ZHENG HE

CHINESE ADMIRAL IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

By Cynthia Stokes Brown, adapted by Newsela

Born
1371
Yunnan province, China

Died
1433
At sea
In the early 1400s, Zheng He led the largest ships in the world on seven voyages, exploring lands around the Indian Ocean. His travels showed off China’s excellent shipbuilding and navigation skills.
Background

Zheng He (pronounced Jung Ha) was born in 1371 in Yunnan, China. His home was at the foothills of the Himalaya Mountains, 6,000 feet, or about 2,000 meters, above sea level. It was a two months’ journey to the nearest seaport. As a child, Zheng He was named Ma He. Ma He’s father was an official in the Mongol Empire. But he 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. For much of that time they ruled over China as well. But then the empire splintered into a number of smaller khanates. Each khan ruled a different plot of land. War broke out between the khans. The warfare on land made traders look for sea routes to move their goods. 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. The new Ming dynasty now ruled China. When Ma He was about 10, the Ming army invaded Yunnan. They took it back from the Mongols. Ming soldiers killed Ma He’s father and captured Ma He. As was customary with young captives, they castrated him by cutting off his testes and penis. 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 common at the time. They existed as groups both inside and outside of China. Emperors, princes, and generals employed them as staff members. Eunuchs were seen as servants who could be left around women. There was no way a Eunuch could make children with women. Protecting the purity of the family blood line was of great concern to royalty in ancient times.

The prince whom Ma He served, Zhu Di, was only 11 years older than He. They were based in Beijing. The city lay in the north of China, near Mongol territory. They spent a lot of time together in military battles. Ma He grew unusually tall and strong. He became a skilled fighter and brave leader.

The Yongle Emperor, Zhu Di
When the first Ming emperor died, his grandson succeeded him, because his oldest son had died.

In 1402, Zhu Di took the throne from his nephew by force. He named himself Emperor Yongle ("Perpetual Happiness"). He made Ma He the director of palace servants. Yongle 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 wanted to expand the empire. 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. Yongle 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 commanding the fleet.

Some of these ships were the largest 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. The fleet’s first voyage occurred from 1405 to 1407. Leading the way were 62 nine-masted ships. Behind them were 200 smaller ships carrying horses, grain, and 28,000 armed troops.

Historians once doubted the accounts of these giant ships. Then, in 1962, workers on the Yangtze river found a wooden 36-foot-long steering post. Next to it was a massive rudder. It was the right size to have been able to steer a ship of 540 to 600 feet in length. And scientists dated the wood at 600 years old. It was the right size and age to be from one of Zheng He’s ships.

Zheng He’s first trip took him away from China. He cut through the Indian Ocean to 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 battle those who didn’t respect them.

Near the end of the voyage, Zheng He’s ships encountered pirates in Sumatra. The pirate leader pretended to submit, with the intention of escaping. However, Zheng He started a battle. He easily defeated the pirates. His forces killed more than 5,000 people and took the pirate leader back to China to be beheaded.

Five more voyages followed before Emperor Yongle’s death in 1424. Zheng He sailed to Hormuz, an Arab port on the Persian Gulf. He even traveled to eastern Africa. He returned with giraffes and zebras. The Chinese had never before seen such animals.

Zheng He’s seventh and final voyage lasted from 1431 to 1433. Apparently Zheng He died at sea. He was likely buried off the coast of India.
THE TRAVELS OF ZHENG HE
1405 TO 1433

Beijing
Inscribing his adventures

Zheng He left on his final voyage at age 60. This was the traditional Chinese age to look back on one’s life. On this last voyage he stopped at two places in China. He ordered that his great deeds be carved into tablets of granite. With this act his adventures would not be forgotten. The tablets were placed in two cities in China.

In the first inscription, Zheng He describes Tianfei (“Heavenly Princess”), the goddess of Chinese sailors. He explains how sailors depended on her protection:

[We have] traversed over a hundred thousand li of vast ocean [and have] beheld great ocean waves. They rose as high as the sky. The waves swelled and swelled endlessly. 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’] divine merit, how could we have done this in peace and safety? When we met danger, we invoked the divine name. Once we did so, 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... all trusted they had nothing to fear.

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

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

The second inscription follows below. In it, 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. He’s asked us to convey to the distant barbarians the favor [earned by their] respectfulness and good faith. While in command of the personnel of the fleet, we were [responsible for the great] amount of money and valuables. Our 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 provided safety for the fleet in its comings and goings. Therefore we have made manifest the virtue of the goddess with this inscription on stone. It records the years and months of our going to and returning from the foreign [countries]. Now 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. The ships were so large they might have 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. The knowledge was lost. The ministers who advised the emperor distrusted the eunuchs, who supported the voyages. New military threats came from the Mongols in the north. The emperor’s ministers thought money should be spent on defenses there instead of ships.
Timeline of Zheng He's life

- **1371**: Born in Yunnan as Ma He
- **1381**: Ma He captured and castrated by Ming soldiers, given to emperor’s fourth son
- **1399**: Fourth son rebels against his nephew; Ma He wins battle
- **1402**: Fourth son rules as Emperor Yongle, third Ming emperor
  - **1402–1405**: Ma He appointed director of palace servants; renamed Zheng He
- **1408–1409**: Second voyage: to Calicut and back
- **1409–1411**: Third voyage: to Calicut and back
- **1412–1415**: Fourth voyage: to Hormuz and back
- **1417–1419**: Fifth voyage: to Arabia and Africa

**During the time of Zheng He**

- **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
Sixth voyage: to many lands, including Hormuz, the Arabian Peninsula, and Africa

Seventh voyage: death at sea

Three firsthand accounts survive. They were written by men who sailed with Zheng He. Eventually, Chinese interest in these accounts revived in the twentieth century. Prior to that, Zheng He’s exploits were passed on by storytellers. They told the adventures of Zheng He as a source of wonder, blending them with other fantastic tales.
Sources


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 © Chris Hellier/CORBIS