

## THE EUROPEANS DISCOVERY OF XINA POMPEU FABRA UNIVERSITY BARCELONA

### THE CHINA THAT EUROPEANS DISCOVERED: THE MING DINASTY THE FADING CHINESE MEMORY OF ZHENG HE'S TRAVELS

Over the last twenty years so much has been said about Zheng He, there have been so many commemorations, exhibitions and symposia that it is easy to imagine that he has always been a key figure in Chinese historiography.

Even the Beijing Olympic Games opened with a spectacular choreography exalting **Zheng He's maritime travels**. It featured its gigantic fleet, the tens of thousands sailors that manned the ships, the items that China brought to its tributary states – tea and blue-and-white porcelain - **and a golden Zheng He directing the fleet's movements with a compass**.

However, the truth is in fact the reverse. The voyages took place in the face of permanent and irrevocable opposition from the Confucian civil service. Three narratives of the travels, **written by people who actually made the voyages, are extant, but all Zheng He's own documents were systematically destroyed**.

Zheng He voyages were very long, lasting more than three months from China to the Persian Gulf and often sailing on the open seas. Although the fleet compiled very detailed logbooks of its itineraries, **Zheng He's logbooks disappeared at the end of the 15th century**.

They were probably destroyed on the orders of the minister of war, for the purpose of weakening the power of the eunuchs by discrediting the expeditions to Vietnam and the Western Oceans which they continued to defend.

**In accordance with this official dismissal of Zheng He's voyages, the official History of the Ming dynasty contains only a brief biography of Zheng He in the chapter reserved for the eunuchs, and some sparse information related to the voyages, scattered throughout the nine chapters dealing with foreign countries.**

The memory of Zheng He in China had already faded by the end of the 15th century and he never managed to take his place among the key characters of Chinese history. Even so, **traces of Zheng He's voyages can be tracked in less official realms.**

What Zheng He probably used were the seaman's guides, or rutters, and the astronomical charts that were conserved in the Wubei zhi, a 17th century treatise on military technology.

This is the first page of the Zheng He sailing chart: it shows the walled capital, Nanjing, the shipyard where the Treasure ships were built, the bridges that connected the great Yangzi River with its tributaries, and the mountains that were navigation points when seen from the sea.

The great routes and their interconnections were also shown together with explicit indications for navigation, as in this sheet that shows India, and its major cities, as well as Ceylon and the African coasts.

The Wubei zhi also contains the star charts that the Zheng He fleet used to calculate latitude. Although the compass had been known and used for centuries, the essential requirement for calculating latitude was the same in China as anywhere else. It relied on **one's ability** to measure the position of the stars.

This diagram, for instance, shows the position of the guiding stars around the three mast vessel that has to be maintained to navigate from Ceylon to Sumatra. The name of Zheng He survived in the Chinese imagination thanks to a 16th century novel that transformed him into a hero who voyaged to the Western oceans and even travelled to hell.

**Nevertheless, Zheng He's travels had a continuing impact on Chinese natural sciences.** The exotic plants collected by the 180 doctors that went in his ships found their way into the biggest pharmacopeia that the world had ever seen, the Compendium of Materia medica compiled by Li Shizhen in the 16th century.

But it was only in 1905, the same year that the crushing defeat of Russia by Japan in Southern Manchuria showed to the Chinese the vital importance of having a good navy, that Liang Qichao, a reforming politician and journalist, revived the memory of the great Chinese navigator.

With the reclaiming of the figure of Zheng He, emerging Chinese nationalism could boast that the great Chinese expeditions had preceded those of the European navigators of the Renaissance. But, in the mid-20th century, Zheng He was put aside once more, because maritime expeditions were not to the liking of Mao Zedong.

On the contrary, the name of Zheng He reached a peak of glory in South-East Asia where **Chinese migrants worshipped him, even before his death, as Sanbao Taijian ('the eunuch of the Three Treasures')**.

The Chinese had been migrating to the southern seas since at least the Song dynasty, many centuries before, and the Zheng He voyages certainly encouraged the trading voyages by private shippers from southern coastal China.

Their numbers grew exponentially wherever they found clear opportunities for profit. **As we'll see, this will be the case in colonial Manila.** By the end of the Zheng He voyages, Chinese colonies in South-East Asia had become quite numerous and the memory of Zheng He was

preserved to a much greater extent in these Chinese overseas communities than in China Proper.