

# Admiral Zheng He's Voyages to the "West Oceans"

By Yang Wei



Screen capture from the docudrama *Emperor of the Seas* depicting Zheng He's fleet of ships in Nanjing harbor the day they set sail for their first voyage. Source: MagicPlay Entertainment. Series available on Amazon.com.

**E**ighty years before Vasco da Gama's arrival in West India, a formidable Chinese navy ruled the China Sea and Indian Ocean, from Southeast Asia to the Persian Gulf and East Africa. Between the period from 1405 to 1433, China's Ming dynasty launched seven voyages led by Admiral Zheng He to explore these vast regions, known then to the Chinese as the "West Oceans." One such voyage typically featured over 300 vessels, including a number of "treasure ships" over 400 feet long, accompanied by a legion of supply ships, water tankers, warships with canons, and multi-armed patrol boats; the total personnel on the fleet numbered over 28,000.<sup>1</sup> As has been pointed out, "It was a unique armada in the history of China—and the world—not to be surpassed until the invasion fleets of World War I sailed the seas."<sup>2</sup> Rather different from the Europeans, the Chinese armada never sought to establish colonial rule over these oceans by military force. It was by and large intended to facilitate peaceful diplomatic and trade relationships with foreign countries. China's maritime supremacy vanished abruptly in the 1430s because of domestic objections, and the overseas expeditions were eventually ended by the court. All this happened only decades prior to the advent of the great age of European discovery and exploration.

## The Eunuch Admiral

The Ming dynasty (1368–1644) was founded after the Chinese rebellion against the Mongols who ruled China during the previous century. In 1368, having established the new dynasty in Nanjing, Zhu Yuanzhang, the rebel leader, ordered his army to attack Beijing and ousted the Mongols who fled back to the Mongolian steppe outside the Great Wall. Loyalists to the fallen Mongol Yuan dynasty remained in provinces such as Yunnan, located in Southwest China. Originally named Ma He, Zheng He was born to a Muslim family in Yunnan. The family had migrated to China from Central Asia and had served in the Mongol administration in this region. Both Zheng He's father and grandfather bore the title of *hajji*, indicating that they had completed pilgrimages to Mecca. In 1381, when the Ming army invaded Yunnan to subdue the Mongol remnants there, eleven-year-old Ma He was captured. The young prisoner of war was castrated and given, as a servant,

to the court of Prince Yan, Zhu Di. The intimate company with the young prince bred a lifetime trust.<sup>3</sup>

In 1399, Zhu Di launched a rebellion against his nephew, the emperor Jianwen, and usurped the throne three years later as the emperor Yongle. Having actively assisted Zhu Di in the civil war, Ma He was given the new name Zheng He by his lord for his military merits. The dethroned emperor Jianwen went missing in the last battle. Rumor had it that he absconded overseas. Some sources report that the new emperor organized the maritime expeditions to trace Jianwen's whereabouts. But most historians discredit this story, for it is obviously unnecessary to launch seven costly voyages for this purpose. It is suggested that a variety of concerns motivated the missions, including an intent to display China's military prowess; extend the new emperor's political influence; seek trade opportunities and strategic allies against the Timurid Empire rising in Central Asia; facilitate an international order marked by peace and harmony; and perhaps most importantly, encourage tributes and endorsement by the various foreign states of the fragile legitimacy of the new emperor.<sup>4</sup>

Zhu Di's usurpation of the throne encountered resistance by the orthodox Confucian scholar-officials; instead, the new ruler entrusted eunuchs for important missions as imperial agents. In addition to having the emperor's trust, Zheng He was known for his military talent, knowledge in the classics, strategic insights, and mature personality. Though born to a Muslim family, Zheng He was reportedly also a Buddhist. He also meticulously performed the state ritual sacrifice to the goddess of celestial consort, *tianfei*, a popular deity believed to provide protection for seafarers. He may have known Central Asian languages. Zheng He's eclectic religious attitude and broadened cultural horizons made him a good candidate for the armada's commander.<sup>5</sup>

## The Treasure Fleet

The vessels needed by the expeditions were constructed at the Longji-ang shipyard in the capital by the Yangzi River. The sailors were recruited from coastal provinces, mostly Fujian. During the Ming period, the most

popular type of ocean-going ships was the *shachuan*, or “sandboats,” with flat-bottom hulls used for travel in the relatively shallow coastal waters. The Fujian shipwrights redesigned the junk for travel in the South China Sea and Indian Ocean. The largest of the junks constituting the fleet, called “treasure ships,” had nine staggered masts and twelve sails made of strong silk cloth. They featured pointed hulls as sharp as knives to cut through large waves, and had high prows and sterns with a keel on the bottom of the hull for enhanced stability in high seas. Wide, overhanging decks were also added: the lowest deck was filled with stones and earth for ballast; the second deck included living quarters for sailors and storage spaces; the third deck contained the kitchen, open space, and the operations bridge; and the fourth deck was a fighting platform, armed with twenty-four cast-bronze cannons. The ships were strengthened by strong prows to ram smaller boats, watertight bulwark compartments for added safety, and a balanced rudder that could be raised and lowered and functioned like an extra keel. These technological innovations were not introduced in Europe until the late eighteenth century.<sup>6</sup>

Rather wide and bulky, the treasure ships were approximately 390-408 feet in length and 160-166 feet in width. With a displacement of 10,000 tons or more, these were undoubtedly the largest wooden sailing ships ever built in world history, dwarfing Columbus’s flagship, the *St. Maria*, which, in contrast, was only 85 feet in length. The actual size of these treasure ships had been controversial, but in 1957, archeologists found in the Longjiang shipyard a huge 36.3-foot-long rudder, a discovery that supported the accuracy of existing records. The reported size of the treasure ships is also consistent with the size of the dry docks at Longjiang, two of them 210 feet wide, big enough to accommodate a ship 166 feet wide.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to the colossal treasure ships, the fleet was composed of other types of specialized vessels of diverse sizes, including the eight-masted “horse ships” that carried horses and building materials needed to repair the fleet at sea, the seven-masted “supply ships” containing food staples for the crew, “troop transports” that accommodated the soldiers, and fresh water tankers that supplied enough water for continual sailing for one month or longer. The fleet also had two types of warships designed for use against pirates. The ships utilized large flags, signal bells, drums, gongs, lanterns, and carrier pigeons to communicate with one another during the journey.<sup>8</sup>

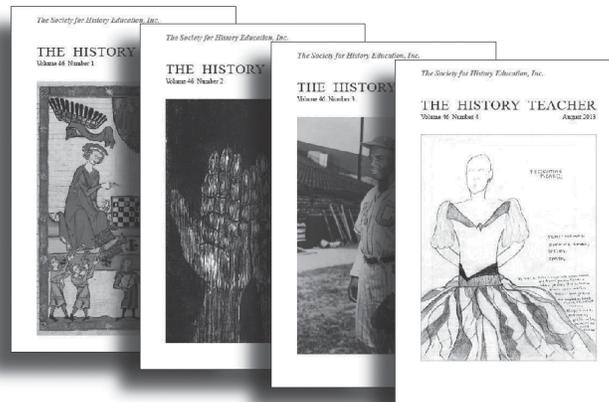
Eunuchs of different ranks were the top fleet commanders. Fleet crews included military officers, personnel from the Ministry of Rites (in charge of foreign affairs), Ministry of Revenue senior secretaries, astrologers and geomancers, translators knowledgeable of Arabic and other Central Asian languages, and a number of medical officers and pharmacologists whose task was to collect herbs. Regular seamen and soldiers, as well as iron-smiths, caulkers, and carpenters to provide needed repairs, constituted the rest of the crew.

**The Voyages**

The 1405 maiden voyage of the fleet consisted of 317 ships, and over 27,000 men. The fleet assembled at Liujiagang, a port on the Yangzi River near Suzhou. The ships carried large cargo to be traded abroad, including thousands of bolts of fine silk, embroideries, cotton cloth, gold, iron, salt, hemp, tea, wine, oil, porcelain, and candles. The fleet sailed along China’s southeast coast to Champa, Java, Malacca, Semudera, and Lambri in northern Sumatra, and then crossed the Indian Ocean to the major trading ports on the southwest coast of India, including Ceylon, Quilon, and Calicut. The scene of Zheng He’s 300-vessel fleet at sea, spreading out over many square miles, must have been awe-inspiring to eyewitnesses. While engaging in trade with the various ports, the fleet impressed the local regimes. Ambassadors from Calicut, Semudera, Quilon, Malacca, and other states joined the returning fleet to Nanjing to pay tribute. The tribute trade had long been an integral part of the Chinese imperial diplomatic system. The foreign envoys, often a combination of diplomats and merchants, came to the emperor’s court to

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The sixth pool (once the sixth shipbuilding dry dock) at the Treasure Boat Shipyard Park in Nanjing.  
Source: Vmenkov via Wikimedia Commons at <http://tinyurl.com/nf8xfqj>.



The statue of Zheng He at the Treasure Boat Shipyard Park in Nanjing.  
Source: Vmenkov via Wikimedia Commons at <http://tinyurl.com/phsj89x>.

offer local specialties, and the emperor would give far more expensive gifts in return and entertain the envoys with great hospitality.

On the armada's way home, they encountered the Chinese pirate Chen Zuyi, who had dominated the Malacca Strait and posed a threat to the trade routes. Zheng He's fleet defeated the pirates; destroyed their lair in Palembang; and captured Chen, who was escorted to Nanjing and executed there. This military operation cleared the passage from the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean.

The second voyage was in 1407. The fleet visited Siam, Java, and northern Sumatra, then again headed for the Indian Ocean. In Calicut, the Chinese emissaries presided over the formal investiture of the Calicut king with Chinese titles and gifts for the king and his retinue. On their return, the fleet visited Siam and Java, where Zheng He was involved in a power struggle between two rival native rulers. The third expedition began in 1409 and followed the previous routes to India. Zheng He's activities in Ceylon revealed his eclectic attitude concerning religion. Although Zheng He was a Muslim, he visited a local Buddhist temple and erected a stone with inscriptions in Chinese, Persian, and Tamil to commemorate the journey. In 1411, on the return from Calicut, the fleet had a military confrontation with Alagakkonara, the king of Ceylon. Alagakkonara tried to kidnap Zheng He and plunder the fleet, and Chinese troops then attacked the Sinhalese palace and captured the king, who was taken with his family to Nanjing. The Yongle emperor later released them back to Ceylon, but the Chinese supported another local regime considered legitimate.<sup>9</sup>

The fourth voyage in 1413 and 1415 explored further regions. After visiting India, the fleet, for the first time, continued to the Maldives and Hormuz in the Persian Gulf. A subfleet may have visited the port of Aden in what is now modern-day Yemen, as well as Bengal. Again, Zheng He was entangled in a local conflict in Semudera on their return. A usurper who murdered the king was defeated, captured, and executed in Nanjing; the Chinese idea of political legitimacy and international order was declared through their involvement in a local power struggle. After this expedition, eighteen states from today's Việt Nam to the distant coast of East Africa

sent tribute envoys to the Ming court. Chinese political power and influence reached its height thanks to Zheng He's voyages.

The fifth voyage that began in 1417 was intended to bring home the envoys of the eighteen states. The armada visited the ports on the East African coast, and from there Zheng He brought back more ambassadors with a cargo of tribute from Africa, including lions, leopards, dromedary camels, ostriches, rhinoceroses, antelopes, and giraffes. When Zheng He returned to the capital, the city gate had to be enlarged so that the tall giraffes could enter. The Chinese believed that the giraffes were legendary beasts called *qilin* who were mentioned in ancient Confucian classics as epitomizing virtue and prosperity. Greatly pleased, the emperor constructed a royal zoo to accommodate exotic animals and plants. The sixth expedition in 1421 escorted the ambassadors who had stayed in China for years back home. The fleet split in Sumatra. While Zheng He returned, parts of his fleet visited Hormuz, Dhufar, Aden, Mogadishu, and Brava on the Somali coast. Again, many more envoys accompanied the fleet back to Nanjing.

After the demise of the Yongle emperor, the voyages were stopped for several years. One last voyage was ordered by the Xiande emperor in 1431. A partial objective of the mission was the restoration of peaceful relations between the Siam and Malay kingdoms of Malacca. In the imperial edict Zheng He brought to the Siamese king, the Chinese emperor scolded the ruler for harassing Malacca and for detaining the Malaccan king on his way to the Ming capital. Restoring peace and order in the South China Sea was the major mission of the voyage. Zheng He died on India's west coast during the return journey; his deputy, eunuch Wang Jinghong, led the fleet home in 1433. Zheng He may have been buried at sea in accordance with Islamic tradition. A symbolic tomb, containing the admiral's caps and clothes, was built right outside of Nanjing and remains there.

### The Accomplishments

Zheng He's voyages took place in an era of costly military expansions and construction projects, including wars against the Mongols and Việt Nam, as well as the building of the new capital city (Beijing). Due to concerns

about high costs fueled by the objections of Confucian scholar-officials, the imperial government stopped these voyages for good in the 1430s. No records suggest the establishment of permanent embassies in the regions the fleet visited. Nevertheless, the missions did succeed in extending the Ming court's influence, demonstrating China's military power, enriching Chinese knowledge of the empire's "far west," encouraging tribute trade, combating pirates, and promulgating the Chinese concept of world order and political legitimacy. A "Pax Sinica" (Chinese peace) was maintained across the oceans during these decades. Hundreds of foreign envoys visited China, including eleven kings, all entertained well by the emperor. Several kings stayed in China for years and died there, including the king of Brunei and the king of Sulu in the Philippines. Their tombs have become symbolic relics testifying to generally positive international relations between China and neighboring polities. The voyages also left a cultural imprint in the regions they visited. Besides the known stone steles commemorating the journeys, Zheng He and his fleet remained an enduring theme in popular Southeast Asia folktales. In 2003, an iron statue of Zheng He was discovered in India, which strikingly resembles another statue of his excavated in Fujian, China.<sup>10</sup> Zheng He's voyages also bequeathed a rich maritime legacy to later generations. Two surviving records of the expeditions, the *Overall Survey of the Ocean Shores* (*yin ya sheng lan*) by Ma Huan and the *Description of the Starry Raft* (*xin cha sheng lan*) by Fei Xin, provide detailed accounts of the voyages and the various states the fleet visited.<sup>11</sup> These texts also record the distinctive Chinese nautical technologies of the time, including methods of measuring distance and depth of the ocean, as well as technologies of navigation through the combined use of maritime compass, celestial observation, and time calculation.

International trade was a crucial dimension of these expeditions, though the actual economic impact was difficult to evaluate. Zheng He's fleet traded China's products for foreign luxuries as well as products for daily use, especially spices, exotic wood, and medicines, to be brought back to the capital. Although these goods were mainly presented to the emperor for his consumption and disposal, foreign emissaries who came to China were permitted to trade with locals in the capital for handsome profits that also allowed ordinary Chinese to benefit from international trade.

### Contested Legacy

Attitudes about Zheng He's expeditions had been conflicted since the fifteenth century. Confucian scholar-officials were disturbed by the emperor's trust in eunuchs, and saw such costly expeditionary activities as a meaningless waste of resources. They destroyed Zheng He's maritime log and deliberately left the treasure ships unrepaired to prevent their possible future use. Imperial China's seafaring competency was never revived, and these voyages were rarely mentioned later in official dynastic records. Although part of Zheng He's nautical charts was reprinted in a seventeenth-century encyclopedia, these expeditions were by and large forgotten for centuries until the early twentieth century, when modern Chinese intellectuals "rediscovered" China's maritime tradition. Since then, Zheng He had been reinterpreted as China's "great maritime giant" who accomplished glorious overseas explorations comparable to the European voyages of discovery that marked the advent of the modern era.<sup>12</sup> Studies of maritime routes, technological achievements, and expansion of diplomatic relations associated with the voyages were sparked by nationalist pride and renewed interest in international relations in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, Zheng He's epic voyages were theatrically represented as part of China's grand historical tradition.

Zheng He's journeys also fascinated the nonscholarly world. In 2002, a retired British naval officer, Gavin Menzies, published his amateur historical study, asserting that Zheng He's subfleet discovered the Americas before Columbus; his book was soon popularized in TV documentaries.<sup>13</sup> Most professional historians believe Menzies's story to be pure fantasy and



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not based on any Chinese historical sources. For example, the 1418 nautical chart that Menzies cites that includes the Americas and Antarctica is believed to be a fake.<sup>14</sup> Zheng He's voyages also remained a significant part of many people's memories and identities. On East African and Australian coasts, there are reports of fair-skinned residents with vocabularies and styles of architecture different from other natives who claim to be descendants of Zheng He's sailors. In 2005, a Kenyan girl even received a Chinese government's scholarship to study in Nanjing because of her repeated requests to visit her "ancestors' country" as an offspring of Zheng He's seamen.<sup>15</sup>

An enduring topic of international history, Zheng He's voyages marked the acme of China's seafaring; but for many, it also implies the "missed opportunity" China had on the eve of the modern era. Shortly after the conclusion of these monumental maritime achievements, China turned inward and subsequently failed to successfully compete with rising European powers. But, it is clear that fifteenth-century China maritime history is largely about Zheng He and the effects of his voyages. Although the court ended official expeditions, international trade and local markets continued to flourish along these oceans. For instance, Malacca—Zheng He's most important port after those in China—was transformed into a crucial hub of an expanding network of trade that extended across Southeast Asia and up to China's coasts in that century. In this regard, Zheng He was only the most prominent of the many who together changed the cultural geography of these oceans through varied maritime engagements. Further studies of trade and international connections in the fifteenth century and beyond may reveal an Asia that is even more different than one imagined by Eurocentric scholarship. ■

## NOTES

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YANG WEI is an Assistant Professor in the History Department at the University of Colorado, specializing in East Asian history. He obtained his PhD at Harvard University and has published in English and Chinese on the history of late imperial Chinese politics, institutional reforms, literature, and ethnicity. He is currently revising his doctoral dissertation on the evolving concept of "public opinion" in the context of Ming-Qing political and social activism.

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