

China's greatest seaman

Zheng He (1371 AD - 1433AD) is considered the best explorer of the oceans in Chinese history. Sarah Brennan tells of his 15th century voyages - a huge achievement by a huge man

By 1404, the campaign of terror along the Silk Road launched by Asian conqueror Tamerlane made it essential for China's third Ming emperor, Yongle, to establish secure trade routes to the West by sea. For the next 28 years, he sent seven mighty armadas from China to as far afield as Africa, bringing China's maritime influence to its all-time peak. These armadas were all led by a Muslim eunuch named Zheng He.

Zheng was born in 1371, and at the age of 10, was captured, castrated and placed in the service of Zhu Di, prince of Yan. He rose rapidly through the ranks, and when Zhu finally became Emperor Yongle, was promoted to admiral of the fleet and first envoy.

Zheng was reportedly more than two metres tall and 1.5 metres wide, with glaring eyes, perfect teeth and a very loud voice. In 1405, he set off on the first of his voyages to the West, to explore, to trade and, above all, to show off the might of the Chinese empire.

The first armada left Nanjing (南京) with an amazing 317 ships, packed with silks, porcelain and lacquerware for trade, and carrying 27,870 men. This floating city included 62 massive "treasure junks" with nine masts, and decks reputedly longer than a modern football field. They were accompanied by supply ships, water tankers, troop and horse transports, warships and patrol boats.

Zheng's first expedition lasted two years; he visited Champa (Vietnam), Java, Sumatra and Sri Lanka, until finally reaching Calicut on

the west coast of India. On his return, Zheng built massive warehouses in the Straits of Malacca for sorting all the spices, ivory, medicines, rare woods, pearls, precious metals and gemstones accumulated on his voyages.

His later trips brought trading routes from Taiwan all the way to the Persian Gulf under Chinese control. Understandably, the countries visited by these massive armadas were impressed with China's power. One of Zheng's duties was to secure their rulers' allegiance to the emperor. If they refused, Zheng would kidnap them and take them to China as prisoner. During his travels, about 40 kingdoms sent envoys to China with Zheng to pay their respects to the emperor.

During Zheng's fourth trip in 1414, some ships of his fleet visited Bengal (now Bangladesh), where the sailors saw a giraffe,

which an African king had given the Bengali ruler. The king was persuaded to part with his giraffe, which was shipped to Nanjing, where court philosophers declared it a unicorn, and a sign of heaven's blessing on the emperor's reign. Promising to replace the giraffe, Zheng sailed to Somalia, returning with a cargo of lions, leopards, ostriches, zebras and oryxes for the delighted Bengali emperor.

Sadly, during his seventh voyage from 1431 to 1433, Zheng died in Calicut at the age of 62. He was buried at sea.

By then, Confucians had usurped the power

of the eunuchs in the Ming court, declaring it improper to travel abroad while one's parents were alive, and saying that "barbarian" nations had little to offer the Middle Kingdom. In addition, the threat of new Mongol invasions from the north diverted investment away from the expensive treasure fleets.

Within a century, China's massive navy was basically destroyed. Thus began many centuries of China's official isolation from the West. Many believe that, had China continued to invest in its treasure fleets and maintained its domination of trade in the Indian Ocean, the history of the world would have been very different.



- Some records imply that Zheng's first voyage was part of a massive hunt for the emperor's predecessor, who had fled in disguise.
- Although born a Muslim, Zheng was more spiritually open, his favourite god being Tin Hau, the goddess of sailors.
- Some historians believe Zheng's ships may have visited Australia.
- On the mainland, Zheng is celebrated on Maritime Day (July 11).

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armadas (n) 艦隊
maritime (adj) 海事的
eunuch (n) 宦官

accumulated (v) 累積
usurped (v) 篡奪
barbarian (adj) 野蠻的

