

Ming Maritime Expeditions

Míng Cháo hánghǎi huódòng 明朝航海活动

The Ming Maritime Expeditions of the early fifteenth century, led by the court eunuch Zheng He, were China's greatest explorations before the twentieth century. The seven expeditions to Asia and Africa were for purposes of trade and diplomacy, not exploration.

During the early years of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) China, rather than viewing itself as the Middle Kingdom, which its name 中国 (*zhongguo*) implies, sent explorers to sea in the seven Ming Maritime Expeditions. The world beyond its borders was not entirely unknown to China; invasions by land had been common throughout China's history, and Japan was close by sea. But China's self-sufficiency had precluded any need for maritime commerce, and the expeditions shifted the nation's attention to a world much larger than was commonly known.

The Ming Maritime Expeditions were led by Zheng He (郑和, also transliterated as "Chong Ho," 1371–1433) and are generally regarded as China's greatest explorations before the twentieth century. They were completed decades before European explorers of the late fifteenth century discovered North America.

In the late 1990s several popular books described the expeditions as a departure from Chinese isolationism. But during the fourteenth century Chinese merchants had engaged in trade with the same regions that Zheng He visited decades later. The difference between the trade

missions of the late Mongol era (to the mid-thirteenth century) and the Ming Maritime Expeditions is that trade during the late Mongol era (Yuan dynasty, 1279–1368) was carried out by private merchants, whereas those of the early Ming dynasty were funded and organized by the Chinese government.

Much of the change in the Chinese perception of the outside world was the result of moving the capital from Peking (Beijing) to Nanking (Nanjing), which had better access to the sea and to shipping trade routes. The government-supported Ming Maritime Expeditions began with the third Ming emperor, Zhu Di 朱棣, during his reign as the Yongle (永乐, also transliterated as "Yung-lo") emperor (1402–1424) and ended with a single voyage authorized by his successor and grandson Zhu Zhanji 朱瞻基, the Xuande 宣德 emperor from 1425 to 1435.

Although commercial trade served its own purposes, government-organized expeditions helped to support the tributary state system. This political arrangement helped to establish China as the hegemon (influencer) among all the countries with which it dealt, with the lesser countries sending emissaries and gifts to the Chinese capital and China extending its protection to those countries.

At his birth during Zheng He was named "Ma He" ("Ma" was short for "Muhammad"), and his family's Muslim religion was tolerated. But in 1368 the Yuan dynasty collapsed, and with the rise of the Ming dynasty this toleration ended, and Ma He's family was killed. As a young boy, Ma He was castrated but lived to serve the Ming dynasty as a eunuch. He was particularly useful to his new emperor because as a young child Ma He had

heard his grandfather's stories of traveling to Mecca for the hajj (pilgrimage). Although commercial traders had traveled to such regions, official missions for the purposes of diplomacy had not been made until Ma He, under his new name "Zheng He" as an attendant to Emperor Zhu Di, was authorized to plan a series of missions for trade and diplomacy.

Using the resources of the Ming empire, Zheng He directed the building of a fleet of "treasure ships" based on the design of traditional transport ships but far larger. The exact size of the largest of these ships is uncertain because of inconsistent standards of measurement, but even conservative estimates would have given the ships lengths in excess of 122 meters. In addition to the large transport ships, Zheng He's fleet included naval ship to provide defense, ships to carry animals, including horses, and ships to carry supplies. To prepare for the long expeditions, Zheng He undertook shorter voyages to Japan before departing on the first of the Ming Maritime Expeditions in late 1405.

The expeditions were not voyages of discovery. Maps of the coasts of Asia and Africa had been made before the expeditions began, and maritime trade from China and other countries had been going on for centuries. The Ming expeditions were not for trade as much as for the diplomatic expansion of China's influence.

First Voyage

The first of the expeditions had the goal of reaching the western Indian city of Calicut (modern Kozhikode). The fleet of more than 250 ships and 27,000 men departed Nanjing in July 1405, traveling south to Taiping in Fujian Province. Navigation in sailing ships of the time relied on favorable winds, so the fleet had to wait until late that year to depart for its first stop in the kingdom of Champa, where the city of Qui Nhon is located in modern Vietnam.

From Champa the Ming fleet continued southward to Majapahit on the island of Java in what is now Indonesia. From there the fleet proceeded northwest to Sumatra, then through the Strait of Malacca into the Indian Ocean. Then, as now, ships in the Strait of Malacca were in danger from pirates.

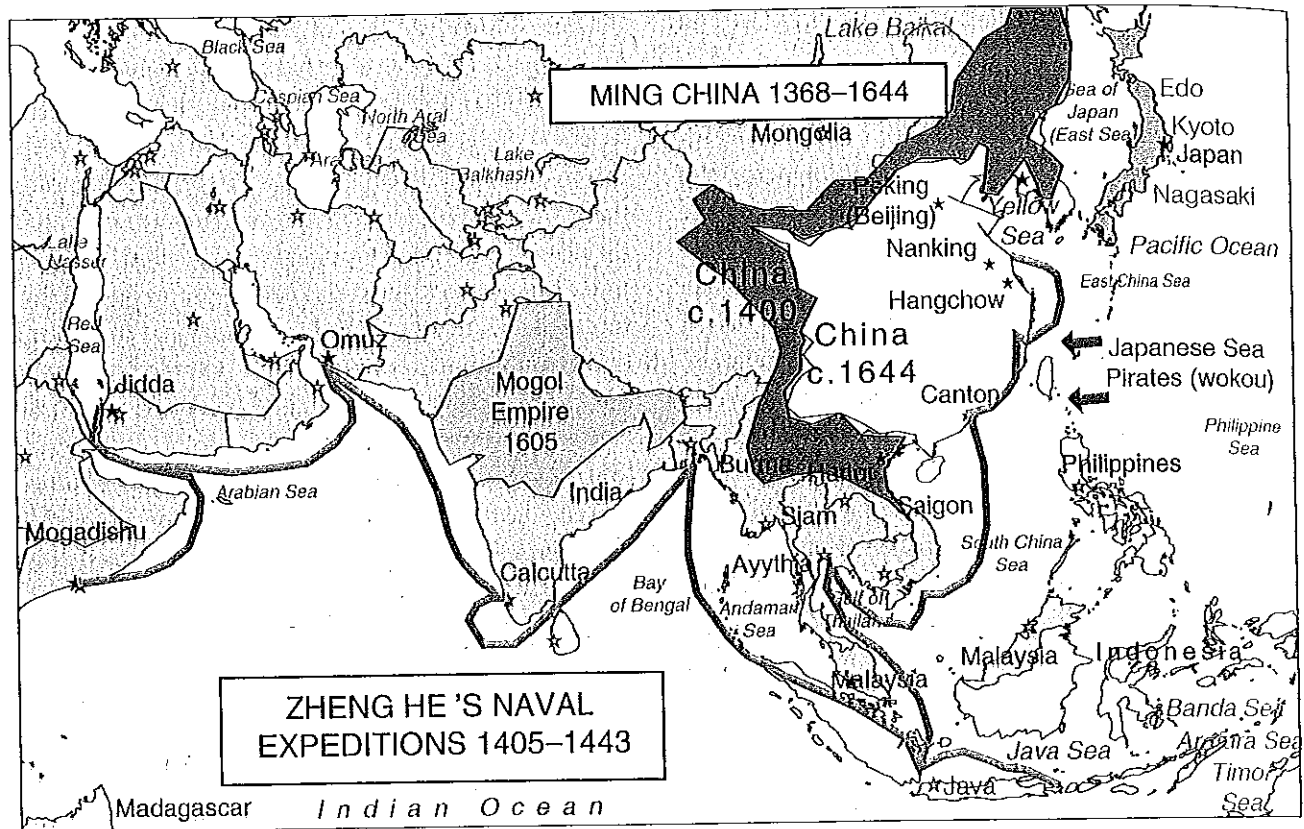
After the fleet was clear of the straits, it continued west for an unsuccessful visit with the king of Ceylon (modern Sri Lanka). Recognizing that the Chinese were not welcome there, Zheng He continued to the fleet's destination of Calicut. Feeling properly received by the ruler there, the Chinese engaged in several months of trading the materials they had brought for other goods native to India. The stay in Calicut was not simply for purposes of trade; the fleet had to wait for the seasonal shift of the trade winds for its return to China. On the return voyage Zheng He captured the pirate Chen Zuyi in the Strait of Malacca, destroyed or captured several of the pirate's ships, and brought Chen Zuyi back to Nanjing to be executed. The fleet arrived home in early 1407. Because of the success of this voyage, Zheng He was ordered to prepare immediately for another.

Second Voyage

The second voyage of the Ming fleet was to return to Calicut with stops at Champa and Java, as had the first voyage. The fleet also stopped in Siam (modern Thailand) and the Indian kingdom of Cochin (Kochi), located south of Calicut. However, Zheng He did not accompany the fleet on this voyage; instead the fleet was commanded by two other eunuchs who took part in ceremonies recognizing Mana Vikraman, the new king of Calicut. In 1407 the fleet returned to China, where it remained for two years.

Third Voyage

The third voyage was more ambitious than the first two, going to countries and ports that had not been visited on the earlier expeditions. Zheng He had to deal with several difficult diplomatic and military confrontations. Leaving Nanjing in late 1409, the fleet proceeded as usual to Champa, then passed through the Strait of Malacca, this time stopping at the port of Malacca. One of the reasons for visiting Malacca was to reinforce the diplomatic relationship between Malacca and China because the king of Siam had challenged Malacca's relationship with the Ming empire.



From Malacca the fleet continued to Sumatra, then on to Ceylon in an attempt to improve relations with the island. However, Ceylon was in the midst of a civil war, and Zheng He's diplomacy was rebuffed by one of the warring factions. The Ming fleet continued to Kollam, a port city south of Cochin, then to Cochin and Calicut for a third visit.

Zheng He then returned to Ceylon to deal with the insubordination he had received on his previous visit. Accounts of how he dealt with this matter differ: He either captured the royal family of Ceylon or captured the leader of the group who had rebuffed him earlier. In any case, Zheng He took his captives back to China in June of 1411. His captives were pardoned and returned to Ceylon.

Fourth Voyage

The fourth expedition, which again was led by Zheng He, was the most far-ranging of all the voyages. After two years in China the fleet departed in 1413, visiting the

ports that had been visited before (Champa, Java, Malacca, Sumatra, Ceylon, Cochin, and Calicut). The fleet continued westward as far as Hormuz, the entry to the Persian Gulf, where the fleet traded its goods for those of the Arab world.

The fleet had divided in two on this voyage, with another of the royal eunuchs, Yang Min, visiting the western Indian kingdom of Bengal (modern Bangladesh). The king of Bengal gave Yang Min an exotic gift for the Chinese emperor: a giraffe. For the Chinese who had never seen such a creature, the giraffe was mistaken for the mythical beast *qilin* 麒麟, a form of dragon known to other east Asian cultures (*kirin* in Japanese, *girin* 기린 in Korean). Zheng He's portion of the fleet traveled as far south as Mogadishu in what is now Somalia before returning to Nanjing in the summer of 1415.

The next year a major engineering project that would lead to the end of the Ming voyages was completed. The Grand Canal 大运河, which extended from Hongzhou southwest of Shanghai to Peking (modern Beijing), a distance of nearly 1,800 kilometers, was repaired. This canal

had been completed in the sixth century (Sui dynasty, 581–618 CE) but had fallen into disrepair because of annual floods. Part of the Ming dynasty's engineering projects included the repair of the canal.

Fifth Voyage

The Chinese emperor ordered Zheng He to embark on another voyage in late 1416; this voyage began in 1417 when the winds became favorable. Much as the fourth voyage had progressed, the fifth voyage of the Ming fleet visited the usual ports in southeast Asia before continuing to the Maldiv Islands, Hormuz, Mogadishu, Kenya, and Aden. This expedition had diplomatic goals as well as trade, and in particular Zheng He was to establish better relations with the Muslims who ruled much of this part of the world. The fleet returned to China in 1419.

Sixth Voyage

The sixth expedition was the shortest for Zheng He, who left with the fleet in early 1421 but returned with a part of it later that year. The rest of the fleet continued to Hormuz, east Africa, and ports on the Arabian Peninsula under the command of another of the court eunuchs. The longer voyage returned foreign diplomats to their home countries before it returned to China in 1422.

Seventh and Final Voyage

The final voyage of the Ming fleet was to be the grandest; some accounts claim that more than three hundred ships sailed. The fleet had been in its home waters for more than six years before departing China in late 1430 or early 1431. Nevertheless, Zheng He visited the usual ports of

Champa, Java, Palembang on Sumatra, Malacca, Ceylon, and Calicut, and one part of the fleet went on to Hormuz and other places on the Arabian Peninsula. After the fleet joined up at Calicut during its return voyage, Zheng He died while the fleet was at sea.

The end of Ming exploration came with the death of Emperor Zhu Di and the ascent of his grandson Zhu Zhanji. Zhu Zhanji's views of the outside world were more typical of leaders other than Zhu Di, and China returned to its isolation. The ships of the Ming fleet fell into disrepair. The Ming Maritime Expeditions had greatly expanded the range of China's tributary states, but the end of the expeditions would eventually reduce the influence of China in the vicinity of the Indian Ocean littoral (coastal region).

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