ZHENG HE

BIOGRAPHY

BIG HISTORY PROJECT
ZHENG HE

CHINESE ADMIRAL IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

Born 1371
Yunnan province, China

Died 1433
At sea

By Cynthia Stokes Brown
In the early 1400s, Zheng He led the largest ships in the world on seven voyages of exploration to the lands around the Indian Ocean, demonstrating Chinese excellence at shipbuilding and navigation.
Background

Zheng He (pronounced jung ha) was born in 1371 in Yunnan, in the foothills of the Himalaya Mountains, 6,000 feet (not quite 2,000 meters) above sea level and two months’ journey to the nearest seaport. As a child Zheng He was named Ma He. Ma He’s father, a minor official in the Mongol Empire, was not Mongol; his ancestors were Persian Muslims. Both Ma He’s father and his grandfather even made the “hajj,” or pilgrimage to Mecca.

The Mongols had controlled the Silk Road routes across Central Asia from roughly 1250 to 1350, and ruled China for much of that time too, but the empire then splintered into a number of smaller khanates, each ruled by a different khan. The resulting anarchy and warfare on land encouraged traders to use sea routes and later, by about 1400, most long distance trade was moving by sea.

Three years before Ma He’s birth, the Chinese regained control of their empire under the new Ming dynasty. When Ma He was about 10, the Ming army invaded Yunnan to take it back from the Mongols and bring it under Ming control. The Ming soldiers killed Ma He’s father in the fighting and captured Ma He. As was customary with juvenile captives, they castrated him by cutting off his testes and penis with a sword. He survived this trauma and was handed over to be a servant in the household of the emperor’s fourth son, Zhu Di.

Castrated men, called eunuchs, were a recognized group inside and outside of China. Emperors, princes, and generals employed them as staff members, figuring this as a way to have male servants serve women without risking the genetic integrity of the ruling family.

The prince whom Ma He served, Zhu Di, was only 11 years older than He. They were based in Beijing, in the north of China near Mongol territory, and they spent a lot of time together campaigning on horseback on the Mongolian steppe. Ma He grew unusually tall and strong and became a skilled fighter and brave leader. When the first Ming emperor died, his grandson (the son of his deceased oldest son) succeeded him. In 1402, Zhu Di took the throne

The Yongle Emperor, Zhu Di
from his nephew by force and proclaimed himself Emperor Yongle (“Per-
petual Happiness”). He made his companion Ma He the director of palace
servants (similar to a chief of staff), and changed Ma’s name to Zheng He
in commemoration of his role in battles to win the throne. (Zheng was
the name of Yongle’s favorite warhorse.) Yongle ruled from 1402 to 1424.

The seven voyages

Yongle proved extremely ambitious. He temporarily conquered Vietnam and
tried to overpower Japan. He built a new imperial capital in Beijing, including
the Forbidden City, and extended the Great Wall. Since he was determined to
control trading in the Indian Ocean, one of his first acts was to commission
the construction of 3,500 ships, with Zheng He supervising the construction
and then commanding the fleet.

Some of these ships were the largest marine craft the world had ever known.
Zheng He’s nine-masted flagship measured about 400 feet long; for com-
parison, Christopher Columbus’s Santa Maria measured just 85 feet. On the
first voyage, from 1405 to 1407, 62 nine-masted “treasure ships” led the
way, followed by almost 200 other ships of various sizes, carrying personnel,
horses, grain, and 28,000 armed troops.

Historians were skeptical of accounts describing the size of these ships
until, in 1962, workers on the Yangtze riverfront found a buried wooden
timber 36 feet long (originally a steering post) beside a massive rudder. It
was the right size to have been able to steer a ship of 540 to 600 feet
in length, and the right age — dated at 600 years old — to be from one of
Zheng He’s ships.

Zheng He’s initial trip took him from the South China Sea through the Indian
Ocean to Calicut (now Calcutta), India, and back. The emperor’s purpose for
this expedition seems to have been to obtain recognition and gifts from other
rulers. The voyagers did not intend to conquer or colonize, but they were
prepared to use military force against those who refused to respect them.

Near the end of the voyage Zheng He’s ships encountered pirates in the
Sumatran port of Palembang. The pirate leader pretended to submit, with the
intention of escaping. However, Zheng He started a battle, easily defeating
the pirates — his forces killing more than 5,000 people and taking the leader
back to China to be beheaded.

Five more voyages followed before Emperor Yongle’s death in 1424; they
included excursions to Hormuz — the Arab port at the mouth of the Persian
Gulf — and the coast of eastern Africa, from which He returned with giraffes,
zebras, and other items unfamiliar to the Chinese.

On his seventh and final voyage, from 1431 to 1433, Zheng He apparently
died at sea and was likely buried off the coast of India, although some of his
descendants believe that he made it back to China and died soon after his
return.
THE TRAVELS OF ZHENG HE
1405 TO 1433
Inscribing his adventures

Leaving on his final voyage, at age 60 — the traditional Chinese age of reflection — Zheng He stopped at two places in China to have granite inscriptions placed so that his deeds would be understood and not forgotten. These tablets were erected in Liujiagang (now Liuhe), a port on the Yangtze River, and at Changle, in Fujian province.

In the first inscription Zheng He describes his dependence on Tianfei ("Heavenly Princess"), the goddess of Chinese sailors:

[We have] traversed over a hundred thousand li of vast ocean [and have] beheld great ocean waves, rising as high as the sky and swelling and swelling endlessly. Whether in dense fog and drizzling rain or in wind-driven waves rising like mountains, no matter what the sudden changes in sea conditions, we spread our cloudlike sails aloft and sailed by the stars day and night. [Had we] not trusted her [Heavenly Princess’s] divine merit, how could we have done this in peace and safety? When we met danger, once we invoked the divine name, her answer to our prayer was like an echo; suddenly there was a divine lamp which illuminated the masts and sails, and once this miraculous light appeared, then apprehension turned to calm. The personnel of the fleet were then at rest, and all trusted they had nothing to fear. This is the general outline of the goddess’s merit...

When we arrived at the foreign countries, barbarian kings who resisted transformation and were not respectful we captured alive, and bandit soldiers who looted and plundered recklessly we exterminated. Because of this the sea routes became pure and peaceful and the foreign peoples could rely upon them and pursue their occupations in safety. All of this was due to the aid of the goddess.

The “divine lamp” Zheng He mentions is thought be “St. Elmo’s Fire,” the electrical discharge from a ship’s mast that occurs after a storm at sea.

If men serve their prince with utmost loyalty, there is nothing they cannot do, and if they worship the gods with utmost sincerity there is no prayer that will not be answered...

We, [Zheng] He and the rest, have been favored with a gracious commission from our Sacred Prince to convey to the distant barbarians the favor [earned by their] respectfulness and good faith. While in command of the personnel of the fleet, and [responsible for the great] amount of money and valuables [our] one concern while facing the violence of the winds and the dangers of the nights was that we would not succeed. Would we then have served the nation with utmost loyalty and worshipped the divine intelligence with utmost sincerity? None of us could doubt that this was the source of aid and safety for the fleet in its comings and goings. Therefore we have made manifest the virtue of the goddess with this inscription on stone, which records the years and months of our going to and returning from the foreign [countries] so that they may be remembered forever.
Timeline of Zheng He’s life

- **1368**: The Mongol Yuan dynasty, founded by Kublai Khan, is overthrown by the Ming dynasty.
- **1371**: Born in Yunnan as Ma He.
- **1381**: Ma He captured and castrated by Ming soldiers, given to emperor’s fourth son.
- **1399**: Fourth son rebels against his nephew; Ma He wins battle.
- **1402**: Fourth son rules as Emperor Yongle, third Ming emperor.
- **1402–1405**: Ma He appointed director of palace servants; renamed Zheng He.
- **1405–1407**: First voyage: to Calicut, India, and back.
- **1408–1409**: Second voyage: to Calicut and back.
- **1409–1411**: Third voyage: to Calicut and back.
- **1412–1415**: Fourth voyage: to Hormuz and back.
- **1417–1419**: Fifth voyage: to Arabia and Africa.

During the time of Zheng He

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During the time of Zheng He
The legacy of Zheng He’s adventures

The voyages of Zheng He are a favorite topic of world historians today. They show that Chinese ships could have ruled the Indian Ocean for many more years and possibly been able to sail to the Americas. Why didn’t they? What if they had? How different would the world be?

After the final voyage, the Chinese emperor suddenly ordered that these expensive expeditions be halted. The ships were left to rot in the harbors, and craftsmen forgot how to build such large ships, letting the knowledge slip away. The Confucian ministers who advised the emperor distrusted the eunuchs, who supported the voyages. New military threats came from the Mongols in the north and the ministers argued that resources needed to focus on land defenses there instead.

Three firsthand accounts survive, written by men who sailed with Zheng He — two from officers and one from a translator. Eventually, Chinese interest in these accounts revived in the 20th century. Prior to that, Zheng He’s exploits were passed on by storytellers who used them as a source of wonder, blending them with other fantastic tales.
Sources


Image credits

A monument to Zheng He at the Stadhuys Museum in Malaysia, photograph by Hassan Saeed

An unsigned hanging scroll depicting the Yongle Emperor, public domain

A painting of Zheng He at a temple shrine in Penang, Malaysia © Chris Hellier/CORBIS