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 and annotate the documents, and answer the following questions in full sentences.

Reclaiming China: The Rise of the Ming Dynasty
In 1368 a peasant named Zhu Yuanzhang (JOO YOO-AHN-jahng) and his rebel army overthrew the last Mongol emperor of China. Zhu took the name Hongwu, meaning “vastly martial,” and founded the Ming dynasty. Ming means “brilliant,” and Ming China lasted nearly 300 years until 1644. During this period, China’s rulers gained control of Korea, Mongolia, and parts of Central and Southeast Asia. Having expelled the Mongols, Hongwu worked to rebuild China. He reduced taxes and passed reforms to improve agriculture and trade, increasing stability and prosperity in China. In addition, Hongwu worked to eliminate Mongol influences and to revive traditional Chinese values and practices, such as Confucian principles. For example, to obtain government officials educated in Confucian ideas, he restored and improved the civil service examination system. To root out corruption, he increased the influence of censors, officials who monitored government. At the same time, Hongwu greatly expanded his power as emperor. He did away with the positions of some high-level officials and took over more control of the government. As a result, the Ming emperors were much more powerful than emperors of previous dynasties. In addition, Hongwu eliminated anyone whom he saw as challenging his authority, and over time he had thousands of his rivals killed.

Source: “The Ming and Qing Dynasties,” Susan Ramirez, et al., World History: Human Legacy

1. How were the Ming Emperors different from previous emperors? Be specific.

Interesting Facts About 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 (Chinese 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 (castrated servant) and sent to Beijing (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. 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.

Source: “Zheng He: Ming China's Great Admiral,” Kallie Szczepanski, Asian History Expert, About.com

2. How does Zheng He's faith and lineage (ancestry) reflect the diversity fostered (supported) by the Mongol rulers of China during the previous Yuan Dynasty?

3. How did Zheng He rise to a position of power within the Ming Dynasty?

Great Voyages Across the Seas

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.

**Source:** “Zheng He: Ming China's Great Admiral,” Kallie Szczepanski, Asian History Expert, About.com

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."... 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."

**Source:** “Ancient Chinese Explorers,” Evan Hadingham, NOVA, PBS.org

Like a huge floating city, the fleet sailed from port to port along the Indian Ocean. Everywhere Zheng He went, he distributed gifts including silver and silk to show Chinese superiority. As a result, more than 16 countries sent tribute to the Ming court.

**Source:** “China Limits European Contacts,” Roger Beck, et al., World History: Patterns of Interaction

4. What were the purposes behind Zheng He's voyages?

**Giant Junks!**

The Ming account of the voyages that followed strains credulity (is hard to believe): "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.

**Source:** “Ancient Chinese Explorers,” Evan Hadingham, NOVA, PBS.org

Do you think these ships were as large as the accounts say? Why or why not?
So Close Yet So Far

Why did China, with its advanced naval technology, turn its back on overseas exploration? Historians are not sure. Some speculate that the fleets were costly and did not produce profit. Also, Confucian scholars at court had little interest in overseas ventures and commerce. To them, Chinese civilization was the most successful in the world. They wanted to preserve its ancient traditions, which they saw as the source of stability. In fact, such rigid loyalty to tradition would eventually weaken China and once again leave it prey to foreign domination. Fewer than 60 years after China halted overseas expeditions, the explorer Christopher Columbus would sail west from Spain in search of a sea route to Asia. We can only wonder how the course of history might have changed if the Chinese had continued the explorations they had begun under the Ming.

Source: “The Mongol and Ming Empires,” Elizabeth Gaynor Ellis & Anthony Esler, World History

Chinese scholar-officials complained that the voyages wasted valuable resources that could be used to defend against barbarians’ attacks on the northern frontier. After the seventh voyage, in 1433, China withdrew into isolation.


The Ming faced a renewed Mongol threat to the north. To improve defense, the Ming restored China’s Great Wall. Parts of earlier walls were repaired but most of the construction was new. In fact, much of the Great Wall that is seen today was built during the Ming period.

Source: “The Ming and Qing Dynasties,” Susan Ramirez, et al., World History: Human Legacy

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?

Source: “Ancient Chinese Explorers,” Evan Hadingham, NOVA, PBS.org

5. What possible reasons may have motivated the abrupt end to overseas exploration? Give more than one.

6. Use your historical imagination. How might history have turned out differently if China had not stopped their exploration, and perhaps continued to advance and explore further?