Zheng He's Western Voyages

107 ▼ Ma Huan,
THE OVERALL SURVEY
OF THE OCEAN'S SHORES

As the previous source suggests, vigorous expansionism characterized the early Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), particularly during the reign of Chengzu, known as the Yongle Emperor (r. 1402-1424). Between 1405 and 1421 this emperor sent out a series of six great fleets under the command of China's most famous admiral, a Muslim eunuch of Mongolian ancestry named Zheng He (1371-1435). If we can believe the records, several fleets carried in excess of 27,000 sailors, soldiers, and officials. The first expedition of 1405-1407 reportedly consisted of 317 vessels, including 62 massive treasure ships, some of which had 9 masts and were over 400 feet long, more than 150 feet wide (imagine a ship larger than a football field), and around 3,100 tons in weight. These armadas — as well as a seventh, which went out in 1431 and returned in 1433 — sailed through the waters of Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean, visiting numerous ports of call in such far-away places as the Spice Islands, India, East Africa, and the Arabian Peninsula.

Following long-established Arab and Chinese sailing routes, these expeditions were certainly not voyages of exploration. Rather, their main purpose appears to have been the reassertion of Chinese prestige to the south and west. In essence, they were commissioned to accept the submission and tribute of the foreign rulers they encountered. A secondary purpose seems to have been to stimulate China's economy and strengthen its commercial position in South Asia, particularly in light of the fact that the armies of Tamerlane had disrupted certain routes along the old Silk Road.

A book that appeared in 2002, 1421: The Year China Discovered America by Gavin Menzies, claims that the sixth expedition, which went out in 1421 and returned in 1423, divided into a number of independent squadrons. This was usual for the fleets, but what followed was not. One squadron circumnavigated the globe, sailing to both American continents, as well as to Australia and New Zealand before returning to home port. Another visited the east coast of North America and then went north to Greenland and Iceland and across the Arctic Ocean until it reached the eastern tip of Siberia. From there it sailed south to China. A third sailed to South America and then to the top of Antarctica and back across the Atlantic and Indian Oceans to Australia, and then home. Historians are skeptical of this theory and the evidence that Menzies has produced. As the issue currently stands, scholars generally agree that the squadrons of this fleet, as was true of earlier voyages, sailed no farther west than East Africa.

Wherever they sailed, all of the fleets made an impression on those whom they visited. In one area of Thailand, for example, Zheng He was remembered as a god. Despite the awe that these shows of strength engendered, China failed to gain dominance over the Indian Ocean. After the Yongle Emperor's death, the imperial court did not follow through on what had begun so well. The reasons are not too
difficult to discern. The cost of mounting the expeditions was prohibitively high. Moreover, the Confucian literarchy, with its traditional contempt for commerce and foreign cultures, was on the ascendance after the Yongle Emperor’s death. Although Zheng He was allowed to lead a seventh expedition westward, it proved to be China’s last moment of transoceanic greatness. The court called a halt to further overseas adventures; the fleet was allowed to decay; and China deliberately and effectively forgot much of the naval technology that had made it the world’s greatest maritime power in the ages of Song and early Ming.

The following account describes various sites visited in the course of three of Zheng He’s expeditions in western waters. Its author, Ma Huan (ca. 1380–after 1451), a Chinese Muslim, joined the fourth voyage (1413–1415) as an Arabic translator, and upon his return transcribed his notes into book form. He later sailed on the sixth (1421–1423) and seventh (1431–1433) expeditions and amended his account accordingly, eventually publishing it in 1451.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. What evidence is there that the emperor saw these expeditions as a way of extending Chinese influence abroad?
2. How did Zheng He use both diplomacy and military force to achieve this objective?
3. What evidence is there that these expeditions also served commercial purposes?
4. What evidence is there that a high level of international commerce existed in the Indian Ocean well before the coming of Zheng He’s fleets?

THE COUNTRY OF MANLAJIA
(MALACCA)

From Zhan City you go due south, and after traveling for eight days with a fair wind the ship comes to Longya strait, after entering the strait you travel west; and you can reach this place in two days.

Formerly this place was not designated a “country”; and because the sea hereabouts was named “Five Islands,” the place was in consequence named “Five Islands.” There was no king of the country; and it was controlled only by a chief. This territory was subordinate to the jurisdiction of Xian Luo; it paid an annual tribute of forty liang of gold, and if it were not paid, then Xian Luo would send men to attack it.

In the seventh year of the Yongle period, the Emperor ordered the principal envoy, the grand eunuch Zheng He, and others to assume command (of the treasure-ships), and to take the imperial edicts and to bestow upon this chief two silver seals, a hat, a belt and a robe. Zheng He set up a stone tablet and raised the place to a city; and it was subsequently called the “country of Manlajia.” Thereafter Xian Luo did not dare to invade it.

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1Malacca, a port on the west coast of the Malay Peninsula.
2In Champa (central Vietnam).
3The Singapore Strait.
4Thailand.
5About forty-eight ounces.
61409: This would be the third expedition of 1409–1411.
The chief, having received the favor of being made king, conducted his wife and son, and went to the court at the capital to return thanks and to present tribute of local products. The court also granted him a sea-going ship, so that he might return to his country and protect his land.

Whenever the treasure-ships of the Central Country arrived there, they at once erected a line of stockading, like a city-wall, and set up towers for the watchdrums at four gates; at night they had patrols of police carrying bells; inside, again, they erected a second stockade, like a small city-wall, within which they constructed warehouses and granaries; and all the money and provisions were stored in them. The ships which had gone to various countries returned to this place and assembled; they marshaled the foreign goods and loaded them in the ships; then waited till the south wind was perfectly favorable. In the middle decade of the fifth moon they put to sea and returned home.

Moreover, the king of the country made a selection of local products, conducted his wife and son, brought his chiefs, boarded a ship and followed the treasure-ships; and he attended at court and presented tribute.

THE COUNTRY OF SUMENDALA
(SEMUDERA, LHO SEUMAWE)

The country of Sumendala is exactly the same country as that formerly named Xuwendana. This place is indeed the principal center of the Western Ocean.

The king of the country of Sumendala had previously been raided by the "tattooed-face king" of Naguer; and in the fighting he received a poisoned arrow in the body and died. He had one son, who was young and unable to avenge his father's death. The king's wife made a vow before the people, saying "If there is anyone who can avenge my husband's death and recover his land, I am willing to marry him and to share with him the management of the country's affairs." When she finished speaking, a fisherman belonging to the place was fired with determination, and said "I can avenge him."

Thereupon he took command of an army and at once put the "tattooed-face king" to flight in battle; and later he avenged the former king's death when the "tattooed-face king" was killed. The people of the latter submitted and did not dare to carry on hostilities.

Whereupon the wife of the former king, failing not to carry out her previous vow, forthwith married the fisherman. He was styled "the old king," and in such things as the affairs of the royal household and the taxation of the land, everybody accepted the old king's decisions. In the seventh year of the Yongle period the old king, in fulfillment of his duty, brought tribute of local products, and was enriched by the kindness of Heaven; and in the tenth year of the Yongle period he returned to his country.

When the son of the former king had grown up, he secretly plotted with the chiefs, murdered his adoptive father the fisherman, usurped his position, and ruled the kingdom.

The fisherman had a son by his principal wife; his name was Suganli; he took command of his people, and they fled away, taking their families; and, after erecting a stockade in the neighboring mountains, from time to time he led his men in...
incursions to take revenge on his father's enemies. In the thirteenth year of the Yongle period, the principal envoy, the grand eunuch Zheng He, and others, commanding a large fleet of treasure-ships, arrived there; they dispatched soldiers who captured Sugania; and he went to the capital, and was publicly executed. The king's son was grateful for the imperial kindness, and constantly presented tribute of local products to the court.

At this place there are foreign ships going and coming in large numbers, hence all kinds of foreign goods are sold in great quantities in the country.

In this country they use gold coins and tin coins. The foreign name for the gold coin is dinaar; they use pale gold, seventy percent pure, for casting it. The foreign name for the tin coin is jisthi, and in all their trading they regularly use tin coins.

THE COUNTRY OF GULI
(CALICUT)

This is the great country of the Western Ocean.

In the fifth year of the Yongle period the court ordered the principal envoy, the grand eunuch Zheng He, and others to deliver an imperial mandate to the king of this country and to bestow on him a patent conferring a title of honor, and the grant of a silver seal, also to promote all the chiefs and award them hats and belts of various grades.

So Zheng He went there in command of a large fleet of treasure-ships, and he erected a tablet with a pavilion over it and set up a stone which said, "Though the journey from this country to the Central Country is more than a hundred thousand li, yet the people are very similar, happy and prosperous, with identical customs. We have here engraved a stone, a perpetual declaration for ten thousand ages."

The king of the country is a Nankun man; he is a firm believer in the Buddhist religion and he venerates the elephant and the ox.

The population of the country includes five classes, the Muslim people, the Nankun people, the Zhedi people, the Geling people, and the Mugua people.

The king has two great chiefs who administer the affairs of the country; both are Muslims.

The people are very honest and trustworthy. Their appearance is smart, fine, and distinguished.

Their two great chiefs received promotion and awards from the court of the Central Country.

If a treasure-ship goes there, it is left entirely to the two men to superintend the buying and selling; the king sends a chief and a Zhedi Weinaoji to examine the account books in the official bureau; a broker comes and joins them; and a high officer who commands the ships discusses the choice of a certain date for fixing prices. When the day arrives, they first of all take the silk embroideries and the open-work silks, and other such goods which have been brought there, and discuss the price of them one by one; and when the price has been fixed, they write out an agreement stating the amount of the price; this agreement is retained by these persons.

THE COUNTRY OF HULUMOS
(HORMUZ)

Setting sail from the country of Guli, you go towards the north-west; and you can reach this place after traveling with a fair wind for twenty-

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1415
1 Presumably Nanjing.
2 Non-Chinese.
3 From the Arabic dinaar.
4 The English would later transliterate this local word as "cash."
5 Calicut on India's southwest coast (not to be confused with Calcutta in the northeast).
6 1407. This was the second expedition (1407–1409). Although Zheng He was its nominal commander, he did not accompany it.
7 A li is a bit more than one-third of a mile.
8 Upper class. He probably means a member of the Kshatriya, or warrior-ruler, caste.
9 Incorrect; he was Hindu.
10 These would be the four castes, or varnas.
11 Probably an accountant.
12 Hormuz, an island off the coast of Iran and at the mouth of the Persian Gulf.
five days. The capital lies beside the sea and up against the mountains.

Foreign ships from every place and foreign merchants traveling by land all come to this country to attend the market and trade; hence the people of the country are all rich. . . .

The king of this country, too, took a ship and loaded it with lions, qilin, horses, pearls, precious stones, and other things, also a memorial to the throne written on a golden leaf; and he sent his chiefs and other men, who accompanied the treasure-ships dispatched by the Emperor, which were returning from the Western Ocean; and they went to the capital and presented tribute.30

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30A giraffe.
31This probably took place at the end of the seventh expedition.

The Origins of Portugal's Overseas Empire

408 v Gomes Eannes de Azurara,
THE CHRONICLE OF GUINEA

At the same time that Zheng He’s fleets were sailing majestically through the western seas and Muslim sailors dominated the coastal traffic of virtually every inhabited land washed by the Indian Ocean (except Australia), the Portuguese were tentatively inching down the west coast of Africa. From 1419 onward, Prince Henry (1394–1460), third son of King John I (r. 1385–1433), almost annually sent out a ship or two in an attempt to push farther toward the sub-Saharan land the Portuguese called Guinea; only in 1434, however, did one of his caravels manage to round the feared Cape Bojador, along the western Sahara coast. Once this psychological and navigational barrier had been broken, the pace of exploration quickened. By 1460 Portuguese sailors had ventured as far south as modern Sierra Leone, an advance of about 1,500 miles in twenty-six years. Finally, Bartholomeu Dias rounded the southern tip of Africa in early 1488, and Vasco da Gama, seeking, in his words, “Christians and spices,” dropped anchor off Calicut on May 20, 1498. Although da Gama lost two of his four ships and many of his crew, the profits from this small enterprise were astounding. Portugal was now in the Indian Ocean to stay.

Portugal’s commercial empire was still over half a century in the future when, in 1452, Gomes Eannes de Azurara (ca. 1400–after 1472) began to compose a history of the life and work of Prince Henry “the Navigator,” in so many ways the father of an empire-to-be. Azurara’s history details Portuguese explorations along the coast of West Africa down to 1448. He promised a sequel because Henry was still alive and actively promoting voyages to Africa when Azurara completed The Chronicle of Guinea in 1453. Azurara’s other duties apparently intervened, and he never returned to the topic. Still, the chronicle he managed to write is a revealing picture of the spirit behind Portugal’s first generation of oceanic exploration and colonialism.

In the following excerpts Azurara explains why Prince Henry sponsored the expeditions and defends the consequent enslavement of West Africans. Trade in