

THE CHINA THAT EUROPEANS DISCOVERED: THE MING DYNASTY
THE LAUNCHING OF THE EXPEDITIONS

Between 1405 and 1433 the biggest armada that the world had ever seen patrolled the coasts of the Indian Ocean. Small crowds gathered in the shores of Sumatra, Ceylon, India, the Persian gulf, Arabia, Somalia and Kenia and watched the approach of hundreds of Chinese ships in utter amazement.

The Chinese had been sailing the Indian Ocean for the last three centuries, but had never made such a military display. But even if the fleet was armed to the teeth, its aim was not to launch a military conquest. Once in the beach, the fleet landed porcelains and silks that dazzled people and rulers alike. So, what were they doing there, who had sent them and who was their Supreme Commander? The orders came from the Yongle emperor and the Supreme Commander of the fleet was a eunuch named Zheng He. The chain of events that would converge in the extraordinary history of Zheng He had started 20 years ago, when in 1381, the Ming conquered Yunnan, a province in southwest China that was one of the last stronghold of the Mongols.

As we have seen in previous lectures, Kubilai Khan had conquered Yunnan a century before and entrusted the government of it to people from Central Asia; Marco Polo left a record of the large number of Muslims living in Yunnan. Zheng He was one such Muslim, his family probably coming originally from Central Asia. The family certainly thrived in Yunnan; the father and grandfather were hajji, men who had made the pilgrimage to Mecca, a journey that incurred great costs but also implied a great voyage that opened up great opportunities. They were a family used to long journeys. As a child, Zheng He, born in 1371, must have heard lengthy accounts of **his relatives' voyages**. His family, like most Muslims in Yunnan, was well connected with the Mongol establishment. But in 1381, the Ming, who by then had already conquered Mongol China, invaded Yunnan and ruthlessly deported the Mongols and Muslims of Central Asia who had been in control of Yunnan for a century. Small boys were captured, castrated and deported to the court of one the princes of the Ming imperial family. And this was the fate of Zheng He, a ten years old small Muslim boy.

From the moment he was castrated, Zheng He was sent the long way to north China to serve in the court of one of Hongwu's sons, the future emperor Yongle. Yongle was not the heir apparent, but he came to the throne after a civil war against the designated heir. With most of the civil service remaining faithful to the deposed emperor, the usurper Yongle relied heavily on the eunuchs, and their numbers increased exponentially during Yongle's reign. The eunuchs played an important role in almost all sectors of the administration and one of their functions was to lead the embassies sent to the tributary states.

Eunuch ambassadors were not a completely new phenomenon in the history of China, but the fact that foreign policy was almost exclusively their responsibility was a phenomenon peculiar to the Ming dynasty. Ming documents mention 140 foreign missions led by eunuchs.

In 1405, emperor Yongle ordered Zheng He, who by then held already a high position in the eunuch hierarchy, to launch a series of maritime voyages, while other land embassies were directed to Central Asia. The aim was to project China's power over all the known world, maritime or Central Asian, forcing everyone to enter into a ritual relationship with China. The first voyage established the pattern which, with only slight differences, all the others would follow. It was a very large fleet, made up in this case of 255 vessels, 62 of which were Treasure Ships, *baochuan*. These ships were like enormous floating palaces. The official history of the Ming claims that they were a staggering 137 metres long and 56 metres wide, which is difficult to believe. Drawings like this one, which compare the sizes of a Treasure ship with that of Columbus' *Santa Maria*, are very common in all kind of publications about Zheng He, but have been considered by many scholars to be a gross exaggeration. But even so, the large shipyards that have been excavated near Nanjing and the impressive size of a rudder control arm found in Quanzhou do suggest that the Treasure ships were extremely vast. And it is worth remembering that the narratives of the 13th and 14th centuries, those of Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta among others, corroborate the existence, already in the Yuan period, of extremely large ships with more than six masts and manned by hundreds of crew. The other ships in the armada were medium-sized ships for the transport of horses, supplies, troops and miscellaneous staff and for servicing the imposing Treasure Ships.

The expedition was always led by seventy or so eunuchs of the highest rank, and the Supreme Commander was always Zheng He. Below the eunuchs were the military, who despite being of a higher rank than the eunuchs, were under the orders of the former. Among the staff were 180 doctors, who had to fight the epidemics that frequently broke out in such a large fleet and carefully identify the

materials of medical interest collected on the voyage. The expeditions also carried back the foreign delegates who came to pay homage and offer tribute, and who generally remained in China, at the expense of the Chinese government, until the next fleet sailed. The expeditions sailed laden with gifts such as silks, ceramics and other luxury products. They also presented the tributary states with the Chinese calendar, which was necessary for performing the tributary ceremony at the right moment.

Large amounts of paper money were also carried on board. This had been put into circulation by the Song and made common currency by the Yuan, but had already begun to devalue. From 1450 there were no new issues and although it survived until the end of the 16th century, immediately **after Zheng He's voyages**, its value by then was next to nothing. The generosity with which Zheng He distributed paper money contributed to the devaluation. A century after the great voyages paper money had completely disappeared in China except for the ritual practice of burning it as offerings to the dead, that's still alive nowadays.