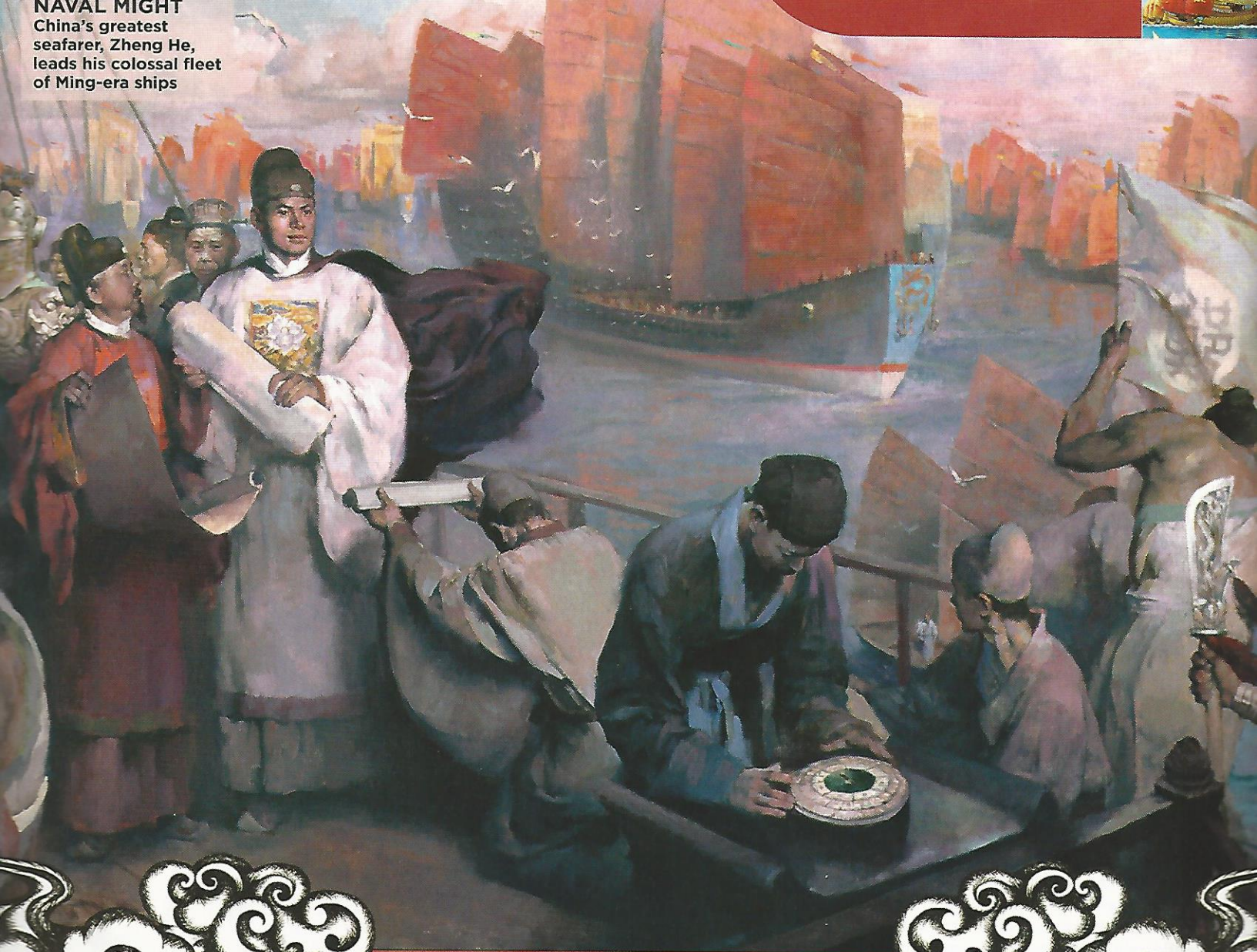


NAVAL MIGHT  
China's greatest  
seafarer, Zheng He,  
leads his colossal fleet  
of Ming-era ships



# ZHENG HE AND HIS TREASURE FLEET

Six centuries ago, a towering Chinese eunuch led a fleet of enormous ships to India, Arabia and beyond – **Pat Kinsella** follows Zheng He's treasure-ship armada



**D**uring the reign of China's Yongle Emperor in 1403, an imperial order was issued to begin the construction of a fleet of super-ships – vessels vastly bigger than anything ever seen before. Officially called Xiafan Guanjun ('The Foreign Expeditionary Armada'), the behemoth boats would become better known as the Ming Empire's treasure ships.

Capable of carrying as many as 1,000 men, some of these ships were purportedly 137 metres long, 55 metres wide, several stories high, and each boasted nine masts with 12 sails. They dwarfed contemporary European ships – by comparison, Christopher Columbus's flagship, the *Santa Maria*, built 60 years later, measured just 18 metres from bow to stern.

Overseeing this immense shipbuilding project on the banks of the Qinhuai River was Zheng He, a eunuch who wielded enormous power, and who was himself a huge physical presence, standing well over 6-feet tall. He would become the Admiral of this imperial fleet, leading the floating city of sails on seven far-ranging expeditions around the South China Sea and across the Indian Ocean.

Although the treasure ships usually left China together, as an awe-inspiring fleet, separate squadrons under the command of sub-admirals – such as the eunuchs Hong Bao and Zhou Man – often detached from the main force to visit other destinations, maximising the impact of the missions.

But what was the Emperor trying to achieve with this flexing of maritime muscle, and why would he place such naval power in the hands of a common-born former-prisoner, mutilated as a child, who hailed from an ethnic minority of Muslim, mountain-dwelling inlanders?

**HE BOY TO HE MAN**

China's greatest seafarer was born several weeks' journey from the nearest coast, in the mountains of Central Asia. Named Ma He, he was brought up as a Hui Muslim. The Chinese army, leading an invasion against the Mongols, overran his hometown in 1382. His father was killed in the fighting, and the ten-year-old boy was captured. Ritually castrated, he was trained as an imperial eunuch, renamed San Bao (meaning 'Three Jewels') and dispatched to the court of Zhu Di – Prince of Yan and fourth son of Zhu Yuanzhang, the Hongwu Emperor, who founded the Ming dynasty – in Beijing (modern-day Beijing).

During the next two decades, against a backdrop of near-constant violent conflict with the Mongols and complex political shenanigans within the Ming dynasty, the young San Bao repeatedly distinguished himself with valour, loyalty and intelligence. He rose through the ranks to become the most trusted lieutenant of Zhu Di, who bestowed him with the honorary name Zheng

**THE MAIN PLAYERS**

**ZHENG HE**

Born in 1371 to a Muslim Hui family in today's Yunnan province, Ma He was captured by Chinese troops aged ten. He grew to be huge, standing over 6-feet tall. He probably died during his seventh journey, but some reports claim he lived until 1435. His empty tomb is in Nanjing.

**ZHU DI**

Prince of Yan and later third emperor of the Ming dynasty, the Yongle Emperor set up the treasure fleet, promoted Zheng He to the position of Admiral and ordered six expeditions.

**WANG JINGHONG**

Zheng He's second-in-command during the treasure voyages to south-east Asia, India, Sri Lanka, Arabia and East Africa between 1405 and 1433.

**FEI XIN**

Accompanied Zheng He on four of the voyages, including the seventh, and subsequently wrote *Xingcha Shenglan* (Description of the Starry Raft), a first-person account of his experiences.

**A TRAVELLER'S LIFE**

BELOW: The honoured Admiral Zheng He (in white) is welcomed home after one of his missions BELOW, INSET: Zhu Di, the Yongle Emperor who commissioned the fleet RIGHT: An ivory bas-relief in Java celebrates the landing of the Admiral's treasure fleet FAR RIGHT: A c1754 world map, copied from one believed to have been compiled on Zheng He's expeditions



**SHIPS AND STARS**  
 MAIN: Sketches of Zheng He's treasure ships – each of the larger vessels boasted 12 sails  
 LEFT: One of a set of maps, or 'star charts', of Zheng He's maritime expeditions to the Indian Ocean, reproduced in the 1628 *Mao Kun* book of maps





He after some remarkable heroics at the Battle of Zhenglunba.

In 1402, Zhu Di unseated his nephew Zhu Yunwen (the Jianwen Emperor) from the Dragon Throne and became the Yongle Emperor. Immediately, he set about breaking the explicit instructions of his father, who had forbidden military expeditions into foreign lands. The new ruler commissioned the treasure fleet and made his chief eunuch Admiral of the expeditionary armada.

Debate still rages over the primary purpose of the journeys, which were more like intimidating visits than overt invasions.

The end result was that China secured lucrative trading routes, quashed large-scale piracy and received generous tariffs and unquestioning fealty from frightened foreign leaders all around the region. Some historians have argued that the whole exercise was an enormously elaborate manhunt to track down Zhu Di's predecessor Zhu Yunwen, who possibly escaped death during the coup that overthrew him.

Whatever else he intended to achieve, the Yongle Emperor clearly wanted to show the entire known world who was boss. And his right-hand man throughout this was Admiral Zheng He, who was so trusted he was given blank scrolls and the Emperor's seal, so he could issue imperial orders at sea.

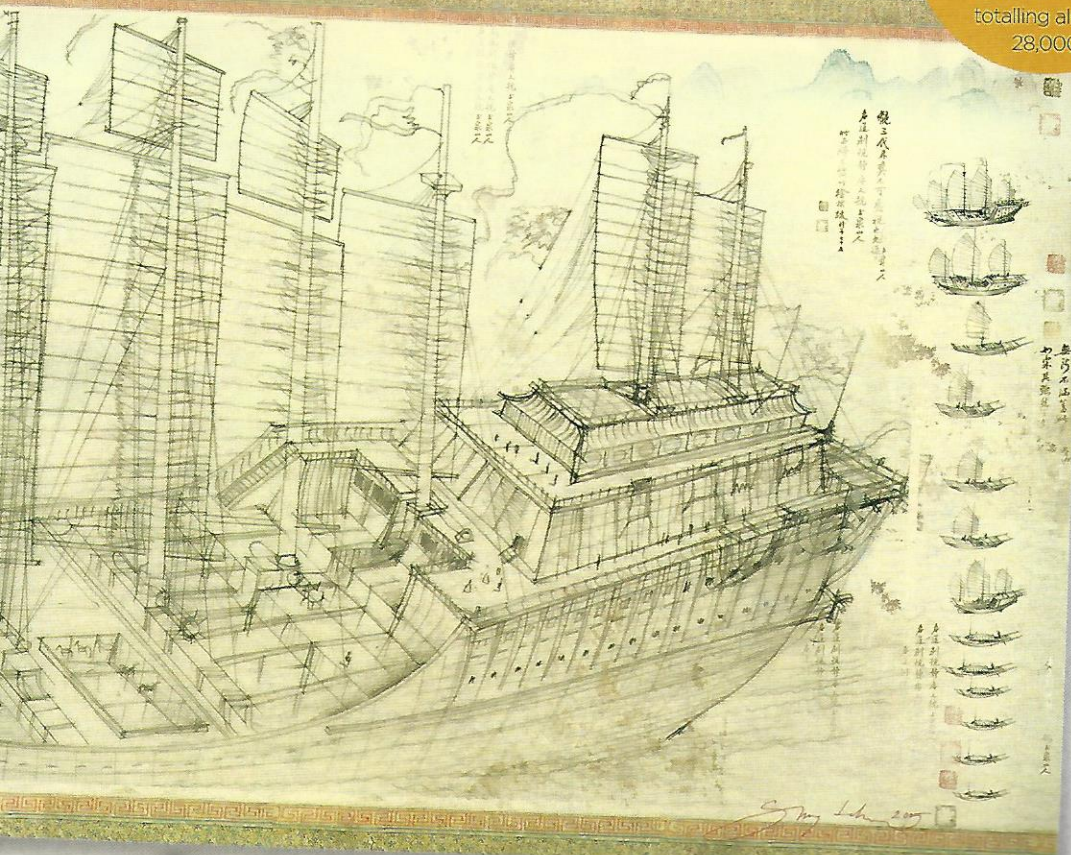
## EARLY VOYAGES

Accompanied by his deputy, Wang Jinghong, and 27,000 men, Zheng He departed Nanjing on his first voyage in 1405 (see point 1 on map overleaf). Travelling through the Chinese Sea, they sat out a monsoon in Taiping before heading south along the coasts of modern-day Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia, to reach Java. They then veered west through the Straits of Malacca and across the Bay of Bengal to Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka), Quilon (now Kollam) and Calicut (Kozhikode) in Kerala, India.

The most significant engagement of this journey was the epic showdown at Palembang, Sumatra (2), with a huge mercenary force led by the infamous pirate king Chen Zuyi, who

**317**

The number of ships in Zheng He's first fleet, which had a crew totalling almost 28,000





had long been terrorising shipping in the Strait of Malacca. In the ensuing battle, 5,000 pirates were killed and Chen Zuyi was captured and taken to Nanjing for execution.

The second expedition departed at the beginning of 1408, and followed a similar route – with stops at Calicut, Malacca, Semudera, Java, Siam, Champa and Quilon, to name but a few. One of the objectives of this voyage was to remind Java's Majapahit kings, who had just been forced to apologise and pay a fine for the killing of some Chinese officials, that the Empire was watching them. Zheng He also formally invested Mana Vikraan as the King of Calicut, and reaffirmed the relationship between China and India (3).

During the third journey (1409-11), Zheng He engaged in a battle with King Alakeshvara of Ceylon (4), who had been menacing neighbouring countries that China enjoyed good diplomatic relations with. Alakeshvara lured Zheng He and 2,000 of his troops inland towards the capital Kotte, and then cut off their lines to the treasure fleet. But the Chinese were not easily beaten. Their response was to attack the capital and wait for the Sinhalese troops to come back and protect it. The locals were defeated

and Alakeshvara captured. He was eventually released, but the might of the Ming Empire had again been demonstrated.

By 1413, when the fleet left Nanjing to embark on its fourth trip, Admiral He had orders to truly test the range of the titanic treasure ships. After stops along the route of previous voyages, the fleet continued beyond Calicut to visit the Maldive and Laccadive Islands, and then Hormuz Island in the Persian Gulf (5).

In 1415, Zheng He paused while passing northern Sumatra to take action against the pretender to the throne of Semudera, Sekandar (6). The usurper had just ousted Sultan Zain al-'Abidin, whom the Chinese supported. Zain al-'Abidin was restored to power while Sekandar was captured, taken back to the Ming Court and executed.

## ACTS OF DIPLOMACY

Not everyone was dragged to China in chains, though. Many ambassadors were transported back to Beijing (which replaced Nanjing as the capital under the Yongle Emperor) on the huge treasure ships, travelling in luxurious on-board staterooms complete with balconies, while carrying gifts for the Emperor.

The fifth journey saw the fleet tour the trading centres of Arabia and East Africa, landing at Aden, Mogadishu, Brava, Zhubu and Malindi (7). The treasure ships must have resembled arks during their return voyage, carrying tributes including exotic African animals such as lions, leopards, camels, ostriches, zebras, rhinoceros, antelopes and a giraffe from Malindi. The giraffe in particular provoked much excitement in the Ming court, where it was thought to be a qilin – a creature prominent in Chinese mythology that's sometimes compared to a unicorn, but more closely resembles a dragon-horse hybrid.

Once the tribute-bearing ambassadors had delivered their payload and acknowledged the power of the Emperor, they were returned home, with gifts (typically silk) for their respective leaders. The sixth journey, which departed in 1421, saw 16 such envoys returned to their home states (8). The treasure fleet travelled to Ceylon and then split up, with detached squadrons shooting off in various directions like sparks from an exploding firecracker.

By the early 1420s, the Yongle Emperor's focus was distracted from his treasure ships by conflicts erupting along China's land border to the north. The voyages were suspended and the fleet was docked in Nanjing from 1422 to 1431,

**5,000**

The number of pirates killed in a battle during Zheng He's first voyage.

