

THE CHINA THAT EUROPEANS DISCOVERED: THE MING DINASTY

THE END OF ZHENG HE EXPEDITIONS

The first three expeditions starting in 1405 followed an almost identical itinerary. The fleet travelled from Nanjing, where the shipyards were, to Fujian, where experienced sailors abounded. From there they went south, displaying their power as they sailed past the coasts of a hostile and recently conquered Vietnam. Then the fleet continued on to Java and Sumatra, and from there through the Malacca straits to Ceylon and the Malabar coast as far as Calicut, returning to China with the summer monsoon the following year. When he reached Ceylon on the third expedition, Zheng He raised a trilingual stele in Chinese, Tamil and Persian.

The Chinese version gives thanks to Buddha for the success of the expedition, the Tamil version thanks Vishnu and the Persian one Allah. The deterrent effect of the expedition was obvious. The fleet of 255 ships manned by more than 27,000 crew members often appeared off the coast of small principalities with just a few thousand inhabitants, and in any case always carried a far larger population than any port in the Indian Ocean. Zheng He's navy was so fearsome that he rarely needed to fight, but his primary mission was to show that he was capable of doing so. One of the essential aims of the expeditions was to guarantee the safety of the tributary trade routes, and in fact Zheng He's armies intervened three times.

Although the military actions of Zheng He's fleet did not turn the voyages into expeditions of conquest, the clashes were significant, since all three receive special mention in the three inscriptions of his that are still extant.

The Official History of the Ming states expressly that Yongle "wanted to display his soldiers in strange lands in order to make manifest the wealth and power of the Middle Kingdom" and adds that "they went in succession to the various foreign countries, proclaiming the edicts of the Son of Heaven and giving gifts to their rulers and chieftains. Those who did not submit were pacified by force". In further voyages, the expeditions reached Hormuz, Arabia and the east coast of Africa. In the seventh voyage, Zheng He remained in Calicut, while some of the main eunuchs went on an expedition as far as Mecca, where they revered the Kaaba.

Zheng He died between 1433 and 1435, probably on land and not at sea, as some of his biographers claim. One consequence of the voyages was the enormous increase of the tributary missions coming to China. This extended Chinese influence from the Philippines to the Persian Gulf.

Looking at the chart you'll see that during the Zheng He expeditions there was an unusual frequency of embassies on both sides. But even so, the continuity of the expeditions was almost impossible. The problems were in part economic: Yongle had simultaneously launched the construction of Beijing, the re-opening and elongation of the Grand Canal, the wars against the Mongols, the conquest of Vietnam and the expeditions of Zheng He. No wonder the Confucian civil service officials in charge of the budget were seriously alarmed and spent a whole decade voicing their opposition. But the problems were not only economic. It was deemed outrageous by the Confucian civil servants that the power of the eunuchs and the military had been so bolstered by their part in the missions. The civil servants claimed that nothing had been attained by the missions except exotic products like the famous giraffe. The giraffe was believed by some to be a sort of unicorn that gave a good omen to the dynasty, but was viewed with strong scepticism by the Confucian establishment.

When Zheng He died his armada was dissolved and although the number of Ming ships remained very high – as many Portuguese and Castilian observers of the 16th century testify – the fleet was fragmented and the remaining boats were assigned to different coastal authorities.

No fleet on the scale of Zheng He's was ever gathered again in China.