**Treasure fleets of the Dragon Throne**

**The Middle Kingdom reaches out**

**Taken From:** http://worldhistoryforusall.sdsu.edu/

Zheng He, Muslim eunuch and confidant of the Chinese emperor, organized six long-distance naval expeditions to the south and west of China from 1403 to 1433. Each involved thousands of men, including professional negotiators, diplomats, interpreters,scribes, signalers, doctors, soldiers, mechanics, and other specialists. The fleet consisted of over one hundred auxiliary ships, including troop and supply carriers and forty to sixty “treasure ships.” These were estimated to weigh some 1,500 tons and range up to 400 feet in length, with three decks, nine masts, twelve sails, and watertight compartments to keep them afloat even when damaged. Besides ample supplies, they carried Chinese trade goods.

Their destinations, ports in India, Arabia, and East Africa, were not unknown. There is evidence that Chinese in earlier centuries sailed regularly to India and occasionally to the Persian Gulf, and they knew about East Africa at least from hearsay. Zheng He himself had made the pilgrimage to Mecca.

Having generally followed a contemporary’s advice to “treat the barbarian kings like harmless seagulls,” the expeditions traveled over 30,000 miles and returned with “wonderful precious things,” among them a giraffe. With no need for ongoing supplies from abroad, no desire for conquest at a distance, and no cultural tradition of proselytizing, they built no forts and left neither garrisons nor naval patrols.

Some Confucian government officials opposed the long-distance voyages as a waste of money, especially since deforestation at this time raised the costs of shipbuilding. They felt the government would do better to invest in containment of belligerent Mongols and other pastoral peoples who lived along China’s northwestern frontier. In fact, nomad raids were not uncommon, so these officials had good reason for concern. Confucian bureaucratsalso feared that the court eunuchs, a powerful political faction, were threatening their power and influence.

Consequently, the Ming government banned further large-scale maritime expeditions to the Indian Ocean after 1433, though Chinese trade in the East and South China seas continued. The following account of Zheng He’s voyages is from an inscription on a stone he ordered rected in the winter of 1431-32. The last paragraph is from a different inscription.

“The Imperial Ming Dynasty, in unifying seas and continents, surpasses [earlier] dynasties. The countries beyond the horizon and at the ends of the earth have all become subjects and to the most western of the western, or the most northern of the northern countries, however far they may be, the distances and the routes may [now] be calculated. Thus the barbarians from beyond the seas, though their countries are truly distant … have come to audience bearing precious objects and presents.

The Emperor, approving their loyalty and sincerity, has ordered us [Zheng He] and others at the head of several thousands of officers and troops to [board] more than a hundred large ships to go and confer presents on them, in order to [make clear] the transforming power of the imperial virtue, and to treat distant people with kindness. From [1405] until now, we have several times been appointed ambassadors to the Western Ocean. The barbarian countries we have visited are [among others, Java, Siam, Ceylon, Calicut in India, Aden on the Red Sea, and Mogadishu in East Africa], all together more than thirty countries large and small.

We have crossed more than one hundred thousand *li* of immense water spaces, and have seen in the ocean huge waves like mountains rising sky-high, and we have set eyes on barbarian regions far away hidden in the blue transparency of light vapors, while our sails, loftily unfurled like clouds, day and night continued their course, crossing those savage waves as if we were treading a public thoroughfare.

Those among foreigners who were resisting the transforming influence of Chinese culture and were disrespectful, we captured alive, and brigands who indulged in violence and plunder, we exterminated. Consequently the sea route was purified and tranquillized and the natives were enabled to pursue their vocations.”

Source: Qtd. in Joseph R. Levenson, *European Expansion and the Counter-Example of Asia, 1300-1600*

(Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967), 14-5; last paragraph qtd. in Michael Pearson, *The Indian Ocean* (New

York: Routledge, 2003), 90.