

Name _____ Date _____ Class _____ Period _____

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MING CHINA AND ZHENG HE

Introduction

In 1279 the Mongol leader Kublai Khan conquered China and founded the Yuan dynasty. After Kublai Khan's death in 1294, however, the Yuan dynasty weakened. This weakness, combined with Chinese hatred of Mongol rule, led to rebellion, and the rise of a new dynasty: The Ming. The **Ming Dynasty** is most famous for two accomplishments. They built the Great Wall as we know it today, the incredible stone structure stretching across the edge of the steppe, a symbol and a message to the Mongols and to the world, that China would never again be conquered by steppe nomads. The second accomplishment was a short-lived but very impressive series of Chinese sea voyages throughout the Indian Ocean world led by the famous admiral **Zheng He**.

Directions: Read the article on the back, and answer the following questions.

What are the most important things to know about Zheng He?

What technology made his voyages possible? Describe the ships.

What was the purpose of the voyages led by Zheng He? How did they help China?

Why did the Ming Dynasty end its tribute voyages?

How might history have taken a different course if the Ming Dynasty had kept their fleet and continued its overseas voyages?

15th Century Mariners: Zheng He

John Green, *Crash Course: World History* (adapted)

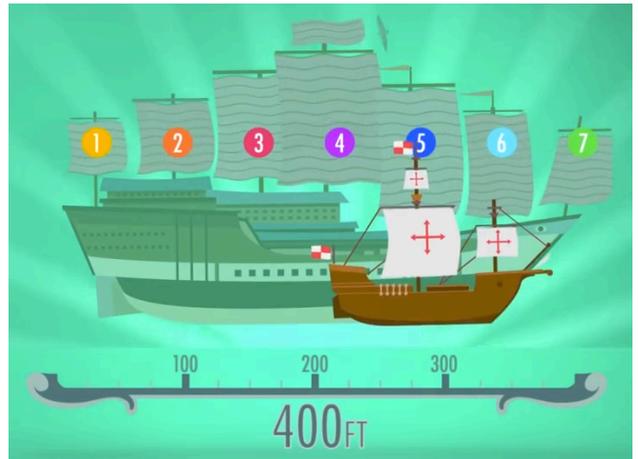
Two Surprising Personal Details



Let's begin with Zheng He, who is probably the greatest admiral you've never have heard of. Couple of important things about Zheng He, First, he was a Muslim. That may seem strange until you consider that by the late 14th century, China had long experience with Muslims, especially when they were ruled by, wait for it... The Mongols. Secondly, Zheng He was a eunuch. Fortunately, 15th century China had excellent general anesthesia, so I'm sure it didn't hurt at all when they castrated him – what's that? They didn't have any anesthesia? Oh, boy... Right, so Zheng He rose from humble beginnings to lose both of his testicles, and become the greatest admiral in Chinese history.

Giant Treasure Ships

Between 1405 and 1433, Zheng He led seven voyages throughout the Indian Ocean, the expeditions of the so-called treasure ships, and they were huge. Columbus' first voyage consisted of three ships. Zheng He led an armada of over 300, with a crew of over 27,000 – more than half of London's population at the time. And some of these ships were, well, enormous. The flagships, known as the treasure ships, were over 400 feet long and had 7 or more masts. See that little tiny ship there in front of the Treasure Ship? That's a to-scale rendering of Christopher Columbus' flagship, the Santa Maria.



The Purpose of the Voyages

Zheng He wasn't an explorer: The Indian Ocean trade routes were already known to him and other Chinese sailors. He visited Africa, India, and the Middle East, and in a way, his journeys were trade missions, but not in the sense of filling his ships up with stuff to be sold later for higher prices. At the time, China was the leading manufacturer of quality goods in the world, and there wasn't anything they actually needed to import. What they needed was prestige and respect so that people would continue to see China as the center of the economic universe, so there was a tribute system through which foreign rulers or their ambassadors would come to China and engage in a debasing ritual called the kowtow wherein they acknowledged the superiority of the Chinese emperor and offered him - or her, but usually him - gifts in exchange for the right to trade with China. The opportunity to humble yourself before the Chinese emperor was so valuable that many a prince was happy to jump on a treasure ship and sail back to China with Zheng He. Also, these tribute missions brought lots of crazy things to China, including exotic animals: from Africa, Zheng He brought back a zoo's worth of rhinos, zebras, and even giraffes.



Why Did They Stop?

So the Chinese were world leaders in naval technology, and they wanted to dominate trade here in the Indian Ocean. So why, then, did these voyages end? One reason was that Zheng He couldn't live forever, and sure enough, he didn't. Also his patron (financial supporter), the Yongle Emperor, died. And the emperor's successors weren't very interested in maritime (overseas) trade. They were more concerned with protecting China against its traditional enemies, nomads from the steppe. To do this, they built a rather famous wall. The Great Wall was mostly built under the Ming Dynasty using resources that they only had because they stopped building gigantic ships. Just imagine what might have happened if the Ming emperors had embraced a different strategy. One that was based on outreach instead of isolationism.