [London: 1902], p. 24, n. 4).

Conti is essential to Menzies's argument since he represents the sole vehicle by which Chinese geographical knowledge reached the West. Much of *1421* is devoted to interpreting European maps in the light of that knowledge, and without Conti as "the crucial link" in the chain of evidence, the central thesis of the book collapses (p. 93).

To establish the relevance of Conti, Menzies splices into one quotation a passage from Poggio and another from Pero Tafur (c. 1410–c. 1484), a Spaniard who met Conti at Mt. Sinai (Egypt) in 1437, when the Venetian was planning to return home (p. 85).¹⁰ Poggio refers to large Indian ships, with five sails, many masts, and hull compartments. Since only Chinese ships possessed the latter, it is generally assumed that Conti actually described Chinese vessels, evidently without knowing their origins.¹¹ Tafur writes of ships "like very large houses" [*como casas muy grandes*], with ten or more sails and large cisterns of water inside, that delivered cargo to Mecca.¹² Neither Poggio nor Tafur refer to Calicut in connection with the large ships, to Chinese vessels visiting India, or to the fleet of Zheng He; neither chronicler provides a date for Conti's stay in Calicut. Still, Menzies takes for granted that Conti was in Calicut in 1421 when the Ming armada anchored there, and since both Conti and Ma Huan describe similar scenes in Calicut, Menzies surmises that Conti must have met the Chinese chronicler in that port (p. 86).

Based on these presumptions, Menzies creates an incredible scenario: he declares that Conti boarded Zheng He's junks for their voyages to the Cape Verde Islands, Brazil, Patagonia, Australia, New Zealand, North America, and Mexico. Moreover, after the fleet returned to Southeast Asia and China in late 1423, Conti dashed home to Venice, where in 1424 he was "debriefed" by the Infante Dom Pedro of Portugal (d. 1449), older brother of Prince Henry (1394–1460), the so-called "Navigator," and where Conti handed over copies of Chinese

¹⁰ Menzies does not cite Tafur's account itself and it does not appear in his bibliography. He takes his quotations from Richard Hall's *Empires of the Monsoon: A History of the Indian Ocean and Its Invaders* (New York, 1996, p. 124), which, however, does not conflate the two statements.

¹¹ Mills, *Ying-Yai Sheng-Lan*, p. 66; Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 4, pt. 3, p. 452, note b. Sensburg ("Poggio Bracciolini und Nicolo de' Conti," pp. 304–307) speculates that Conti did not actually visit China, although he displays some knowledge of Chinese customs.

¹² "The Travels of Nicolò Conti," p. 27; Tafur, *Andanças e viagens de un hidalgo español*, p. 108. See also Pero Tafur, *Travels and Adventures, 1435–1439*, trans. and ed. Malcom Letts (New York: 1926). For comparison of Conti's information in Poggio and Tafur, see Joan-Paul Rubiés, *Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance: South India through European Eyes, 1250–1625* (Cambridge, U.K.: 2000), pp. 118–123.

charts produced during the great voyage (pp. 351–354, 435).¹³ Those charts, Menzies asserts, formed the basis for all subsequent European maps that showed lands across the Atlantic, including, inter alia, the Pizzigano map (1424), the (disputed) Vinland map (1420–1440?), the Cantino planisphere (1502), and the Waldseemüller maps (1507, 1513). Furthermore, Conti's information prompted Prince Henry to secretly dispatch settlers to Puerto Rico in 1431, where (Menzies suggests) they perhaps found evidence of a previous Chinese colony (p. 359). European copies of Ming charts also explain Columbus's ambition to voyage across the Ocean Sea, Magellan's conviction that he could sail around South America, and Cook's alleged "discovery" of Australia.

Even though "The Travels of Nicolò di Conti" is silent about the global journey of the Venetian—one wonders why he kept that thrilling news from Poggio—Menzies repeatedly claims the document proves that Conti "sailed with the Chinese fleet from India to Australia and China."¹⁴ Thus with no more warrant than a passing mention by Poggio and Tafur of large ships in the Indian Ocean, Menzies concocts a scenario in which Conti tours the world on Zheng He's junks, collecting information that transforms European cartography and inspires European overseas expansion. In a book bloated with extravagant arguments, Menzies's assertions regarding Poggio's well-known text stand out for their obdurate distortion of evidence.

Menzies's claims regarding the fleet's "missing years" and Conti's global cruise clearly cannot be sustained. The author's proof for the presence of the Ming argosy in new lands also lacks substance. In his first two chapters (pp. 19–75), he lays the groundwork for his claims when describing Zheng He's fleet before its departure from Nanjing. Although the portrait lacks any documentation, it provides the foundation for virtually all the evidence Menzies later cites for Chinese exploration. His depiction, then, does not represent mere scene setting aimed at engaging the reader—a rhetorical tactic that perhaps does not call for footnotes—but assumptions read back into the narrative itself. In effect, the author stocks the ships on their exodus from China with

¹³ According to Menzies, because Conti was a religious renegade in 1424, he traveled incognito and did not reveal his identity until his interview by Poggio some two decades later (p. 352). Not only is there no evidence for this, it is clear from Tafur's account that Conti was in Egypt as late as 1437 (*Andanças e viajes de un hidalgo español*, p. 99).

¹⁴ Menzies, pp. 435, 93, 114, 192, 353–354, 369, 389. In his appendix, Menzies characterizes Poggio's account of Conti in "The Travels" as follows: "Describes Chinese fleet passing through Indian Ocean and his passage to Australia and China" (p. 448).

the very items that will confirm that the mariners reached their far-flung destinations.¹⁵

Thus while no evidence survives of the garb worn by Zheng He's sailors, Menzies describes them as wearing long white robes because legends and folklore from Australia and the New World speak of visits from white-robed aliens.¹⁶ Although sources are silent on the presence of women in the fleet, Menzies assumes that many prostitutes were aboard because the colonies supposedly founded during the voyages required Chinese mates for the men.¹⁷ In like fashion, he infers that many coops of Asiatic chickens were loaded on the junks (as "valuable presents for foreign dignitaries," p. 42) because the presence of chickens in the New World is a central part of his proof of the passage of the Ming fleets.¹⁸ Since Central American natives used chicken entrails for divination, Menzies presumes they were "indoc-trinated" in the practice by the fowl-bearing colonists of Zheng He (pp. 225, 420).

There is no evidence for masons and stone carvers in Zheng He's flotilla, but Menzies believes they were aboard because no one else could have carved the numerous stone markers supposedly left behind by the fleets in the Cape Verde Islands and other landing spots, and they must have built the "pyramids" and astronomical "observation platforms" found just about everywhere else.¹⁹ The latter, Menzies

¹⁵ It would be tedious to deal with all the items in the fleet mentioned by Menzies, which also includes mirrors, roses, jade, seeds, citrus fruits, coconuts, red tunics, pantaloons, mining engineers, Hindu savants, and Buddhist religious figures. The items omitted from the following discussion, however, have the same status in Menzies's narrative as those that are included; that is, the author assumes they were aboard the fleet in Nanjing because evidence for them supposedly has been found in areas overseas where he believes the fleets ventured. Porcelain is a different case, for it certainly was carried on Zheng He's ships, and Menzies makes much of that consideration (pp. 73, 195, 203, 208, 227, 275, 451, 453); but trade in the ceramic was so extensive and of such long standing that its appearance in places such as East Africa and the Philippines cannot be used as evidence for the presence of Zheng He's fleets. See Robert Finlay, "The Pilgrim Art: The Culture of Porcelain in World History," *Journal of World History* 9 (1998): 141-187, especially 158-165.

¹⁶ Menzies, pp. 163-164, 167, 177, 190, 207, 276-277, 285, 322, 414-415, 445.

¹⁷ Menzies, pp. 67-69, 281, 285, 296. Supposedly recruited from Canton brothels, the women are described as "beautiful concubines" who were well-educated, talented, and regarded sex as "a sanctified act" (p. 67). Oddly, the author devotes more discussion to their presumed sexual activity than he does to the other six expeditions of Zheng He.

¹⁸ Menzies, pp. 123, 124-126, 162, 209, 223-224, 232, 378, 395, 403.

¹⁹ On presumed "observational platforms" and the like, see Menzies, pp. 103, 105-106, 163, 172, 173, 175, 185-186, 191, 270, 324-325, 401, 437, 440, 453-455. Inscribed steles actually associated with Zheng He were carved in China before departure of the fleet, as with one erected in Ceylon in 1411 (see Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 4, pt. 3, p. 523).

claims, were needed by Chinese astronomers, indispensable passengers in the fleet since they had to carry out the (undocumented) imperial command to detect “guiding stars” in order to “correctly locate the new territories” (pp. 28–29). Teak was not used in building Zheng He’s fleets, as sources supposedly consulted by Menzies make clear, yet he regards any appearance of teak in marine excavations as marking the presence of the Ming vessels.²⁰ It is highly unlikely that the Chinese junks (or any ships at any time) carried specially carved stones for ballast, as Menzies imagines, yet he elaborately describes how the mariners built a slipway to refloat grounded junks at Bimini in the Bahamas, the evidence for which is “tongued and grooved” rectangular rocks found underwater there—ballast, the author declares, from the Ming ships (pp. 63, 265–277).²¹

Zheng He’s armada almost certainly included some horses used by the admiral and other high commanders. Menzies claims, however, that thousands of horses were transported, many being used to stock the Americas and to explore the interior of Australia. At sea for months at a time, the mariners allegedly nourished the horses with boiled, mashed rice and with water distilled from seawater, “using paraffin wax or seal blubber for fuel” (p. 67). Although Needham states that there is no evidence that the Chinese knew how to desalinate seawater, Menzies asserts that a ship wrecked off the Oregon coast is reported to have carried paraffin wax, hence he regards the rumor as implicit verification of his contentions about both desalination and hordes of junk-journeying steeds.²²

²⁰ Menzies cites Li Zhaoxiang’s *Longquan chuan chang zhi* [Record of the shipbuilding yards on the Dragon River] (1553) and Needham on the subject of Zheng He’s ships. Both discuss the woods used in constructing the junks—cedar, chestnut, fir, camphor, and elm—and do not mention teak. See *Longquan chuan chang zhi*, 5:7; Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 4, pt. 3, pp. 411, 414. On teak as evidence of Zheng He’s vessels, see Menzies, pp. 154, 172–173, 201, 227, 309, 459.

²¹ Menzies states that the large stones were carved in Nanjing to lock together as ballast so the ships would not be damaged in a heavy storm (p. 273). There is no evidence that the Chinese ever employed this labor-intensive technique. Rather, loose and flexible materials, such as rock salt, cowrie shells, metal ingots, porcelain, gravel, sand, and timber typically were used as ballast, for they could be loaded and removed relatively easily, and they could be sold at the end of a voyage when the bilge was cleaned.

²² Menzies, pp. 201, 183, 310. On lack of evidence for desalination in China, see Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 5, *Chemistry and Chemical Technology*, pt. 4, *Spagyric Discovery and Invention: Apparatus, Theories and Gifts* (Cambridge, U.K.: 1980), p. 61. Always eager to inflate Chinese achievements, however, Needham immediately adds that “very possibly [desalination] was done during the great voyages of Chêng Ho” Menzies may have taken this hint from Needham, adding to it his notion of wax and blubber fuel. If the fleet described by Menzies included only 1,000 horses, however, then at least

The seamen, prostitutes, and eunuchs were kept in fresh fish at sea by “trained otters, working in pairs to herd shoals into the nets . . .” (p. 39). These marvelous creatures, alas, remain unheralded in any document, but since some wild ones “have been seen swimming in the fjords of South Island” (New Zealand), Menzies infers that their forbears must have jumped Zheng He’s ships there (pp. 173, 185). Chinese shar-peis must have sailed with the Ming flotilla because an animal resembling the dog appears in a Mexican painting discovered in the nineteenth century (pp. 42, 223). One audacious shar-pei, Menzies proposes, absconded from the junks in the Falklands and mated with an indigenous fox, giving birth to a now-extinct animal called a warrah—DNA results, the author promises, will be posted on the website (p. 135).

Menzies also goes beyond his portrait of Zheng He’s armada in Nanjing to point to evidence deriving from its global adventures. He suggests that the Chinese captured a few giant South American sloths (or mylodons) in Patagonia. This deduction arises from the author’s notion that a “dog-headed man” depicted on the Piri Reis map of 1513—which, of course, Menzies regards as based upon a copy of a Chinese map from Conti’s collection—is in fact a mylodon, an animal (he assumes) that Zheng He’s captains desired for the emperor’s zoo (pp. 118–119). He further supposes that one of the sloths aroused itself enough to escape Chinese incarceration in Australia because a stone carving near Brisbane (he thinks) looks something like the Patagonian beast (p. 185).

It is impossible to keep track of how many self-confirming assumptions are at work in such citations of alleged evidence. Piling supposition upon supposition, Menzies never considers a question that he does not beg: every argument in *1421* springs from the fallacy of *petitio principii*. The author’s “trail of evidence” is actually a feedback loop that makes no distinction between premise and proof, conjecture and confirmation, bizarre guess and proven fact.

Thus just as Menzies describes the junks as supplied with all the paraphernalia that will prove they sailed where he contends, he also reconstructs the routes of the voyages by treating European maps, supposedly based on Conti’s cache, as the by-product of those very voyages. This inevitably leads to some curious conclusions. Since the

five gallons of drinking water and two gallons for boiling rice would be needed daily for every horse (see Menzies, p. 183). The total comes to 7,000 gallons of desalinated seawater every day. That’s a lot of seal blubber.

Waldseemüller map of 1507 seems to show an open sea passage between the Arctic Circle and Eurasia from the Barents Sea to the Bering Straits, a distance of more than 4,000 miles, Menzies concludes that the route was surveyed by a Ming fleet taking a shortcut home after its exploration of Greenland, boldly going where no eunuch had gone before (p. 311). The author, however, does not discuss this epic voyage except to observe that the Waldseemüller map proves it took place.

Similarly, since Menzies believes that the Chinese first navigated around South America and that the Piri Reis map is proof of that achievement, he declares that the map does not show a landlocked Atlantic, with an eastward extension of the Americas linking up with the peninsula of Southeast Asia, but, rather, “what appears to be ice connecting the tip of South America to Antarctica” (p. 116). Rivaling his mistreatment of Poggio’s “Travels,” Menzies makes this claim even though his own reproductions of the Piri Reis chart patently contradict it (pp. 117, 122, and color illustration). Not only that, Piri Reis himself states the contrary, for he noted on his map that Spanish and Portuguese explorers “have found out that coasts encircle this sea [that is, the Atlantic], which has thus taken the form of a lake . . .”²³ Menzies does not think it necessary to inform his readers of this evidence.

Unfortunately, this reckless manner of dealing with evidence is typical of *1421*, vitiating all its extraordinary claims: the voyages it describes never took place, Chinese information never reached Prince Henry and Columbus, and there is no evidence of the Ming fleets in newly discovered lands. The fundamental assumption of the book—that Zhu Di dispatched the Ming fleets because he had a “grand plan,” a vision of charting the world and creating a maritime empire spanning the oceans (pp. 19–43)—is simply asserted by Menzies without a shred of proof. It represents the author’s own grandiosity projected back onto the emperor, providing the latter with an ambition commensurate with the global events that Menzies presumes *1421* uniquely has revealed, an account that provides evidence “to overturn the long-

²³ Quoted in Svat Soucek, *Piri Reis and Turkish Mapmaking after Columbus: The Khalili Portolan Atlas* (London: 1996), p. 60; see also *Kitabi-I Bahriye Pirî Reis*, ed. Ertugrul Zekâi Ökte and translated by Robert Bragner (Istanbul: 1988), 1:107. In fact, the continental extension of South America on the Piri Reis map represents an interesting, post-*da Gama* update of Ptolemy’s contention that the Indian Ocean is a land-locked sea, with the southernmost end of Africa curving eastward to connect with Southeast Asia (see W. G. L. Randles, “The Recovery of Ptolemy’s *Geography* in Renaissance Italy and Its Impact in Spain and Portugal in the Period of the Discoveries,” *Geography, Cartography and Nautical Science in the Renaissance: The Impact of the Great Discoveries* [Aldershot, U.K.: 2000], n.p.).

accepted history of the Western world" (p. 400). It is clear, however, that textbooks on that history need not be rewritten. The reasoning of 1421 is inexorably circular, its evidence spurious, its research derisory, its borrowings unacknowledged, its citations slipshod, and its assertions preposterous.

Still, it may have some pedagogical value in world history courses. Assigning selections from the book to high-schoolers and undergraduates, it might serve as an outstanding example of how not to (re)write world history. Instructors seeking to provide some light relief to a sometimes heavy-going subject also could encourage students to vie with one another in nominating the most peculiar or amusing passage in the book. A top contender surely would be the notion that the Ming mariners transported to the Americas "millions of tiny glass beads the size of those used by the Chinese as a sex aid," intended to be stitched into the skin around the head of the penis to increase the pleasure of one's spouse (p. 227).²⁴ Indeed, if the eunuch-captains of Zheng He's fleets tried to indoctrinate the peoples they encountered in this exotic practice, it is little wonder that all the fabled Chinese colonies in the New World floundered and faded in the years between 1421 and 1492.

²⁴ Citing Ma Huan on Malay men inserting tin beads inside the skin of the penis, Menzies inexplicably describes the tin beads as "Chinese-made glass beads" (pp. 72–73). There was an ancient Asian trade in glass beads, which were certainly not used by the Chinese, or anyone, as a "sex aid." See Peter Francis Jr., *Asia's Maritime Bead Trade: 300 B.C. to the Present* (Honolulu: 2002).