



# ZHENG HE AND THE CHINESE ARMADA

▲ Leader of one of the largest trading fleets the world has ever known, Zheng He was said to have been an enormous man. According to his family, he was over 2 meters (7 feet) tall, and had “a voice as loud as a huge bell.”

- 1 Six hundred years ago, China’s Admiral Zheng He led a powerful fleet of trading ships on seven voyages that changed China and many parts of the world forever. On each of his journeys, Zheng He **commanded** more than 300 ships of 30,000 sailors, **accompanied** as well by hundreds of government officials, doctors, cooks, merchants, and interpreters. The fleet **accumulated** knowledge and wealth and spread Chinese influence all across Asia to Africa. And yet, today, Zheng He—one of the world’s greatest explorers—is scarcely known in many places around the world.

- Born into a Muslim family in 1371 and given the name Ma He at birth (“Ma” is the Chinese translation of the name “Muhammad”),
- 10 Zheng He was captured as a young boy by the Chinese army. By the time he was 31 in 1402, Ma He had become one of the military’s most powerful soldiers and an advisor to China’s leader, who gave him a new name—Zheng
- 15 He—and an important new job: Admiral of China’s Imperial Navy.

- In the summer of 1405, Zheng He **departed** on the first of his seven voyages from the city of Nanjing, then the capital of China. His
- 20 goal was to mix exploration with business and diplomacy,<sup>1</sup> and to that end, he carried Chinese silk, coins, and other goods to be exchanged for foreign **commodities** such as spices, animals, cloth, and other products.

- 25 By the end of 1405, Zheng He’s fleet had arrived in present-day Vietnam. Later, he traveled to the islands of Java and Sumatra

- (in Indonesia), and then west toward India **via** Sri Lanka. On **subsequent** voyages, Zheng
- 30 He’s ships traveled further west to places such as Iran, Oman, and Yemen and ultimately to the eastern coast of Africa. By the end of his last voyage 28 years later, Zheng He had established major trading centers at ports all
- 35 along the way, and China was importing and exporting goods in ports from East Asia to Africa.

- Throughout their travels, Zheng He and his men were introduced to different foods,
- 40 languages, customs, architecture, and scientific and religious beliefs. “How can there be such diversity in the world?” said one of the admiral’s men at one point. Though he was constantly faced with the unfamiliar, Zheng He
- 45 was **fascinated** by the cultures he visited, and he spoke often of the need to “treat distant people with kindness.”





▲ A mural of Zheng He painted on a wall in his hometown of Kunyang, China.

In addition to promoting trade and diplomacy, Zheng He's seven voyages also resulted in the spread of Chinese people and culture throughout Asia and beyond. Malaysia and Indonesia, for example, had important ports that Zheng He's fleet returned to often. Eventually, thousands of Chinese migrated to and settled in these places and maintain a strong presence there today. In a later voyage to eastern Africa, legend says that some of Zheng He's ships were caught in a storm and sank. The men swam to an island off the coast of Kenya, where they ultimately married local women and had children. Their descendants in Africa are said to have Asian features and family names such as Famao and Wei.

The end of Zheng He's sixth voyage in 1422 coincided with a new emperor coming to power. The country's new leader wanted to terminate all foreign exploration and to

focus on China only. This reversal "changed history, and stopped short what might have been a very different future for Asia and the world," says professor Liu Ying-sheng of Nanjing University. As China ended foreign exploration, European powers such as Spain and England rose to take its place and by 1492, Columbus had arrived in the Americas.

Before his fleet was grounded forever, though, Zheng He's armada made one final voyage in 1431—back to Africa's east coast. Along the way, the admiral, a lifelong Muslim,<sup>2</sup> also made a personal visit to Mecca, Islam's most holy site. On the return journey to China in 1433, Zheng He died, and it is believed that he was buried at sea just off India's southwestern coast.

Over 600 years after his first voyage, Zheng He's legacy<sup>3</sup> lives on. Mosques<sup>4</sup> in Indonesia are named after him. In some places in Southeast Asia, he is considered a god and there are festivals that celebrate his life. Perhaps most important, says scholar Roderich Ptak, is that today, "China is again engaging the world [and] Zheng is a symbol of that opening."

<sup>1</sup> **Diplomacy** is the activity of creating good relations between the people and governments of different nations.

<sup>2</sup> A **Muslim** is someone who believes in Islam and lives according to its rules.

<sup>3</sup> A person's **legacy** is something that continues to live on or that people remember after the person dies.

<sup>4</sup> A **mosque** is a building where Muslims go to worship.

▼ Zheng He's treasure ships, the largest wooden ships ever built, make those of Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama seem tiny in comparison.

