

# Zheng He Background

In 1381, a ten year old boy for Yunan Province in southwestern China watched his father die at the hands of the Ming Dynasty's invading army and was taken prisoner. The boy, named Ma He, was castrated and forced to join the thousands of eunuchs who made up the governmental and household staffs of the royal family.

As a young man, Ma quickly rose through the ranks of the military and became a trusted advisor of the emperor. To recognize Ma's loyalty, Emperor Yongle gave him wealth, power and a noble, new names Zheng He.

The emperor also gave him a huge task. In July of 1405, Zheng He received orders to lead a fleet of ships down the coast of China, then across the ocean to India. It would be the first of seven such voyages. For the next 28 years Zheng He crisscrossed the Pacific and Indian Oceans at the helm of the largest fleet of wooden ships the world has ever known.

Emperor Yongle had several reasons for sending Zheng He on the epic mission. He wanted to explore new lands and establish new trade relationships. The emperor also had a strong desire to show the world the greatness of both China and himself. What better way to do this than to appear on the horizon with hundreds of gigantic ships, thousands of soldiers, bundles of Chinese silk, and the promise of friendship? To avoid military conflict, local leaders typically responded by offering tribute in the form of gifts and sending emissaries to pay their respects to the emperor. On only three occasions during the seven voyages did Zheng He's fleet encounter serious armed resistance—once from pirates.

Despite these glories, Zheng He's story ends with obscurity. Not long after both Zhen He and Emperor Yongle died, Chinese officials dismantled the fleet and destroyed the records of the seven voyages. One explanation is that building and maintaining the fleet while fighting the costly wars against Vietnamese and the Mongols had bankrupted the Ming treasury. Also, there was strong feelings by some in government that China did not need trade and diplomatic contact with the world. Zhen He's expeditions, they concluded, were a big mistake.

How different was this from Spain's behavior 60 years later after the 4 voyages of Columbus. Seeing the chance for trade and treasure, Spanish ships began to pour into the Americas. European colonialism soon followed. Columbus may not have discovered America, but he started something big. Compared to this, were Zheng He's voyages simply a lost opportunity?

In 2004, port cities such as Singapore and Semarang in Indonesia recognized the 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Zheng He's voyages, but the event didn't make much of a ripple around the world.



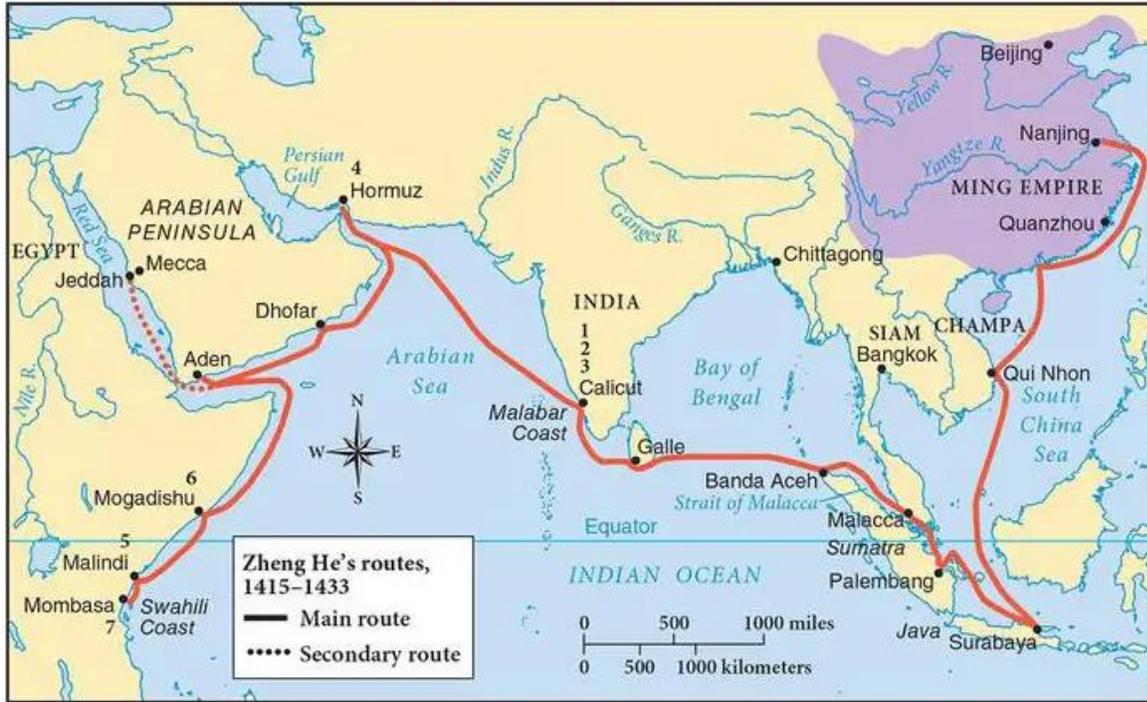
The pet giraffe of the Sultan of Bengal, brought from the Somali Ajuran Empire, and later taken to China in the thirteenth year of Yongle (1415). Zheng He often received animals as tribute.

Timeline	
1368	Beginning of Ming Dynasty
1371	Birth of Zheng He
1381	10-year old Zheng He kidnapped by government soldiers
1399	Zheng He wins major battle for Prince Yan near Beijing
1402	Prince Yan, known as Yongle, becomes Emperor of China
1403	Zheng He given highest eunuch rank and serious shipbuilding begins
1405-1433	Zheng He leads seven expeditions to India and beyond
1433	Zheng He dies toward the end of the seventh voyage
1905	An article written by Chinese scholar Liang Qichao is first modern-day recognition for Zheng He

# Document 1

Source: Map adapted from "China's Great Armada" *National Geographic*, July 2005

The Voyages of Zheng He: 1405 - 1433



Voyage	Date	Furthest Port of Call	Approx. Miles Roundtrip (From Nanjing, China)
1	1405-1407	Calicut (India)	11,600
2	1407-1409	Calicut	11,600
3	1409-1411	Calicut	11,600
4	1413-1415	Hormuz (Iran)	14,500
5	1417-1419	Malindi (Kenya)	19,000
6	1421-1422	Mogadishu (Somalia)	18,000
7	1431-1433	Mombasa (Kenya)	19,000

## Document 2



Source: Illustration from *When China Ruled the Seas* by Louise Levathes, 1994  
 Zheng He's treasure ship (400 feet) and Christopher Columbus's Santa Maria (85 feet).

	<b>Zheng He</b>	<b>Christopher Columbus</b>
<b>Size of Fleet</b>	225 ships	3 ships
<b>Size of Crew</b>	27,500	90
<b>Voyages</b>	7 (1405-1433)	4 (1492-1502)
<b>Legacy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Soon after Zheng He's death, sea exploration was banned in China</li> <li>- The fleet was dismantled</li> <li>- All records of Zheng He's voyages were destroyed by Chinese officials</li> <li>- Zheng He was more or less lost to history for 500 years</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- After Columbus' first voyages, Europeans exploration took off</li> <li>- North and South America were conquered and colonized</li> <li>- The Columbian Exchange followed, marked by the trading of plants, animals, ideas, and people, including slaves</li> </ul>

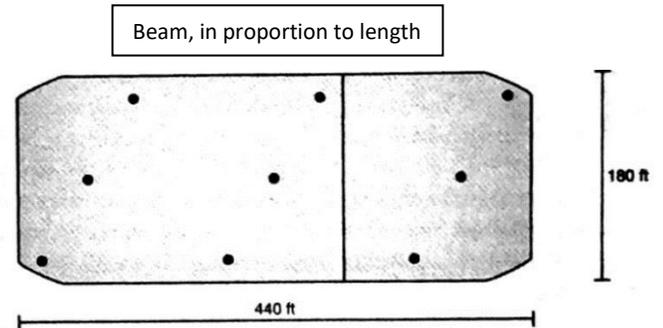
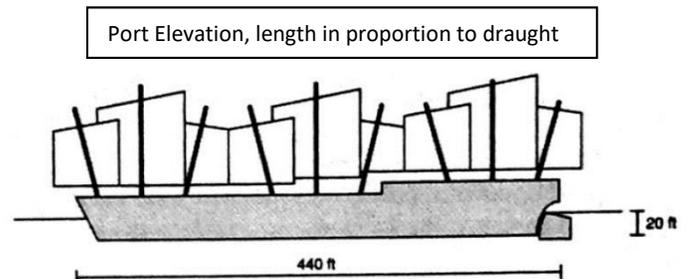
# Document 3

Source: Chart compiled from various sources.

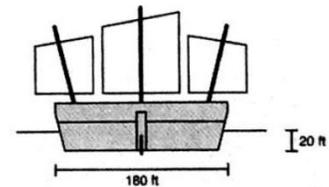
<b>Zheng He's Fleet by the Numbers</b>	
<b>Approximate size of fleet on each voyage:</b>	
Treasure Ships	62
Tenders *	193
* Tenders were smaller ships that serviced each treasure ship. These included ships dedicated solely to carrying fresh water for crew and animals.	
<b>Crew (on each voyage)</b>	
Fleet commanders	7
Commander assistances	70
Military officers	302
Ceremonial officers	1
Doctors	180
Chief purser (financial officer)	1
Fortune tellers	5
Soldiers, petty officers, sailors, sail makers, caulkers, anchormen, horse groomers, rudder operators, business managers, cooks, servants, interpreters	26,803

Source: Illustration from *Zheng He* by Edward L Dreyer, 2007

Note: No one knows what Zheng He's treasure ships looked like, but this drawing illustrates dimensions reported in historical documents, along with the off-center and off-vertical arrangement of the nine masts. With their board beams (widths) and the flat bottoms, the treasure ships would have resembled enormous river barges rather than true oceangoing ships. Draught is how deeply a ship sits in the water.



Aft elevation, showing beam in proportion to draught



## Document 4

Source: Chart compiled from various sources:

<b>Sample of Tribute Offered by Foreign Envoys at Chinese Court</b>		
<b>Envoy's Homeland</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Gift</b>
Calicut (India)	1407	Local products
Aru (Sumatra)	1407	Pepper
Champa (north of Vietnam)	1407	Local products
Bengal (northeast India)	1408	(gifts unknown)
Palembang (Sumatra)	1416	Horses, rhinoceroses, elephants
Malacca	1416	(gifts unknown)
Hormuz	1417	Lions, leopards, Arabian horses
Aden (Arabia)	1417	Giraffes
Brava (East Africa)	1417	Camels, ostriches
Mogadishu (East Africa)	1417	zebras

**Note:** Foreign officials, or envoys, often traveled with Zheng He's fleet when it returned to China. They brought tribute. Tribute is usually money or goods given by a weaker country to a stronger country as a sign of submission and sometimes respect. Emperor Yongle almost always offered local kings and ambassadors gifts in return. Often these were bolts of silk, paper money, and copper coins.

Source: Qing Dynasty historian, after 1644

"[Emperor Yongle acquired] goods and treasures without name that were too many to be accounted for. Yet they did not make up for the wasteful expenditures of the Middle Kingdom."

# Document 5

Source: The Changle Inscription, 1431

The Imperial Ming [Dynasty] has unified [the lands within the four] seas under the canopy of heaven... From the edge of the sky to the ends of the earth there are none who have not become subjects and slaves... Thus the barbarians from beyond the seas, even those who are truly distant, [so that their language require] double translation, all have come to court bearing precious objects and presents.

The Emperor has delighted in their loyalty and sincerity and has ordered [Zheng] He and others to take command of several thousands of imperial officers and soldiers... to go to their countries and confer presents on them by displaying our power while treating distant peoples with kindness. From the third year of Yongle [1405] until now we have seven times received commissions as ambassadors to the countries of the Western [Indian] Ocean...

When we arrived at the foreign countries, barbarian kinds how resisted... we captured alive and barbarian bandits [pirates] who invaded and plundered we wiped out. Because of this the sea routes became pure and peaceful and the foreign peoples would rely upon them.

**Note:** The Changle Inscription was carved into a stone pillar near the city of Changle on the east coast of China just before Zheng He departed on his last voyage. This excerpt was followed by short descriptions of each of the first six voyages and the plan for the seventh. It is the closest thing historians have to a document revealing Zheng He's words and ideas.