



## China's Great Armada: six hundred years ago China's Admiral Zheng He led a mighty fleet on the first of seven voyages that reshaped an empire -- [Frank Viviano](#)

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Exactly 600 years ago this month [July 2005] the great Ming armada (navy) weighed anchor in Nanjing, on the first of seven epic voyages as far west as Africa -- almost a century before Christopher Columbus's arrival in the Americas and Vasco da Gama's in India. Even then the European expeditions would seem insignificant by comparison: All the ships of Columbus and da Gama combined could have been stored on a single deck of a single vessel in the fleet that set sail under Zheng He.

Its commander was, without question, the most towering maritime figure in the 4,000-year annals of China, a visionary who imagined a new world and set out consciously to fashion it.

The greatest seafarer in China's history was raised in the mountainous heart of Asia, several weeks' travel from the closest port. More improbable yet, Zheng was not even Chinese -- he was by origin a Central Asian Muslim.

Within 20 years the boy who had writhed under Ming knives had become one of the prince's chief aides, a key strategist in the rebellion that made Zhu Di the Yongle (Eternal Happiness) emperor in 1402. Renamed Zheng after his exploits at the battle of Zhenglunba, near Beijing, he was chosen to lead one of the most powerful naval forces ever assembled.

The fleet commanded by Zheng He counted as many as 62 of these gargantuan vessels, which some nautical experts believe may have measured up to 400 feet in length and 170 feet across the beam--with nine masts, 50,000-square-foot main decks, and a displacement of at least 3,000 tons, ten times the size of Vasco da Gama's flagship. Scholars disagree on the *baochuan's* actual size, but even at far more modest estimates they were surely the largest wooden ships ever launched.



The *baochuan* were escorted by 370-foot-long, eight-masted "galloping-horse ships," the swiftest in the fleet, 280-foot supply ships, 240-foot troop transports, and agile 180-foot combat junks, according to interpretations of Ming sources. More than 300 vessels are believed to have sailed on Zheng's main voyages to what the Chinese call Xi Yang, the Western Ocean. The ships were manned by nearly 30,000 sailors and marines, seven grand eunuchs and hundreds of other Ming officials, 180 physicians, five astrologers, and ranks of geomancers, sailmakers, herbalists, blacksmiths, carpenters, tailors, cooks, accountants, merchants, and interpreters.

It was against this frenetic background that Admiral Zheng He received

his sailing orders on July 11, 1405.

He was, according to family sources, as outsized as his ships: seven feet tall, with a waist five feet in circumference, "and a voice as loud as a huge bell." Even allowing for exaggeration, by all accounts Zheng was an imposing man.

But it was not the admiral's physical stature that seized my attention early on. It was his surprising faith in the virtue of humility, expressed on a trip back to Kunyang, his Yunnan Province hometown, just one month before the first voyage. The trip's purpose was to erect a stone pillar, inscribed with an epitaph, over the grave of his father, Ma Haji.

The Kunyang epitaph is a portrait of the fundamental human values Zheng He most admired.

### **MAIDEN VOYAGE**

By the last week of 1405 the baochuan were harbored at part of present-day Vietnam. After Champa, the expedition proceeded to the islands of Java and Sumatra in what is now Indonesia, then west toward the most distant lands on its maiden journey, Sri Lanka and the Malabar Coast of India. Altogether, the voyage to India covered some 6,000 miles, at an estimated average speed of 50 miles a day.

From the beginning the Treasure Fleet mixed business with exploration and diplomacy, carrying more than a million tons of Chinese silk, ceramics, and copper coinage on its westward runs, to be exchanged for tropical spices, fragrant woods, precious gems, animals, textiles, and minerals.

The most detailed record of Zheng He's triumph on the Strait of Malacca is found in *The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores*, published in 1451 by Ma Huan, a Chinese Muslim from Zhejiang who spoke Arabic and served as an interpreter on at least three of the voyages.

Ma is entranced by the exotic customs and bounty of the tropics, where most of the fleet's destinations lay. "How can there be such diversity in the world?" he exclaims at one point.

In Champa he and his fellow sailors dine on the succulent jackfruit, with



its "morsels of yellow flesh, as big as a hen's egg and tasting like honey."

"The coconut has ten different uses," he learns in India, ranging from sweet syrup, wine, and oil to the production of rope-fiber, thatched roofs, and shell bowls.

So extensive is the array of spices, nuts, herbs, plants, and cooking styles described and cataloged by Ma, says Mark Stephen Mir, of the University of San Francisco's Ricci Institute for Chinese-Western Cultural History, "that you could probably trace Zheng He's voyages along culinary lines alone."

Ma pondered funeral and marriage rites, domestic and public architecture, religious beliefs, languages and dialects, trade goods and commercial practices, weights and measures, flora and fauna, science and technology, the strengths and weaknesses of governments.

The voyages were a floating encyclopedia-in-progress for Ming China--a compilation of all worth knowing between Nanjing and Africa.

### **ORDER AND LIGHT**

Contemporary sources on the Yongle reign are exceedingly scarce. "Of the several million Ming documents once held in the central government

archives in Beijing and Nanjing, all but 10,000 were destroyed in the fighting at the end of the dynasty," notes Endymion Wilkinson of Harvard University. By contrast, he adds, "14 million original government documents survive from the archives of the Qing dynasty," which lasted from 1644 to 1911.

In the end no general explanation for the voyages seems more convincing than the yearning for order after a century of almost unprecedented violence--a yearning for the assurances of fact and discovery set against a backdrop of worldwide chaos.

Heaven itself seemed to have turned its back on humanity. Catastrophic epidemics and famine in the 14th century had killed an estimated one in three Chinese--35 million people.

The imperial mandate, Treasure Fleet sailor Fei Xin wrote in his diary, was to bring order "to the four quarters [of the Earth] ... as far as ships and carts would go and power of men would reach."

It was a daunting task that, on his third voyage, would lead Zheng He into a savage conflict thousands of miles from China.

In 1411 Zheng He had intervened in an earlier war on the island, pitting Hindu Tamils from the north against two mutually hostile Sinhalese Buddhist realms in the center and south. Zheng was forced to act when one of the Buddhist rulers, a rebel chieftain, attacked a Ming shore party. In a stroke of military genius, the main body of Sri Lankan troops was lured into a fruitless assault on the fleet, leaving their capital open to easy conquest.

The episode marked the only significant overseas land battle ever fought by a Chinese imperial army.

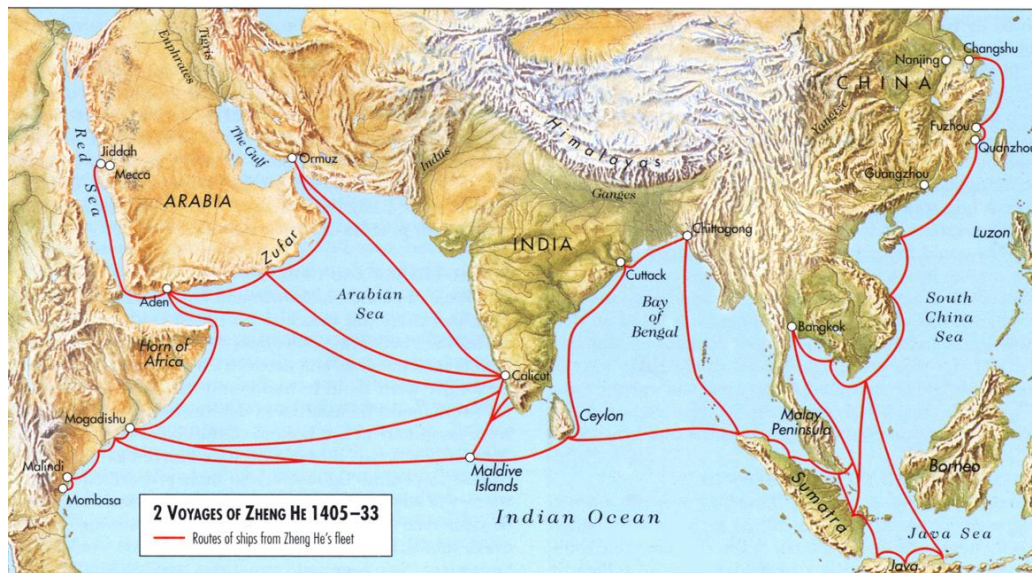
The stela's three inscriptions were addressed, respectively, to Buddha, Siva, and Allah, offering thanks for their compassion and moral virtue, and seeking their protective blessing for the voyages' aims. The chief Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim shrines of Sri Lanka, the stela recorded, were to be presented with equal offerings of gold, silver, silk, and other precious gifts.

Elsewhere in Asia this is the epoch when entire cities were put to the sword in the name of Buddha, Siva, or Allah. It is the epoch of the Inquisition in Europe, when thousands of Muslims and Jews were burned at the stake. In the context of his century's religious fanaticism, Zheng He's Dondra stela was an ecumenical manifesto far ahead of its time--indeed, ahead of our own fanatic times--a plea for tolerance, articulated in three languages.

"We have traversed more than one hundred thousand li [about 40,000 miles] of

immense water spaces and have beheld in the ocean huge waves like mountains rising sky-high, and we have set eyes on barbarian regions far away hidden in a blue transparency of light vapors, while our sails loftily unfurled like clouds day and night."

When the Treasure Fleet returned to China at the end of its sixth voyage in 1422, its admiral and many of his crewmen had been abroad almost constantly for nearly two decades. They must have felt lost in their own homeland.



The void left by China's withdrawal from foreign engagement, he points out, was filled within the next few decades by European imperialism -- and Zheng's sophisticated combination of peacekeeping, trade, and diplomacy yielded to crude military conquest.

But policy calculations in any epoch are subject to changing conditions. In the late 1420s Ming China came under pressure, by land from a new wave of Mongol invasions, by sea from Japanese pirates, and across its far-flung tributary empire from local warlords. Zhu Zhanji began to reconsider his policy on naval expeditions -- though without the sense of unblinking commitment that had characterized his grandfather. Amid rancorous debate in the court, a halfhearted decision was made to reactivate the Treasure Fleet.

It would not affect the long-term balance sheet of Ming affairs; by the end of the 1430s the advocates of isolationism in the imperial court had won a decisive victory. But before that struggle ended, the great ships would sail again, on their seventh and final voyage.

Almost every destination on this final expedition would be familiar. It is difficult not to conclude that the most notable exception had been chosen by the admiral himself: Mecca.

In the 15th century Islam framed the Western Ocean. All of the Treasure Fleet's routes had been charted, long before, by Arab and Persian captains. Every one of the fleet's destinations on the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf had a significant Muslim community.

Islam had also been the starting point of Zheng He's immense journey. His surname, before Zhu Di changed it on an imperial whim, was Ma -- the Chinese transcription of Muhammad.

In their solemn turns around the Kaaba, they embodied a central quality of Islam -- the celebration of humble, egalitarian virtue. They brought the story of Zheng He, who had recognized that virtue in his father, full circle.

Some Zheng biographers contend that he returned to China with the fleet, dying two years later in Nanjing. But the tomb in his name that stands on a suburban hillside outside the old Ming capital appears to be empty. It is more likely that the great admiral died on the return voyage

and was buried at sea off the Malabar Coast.

If so, he found in death what he had sought throughout his extraordinary life: not a warrior's violent end on a battlefield, but a visionary's peace in "a blue transparency of light vapors."

Several decades before Columbus sailed to the New World, a Chinese admiral named Zheng He made even more ambitious voyages. Between 1405 and 1433, Zheng He led seven major expeditions, commanding the largest armada the world would see for the next five centuries. Not until World War I did the West mount anything comparable.

Zheng He's fleet included 28,000 sailors on 300 ships, the longest of which were 400 feet and 160 feet wide. By comparison, Columbus in 1492 had 90 sailors on three ships, the biggest of which was 85 feet long. Zheng He's armada included supply ships to carry horses and as many as 20 tankers to carry fresh water. His crew included interpreters for Arabic and other languages, astrologers to forecast the weather, astronomers to study the stars, pharmacologists to collect medicinal plants, ship-repair specialists, doctors and even two protocol officers to help organize official receptions.

Zheng He's fleet reached Africa and could easily have continued around the Cape of Good Hope and established direct trade with Europe. But the Chinese regarded Europe as a backward region and had little interest in the wool, beads and wine Europe had to trade. China preferred the goods that Africa traded -- ivory, medicines, spices, and exotic woods.

In Zheng He's time, China and India together accounted for more than half of the world's gross national product. Indeed, as recently as 1820, China accounted for 29 percent of the global economy and India another 16 percent.

But during the 1400s, China retreated into relative isolation. By 1500 the Chinese government had made it a capital offense to build a boat with more than two masts, and in 1525 the Government ordered the destruction of all oceangoing ships. A century earlier, China had a fleet of 3,500 ships.