

The Great Chinese Mariner Zheng He [Cheng Ho]

鄭和

Little did the famous Muslim geographer, Ibn Battuta know, that about 22 years after his historic visit to China, the Mongol Dynasty (called the Yuan Dynasty in China) would be overthrown? The Ming Dynasty (1368 - 1644) would begin. A Muslim boy would help a Chinese prince. That prince would become emperor and the boy would grow up to be the "Admiral of the Chinese Fleet."

His name... **Zheng He**.

The ships that he would sail throughout the Indian Ocean would retrace some of the same routes taken by Ibn Battuta, but he would be in huge boats called "junks". He would go to East Africa, Makkah, Persian Gulf, and throughout the Indian Ocean.

Speak of the world's first navigators and the names Christopher Columbus or Vasco da Gama flash through a Western mind. Little known are the remarkable feats that a Chinese Muslim Zheng He (1371-1433) had accomplished decades before the two European adventurers.



A Muslim and a warrior, Zheng He helped transform China into the regions, and perhaps the world's, superpower of his time.

In 1405, Zheng was chosen to lead the biggest naval expedition in history up to that time. Over the next 28 years (1405-1433), he commanded seven fleets that visited 37 countries, through Southeast Asia to faraway Africa and Arabia. In those years, China had by far the biggest ships of the time. In 1420 the Ming navy dwarfed the combined navies of Europe.

Ma He, as he was originally known, was born in 1371 to a poor ethnic Hui (Chinese Muslims) family in Yunnan Province, Southwest China. The boy's grandfather and father once made an overland pilgrimage to Makkah. Their travels contributed much to young Ma's education. He grew up speaking Arabic and Chinese, learning much about the world to the west and its geography and customs.

Recruited as a promising servant for the Imperial household at the age of ten, Ma was assigned two years later to the retinue of the then Duke Yan, who would later usurp the throne as the emperor Yong Le. Ma accompanied the Duke on a series of successful military campaigns and played a crucial role in the capture of Nanjing, then the capital. Ma was thus awarded the supreme command of the Imperial Household Agency and was given the surname Zheng.

Emperor Yong Le tried to boost his damaged prestige as a usurper by a display of China's might abroad, sending spectacular fleets on great voyages and by bringing foreign ambassadors to his court. He also put

foreign trade under a strict **Imperial monopoly** by taking control from overseas Chinese merchants. Command of the fleet was given to his favorite Zheng He, an impressive figure said to be over eight feet tall.

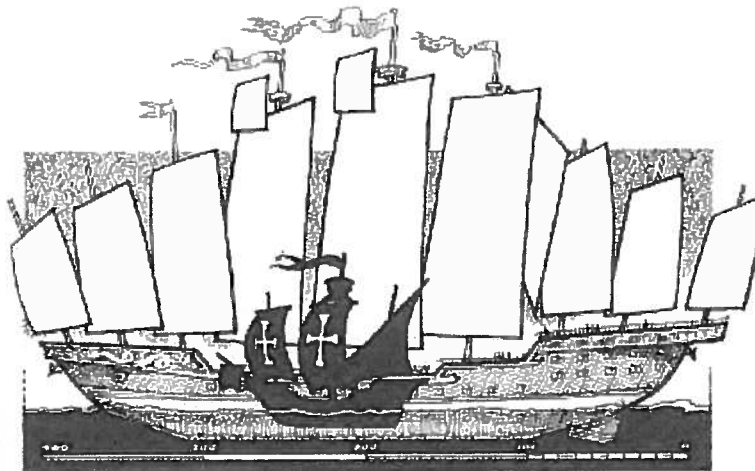
A great fleet of big ships, with nine masts and manned by 500 men, each set sail in July 1405, half a century before Columbus's voyage to America. There were great treasure ships over 300-feet long and 150-feet wide, the biggest being 440-feet long and 186-across, capable of carrying 1,000 passengers. Most of the ships were built at the Dragon Bay shipyard near Nanjing, the remains of which can still be seen today.

Zheng He's first fleet included 27,870 men on 317 ships, including sailors, clerks, interpreters, soldiers, artisans, medical men and meteorologists. On board were large quantities of cargo including silk goods, porcelain, gold and silverware, copper utensils, iron implements and cotton goods. The fleet sailed along China's coast to Champa close to Vietnam and, after crossing the South China Sea, visited Java, Sumatra and reached Sri Lanka by passing through the Strait of Malacca. On the way back it sailed along the west coast of India and returned home in 1407. Envoys from Calicut in India and several countries in Asia and the Middle East also boarded the ships to pay visits to China. Zheng He's second and third voyages taken shortly after, followed roughly the same route.

In the fall of 1413, Zheng He set out with 30,000 men to Arabia on his fourth and most ambitious voyage. From Hormuz he coasted around the Arabian boot to Aden at the mouth of the Red Sea. The arrival of the fleet caused a sensation in the region, and 19 countries sent ambassadors to board Zheng He's ships with gifts for Emperor Yong Le.

In 1417, after two years in Nanjing and touring other cities, Zheng He escorted the foreign envoys home. On this trip, he sailed down the east coast of Africa, stopping at Mogadishu, Matindi, Mombassa and Zanzibar and may have reached Mozambique. The sixth voyage in 1421 also went to the African coast. Emperor Yong Le died in 1424 shortly after Zheng He's return. Yet, in 1430 the admiral was sent on a final seventh voyage. Now 60 years old, Zheng He revisited the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea and Africa and died on his way back in 1433 in India.

Zheng He's flag "treasure ship" was four hundred feet long - much larger than Columbus's. In this drawing, the two flagships are superimposed to give a clear idea of the relative size of these two ships.



*Zheng He's treasure ship (four hundred feet) and Columbus's St. Maria (eighty-five feet).
(Illustration by Jan Adkins, 1993.)*

Columbus's ship St. Maria was only 85 feet long whilst Zheng He's flag ship was an astonishing 400 feet. Imagine six centuries ago, a mighty armada of Zheng He's ships crossing the China Sea, then venturing west to Ceylon, Arabia, and East Africa. The fleet consisting of giant nine-masted junks, escorted by dozens of supply ships, water tankers, transports for cavalry horses, and patrol boats. The armada's crew totaling more than 27,000 sailors and soldiers.

Loaded with Chinese silk and porcelain, the junks visited ports around the Indian Ocean. Here, Arab and African merchants exchanged the spices, ivory, medicines, rare woods, and pearls so eagerly sought by the Chinese imperial court.

Seven times, from 1405 to 1433, the treasure fleets set off for the unknown. These seven great expeditions brought a vast web of trading links -- from Taiwan to the Persian Gulf -- under Zheng He's imperial control. This took place half a century before the first Europeans, rounding the tip of Africa in frail Portuguese caravels, 'discovered' the Indian Ocean.

In summary, before the 15th century, the Chinese were ahead in oceangoing ship technology, with larger compartmented ships and efficient fore-and-aft lugsails on multiple masts. In the 15th century, the Chinese and the Europeans were in rough overall parity. The Chinese were ahead in ship size and hull construction, and the Portuguese were ahead in the arts of navigation, and there was parity in sail technology (the Chinese with battened lugsails, the Portuguese with lateen sails). Neither had a distinct overall advantage. Both were technologically capable of great voyages of discovery, mercantile enterprise, and colonization. In tracing the developments, what is distinctive is that the rate of progress in nautical technology of the West was considerably faster than that of the East. By the 16th century, the West was clearly superior in ocean-going maritime technology (especially considering the regression that occurred in China due to policy influences).

