Zheng He, Ming China's Great Admiral

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Scholars of Zheng He's life always wonder how history would be different if the first Portuguese explorers to round the tip of Africa and move into the Indian Ocean in the 15th century had met up with the admiral's huge Chinese fleet. Would Europe have gone on to dominate much of the world in the 18th and 19th centuries? Zheng He is surrounded by such "what if" questions. However, it's important not to lose sight of his amazing accomplishments as they actually happened, among all the counterfactual speculation. At the beginning of the 1400s, Zheng He and his sailors set out to show off China's might across the world. Where did this remarkable admiral get his start?

Zheng He's Early Life:
Zheng He was born in 1371 in the city now called Jinning, in Yunnan Province. His given name was "Ma He," indicative of his family's Hui Muslim origins, since Ma is the Chinese version of "Mohammad." Zheng He's great-great-great-grandfather, Sayyid Ajjal Shams al-Din Omar, had been a Persian governor of the province under the Mongolian Emperor Kublai Khan, founder of the Yuan Dynasty, which ruled China from 1279 to 1368. Ma He's father and grandfather were both known as "Hajji," the honorific title bestowed upon Muslim men who make the hajj (pilgrimage) to Mecca. Ma He's father remained loyal to the Yuan Dynasty even as the rebel forces of what would become the Ming Dynasty conquered larger and larger swathes of China.

In 1381, the Ming army killed Ma He's father and captured the boy. Just 10 years old, he was made into a eunuch and sent to Beiping (now Beijing) to serve in the household of 21-year-old Zhu Di, the Prince of Yan, who later became the Yongle Emperor. Ma He grew to be 7 Chinese feet tall (probably around 6' 6"), with "a voice as loud as a huge bell." He excelled at fighting and military tactics, studied the works of Confucius and Mencius, and soon became one of the prince's closest confidants. In the 1390s, the Prince of Yan launched a series of attacks against the resurgent Mongols, who were based just north of his fiefdom. Ma He fought side by side with him on all the prince's campaigns.

Zheng He's Patron Takes the Throne:
The first emperor of the Ming Dynasty, Prince Zhu Di’s eldest brother, died in 1398, after naming his grandson Zhu Yunwen as his successor. Zhu Di did not take kindly to his nephew's elevation to the throne, and lead an army against him in 1399. Ma He was one of his commanding officers. By 1402, Zhu Di had captured the Ming capital at Nanjing and defeated his nephew's forces. He had himself crowned as the Yongle Emperor. Zhu Yunwen probably died in his burning palace, although rumors persisted that he had escaped and become a Buddhist monk. Due to Ma He's key role in the coup, the new emperor awarded him a mansion in Nanjing as well as the honorific name "Zheng He."

The new Yongle Emperor faced serious legitimacy problems, due to his seizure of the throne and possible murder of his nephew. According to Confucian tradition, the first son and his descendants should always inherit, but the Yongle Emperor was the fourth son. Therefore, the court’s Confucian scholars refused to support him, and he came to rely almost entirely upon his corps of eunuchs - Zheng He most of all. In order to secure his place on the throne, and convince his subjects of his legitimacy, the Yongle Emperor began massive projects such as repairing the Grand Canal between the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers. He had plans of a more international kind, as well.

The Treasure Fleet Sets Sail:
Zheng He's most important role in his master's service, and the reason he is remembered today, was as the commander in chief of the new treasure fleet, and as the emperor’s principal envoy to the peoples of the Indian Ocean basin. The Yongle Emperor appointed him to head the massive fleet of 317 junks (junks = type
of Chinese ships), crewed by over 27,000 men, that set out from Nanjing in the fall of 1405. At the age of 35, Zheng He had achieved the highest rank ever for a eunuch in Chinese history.

With a mandate to collect tribute and establish ties with rulers all around the Indian Ocean shores, Zheng He and his armada set forth for Calicut, on India’s western coast. It would be the first of seven total voyages of the Treasure Fleet, all commanded by Zheng He, between 1405 and 1432. During his career as a naval commander, Zheng He negotiated trade pacts, fought pirates, installed puppet kings, and brought back tribute for the Yongle Emperor in the form of jewels, medicines and exotic animals, among other things. He and his crew travelled and traded with not only with the city-states of what is now Indonesia and Malaysia, with Siam and India, but even with the Arabian ports of modern-day Yemen and Saudi Arabia, and as far as Somalia and Kenya.

Although Zheng He was raised Muslim, and visited the shrines of Islamic holy men in Fujian Province and elsewhere, he also venerated Tianfei, the Celestial Consort and protector of sailors. Tianfei had been a mortal woman, living in the 900s, who achieved enlightenment as a teenager. Gifted with foresight, she was able to warn her brother of an approaching storm at sea, saving his life. Zheng He and his crew believed that Tianfei saved them from a massive storm during their first voyage. Grateful for her help, Zheng He was instrumental in the 1407-08 remodeling of a temple dedicated to her in Meizhou, the city of her birth.

**Death of the Yongle Emperor:**
In 1424, the Yongle Emperor passed away. Zheng He had made six voyages in his name and brought back countless emissaries from foreign lands to bow before him, but the cost of these excursions weighed heavily on the Chinese treasury. In addition, the Mongols and other nomadic peoples were a constant military threat along China’s northern and western borders. The Yongle Emperor's cautious and scholarly elder son, Zhu Gaozhi, became the Hongxi Emperor. During his nine-month rule, Zhu Gaozhi ordered an end to all treasure fleet construction and repairs. A Confucianist, he believed that the voyages drained too much money from the country. He preferred to spend on fending off the Mongols and feeding people in famine-ravaged provinces instead.

**Zheng He's Final Voyage:**
When the Hongxi Emperor died less than a year into his reign in 1426, his 26-year-old son became the Xuande Emperor. A happy medium between his proud, mercurial grandfather and his cautious, scholarly father, the Xuande Emperor decided to send Zheng He and the treasure fleet out again. The treasure junks had been laying neglected at anchor or in dry-dock for six years, so they needed extensive repairs before they were ready to make another voyage. In 1432, the 61-year-old Zheng He set out with his largest fleet ever for one final trip around the Indian Ocean. They sailed all the way to Malindi, on Kenya’s east coast, stopping at trading ports all along the way. On the return voyage, as the fleet sailed east from Calicut, Zheng He died. He was buried at sea, although legend says that the crew returned a braid of his hair and his shoes to Nanjing for burial.

**Zheng He's Legacy:**
Although Zheng He looms as a larger-than-life figure in modern eyes both in China and abroad, Confucian scholars made serious attempts to expunge the memory of the great eunuch admiral and his voyages from history in the decades following his death. They feared a return to the wasteful spending on such expeditions for small return. In 1477, for example, a court eunuch requested the records of Zheng He’s voyages, with the intention of restarting the program. The scholar in charge of the records told him that the documents were lost.

Zheng He's story survived, however, in the accounts of crew members including Fei Xin, Gong Zhen and Ma Huan, who went on several of the later voyages. The treasure fleet also left stone markers at the places they visited. As sailors will, they left behind people with distinctly Chinese features in some ports, as well. Today, whether people view Zheng He as an emblem of Chinese diplomacy and "soft power," or as a symbol of the country’s aggressive overseas expansion, all must agree that the admiral and his fleet were among the wonders of the world.
Ancient Chinese Explorers
Evan Hadingham, NOVA, PBS.org

In 1999, *New York Times* journalist Nicholas D. Kristof reported a surprising encounter on a tiny African island called Pate, just off the coast of Kenya. Here, in a village of stone huts set amongst dense mangrove trees, Kristof met a number of elderly men who told him that they were descendants of Chinese sailors, shipwrecked on Pate many centuries ago. Their ancestors had traded with the local Africans, who had given them giraffes to take back to China; then their boat was driven onto the nearby reef. Kristof noted many clues that seemed to confirm the islanders’ tale, including their vaguely Asian appearance and the presence of antique porcelain heirlooms in their homes. If Kristof’s supposition is correct, then this remote African outpost retains an echo of one of history’s most astonishing episodes of maritime exploration.

**AN ORIENTAL ARMADA**

Six centuries ago, a mighty armada of Chinese ships crossed the China Sea, then ventured west to Ceylon, Arabia, and East Africa. The fleet consisted of giant nine-masted junks, escorted by dozens of supply ships, water tankers, transports for cavalry horses, and patrol boats. The armada’s crew totaled more than 27,000 sailors and soldiers. The largest of the junks were said to be over 400 feet long and 150 feet wide. (The *Santa Maria*, Columbus’s largest ship, was a mere 90 by 30 feet and his crew numbered only 90.)

Loaded with Chinese silk, porcelain, and lacquerware, 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 Chinese 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.

With unrivaled nautical technology and countless other inventions to their credit, the Chinese were now poised to expand their influence beyond India and Africa. Here was one of history’s great turning points. Had the Chinese emperors continued their huge investments in the treasure fleets, there is little reason why they, rather than the Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch and British, should not have colonized the world. Yet less than a century later, all overseas trade was banned, and it became a capital offense to set sail from China in a multi-masted ship. What explains this astonishing reversal of policy?

**ROOTS OF CHINESE SEAPower**

The first Chinese oceangoing trade ships were built far back in the Song dynasty (c. 960-1270). But it was the subsequent Mongol emperors (the Yuan dynasty of c. 1271-1368) who commissioned the first imperial treasure fleets and founded trading posts in Sumatra, Ceylon, and southern India. When Marco Polo made his famous journey to the Mongol court, he described four-masted junks with 60 individual cabins for merchants, watertight bulkheads, and crews of up to 300.
When the Han Chinese overthrew the Mongols and founded the Ming dynasty in the later 14th century, they took over the fleet and an already extensive trade network. The enterprising spirit of the Ming era reached a climax following the rebellion of the warrior prince Zhu Di, who usurped the throne in 1402. Disapproved of by the Confucian "establishment," Zhu Di put his trust in the worldly eunuchs who had always sought their fortunes in commerce. During his revolt, Zhu Di's right-hand man had been the Muslim eunuch Zheng He, whom he now appointed to command the treasure fleet.

At the start of the first of Zheng He's epic voyages in 1403, it is said that 317 ships gathered in the port of Nanjing. As sociologist Janet Abu-Lughod notes, "The impressive show of force that paraded around the Indian Ocean during the first three decades of the 15th century was intended to signal the 'barbarian nations' that China had reassumed her rightful place in the firmament of nations—had once again become the 'Middle Kingdom' of the world."

**TREASURE JUNKS: FACT OR FICTION?**
The Ming account of the voyages that followed strains credulity: "The ships which sail the Southern Sea are like houses. When their sails are spread they are like great clouds in the sky." Were the reported dimensions of the biggest galleons—over 400 feet long by 150 wide—gross exaggerations? If accurate, these dimensions would signal the biggest wooden ships ever built. Only the mightiest wooden warships of the Victorian age approached these lengths, and several of these vessels suffered from structural problems that required extensive internal iron supports to hold the hull together. No such structures are reported in the Chinese sources.

However, in 1962, the rudderpost of a treasure ship was excavated in the ruins of one of the Ming boatyards in Nanjing. This timber was no less than 36 feet long. Reverse engineering using the proportions typical of a traditional junk indicated a hull length of around 500 feet. Unfortunately, other archeological traces of this "golden age" of Chinese seafaring remain elusive. One of the most intensively studied wrecks, found at Quanzhou in 1973, dates from the earlier Song period; this substantial double-masted ship probably sank sometime in the 1270s. Its V-shaped hull is framed around a pine keel over 100 feet long and covered with a double layer of intricately fitted cedar planking, thus clearly indicating its oceangoing character. Inside, 13 compartments held the residue of an exotic cargo of spices, shells, and fragrant woods, much of it originating in east Africa (see Asia's Undersea Archeology). The Quanzhou wreck suggests that over a century before Zheng He's fabled voyages, the Chinese were already involved in ambitious trading exploits across the Indian Ocean. Even back then, their sturdy ships equaled the largest known European vessels of the period. By inventing watertight compartments and efficient "lugsails" that enabled them to steer close to the wind, Chinese shipbuilders remained ahead of the West in the following centuries.

**EXPLOITS OF THE EUNUCH ADMIRAL**
Zheng He commemorated his adventures on a stone pillar discovered in Fujian province in the 1930s. His mission, according to the pillar, was to flaunt the might of Chinese power and collect tribute from the "barbarians from beyond the seas." On his first trip, leading more than 60 massive galleons, Zheng He visited what would later become Vietnam and reached the port of Calicut, India. On his return, he battled pirates and established massive warehouses in the Straits of Malacca for sorting all the goods accumulated on this and subsequent voyages.
While voyaging to India, the ships encountered a ferocious hurricane. Zheng He prayed to the Taoist Goddess known as the Celestial Spouse. In response, a "divine light" shone at the tips of the mast, and the storm subsided. This heavenly sign—perhaps the static electrical phenomenon known as St. Elmo's fire—led Zheng He to believe that his missions were under special divine protection.

The emperor launched Zheng He's fourth and most ambitious voyage in January 1414. Its destination was Hormuz on the Persian Gulf, where artisans strung together exquisite pearls and merchants dealt in precious stones and metals. While Zheng He lingered in the city to amass treasure for the emperor, another branch of the fleet sailed to the kingdom of Bengal in present-day Bangladesh.

Here the travelers saw a giraffe that the east African potentate of Malindi had presented to the Bengal ruler. The Chinese persuaded their hosts to part with the giraffe as a gift to the emperor and to procure another like it from Africa. When the giraffe arrived at the court in Nanjing in 1415, the emperor's philosophers identified it, despite its pair of horns, as the fabled chi'i-lin or unicorn, an animal associated with an age of exceptional peace and prosperity. As the fleet's merchants laid treasures from Arabia and India at the feet of the emperor, this omen must surely have seemed fitting.

The initial diplomatic contact with Malindi now encouraged Zheng He to plan a direct trading voyage to eastern Africa. Landing at Somalia on the coast, he found himself offered such exotic items as "dragon saliva, incense, and golden amber." But even these substances paled before the extraordinary beasts that were loaded on board his ships. Lions, leopards, "camel-birds" (ostriches), "celestial horses" (zebras), and a "celestial stag" (oryx) were shipped back to the imperial court. Here officials showered congratulations on Zheng He and bowed low in awe before the divine creatures that accompanied him.

END OF AN ERA

Toward the end of his seventh voyage in 1433, the 62-year-old Zheng He died and was said to have been buried at sea. Although he had extended the wealth and power of China over a vast realm and is even today revered as a god in remote parts of Indonesia, the tide was already turning against foreign ventures.

The conservative Confucian faction now had the upper hand. In its worldview, it was improper to go abroad while one's parents were still alive. "Barbarian" nations were seen as offering little of value to add to the prosperity already present in the Middle Kingdom.

The renovation of the massive Grand Canal in 1411 offered a quicker and safer route for transporting grain than along the coast, so the demand for oceangoing vessels plummeted.

In addition, the threat of a new Mongol invasion drew military investment away from the expensive maintenance of the treasure fleets. By 1503 the navy had shrunk to one-tenth of its size in the early Ming. The final blow came in 1525 with the order to destroy all the larger classes of ships. China was now set on its centuries-long course of xenophobic isolation.

Historians can only speculate on how differently world history might have turned out had the Ming emperors pursued a vigorous colonial policy. As it is, porcelain shards washed up on the beaches of east Africa and old men's folktales of shipwreck are among the few tangible relics of China's epic voyages of adventure.