

*Six hundred years ago
China's Admiral Zheng He
led a mighty fleet on the first
of seven voyages
that reshaped an empire.*

China's Great Armada

By Frank Viviano
Photographs by Michael Yamashita



Viewed from the rocky outcropping of Dondra Head at the southernmost tip of Sri Lanka, the first sighting of the Ming fleet is a massive shadow on the horizon. As the shadow rises, it breaks into a cloud of tautly ribbed sail, aflame in the tropical sun. With relentless determination, the cloud draws ever closer, and in its fiery embrace an enormous city appears. A floating city, like nothing the world has ever seen before. No warning could have prepared officials, soldiers, or the thunderstruck peasants who stand atop Dondra Head for the scene that unfolds below them. Stretched across miles of the Indian Ocean in terrifying majesty is the armada of Zheng He, admiral of the imperial Ming navy.

Exactly 600 years ago this month the great Ming armada weighed anchor in Nanjing, on the first of seven epic voyages as far west as Africa—almost a century before Christopher Columbus's arrival in the Americas and Vasco da Gama's in India. Even then the European expeditions would seem paltry by comparison: All the ships of Columbus and da Gama combined could have been stored on a single deck of a single vessel in the fleet that set sail under Zheng He.

Its commander was, without question, the most towering maritime figure in the 4,000-year annals of China, a visionary who imagined a new world and set out consciously to fashion it. He was also a profoundly unlikely candidate for admiral in anyone's navy, much less that of the Dragon Throne.

The greatest seafarer in China's history was raised in the mountainous heart of Asia, several weeks' travel from the closest port. More improbable yet, Zheng was not even Chinese—he was by origin a Central Asian Muslim. Born Ma He, the son of a rural official in the Mongol province of Yunnan, he had been taken captive

as an invading Chinese army overthrew the Mongols in 1382. Ritually castrated, he was trained as an imperial eunuch and assigned to the court of Zhu Di, the bellicose Prince of Yan.

Within 20 years the boy who had writhed under Ming knives had become one of the prince's chief aides, a key strategist in the rebellion that made Zhu Di the Yongle (Eternal Happiness) emperor in 1402. Renamed Zheng after his exploits at the battle of Zhenglunba, near Beijing, he was chosen to lead one of the most powerful naval forces ever assembled.

Six centuries later I left China with photographer Michael Yamashita in search of Zheng He's legacy, a 10,000-mile journey that would carry us from Yunnan to Africa's Swahili coast. Along the way I came to feel that I had found the man himself.

The voyages' initial impulse was bluntly elemental: the Yongle emperor's colossal ambition. Its spirit is best captured at the ancient Yangshan quarries in Jiangsu Province, 15 miles from Nanjing.

Mike and I were among Yangshan's few visitors on a wet May afternoon, wandering



Shown on a mural in his landlocked hometown of Kunyang, China, Zheng, a Central Asian Muslim who was captured and castrated by the Chinese, didn't seem destined for fame.

blindly through a maze of narrow canyons, when a gigantic monolith suddenly loomed ahead of us in the mist. It was a gravestone the size of a skyscraper, carved out of an abrupt cliff—the base of a planned 25-story memorial tablet that Zhu Di commissioned for the tomb of his father, Zhu Yuanzhang, the Hongwu emperor, founder of the Ming dynasty. Eventually it had to be abandoned in its granite niche because, at an estimated 34,000 tons, the completed monument would have been impossible to move.

Zhu's tablet was the funereal equivalent of a maritime buildup so massive, so megalomaniac in its dimensions, that until recently most scholars dismissed them as sheer myth. In 1962 that skepticism was wrenched into dazed astonishment. At the bottom of a muddy trench on the south bank of the Yangtze River in Nanjing, workers unearthed a wooden steering post 36 feet long with evidence of an attached

rudder whose surface area worked out to a mind-boggling 452 square feet—big enough to turn a vessel the size of the legendary *baochuan*, meaning “treasure ships,” of the Ming armada.

The fleet commanded by Zheng He counted as many as 62 of these gargantuan vessels, which some nautical experts believe may have measured up to 400 feet in length and 170 feet across the beam—with nine masts, 50,000-square-foot main decks, and a displacement of at least 3,000 tons, ten times the size of Vasco da Gama's flagship. Scholars disagree on the *baochuan*'s actual size, but even at far more modest estimates they were surely the largest wooden ships ever launched.

The *baochuan* were escorted by 370-foot-long, eight-masted “galloping-horse ships,” the swiftest in the fleet, 280-foot supply ships, 240-foot troop transports, and agile 180-foot combat junks, according to interpretations of Ming sources. More than 300 vessels are believed to have sailed on Zheng's main voyages to what the Chinese call *Xi Yang*, the Western Ocean. The ships were manned by nearly 30,000 sailors and marines, seven grand eunuchs and hundreds of other Ming officials, 180 physicians, five astrologers, and ranks of geomancers, sailmakers, herbalists, blacksmiths, carpenters, tailors, cooks, accountants, merchants, and interpreters.

These are extraordinary numbers, but perfectly in step with the prevailing ethos of Zhu Di's reign. Vast expansions of the Grand Canal and the Great Wall were completed during the Yongle decades, along with hundreds of temples and palaces. In the years between Zheng He's second and sixth expeditions (1409-1421), the emperor would order the imperial capital itself moved 600 land miles to the north, from Nanjing to Beijing, commissioning the monumental Forbidden City at its heart and a sprawling metropolis to surround it.

It was against this frenetic background that Admiral Zheng He received his sailing orders on July 11, 1405.

He was, according to family sources, as outsized as his ships: seven feet tall, with a waist five feet in circumference, “and a voice as loud as a huge bell.” Even allowing for exaggeration, by all accounts Zheng was an imposing man.

But it was not the admiral's physical stature that seized my attention early on. It was his surprising faith in the virtue of humility,

The voyages were a floating encyclopedia-in-progress for Ming China—a compilation of all worth knowing between Nanjing and Africa.

expressed on a trip back to Kunyang, his Yunnan Province hometown, just one month before the first voyage. The trip's purpose was to erect a stone pillar, inscribed with an epitaph, over the grave of his father, Ma Haji.

Ma Haji had died on August 12, 1382, at the age of 37, a casualty of the same Ming invasion that left Ma He a eunuch. The elder Ma, his famous son declares in the epitaph, was moved neither by power nor by position. On the contrary, "he was content as an ordinary commoner" but also insistently brave and decisive in that ordinary life. "When he encountered the unfortunate—including widows, orphans, and others with no one to rely on, he routinely [offered them] protection and aid."

Ma Haji, in short, is a paragon of instinctive nobility—not the nobility of an emperor or admiral but someone who was "by nature . . . especially fond of doing good," the inscription reads.

The Kunyang epitaph is a portrait of the fundamental human values Zheng He most admired. It is also the first of three surviving personal statements, each of them inscribed in stone, that provide a rare glimpse into the private thoughts of a man born in the war-ravaged 14th century—but struggling to escape its martial obsessions.

MAIDEN VOYAGE

The Green Eyebrow was a renowned Song dynasty junk, named for the menacing glare painted on her bow and rebuilt in 2002 to original scale. She rolls like a duck at her mooring, fighting a stiff wind at the mouth of the Yangtze River, where Zheng He's baochuan entered the East China Sea in 1405. Zhang Yonghua, a sailing master for 38 years, peers into the morning haze from the helm, his back ramrod straight, his face a study in placid concentration.

He nods at his first officer, who motions at a windlass, and four barefoot sailors spring into action, hauling 350 feet of anchor chain aboard. Several paces aft at a second windlass, six more men begin raising sails. The sailors chant an ancient

naval dialogue, their rhythmic "Yeee-yee-yo!" answered by the officer's sharp, commanding "Ai hah!"

Within minutes the rolling vanishes and the Green Eyebrow takes flight over the waves. The first officer gives us the thumbs-up sign, then turns to Captain Zhang for his orders—just as the officers of the Ming flagship must have turned, making sail on this very sea, to Admiral Zheng He.

By the last week of 1405 the baochuan were harbored at the city of Qui Nhon in Champa, part of present-day Vietnam. After Champa the expedition proceeded to the islands of Java and Sumatra in what is now Indonesia, then west toward the most distant lands on its maiden journey, Sri Lanka and the Malabar Coast of India. Altogether, the voyage to India covered some 6,000 miles, at an estimated average speed of 50 miles a day.

From the beginning the Treasure Fleet mixed business with exploration and diplomacy, carrying more than a million tons of Chinese silk, ceramics, and copper coinage on its westward runs, to be exchanged for tropical spices, fragrant woods, precious gems, animals, textiles, and minerals. And from the beginning it sailed troubled waters. Over the course of his seven expeditions Zheng He would be drawn into countless regional conflicts. Few were more storied than his 1407 encounter in the Strait of Malacca with the infamous Cantonese pirate Chen Zuyi.

Since well before the Middle Ages, the narrow passage between Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula has been essential to international trade. In 1407 Chen Zuyi was its unrivaled scourge. Operating out of Palembang, a city on Sumatra with a large Chinese population, his heavily armed junks intercepted almost every convoy that passed, including the Ming armada.

Zheng made the opening gambit, demanding Chen's surrender, and the pirate quickly signaled agreement—while preparing for a surprise preemptive strike. But details of his plan had been provided to Zheng by a local Chinese informant, and in the fierce battle that ensued, the pirate

fleet was destroyed and 5,000 of its men killed. Chen was captured and held for public execution in Nanjing.

The informant was installed as Palembang's new ruler and incorporated into what would become a far-flung system of allies who acknowledged Ming supremacy in return for diplomatic recognition, military protection, and trading rights. By the end of the Yongle reign, the kings or ambassadors of more than 30 foreign states had paid official visits to the emperor bearing tribute. They were ferried to China in luxurious staterooms on the *baochuan*.

The most detailed record of Zheng He's triumph on the Strait of Malacca is found in *The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores*, published in 1451 by Ma Huan, a Chinese Muslim from Zhejiang who spoke Arabic and served as an interpreter on at least three of the voyages.

Ma is entranced by the exotic customs and bounty of the tropics, where most of the fleet's destinations lay. "How can there be such diversity in the world?" he exclaims at one point.

In Champa he and his fellow sailors dine on the succulent jackfruit, with its "morsels of yellow flesh, as big as a hen's egg and tasting like honey."

"The coconut has ten different uses," he learns in India, ranging from sweet syrup, wine, and oil to the production of rope-fiber, thatched roofs, and shell bowls.

So extensive is the array of spices, nuts, herbs, plants, and cooking styles described and cataloged by Ma, says Mark Stephen Mir, of the University of San Francisco's Ricci Institute for Chinese-Western Cultural History, "that you could probably trace Zheng He's voyages along culinary lines alone."

The Treasure Fleet crewmen are dazzled by the strange birds of Java—cockatoos, mynahs, and parrots—"all of which can imitate human speech," Ma enthuses. But he is appalled by the incessant violence of real humans on Java, where he discovers that "little boys of three years to old men of a hundred years" routinely carry knives.

"If a man touches their head with his hand, or if there is a misunderstanding about money at a sale, or a battle of words when they are crazy with drunkenness, they at once pull out these knives and stab [each other]."

Zheng's ships carry thousands of young sailors. Not surprisingly their imaginations—and shore leaves—are often aimed at the opposite sex. "If a woman is very intimate with one of our men, wine and food are provided, and they drink and sit and sleep together," Ma reports from the Kingdom of Siam, today's Thailand. Siam's men, by his account, are no less erotically inclined: At the age of 20, he writes, they insert tin or gold



CHINA Giraffes at a zoo near the Great Wall recall the fleet's role in discovery—and diplomacy. Zheng's ships brought home at least one giraffe, a gift for the emperor.

beads in their foreskins, which "when the man walks about, make a tinkling sound. . . . This is a most curious thing."

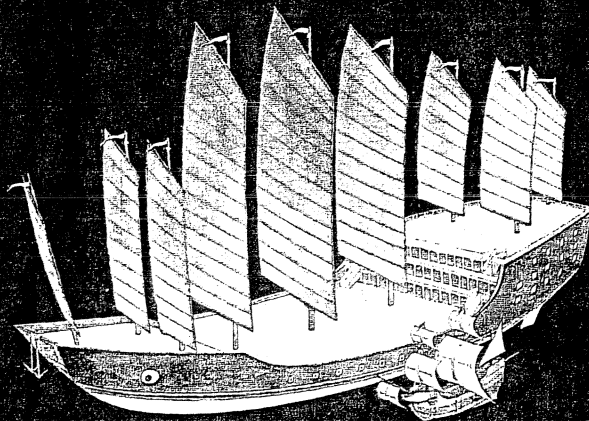
Ma pondered funeral and marriage rites, domestic and public architecture, religious beliefs, languages and dialects, trade goods and commercial practices, weights and measures, flora and fauna, science and technology, the strengths and weaknesses of governments.

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Voyages of Zheng He

1405-1433

The ships of Zheng's armada were as astonishing as its reach. Some accounts claim that the great baochuan, or treasure ships, had nine masts on 400-foot-long decks. The largest wooden ships ever built, they dwarfed those of Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama (art, below). Hundreds of smaller cargo, war, and supply ships bore tens of thousands of men who brought China to a wider world.



A MING TREASURE SHIP
Perhaps 400 ft. (122 m) long,
170 ft. (52 m) wide

**VASCO DA GAMA'S
SÃO GABRIEL**
About 74 ft. (23 m) long,
18 ft. (5 m) wide

A Shrinking World

ca 1000 Leif Eriksson makes landfall in Newfoundland

1100s Chinese junks call at Persian Gulf and Red Sea ports

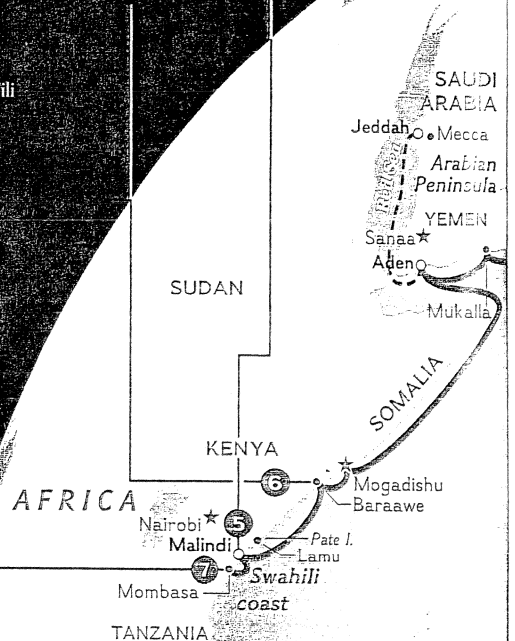
ca 1050 Floating compass in use by Chinese navigators

ca 1070 Chinese develop dry docks

5 1417-1419 Zheng's Treasure Fleet visited the Arabian Peninsula and, for the first time, Africa. In Aden the sultan presented exotic gifts such as zebras, lions, and ostriches.

6 1421-1422 Zheng He's fleet continued the emperor's version of shuttle diplomacy, returning ambassadors to their native countries after stays of several years, while bringing other foreign dignitaries back to China.

7 1431-1433 The last voyage, to Africa's Swahili coast, with a side trip to Mecca, marked the end of China's golden age of exploration and of Zheng He's life. He presumably died en route home and was buried at sea.



Present-day boundaries shown

Scale varies in this perspective.

Straight-line distance between Nanjing and Mombasa is 5,730 miles (9,221 kilometers).

ART BY GREG HARLING
NG MAPS

1215 Mongols under Genghis Khan capture Beijing.

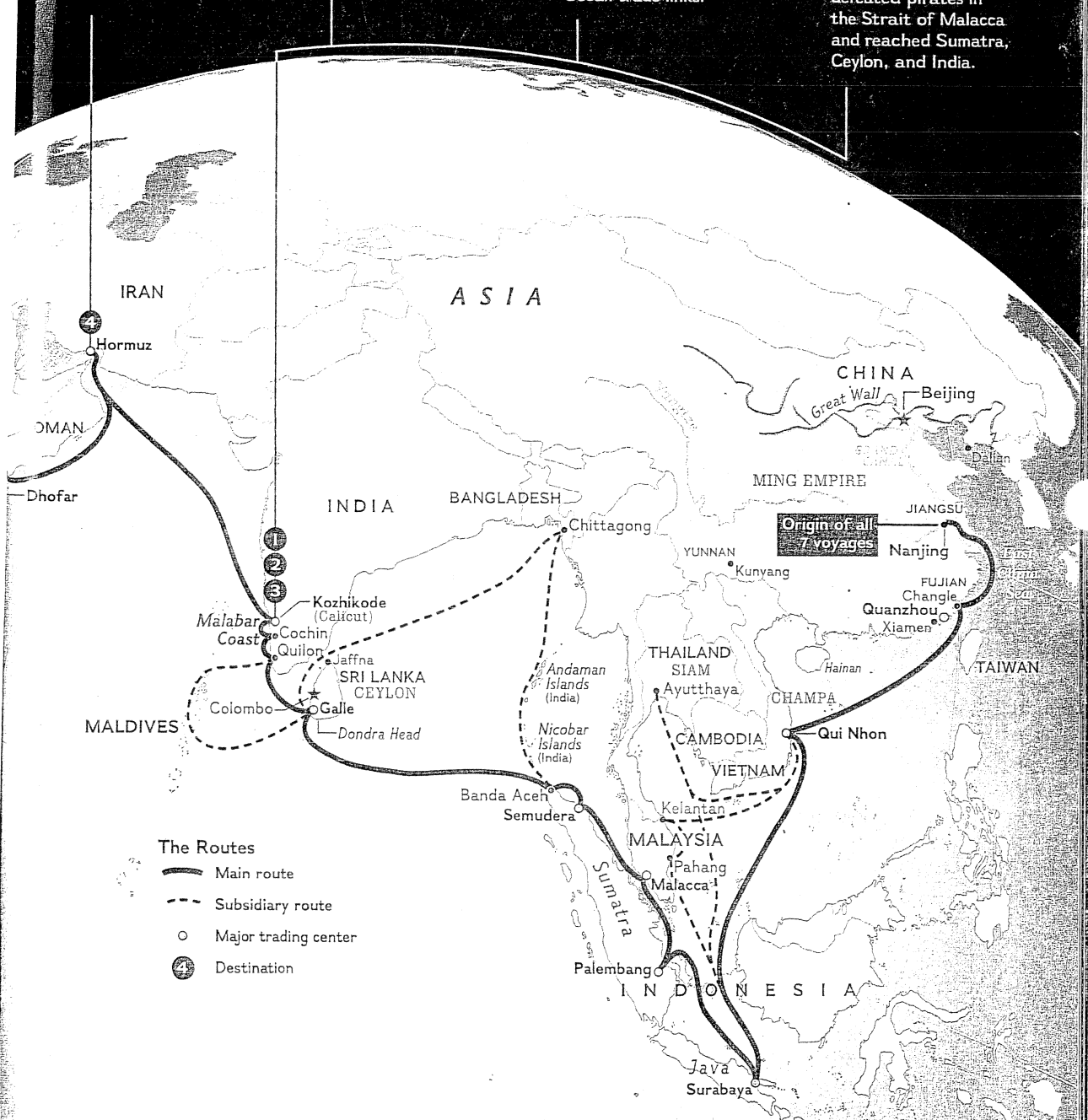
1275 Marco Polo visits Kublai Khan's China.

4 1413-1415 In this voyage's wake, the first to travel beyond India and cross the Arabian Sea, an estimated 18 states sent tribute and envoys to China, underscoring the Ming emperor's influence overseas.

3 1409-1411 Although notable for the imperial fleet's only major foreign land battle, the voyage was also marked by Muslim Zheng's offering of gifts to a Buddhist temple, one of many examples of his ecumenism.

2 1407-1409 The fleet returned foreign ambassadors from Sumatra, India, and elsewhere who had traveled to China on the first voyage. The expeditions firmly established the Ming dynasty's Indian Ocean trade links.

1 1405-1407 317 ships 27,870 men In July the fleet left Nanjing with silks, porcelain, and spices for trade. This well-armed floating city defeated pirates in the Strait of Malacca and reached Sumatra, Ceylon, and India.



1405-1433 Zheng He's seven voyages

1450s Ming sea trade wanes.

1492 Christopher Columbus makes landfall in the New World.

1519-1522 Ferdinand Magellan's crew circles the globe.

1420s Great Wall expansion, completion of Forbidden City, capital moves to Beijing

1495 Dry docks developed in Portsmouth, England

1498 Vasco da Gama anchors off Calicut, India.

1514 Portuguese ships reach Chinese waters.

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ORDER AND LIGHT

Chen Yanhang, an engineer in the port city of Xiamen, has studied the Ming naval scrolls for years. “Going to sea, then and now, was about science,” he says.

We are having lunch with two retired captains, Lin Jinlei and Xu Caiquan, the modern counterparts of the baochuan commanders. Captain Lin echoes engineer Chen: “My men used to pray to a little statue of Mazu, the goddess of the sea, just like they did in Zheng He’s time. But I don’t believe in gods. I believe in facts.”

Captain Xu shakes his head and tells a story: “We were 48 days into a run from New Orleans to Dalian in 1982, via Africa and the Strait of Malacca. Suddenly a north wind screamed in, and the waves heaved a giant sea turtle onto the deck.

“Some of the men wanted to carry it to the Dalian zoo. Others, especially the old-timers, said nothing at all. We locked it up, and 24 hours later the wind was so fierce that I hove the ship to, hoping we could ride out the storm. We’d heard on the radio that three ships had already gone down. That night one of the old-timers crawled over the deck and set the turtle loose. The wind fell a few hours later. Another day, and we’d have been finished.”

Captain Xu pauses, and in his eyes I see the timeless power and mystery of the sea. “I believe in science too,” he says, “but I also believe that turtle was more than a turtle.”

The deeper motives behind Zheng He’s voyages are a matter of intense scholarly debate, with rival historians citing trade, gunboat diplomacy, military defense, and even the personal insecurity of Zhu Di—who was said to fear that his nephew, the dethroned emperor, had escaped overseas. Zheng He, in this interpretation, was sent abroad to hunt Zhu’s predecessor.

Contemporary sources on the Yongle reign are exceedingly scarce. “Of the several million Ming documents once held in the central government archives in Beijing and Nanjing, all but 10,000 were destroyed in the fighting at the

end of the dynasty,” notes Endymion Wilkinson of Harvard University. By contrast, he adds, “14 million original government documents survive from the archives of the Qing dynasty,” which lasted from 1644 to 1911.

In the end no general explanation for the voyages seems more convincing than the yearning for order after a century of almost unprecedented violence—a yearning for the assurances of fact and discovery set against a backdrop of worldwide chaos.

The Mongol Empire, which once stretched from the Danube to the Sea of Japan, had been shattered into a mosaic of warring fragments. In Central Asia the merciless Tamerlane had risen to power, seizing Baghdad and Delhi, then turning east with a vast army and bent on invading China. Only his sudden death in 1405 ended the menace. Sri Vijaya and Angkor, the former superpowers of Southeast Asia, were vanishing into the jungles of Sumatra and Cambodia. Heaven itself seemed to have turned its back on humanity. Catastrophic epidemics and famine in the 14th century had killed an estimated one in three Chinese—35 million people.

Zhu Di’s father chose to call his new dynasty Ming, “brightness,” in explicit contrast with the dark chaos of his times. Brightness lay in order—and in the early 15th century, order depended on a phenomenally energetic and expansive China. The imperial mandate, Treasure Fleet sailor Fei Xin wrote in his diary, was to bring order “to the four quarters [of the Earth] . . . as far as ships and carts would go and power of men would reach.”

It was a daunting task that, on his third voyage, would lead Zheng He into a savage conflict thousands of miles from China.

Along the 22-mile road from Elephant Pass to Jaffna, on the northern tip of Sri Lanka, not a single building remained whole in the summer of 2004. Over the past decade many had been reduced to nothing more than knee-high mounds of rubble. Last August I walked through

the ruins with two friends, Rukshan and Viji Jayewardene. Our tour came to a wordless end in a stain-splattered courtyard. The stains had dried dark-brown in the tropical heat, but it was obvious that they were recently blood-red, and that a number of people had been shoved against the courtyard wall and executed here.

In 1411 Zheng He had intervened in an earlier war on the island, pitting Hindu Tamils from the north against two mutually hostile Sinhalese Buddhist realms in the center and south. Zheng was forced to act when one of the Buddhist rulers, a rebel chieftain, attacked a Ming shore party. In a stroke of military genius, the main body of Sri Lankan troops was lured into a fruitless assault on the fleet, leaving their capital open to easy conquest.

The episode marked the only significant overseas land battle ever fought by a Chinese imperial army. It so strengthened the legitimate Sinhalese king, Parakramabahu VI, that he went on to defeat the Tamils and govern Sri Lanka for 55 years, before the kingdom collapsed into warring divisions once more.

Six centuries later those divisions remain ferocious. In their current guise, they pit the lethal guerrilla force known as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam against the Sinhalese-dominated central government in Colombo, the nation's modern capital.

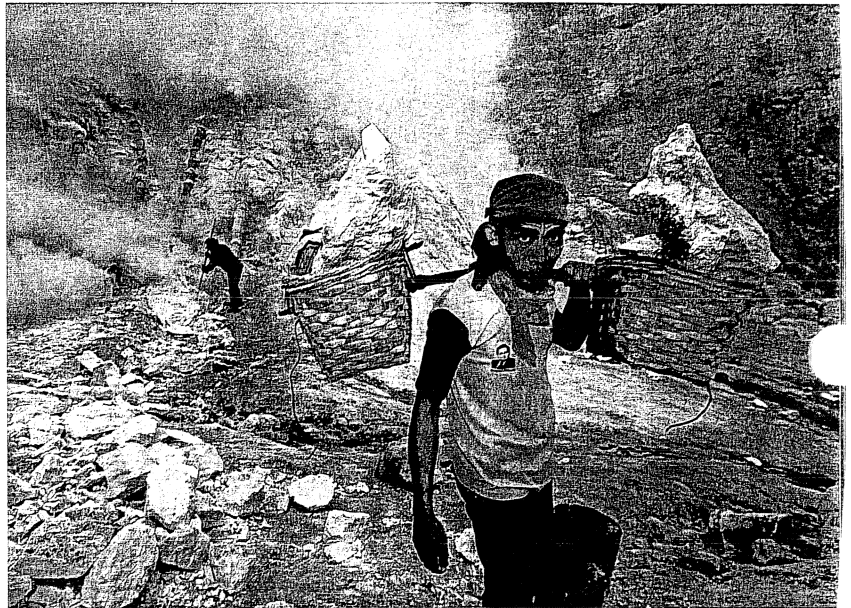
A fragile truce was in effect when I went to Jaffna with Rukshan and Viji, and held through the aftermath of December's tsunami, which killed tens of thousands in Sri Lanka and forced government troops and Tiger insurgents to cooperate in relief efforts. But the long-term picture remains ominous.

Rukshan, a quiet and introspective archaeologist and wildlife photographer, was obliged to keep a low profile because his grandfather, Junius Jayewardene, had been president when the Tamil-Sinhalese conflict reopened in the early 1980s. Now it was dangerous simply to be a Jayewardene in northern Sri Lanka.

Jaffna was a stark reminder of irrational hatred's demoralizing tenacity. Zheng He believed he had put the same crisis to rest 600 years ago—and carved its resolution in stone.

In 1911 a British engineer out for a stroll near the harbor city of Galle chanced upon a strange granite slab with inscriptions in Chinese, Tamil, and Persian. It proved to be a commemorative stela raised by Zheng in 1410 at Dondra Head.

The stela's three inscriptions were addressed, respectively, to Buddha, Siva, and Allah, offering thanks for their compassion and moral virtue, and seeking their protective blessing for the voyages' aims. The chief Buddhist, Hindu, and



I N D O N E S I A *On a volcano on Java, laborers haul sulfur, which Zheng's fleet collected for use in medicines, alchemy, and gunpowder, a Chinese invention. Gathering commodities across half the globe, the fleet imported industrial metals, sandalwood, ivory, and exotic spices such as pepper.*

Muslim shrines of Sri Lanka, the stela recorded, were to be presented with equal offerings of gold, silver, silk, and other precious gifts.

Elsewhere in Asia this is the epoch when entire cities were put to the sword in the name of Buddha, Siva, or Allah. It is the epoch of the Inquisition in Europe, when thousands of Muslims and Jews were burned at the stake. In the context of his century's *(Continued on page 46)*

“We have set eyes on barbarian regions far away hidden
in a blue transparency of light vapors, while
our sails loftily unfurled like clouds day and night.”

religious fanaticism, Zheng He's Dondra stela was an ecumenical manifesto far ahead of its time—indeed, ahead of our own fanatic times—a plea for tolerance, articulated in three languages.

THE WORLD OF EXCHANGE

Ma Huan sits on deck with younger interpreters, sharing what he knows of the ports that lie ahead, of the stories they'll hear, and of the strange new words they must learn. In the language of India, he explains, a prince is called a raja. In the Chinese characters of his diary he will express this as lazha. A king, he adds, is a mahalazha. Ma is the first linguist to transcribe hundreds of foreign words into Chinese, including gaoli (the cowry shell), jiashi (cash), and sakala, the textile Shakespeare would know as sackcloth.

He will also be among the first Chinese writers to tell the story of a holy man who leads his people on a long journey, then appoints his brother to watch over them while he himself goes off to speak with God. In his absence, Ma relates, the brother allows their people to worship “a golden ox.” In Chinese Ma refers to the holy man as Mouxie, a close approximation of the Arabic name for Moses.

The young interpreters listen. Between Ma Huan's lessons and stories, they can hear the sailor who walks the deck from fore to aft, following a float in the sea that measures speed. If the sailor walks 150 feet in 50 seconds, the ship is making two knots on its voyage west, toward the land of the mahalazha.

If tortured Sri Lanka symbolized one pole of Zheng He's personal itinerary, the Malabar Coast of India—the main destination of every one of the Treasure Fleet's seven voyages—was its opposite extreme. Malabar, with its cosmopolitan trading cities of Calicut (now Kozhikode) and Cochin was, in effect, Zheng's second home for most of his years overseas. “The great country of the Western Ocean is precisely this country,” Ma Huan flatly declared.

Nisar Ahmed Lone put it more strongly: “This is God's true country,” he told me, “a country

where everyone is a brother.” He is a cloth merchant who moved his family to Cochin 13 years ago from their native Kashmir.

The Lones are Muslim, which could be a death warrant in some parts of Asia, just as being Hindu or Christian is in others. In Cochin, Lone said, “religion is a private matter, a private choice.” In fact, he told me, the city's Muslims often send their children to the local Catholic schools—according to Malabar tradition, Christianity has been present here since the first century A.D.—simply because it is thought that their teachers are excellent.

Malabar's tolerance must have been breathtaking for Zheng He, a rare living example of the ecumenical dream he'd articulated at Dondra Head. A Calicut Hindu maharaja, Ma Huan wrote, “made a sworn compact with the Muslim people, saying: ‘You do not eat the pig. I do not eat the ox. We will respectively observe these taboos.’” The compact, Ma noted, “has been honored right down to the present day.”

I read Ma Huan's words to Vipin Vasudevan in the Cochin offices of the India Pepper and Spice Trade Association, on the very street where Zheng He's commercial agents had once talked business. Vasudevan, then the association's marketing executive, was managing the annual sale of 66,000 tons of Malabar pepper. A smile of recognition slowly lit his face as he listened to a passage from Ma about a 15th-century negotiating session in Malabar. Supervised by the Cochin maharaja's personal representative, it brought together local brokers, accountants, and prospective buyers. Goods and costs were discussed, an agreement drafted. Then, Ma wrote, all the parties joined hands, declaring “whether the price be dear or cheap, we will never repudiate it or change it.”

It was, said Vasudevan, “so close to how pepper trading works now, that I could have written it myself.” The Spice Trade Association had replaced the king's representative at the negotiating table, but the general process had barely changed. “Everyone involved is legally

bound by the agreement,” Vasudevan said, then added: “We are all morally bound by it as well.”

Ma had written one of history’s first descriptions of a futures market, the means by which Malabar pepper and most other world commodities are sold today. A market that can function only if Vasudevan’s “moral bond” holds. A model of exchange in a world ever wracked by conflict.

It took me three days’ travel out of Nairobi, by air, land, and sea, to reach Pate Island. I had been warned by Kenyan officials that roads into the area were dangerous, beset by marauding gunmen from wars in Somalia and Sudan.

Pate lies in Kenya’s Lamu archipelago, just south of the Somali border. En route to its principal African destination, Malindi, the Treasure Fleet almost certainly anchored there for water and provisions.

In the 14th century Malindi and Pate were among the richest of the Swahili kingdoms, a grand civilization of merchant princes whose realm extended as far south as Mozambique. Reminders of that brilliant past are everywhere in the Lamu archipelago. Traditional wooden trading dhows are still built in Lamu, the islands’ capital on Lamu Island, and the doors on

its aging mansions are encircled with shards of pottery that wash up on the beaches.

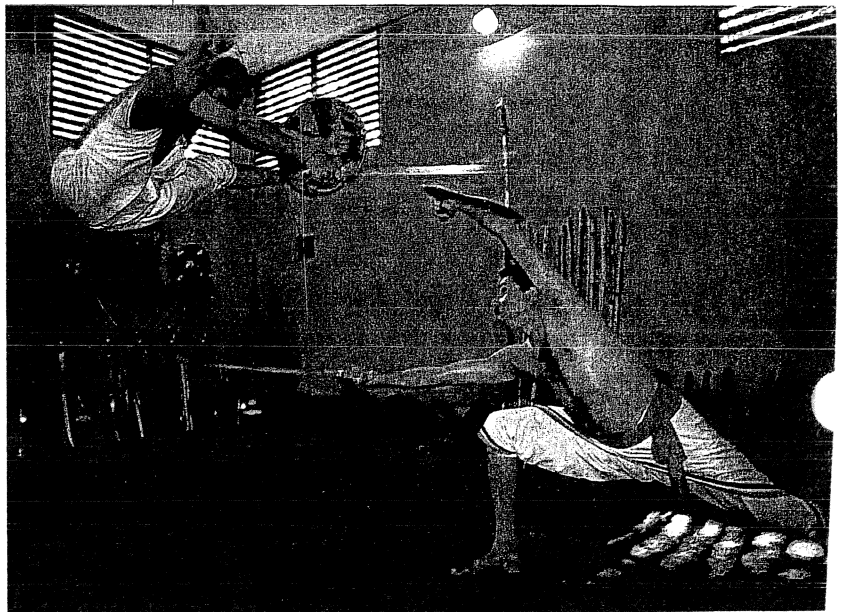
Ghazzal Harith Swaleh, the learned administrative officer of Lamu’s Swahili history museum, is convinced that the pottery is from Zheng He’s fleet—a ship or two caught in a storm and foundered on the shoals. Local legend has it that shipwrecked Ming sailors swam to Pate, he told me, “where they married local women.” Their descendants are said to have “Chinese eyes” and “Chinese-sounding” tribal names such as Famao and Wei.

I had arranged to sail to Pate from Lamu, wading ashore in a deserted lagoon. The landing place was called Old Shanga, explained my guide. “You know, like ‘Shanghai.’ That’s what our Chinese ancestors named it, maybe after

their hometown.” The guide didn’t look Chinese to me, nor did any of his fellow villagers in New Shanga, a collection of mud-walled huts nearby. The trip seemed to have accomplished nothing—until we reached a small clearing, deep in the jungle, where the guide pointed to a series of coral-stone structures draped in vines. “Our ancestors’ graves,” he said.

These burial places, with their half-moon domes and terraced entries, were virtually identical to the classic Ming tombs that dot hillsides above Chinese ports from which shipwrecked Treasure Fleet sailors might have hailed.

A strange melancholy seemed to hang over



I N D I A *Masters of kalaripayattu perform the ancient martial art in Calicut, where Zheng’s crewmen may have seen similar displays. Dispersing Asian arts and ferrying foreign ambassadors, Zheng was a potent agent of cultural exchange.*

the clearing, and I was glad to begin the long trek back to the lagoon.

THE LAST DAYS OF ZHENG HE
As the Treasure Fleet assembles in the autumn of 1431 at the Fujian harbor of Changle, Zheng He oversees the completion of another engraved pillar. Its inscription is a self-conscious statement for posterity. It is as though Zheng knows what lies ahead: history stands at a crossroads, and his own role in it is about to end. (Continued on page 52)

CHINA *A colossal block of granite remains from Emperor Zhu Di's attempt to create a stela honoring his father. That same boundless ambition launched the Treasure Fleet, which was grounded after the emperor's death. Now China is again engaging the world, says scholar Roderich Ptak: "Zheng is a symbol of that opening."*

"[We] have recorded the years and months of the voyages to the barbarian countries," the admiral declares, "in order to leave [the memory] forever."

Zheng goes on to list the major landfalls in the previous six voyages, "altogether more than thirty countries large and small." He writes of his efforts "to manifest the transforming power of virtue and to treat distant people with kindness." He dreams, still, of a new world.

In the Chinese courtly tradition, the great admiral graces the pillar's inscription with a poetic flourish: "We have traversed more than one hundred thousand li [about 40,000 miles] of immense water spaces and have beheld in the ocean huge waves like mountains rising sky-high, and we have set eyes on barbarian regions far away hidden in a blue transparency of light vapors, while our sails loftily unfurled like clouds day and night."

When the Treasure Fleet returned to China at the end of its sixth voyage in 1422, its admiral and many of his crewmen had been abroad almost constantly for nearly two decades. They must have felt lost in their own homeland.

The Ming building boom, ignited during their first voyage, had radically altered China's cities and towns. Nanjing was no longer its capital; Zhu Di, the megalomaniac emperor who had sent the men overseas, now lived in Beijing. He was in his last months of life, about to be succeeded by his son Zhu Gaozhi. The younger Zhu died after just nine months in power. But under the influence of courtiers who opposed the costly voyages, one of his first edicts was to halt all overseas expeditions. Zhu Di's grandson Zhu Zhanji continued the ban.

The policy reversal "changed history, stopped short what might have been a very different future for Asia and the world," says Liu Yingsheng of Nanjing University, a leading Zheng He scholar. The void left by China's withdrawal from foreign engagement, he points out, was filled within the next few decades by European imperialism—and Zheng's sophisticated

combination of peacekeeping, trade, and diplomacy yielded to crude military conquest.

But policy calculations in any epoch are subject to changing conditions. In the late 1420s Ming China came under pressure, by land from a new wave of Mongol invasions, by sea from Japanese pirates, and across its far-flung tributary empire from local warlords. Zhu Zhanji began to reconsider his policy on naval expeditions—though without the sense of unblinking commitment that had characterized his grandfather. Amid rancorous debate in the court, a halfhearted decision was made to reactivate the Treasure Fleet.

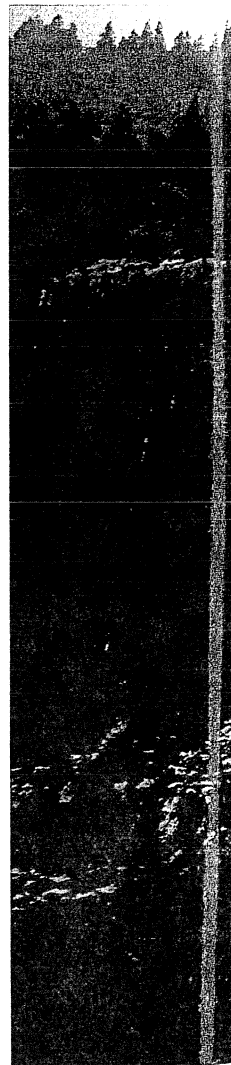
It would not affect the long-term balance sheet of Ming affairs; by the end of the 1430s the advocates of isolationism in the imperial court had won a decisive victory. But before that struggle ended, the great ships would sail again, on their seventh and final voyage.

Almost every destination on this final expedition would be familiar. It is difficult not to conclude that the most notable exception had been chosen by the admiral himself: Mecca.

In the 15th century Islam framed the Western Ocean. All of the Treasure Fleet's routes had been charted, long before, by Arab and Persian captains. Every one of the fleet's destinations on the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf had a significant Muslim community.

Islam had also been the starting point of Zheng He's immense journey. His surname, before Zhu Di changed it on an imperial whim, was Ma—the Chinese transcription of Muhammad.

Zheng's father, Ma Haji, had made the hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca, earning his honorific title. As an admiral of the Ming Empire, Zheng himself could not bow before the symbolic throne of a foreign king. But he could send the man who often seemed his alter ego—his fellow "Muhammad," Ma Huan.



While Zheng waited in Calicut in 1432, a special mission was dispatched to the Arabian Peninsula. Three months later it arrived at what Ma Huan called the Country of the Heavenly Square. The square was the Kaaba, the shrine in Mecca that is the fulcrum of the Muslim universe. What Ma described, the account he brought back to Zheng He, is essentially what is seen during the hajj in Mecca today: "Each year on the tenth day of the twelfth moon, foreign Muslims . . . come to worship." "The men wear long garments, the women all wear a covering over their heads and you cannot see their faces." Some pilgrims, he noted, had made journeys lasting up to a year, from every corner of the known world.

In their solemn turns around the Kaaba, they embodied a central quality of Islam—the celebration of humble, egalitarian virtue. They

brought the story of Zheng He, who had recognized that virtue in his father, full circle.

Some Zheng biographers contend that he returned to China with the fleet, dying two years later in Nanjing. But the tomb in his name that stands on a suburban hillside outside the old Ming capital appears to be empty. It is more likely that the great admiral died on the return voyage and was buried at sea off the Malabar Coast.

If so, he found in death what he had sought throughout his extraordinary life: not a warrior's violent end on a battlefield, but a visionary's peace in "a blue transparency of light vapors." □

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