

Zheng He (1371–1433), formerly romanized as Cheng Ho, was a Hui-Chinese court eunuch, mariner, explorer, diplomat and fleet admiral, who commanded voyages to Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, Somalia and the Swahili coast, collectively referred to as the "Voyages of Zheng He" from 1405 to 1433. As a favorite of the Yongle Emperor, whose usurpation he assisted, he rose to the top of the imperial hierarchy and served as commander of the southern capital Nanjing. These voyages were long neglected in official Chinese histories but have become well known in China and abroad since the publication of Liang Qihao's "Biography of Our Homeland's Great Navigator, Zheng He" in 1904. A trilingual stele left by the navigator was discovered on Sri Lanka shortly thereafter.

Life

Zheng He, born as Ma He (t 馬和, s 马和), was the second son of a family from Kunyang,[a] Yunnan. His family were Hui people. He had four sisters and one older brother. Ma He was initially born into a Muslim upbringing, but his religious beliefs became all-embracing in his adulthood.[9]

He was the great-great-great-grandson of Sayyid Ajjal Shams al-Din Omar, a Persian who served in the administration of the Mongol Empire and was the Governor of Yunnan during the early Yuan Dynasty. His great-grandfather was named Bayan and may have been a member of a Mongol garrisons in Yunnan. Both his grandfather and great-grandfather carried the title hajji, indicating that they had made the pilgrimage to Mecca.

In the autumn of 1381, a Ming army invaded and conquered Yunnan, which was then-ruled by the Mongol prince Basalawarmi, Prince of Liang. In 1381, Ma Hajji (Zheng He's father) died as a casualty of the hostilities between the Ming armies and Mongol forces. Dreyer (2007) states that Zheng He's father died at age 39 while resisting the Ming conquest. Levathes (1996) states Zheng He's father died at age 37, but that it's unclear whether it was due to helping the Mongol army or due to just being caught in the onslaught of battle. Wenming, the oldest son, would bury their father outside of Kunming. In his capacity, Admiral Zheng He had an epitaph engraved in honor of his father, which was composed by the Minister of Rites Li Zhigang on the Duanwu Festival of the 3rd year in the Yongle reign (1 June 1405). After the fall of Kunming in Yunnan, Ma He, then only eleven years old,[contradiction] was captured by the Ming-allied Muslim troops of Lan Yu and Fu Youde and castrated along with 380 other captives.[verification needed] Ma He was captured by the Ming armies at Yunnan in 1381.[18] General Fu Youde saw Ma He on a road and approached him to inquire about the location of the Mongol pretender.[19] Ma He responded defiantly that he had jumped into a pond.[19] Afterwards, the general took him prisoner.[19] In 1385,[19] the young Ma He was castrated by the Ming authorities.

Expeditions



The route of the 7th voyage of Zheng He's fleet.

Solid line: main fleet

Dashed line: a possible route of Hong Bao's squadron

Dotted line: a trip of seven Chinese sailors, including Ma Huan, from Calicut to Mecca on a native ship. Cities known to have been visited by Zheng He's fleets throughout his seven voyages shown in red.

Early 17th century Chinese woodblock print, thought to represent Zheng He's ships.[citation needed]

The Yuan Dynasty and expanding Sino-Arab trade during the 14th century had gradually expanded Chinese knowledge of the world: "universal" maps previously only displaying China and its surrounding seas began to expand further and further into the southwest with much more accurate depictions of the extent of Arabia and Africa. Between 1405 and 1433, the Ming government sponsored seven naval expeditions. The Yongle Emperor – disregarding the Hongwu Emperor's expressed wishes – designed them to establish a Chinese presence and impose imperial control over the Indian Ocean trade, impress foreign peoples in the Indian Ocean basin, and extend the empire's tributary system.[citation needed] It has also been inferred from passages in the History of Ming that the initial voyages were launched as part of the emperor's attempt to capture his escaped predecessor, which would have made the first voyage the "largest-scale manhunt on water in the history of China".

Zheng He was placed as the admiral in control of the huge fleet and armed forces that undertook

these expeditions. Wang Jinghong was appointed his second in command. Preparations were thorough and wide-ranging, including the use of such numerous linguists that a foreign language institute was established at Nanjing. Zheng He's first voyage departed July 11, 1405, from Suzhou: 203 and consisted of a fleet of 317 ships holding almost 28,000 crewmen.

Zheng He's fleets visited Brunei, Thailand and Southeast Asia, India, the Horn of Africa, and Arabia, dispensing and receiving goods along the way. Zheng He presented gifts of gold, silver, porcelain, and silk; in return, China received such novelties as ostriches, zebras, camels, and ivory from the Swahili. The giraffe he returned from Malindi was considered to be a qilin and taken as proof of the favor of heaven upon the administration.

While Zheng He's fleet was unprecedented, the routes were not. Zheng He's fleet was following long-established, well-mapped routes of trade between China and the Arabian peninsula employed since at least the Han Dynasty. This fact, along with the use of a more than abundant amount of crew members that were regular military personnel, leads some to speculate that these expeditions may have been geared at least partially at spreading China's power through expansion. During the Three Kingdoms Period, the king of Wu sent a diplomatic mission along the coast of Asia, which reaching as far as the Eastern Roman Empire.[citation needed] After centuries of disruption, the Song Dynasty restored large-scale maritime trade from China in the South Pacific and Indian Oceans, reaching as far as the Arabian peninsula and East Africa. When his fleet first arrived in Malacca, there was already a sizable Chinese community. The General Survey of the Ocean Shores (瀛涯勝覽, Yíngyá Shènglǎn) composed by the translator Ma Huan in 1416 gave very detailed accounts of his observations of people's customs and lives in the ports they visited. He referred to the expatriate Chinese as "Tang" (唐人, Tángrén).

Zheng He generally sought to attain his goals through diplomacy, and his large army awed most would-be enemies into submission. But a contemporary reported that Zheng He "walked like a tiger" and did not shrink from violence when he considered it necessary to impress foreign peoples with China's military might. He ruthlessly suppressed pirates who had long plagued Chinese and southeast Asian waters. For example, he defeated Chen Zuyi, one of the most feared and respected pirate captains, and returned him back to China for execution. He also waged a land war against the Kingdom of Kotte on Ceylon, and he made displays of military force when local officials threatened his fleet in Arabia and East Africa.[citation needed] From his fourth voyage, he brought envoys from thirty states who traveled to China and paid their respects at the Ming court.[citation needed]

In 1424, the Yongle Emperor died. His successor, the Hongxi Emperor (r. 1424–1425), stopped the voyages during his short reign. Zheng He made one more voyage during the reign of Hongxi's son, the Xuande Emperor (r. 1426–1435) but, after that, the voyages of the Chinese treasure ship fleets were ended. Xuande believed his father's decision to halt the voyages had been meritorious and thus "there would be no need to make a detailed description of his grandfather's sending Zheng He to the Western Ocean." The voyages "were contrary to the rules stipulated in the Huang Ming Zuxun" (皇明祖訓), the dynastic foundation documents laid down by the Hongwu Emperor:

Some far-off countries pay their tribute to me at much expense and through great difficulties, all of which are by no means my own wish. Messages should be forwarded to them to reduce their tribute so as to avoid high and unnecessary expenses on both sides.

They further violated longstanding Confucian principles. They were only made possible by (and therefore continued to represent) a triumph of the Ming's eunuch faction over the administration's scholar-bureaucrats. Upon Zheng He's death and his faction's fall from power, his successors sought to minimize him in official accounts, along with continuing attempts to destroy all records related to the Jianwen Emperor or the manhunt to find him.

Although unmentioned in the official dynastic histories, Zheng He probably died during the treasure fleet's last voyage. Although he has a tomb in China, it is empty: he was buried at sea.