

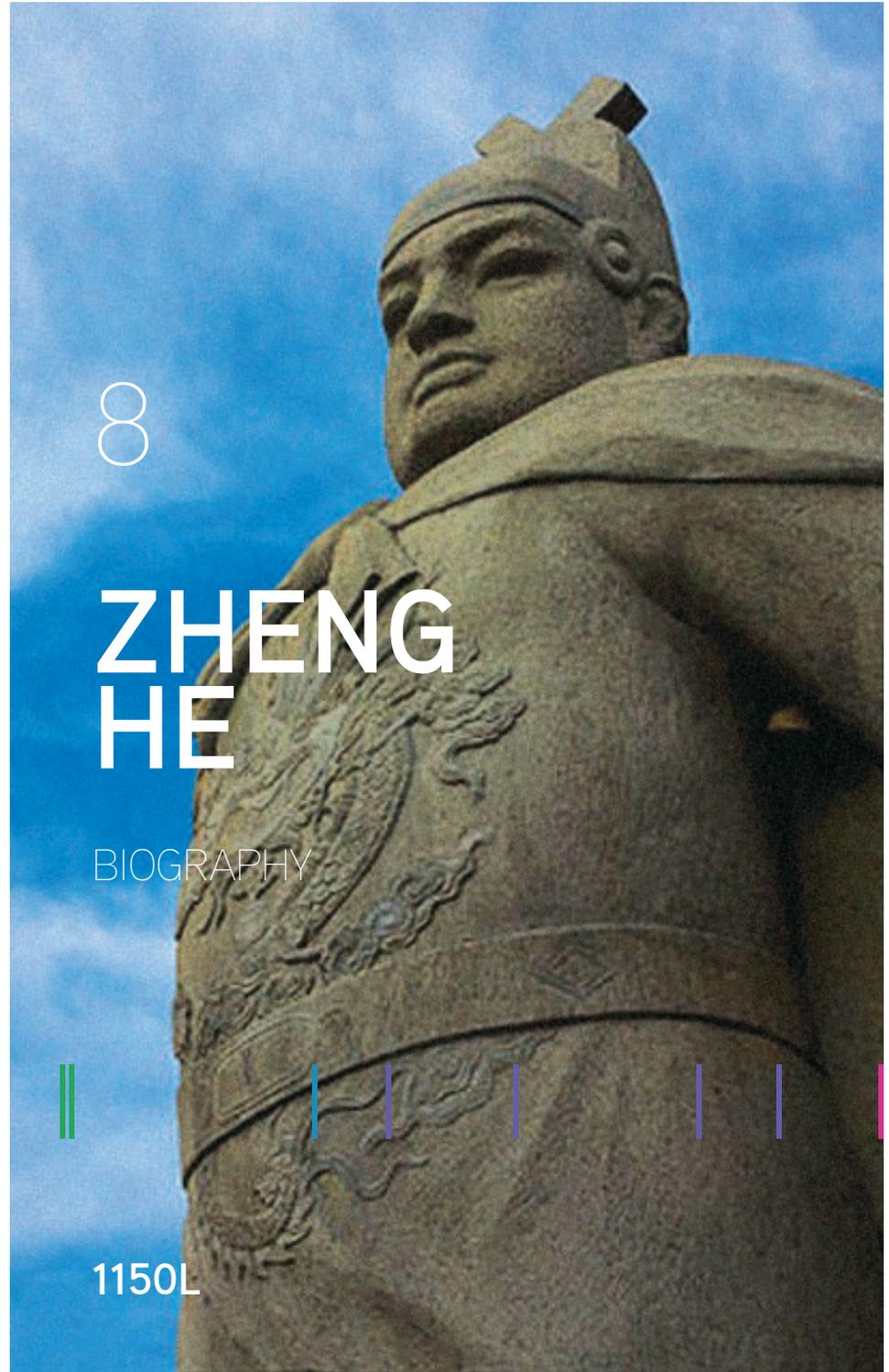
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ZHENG HE

BIOGRAPHY

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BIG HISTORY PROJECT



ZHENG HE

CHINESE ADMIRAL
IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

By Cynthia Stokes Brown, adapted by Newsela

Born
1371
Yunnan province, China

Died
1433
At sea

n the early 1400s, Zheng He led the largest ships in the world on seven voyages of exploration to the lands around the Indian Ocean, demonstrating Chinese excellence at shipbuilding and navigation.

Background

Zheng He (pronounced Jung Ha) was born in 1371 in Yunnan, in the foothills of the Himalaya Mountains, 6,000 feet (not quite 2,000 meters) above sea level and two months' journey to the nearest seaport. As a child, Zheng He was named Ma He. Ma He's father, a minor official in the Mongol Empire, was not Mongol; his ancestors were Persian Muslims. Both Ma He's father and his grandfather even made the "hajj," or pilgrimage, to Mecca.

The Mongols had controlled the Silk Road routes across Central Asia from roughly 1250 to 1350, and ruled China for much of that time too. But then the empire splintered into a number of smaller khanates, each ruled by a different khan. War broke out between the khans. The anarchy on land encouraged traders to use sea routes. Later, by about 1400, most long-distance trade was moving by sea.

Three years before Ma He's birth, the Chinese regained control of their empire under the new Ming dynasty. When Ma He was about 10, the Ming army invaded Yunnan to take it back from the Mongols and bring it under Ming control. The Ming soldiers killed Ma He's father in the fighting and captured Ma He. As was customary with juvenile captives, they castrated him by cutting off his testes and penis with a sword. He survived this trauma. After, he was handed over to be a servant in the household of the Ming emperor's fourth son, Zhu Di.

Castrated men, called eunuchs, were a recognized group inside and outside of China. Emperors, princes, and generals employed them as staff members. They figured this was a safe way to have male servants serve women without risking the genetic integrity of the ruling family.

The prince whom Ma He served, Zhu Di, was only 11 years older than He. They were based in Beijing, in the north of China near Mongol territory. They spent a lot of time together in military campaigns on horseback on the Mongolian steppe. Ma He grew unusually tall and strong and became a skilled fighter and brave leader. When the first Ming emperor died, his grandson succeeded him, because his oldest son had died.



The Yongle Emperor, Zhu Di

In 1402, Zhu Di took the throne from his nephew by force and proclaimed himself Emperor Yongle (“Perpetual Happiness”). He made Ma He the director of palace servants (similar to a chief of staff), and changed Ma’s name to Zheng He in commemoration of his role in battles to win the throne. (Zheng was the name of Yongle’s favorite warhorse.) Yongle ruled from 1402 to 1424.

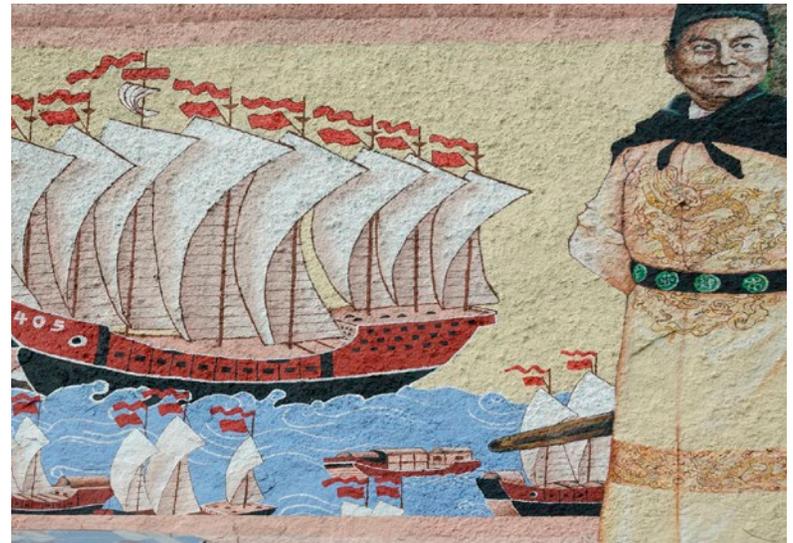
The seven voyages

Yongle proved extremely ambitious. He temporarily conquered Vietnam and tried to overpower Japan. He built the capital of his new empire in Beijing. He constructed the famous Forbidden City, and extended the Great Wall. Since he was determined to control trading in the Indian Ocean, one of his first acts was to order the construction of 3,500 ships. Zheng He was given the job of supervising the construction and then commanding the fleet.

Some of these ships were the largest marine craft the world had ever known. Zheng He’s flagship had nine masts and measured about 400 feet long. By comparison, Christopher Columbus’s Santa Maria measured just 85 feet. On the first voyage, from 1405 to 1407, 62 nine-masted “treasure ships” led the way. Behind them followed almost 200 other ships of various sizes, carrying personnel, horses, grain, and 28,000 armed troops.

Historians once doubted the accounts describing the size of these ships. Then, in 1962, workers on the Yangtze riverfront found a buried wooden timber 36 feet long (originally a steering post) beside a massive rudder. It was the right size to have been able to steer a ship of 540 to 600 feet in length, and the right age — dated at 600 years old — to be from one of Zheng He’s ships.

Zheng He’s initial trip took him from the South China Sea through the Indian Ocean to Calicut (now Calcutta), India, and back. The emperor’s purpose for this expedition seems to have been to obtain recognition and gifts from other rulers. The voyagers did not intend to conquer or colonize. But they were prepared to use military force against those who refused to respect them.



A painting of Zheng He with his fleet

Near the end of the voyage, Zheng He’s ships encountered pirates in the Sumatran port of Palembang. The pirate leader pretended to submit, with the intention of escaping. However, Zheng He started a battle, easily defeating the pirates — his forces killing more than 5,000 people and taking the leader back to China to be beheaded.

Five more voyages followed before Emperor Yongle’s death in 1424; they included excursions to Hormuz — the Arab port at the mouth of the Persian Gulf. Zheng He traveled to the coast of eastern Africa, returning with giraffes, zebras, and other items unfamiliar to the Chinese.

On his seventh and final voyage, from 1431 to 1433, Zheng He apparently died at sea. He was likely buried off the coast of India. Some of his descendants dispute that account, and believe that he made it back to China and died soon after his return.

THE TRAVELS OF ZHENG HE

1405 TO 1433



Inscribing his adventures

Leaving on his final voyage, at age 60 — the traditional Chinese age of reflection — Zheng He stopped at two places in China. He ordered tablets of granite inscribed with his deeds so they would not be forgotten. These tablets were erected in Liujiagang (now Liuhe), a port on the Yangtze River, and at Changle, in Fujian province.

In the first inscription, Zheng He describes his dependence on Tianfei (“Heavenly Princess”), the goddess of Chinese sailors:

[We have] traversed over a hundred thousand li of vast ocean [and have] beheld great ocean waves, rising as high as the sky and swelling and swelling endlessly. Whether in dense fog and drizzling rain or in wind-driven waves rising like mountains, no matter what the sudden changes in sea conditions, we spread our cloudlike sails aloft and sailed by the stars day and night. [Had we] not trusted her [Heavenly Princess’s] divine merit, how could we have done this in peace and safety? When we met danger, once we invoked the divine name, her answer to our prayer was like an echo; suddenly there was a divine lamp which illuminated the masts and sails, and once this miraculous light appeared, then apprehension turned to calm. The personnel of the fleet were then at rest, and all trusted they had nothing to fear. This is the general outline of the goddess’s merit...

When we arrived at the foreign countries, barbarian kings who resisted transformation and were not respectful we captured alive, and bandit soldiers who looted and plundered recklessly we exterminated. Because of this the sea routes became pure and peaceful and the foreign peoples could rely upon them and pursue their occupations in safety. All of this was due to the aid of the goddess.

The “divine lamp” Zheng He mentions is thought to be “St. Elmo’s Fire.” It’s a glowing ball of light caused by the electricity in the air around a ship’s mast that occurs during storms at sea.

On the second inscription, which follows below, Zheng He explains the purpose of the voyages and his gratitude to the sea goddess:

If men serve their prince with utmost loyalty, there is nothing they cannot do, and if they worship the gods with utmost sincerity there is no prayer that will not be answered...

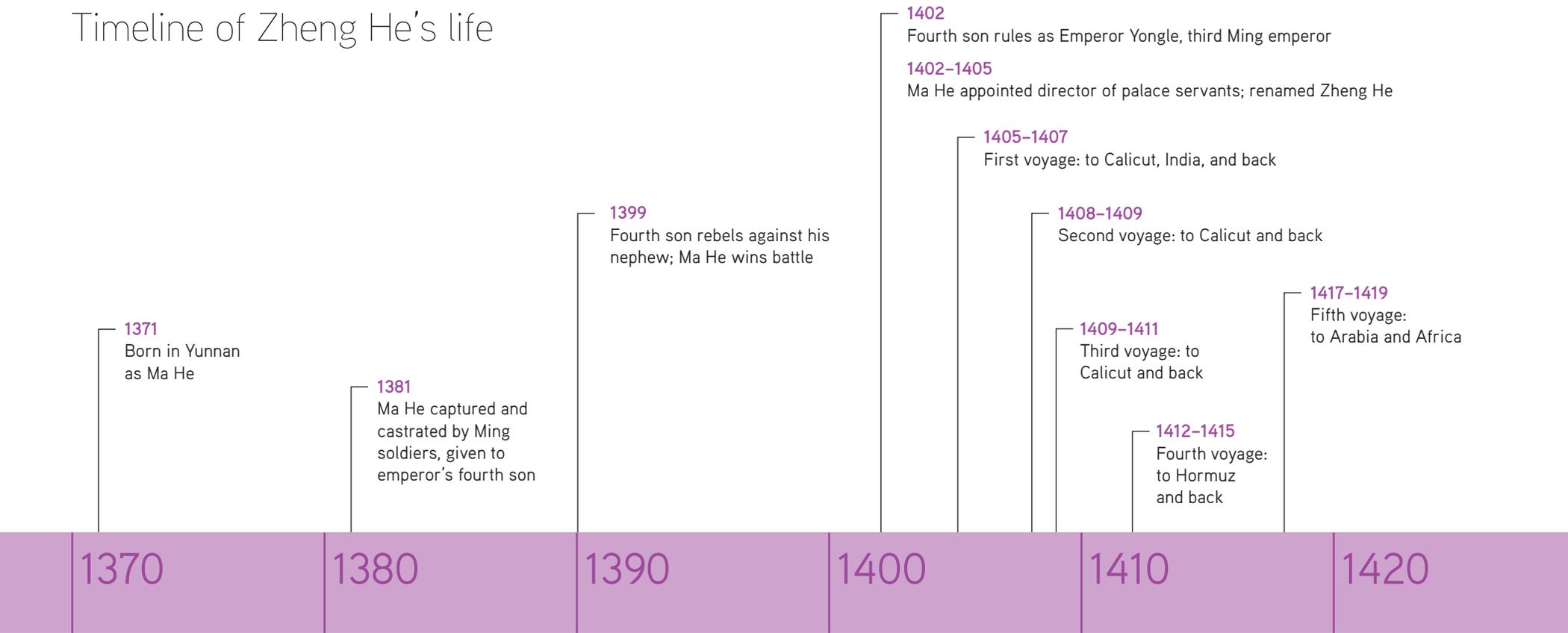
We, [Zheng] He and the rest, have been favored with a gracious commission from our Sacred Prince to convey to the distant barbarians the favor [earned by their] respectfulness and good faith. While in command of the personnel of the fleet, and [responsible for the great] amount of money and valuables [our] one concern while facing the violence of the winds and the dangers of the nights was that we would not succeed. Would we then have served the nation with utmost loyalty and worshipped the divine intelligence with utmost sincerity? None of us could doubt that this was the source of aid and safety for the fleet in its comings and goings. Therefore we have made manifest the virtue of the goddess with this inscription on stone, which records the years and months of our going to and returning from the foreign [countries] so that they may be remembered forever.

The legacy of Zheng He’s adventures

The voyages of Zheng He are a favorite topic of world historians today. They show that Chinese ships could have ruled the Indian Ocean for many more years and possibly been able to sail to the Americas. Why didn’t they? What if they had? How different would the world be?

After the final voyage, the Chinese emperor suddenly ordered that these expensive expeditions be halted. The ships were left to rot in the harbors. Craftsmen quickly forgot how to build such large ships, letting the knowledge slip away. The Confucian ministers who advised the emperor distrusted the eunuchs, who supported the voyages. New military threats came from the Mongols in the north, and the ministers argued that resources needed to focus on land defenses there instead.

Timeline of Zheng He's life



1368
The Mongol Yuan dynasty, founded by Kublai Khan, is overthrown by the Ming dynasty

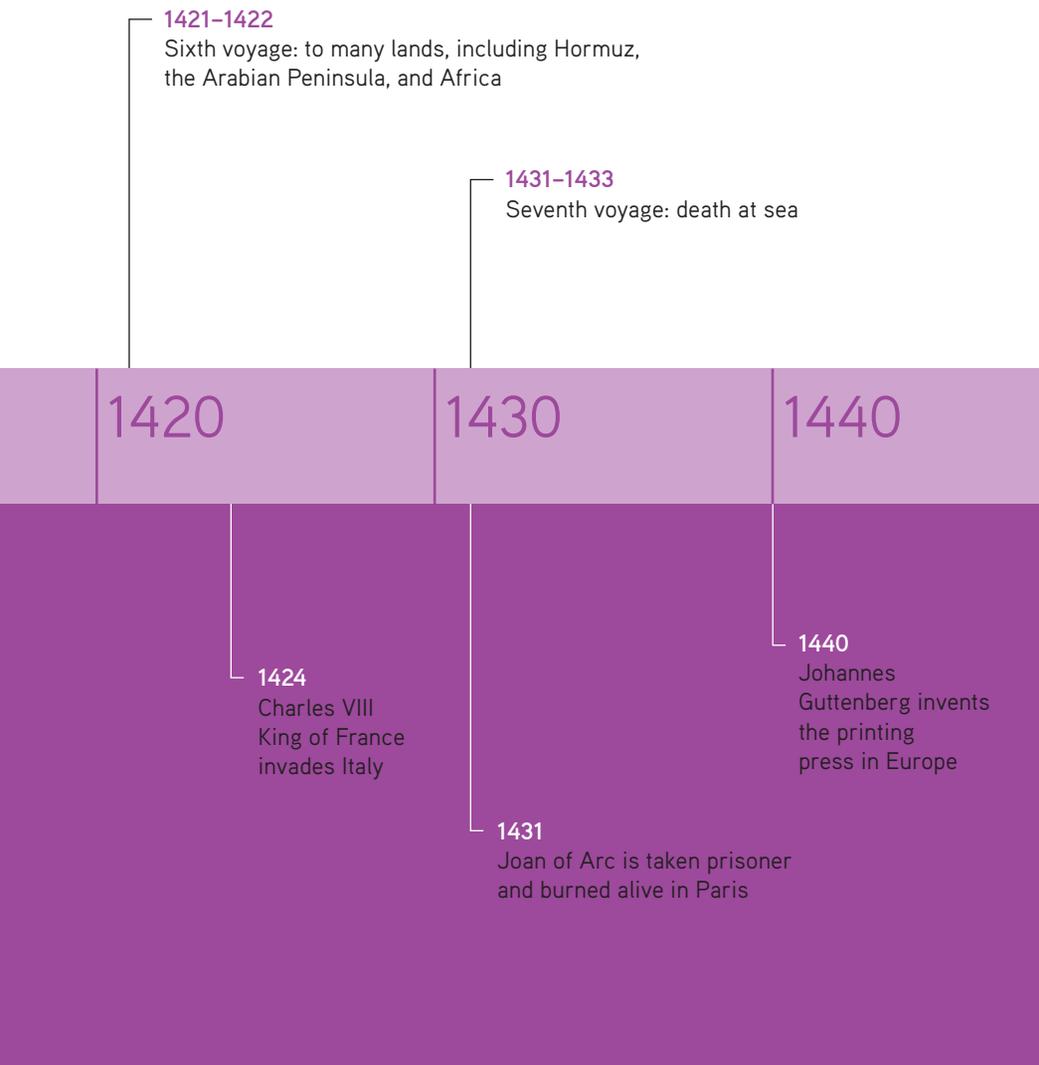
1381
The Peasants' Revolt occurs in England

1380s
Geoffrey Chaucer starts writing *The Canterbury Tales*

1400s
Aztec and Inca culture flourishes in Mesoamerica

During the time of Zheng He

Three firsthand accounts survive, written by men who sailed with Zheng He — two from officers and one from a translator. Eventually, Chinese interest in these accounts revived in the twentieth century. Prior to that, Zheng He's exploits were passed on by storytellers who used them as a source of wonder, blending them with other fantastic tales.



Sources

Dreyer, Edward L. Zheng He: *China and the Oceans in the Early Ming, 1405–1433*. New York: Longman, 2006.

Levanthes, Louise L. *When China Ruled the Sea: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1405–1433*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994.

Image credits

A monument to Zheng He at the Stadthuys Museum in Malaysia, photograph by Hassan Saeed

An unsigned hanging scroll depicting the Yongle Emperor, public domain

A painting of Zheng He at a temple shrine in Penang, Malaysia
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