



# ZHENG HE

“We have traversed more than one hundred thousand *li*\* of immense waterspaces and have beheld in the ocean huge waves like mountains rising skyhigh, and we have set eyes on barbarian regions far away . . . while our sails loftily unfurled like clouds day and night continued their course (rapid like that) of a star, traversing those savage waves as if we were treading a public thoroughfare.”—Fifteenth-century inscription at Changle, Fujian, China, attributed to Zheng He.

## QUICK FACTS

- ▶ The Ming fleet under the command of Zheng He undertook seven epic voyages between 1405 and 1433.
- ▶ The fleet may have numbered 200 vessels or more—warships, supply ships, water tankers, ships to transport horses, and so on. More than 27,000 sailors, government officials, troops, merchants, maintenance workers, and others were transported.
- ▶ Not until World War I did any nation again assemble a fleet comparable to that of Zheng He. It visited ports in the Far East and the Indian Ocean, reaching as far as East Africa.
- ▶ Three of Zheng He's subordinates wrote independent eyewitness accounts that tell us much about his voyages.

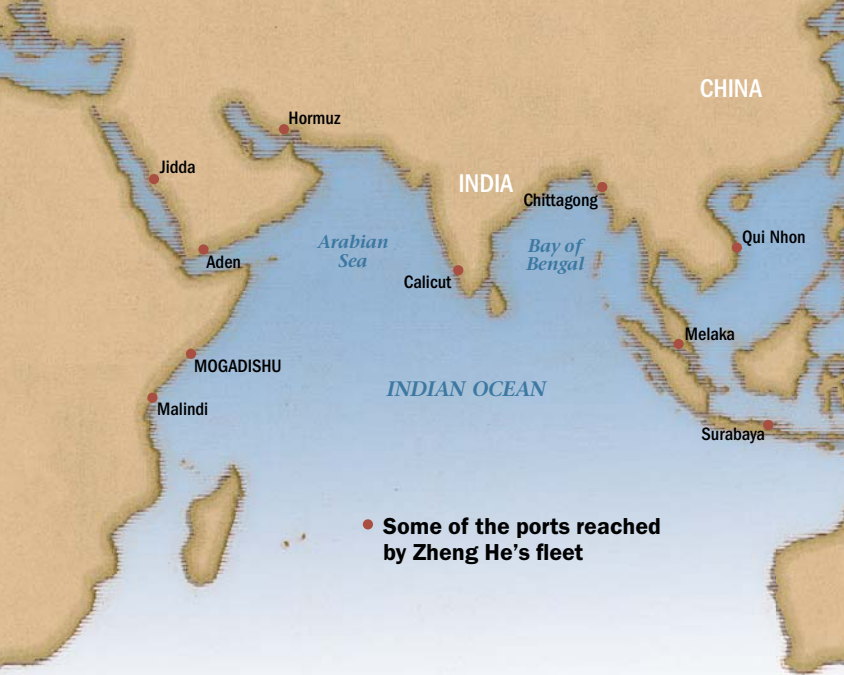
**C**HINA is a land of big things. It has the largest population and one of the largest land areas of earth's nations. Its people built the Great Wall, one of the most ambitious construction projects in history. A fleet of great ships built by China's Ming Emperors Yongle and Xuande was larger than any other that would be assembled for the next five centuries. The admiral of that fleet was a Muslim from southwestern China named Zheng He.

## POWER, TRADE, AND TRIBUTE

According to the inscription partially quoted at the beginning of this article, Zheng He's mission was “to make manifest the transforming power of the (imperial) virtue and to treat distant people with kindness.” As a result of the voyages, it states, “countries beyond the horizon and from the ends of the earth have all become subjects [of China] . . . Barbarians from beyond the seas . . . have come to audience [at the imperial court] bearing precious objects and presents.”

The Ming emperors' objective in undertaking these voyages has been a topic of debate. Some see Zheng He

\* The *li* is a Chinese measure, the length of which has varied through the centuries. It is thought that in Zheng He's time, one *li* was approximately a third of a mile, or half a kilometer.



## Zheng He's Treasure Ships—How Large and How Many?

Historical records from the Ming dynasty say that Zheng He's treasure ships were amazingly large—447 feet (136 m) long and 183 feet (56 m) wide. Scholars find these figures problematic and hard to verify, in that wooden sailing ships in excess of 300 feet (90 m) in length are structurally unsound.

"All indications are that exaggeration has been at work in the accounts that mention the ships' enormous size," says one article on the subject. "A ship of about 200-250 ft [60-75 m] would make much more sense than the 450 ft [135 m] one." Whatever the case, in the 15th century, vessels measuring over 200 feet (60 m) in length were certainly exceptional, and Zheng He's fleet included up to 62 of them!

as an ambassador of culture and goodwill for a powerful yet peaceful nation. Others see his mission as one of aggressive political domination of vassal states. Indeed, Zheng He offered splendid gifts and political support to the rulers who welcomed him, but those who refused to give token submission and tribute to the Ming emperor, he overpowered and took prisoner. As a result of Zheng He's impressive voyages, dozens of rulers from around the Indian Ocean sent ambassadors to China to pay homage to the emperor.

Whatever the case, Zheng He's fleet also carried incomparable lacquerware, porcelains, and silks made by Ming craftsmen to trade in distant ports. The fleet returned with gems, ivory, spices, tropical woods, and other luxury items valued by the Chinese. It even carried a giraffe to China, which is said to have caused quite a stir. Through these exchanges of goods and ideas, the outside world was given inklings of China's impressive 15th-century civilization.

Those remarkable voyages did not continue. Just decades after Zheng He's voyages, China turned its back on foreign trade and diplomacy. Feeling no need to look beyond China's borders, a new emperor and his Confucianist advisers tried to seal the country off from outside influence. They consigned the treasure fleet to the past, apparently destroying records of their epic voyages and even the ships themselves. Only in recent years have people, inside of China and out, learned of that grand epoch when Zheng He's giant fleet sailed the seas. ■



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