

# SHOULD THE MING END THE TREASURE SHIP VOYAGES?

By Jean Johnson, NYU

Suitable for Grades 6 - 8

## Materials

- Description of Ming voyages and of events in China from 1400 - 1450 (see end of lesson)
- Political map of Modern China and South Asia
- Map of Asia with important trading routes of the 14th and 15th centuries.

**Time** One to two class periods,

During the first century of the Chinese Ming dynasty (1368-1644), the government sent out a total of seven voyages into the Indian Ocean, and several voyages went as far as the east coast of Africa and the Red Sea. As a result, by 1415, the important trading ports from Japan and Korea to the east African coast acknowledged the power of the Ming court. Commanded by Admiral Zheng He, these spectacular voyages established, demonstrated and helped maintain China's political and cultural superiority. Yet, after 1433, the Chinese decided to end the voyages, withdraw their ships, and forbid private overseas trading.

The Chinese decision to end their maritime voyages and scrap the fleet is one of the most important decisions in modern history. This lesson presents the background surrounding the Chinese decision and asks students, as advisors to the Ming court, to advise the Emperor whether or not to end the voyages altogether.

## Procedure

1. Present your class with a headline from a Chinese newspaper dated 1406: "Treasure Ship Fleet Discovers Islands off Northwest Eurasia."
2. Review the various reasons the Ming decided to send out a fleet in 1405.
3. Divide the class into seven groups. Give each group information on one of the voyages and an overhead transparency with a map of the Indian Ocean with important trading ports of 14th and 15th centuries highlighted. Have each group trace the route of its voyage on the map.
4. Discuss briefly what people in the ports at which the fleet stopped must have thought about the fleet and China. Summarize what the voyages accomplished.
5. Explain that in 1432 the current Emperor must decide whether to continue the voyages or not. Divide the class into small groups and ask them to become advisors for the Ming Emperor using "Background information for Advisors." You may give each group all of the "Background Information" or divide the reading and give sections to each group. Have each group determine the advice it would give the Emperor.
6. Role play a scene before the Dragon Throne in which various advisors respectfully advise the Emperor on whether or not he should continue the voyages. Have the Emperor make a decision. Have the class make a decision, stating its reasons.
7. Compare the decision(s) with the Ming decision to end the voyages and dock the fleet. Leave students with the question: "Who will fill the power vacuum in the Indian Ocean that will be created when the Ming voyages stop?"

## Background Information

The Middle Kingdom thought of itself as not only the largest and oldest power in the world, but also as the source of all civilization. Written Chinese, the Confucian code of conduct, and leadership based on moral virtue were all signs of China's cultural as well as material superiority. For centuries, China had had a long-established tribute relationship with surrounding areas. Rulers of neighboring states, after acknowledging their "humble submission" and performing ritualized actions such as the kowtow (bowing so that the head touches the floor), exchange of envoys, and trade regulations, gained recognition and were given legitimacy by the Chinese court which might even send aid to them should the need arise.

After defeating the Mongols in 1368 and establishing the Ming dynasty, the Emperor attempted to reestablish the tribute relationship with neighboring states. In 1402, during a devastating civil war, Zhu Di seized the Dragon throne from his nephew. Since he had seized the throne by force, Emperor Zhu Di was especially anxious to demonstrate and prove his legitimacy.

In 1403 Emperor Zhu Di ordered construction of an imperial fleet that was to include trading ships, warships, the so-called "treasure ships," and support vessels. He ordered the fleet, under the command of Admiral Zheng He, to embark on a major voyage in the same year. The emperor and Admiral Zheng He had been friends since the admiral was in his teens, and they trusted one another.

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The voyage had multiple objectives: It would permit the Chinese to explore new areas and expand commercial and diplomatic relations. The grandeur of the fleet would dramatize the superior majesty and power of the Ming empire to peoples of distant lands, causing states of South and Southeast Asia to be incorporated into the tribute system. The fleet expected to receive demonstration of submission from rulers of areas it visited, and many foreign countries surely would acknowledge China's superiority in order to increase their trade. If people did not recognize Chinese greatness, the admiral might have to use force, but the Chinese expected that the encounters would be peaceful since it was only fitting that as many people as possible should come under the sway of the Son of Heaven.

Opening trade routes and establishing trade through the exchange of tribute and gifts was a major goal of the voyage. Since Zheng He was a Muslim, he would be able to establish good relations with Muslim trading communities as well as with Chinese traders in the ports the ships visited. Medical research appears to have been another motivation for the voyages. Several devastating epidemics had swept through the Middle Kingdom, and many doctors and pharmacists went on the voyage, instructed to look for herbs and other medicines. Finally, Zheng He was to look for any signs of the deposed Emperor, whom some people believed was still alive and attempting to build up a power base somewhere in Southeast Asia.

The fleets were impressive, and many ambassadors and rulers from areas the fleet visited came to the Ming court with tribute, acknowledging Chinese superiority. However, several factors contributed to making many in the court, particularly the Confucian scholars around the Emperor, oppose the voyages. Once the tribute relationship had been reestablished, and the explorations completed, some questioned the need to send repeated voyages. Maintaining and manning the fleet was expensive. After the Grand Canal had been repaired, funds were expended to make it easy for grain to travel from the south to northern China on the canal, eliminating the need for war ships that would protect grain shipments from pirate raids. Was it really worth continuing these voyages?

## Information for Advisors

### Classroom Exercise

Here are some examples of the arguments the Emperor's advisors may have made for docking the formidable Ming fleet. Students can research and set up their own "Ming Court" to persuade the "Emperor" with these, or original arguments.

The Mongols present a constant and very real threat to the Middle Kingdom. Look at the humiliating experience we had when the Mongols captured Emperor Zhu Qizhen in Year 13 of his reign [1449]. We must never let such a disgrace occur again. Maintaining forces to protect the northern frontier and fight against Mongol invasions is imperative but very costly. Because Mongol tribesmen are threatening the northwest borders, we must make large allocations of soldiers for defense, and it is very costly to arm and supply them. Other Ming rulers have tried to weakening Mongol power, not by subjugating them or ruling over them, but by destroying their unity and by using the traditional divide-and-rule policy to keep them at bay such as putting friendly Mongol chieftains in charge of Mongol settlements, and rewarding them with titles and honors. But that is not enough now. In addition, there is no military threat from the sea and it is foolish to spend great amounts of money on a military fleet just to protect maritime expeditions that reward merchants and do not increase the safety of the country.

The Ming court has little economic incentive to continue foreign trade. There is nothing the government needs from those areas. Merchants who want to increase trade are not to be respected. Merchants do not serve the country; they drain resources. Confucius taught that merchants are only parasites, making money from the work of others. In addition, many merchants are Muslims.

The Middle Kingdom produces all the goods we need, so why should we try to get useless trifles from abroad? Now that the Ming court controls the whole country, revenue to the court from foreign trade has dropped from 20% during Southern Song times to only 0.77%. Now that the capital is in Beijing, the court is far from the area where ships are built, and the government does not profit directly from seagoing trade. If we have sea-trade, then we must protect it. What is the reason to spend all that money to keep up a navy that protects overseas trade?

Up until the early 1400s, warships protected grain shipments from the south going to troops on the northwest frontier and, after 1421, to the capital of Beijing. But when we repaired and reopened the Grand Canal in 1416, and the government ordered the building of 3000 grain transports for the Grand Canal so that grain shipments could travel internally – and so we don't need a fleet to protect sea transport.

Moving the capital to Beijing cost a lot of money. We do not want to over-tax the people and cause undue unrest. Maintaining the fleet is also very expensive, and offers few benefits to the people. The people will become angry if they are taxed too heavily.

It is good that the Ming emperors have reinstated the examination system based on the Confucian texts. Emperor Zhu Di had the Four Books and Five Classics edited so all our scholars study the same material. We officials who are distinguished scholars oppose commercial ventures.

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The government should try to eliminate piracy and tax the merchants more effectively. The sea trade is a way merchants try to avoid taxes, since each province and each market town imposes its own taxes. Shipping by sea avoids all duties and reduces costs for the merchants by as much as 80%. A ban on overseas trade would be costly for merchants, and many will turn to piracy to survive.

The voyages of the fleet are very impressive and make people in distant lands recognize the greatness of the Ming court. Look at all the many ambassadors who have come to pay tribute to the court as a result of the voyages. The Dragon Throne is respected throughout the Southern Sea (Indian Ocean). In addition, look at all the goods the various visitors have brought to the Court as tribute.

If we do not continue the voyages we will not be able to control the balance of power in important places such as the southern tip of India or the Straits of Malacca. Our influence in these areas is important. It keeps us secure and increases the prestige of the Middle Kingdom. Your trusted advisors know a great deal about shipbuilding and maritime skills, but if we withdraw the fleet, they will soon forget these skills, and we will no longer be able to send out impressive fleets. There is no telling who might come and try to control overseas trade. Muslim traders tell us about strange looking people from the Far West who may come on ships and try to tell us what to do. If we do not keep up our fleet, there will be no strong power in the Indian Ocean. What will happen then?

## A Chronology Of the Ming Voyages

**First Voyage 1405-1406** Zheng He commanded a fleet of 317 ships, almost 28,000 men, their arms and supplies. The fleet included several massive "treasure ships," approximately 400 feet long and 160 feet wide. The places the fleet stopped included Champa (central Vietnam); Majapahit on Java; and Semudra and Deli on the northern coast of Sumatra. It continued to Ceylon and then to Calicut, known as "the great country of the Western Ocean." Traveling through the Straits of Malacca on its return, the Chinese defeated a pirate chief who had been threatening trading ships in the Straits. Zheng He was not able to find any trace of the deposed Emperor whom some Chinese had thought might have found asylum in Southeast Asia.

**Second Voyage 1407-1409** Zheng He did not go on the second voyage which probably returned the Siamese ambassador who had gone to China earlier on his own, and installed a new leader in Calicut. Again the fleet stopped at Champa (central Vietnam); Majapahit on Java; and Semudra and Deli on the northern coast of Sumatra; Ceylon; and Calicut.

**Third Voyage 1409-1411** This expedition's special charge concerned Malacca, a port on the Malay peninsula that was gaining importance. Stopping in Malacca, the Chinese recognized Paramesawara as the legitimate ruler of Malacca and gave him a tablet officially declaring that the city was a vassal state of China. Increasing Malacca's power, the Chinese court believed, would establish a balance of power among Siam, Java and Malacca and insure Chinese trading rights through the Straits. After stopping at Semudra, the fleet went to Ceylon where they got involved in a local power struggle among its Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslim populations. Luring the Sinhalese troops out of the city, Zheng He and his troops took the capital, captured the ruler and installed a ruler of their own choice in his place. After this voyage many ambassadors from the countries the treasure fleet had visited brought tribute to the Ming court.

**Fourth Voyage 1414-15** This voyage headed for Hormuz and the Persian Gulf. The fleet stopped at Champa and Java. At Sumatra, the Chinese captured a pretender to one of the local thrones and sent him back to Nanjing where he was executed. One part of the fleet went to Bengal and brought a giraffe back to the Emperor. (The Chinese believed the giraffe was a magical animal comparable to the unicorn, an auspicious sign and symbol of the righteousness of the Ming reign.) Cheng He and the rest of the fleet continued up the coast of Malay; to Ceylon; the Maldives; ports on the Indian coast; and Hormuz. This voyaged marked the height of Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean.

**1415** The Emperor decides to move the Chinese court from Nanjing to Beijing.

**1416** Repairs on the Grand Canal are completed.

**Fifth Voyage 1417-19** This impressive fleet was to take back home 19 ambassadors who had brought tribute to the Chinese court. While at Quanzhou, Zheng He tried to stop the persecution of Muslims there. The fleet then went to several ports on Champa and Java; to Palembang and other ports on Sumatra; to Malacca on the Malay peninsula; the Maldives, Ceylon; and Cochin and Calicut. This time, the Chinese attempted to strengthen Cochin to counter the power of Calicut. The fleet explored the Arabian coast from Hormuz to Aden and the east coast of Africa, returning ambassadors from Mogadishu, Brawa, and Malinda and also stopped at Mombasa. The sailors brought the Emperor another giraffe from Africa.

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**Sixth Voyage 1421-22** Besides taking ambassadors home, this voyage explored more of the coast of Africa. At Semudra the fleet divided and the majority of the ships went to Aden and the coast of Africa while Zheng He returned to China, perhaps so he could participate in the events surrounding the dedication of the Forbidden City in Beijing as the new capital.

**1419-23** A costly rebellion erupts in Annam.

**1421** Fire destroys much of the Forbidden City. Emperor Zhu Di first invites criticism, but soon he kills those who criticized him.

**1422** Emperor Zhu Di plans a military expedition against the Mongols.

**1424** Emperor Zhu dies while on military maneuvers in the north.

**1424** Zhu Di's eldest son becomes Emperor. He favors his Confucian advisors and hopes to lessen tax burdens on the people caused by expensive military maneuvers, the voyages of the fleet and moving the capital.

**1424** The Emperor issues an edict ending all voyages of the treasure ships.

**1425** The Emperor dies.

**1425-1435** Zhu Zhanji becomes Emperor.

**1430** Emperor Zhu Zhanji issues an edict calling for a 7th voyage to inform distant lands of his rule and to urge them to "follow the way of heaven and to watch over the people so that all might enjoy the good fortune of lasting peace." (Levathes, pg. 160 – see Sources)

**Seventh Voyage 1431-1433** 300 ships with approximately 27,500 men embark. Besides ports on Champa and Java, the fleet stops at Palembang, Malacca, Semudra, Ceylon and Calicut. The Chinese urge the Siamese king to stop harassing the kingdom of Malacca. At Calicut, one part of the fleet goes along the east African coast to Malinidi and trade on the Red Sea and several of the Chinese sailors may have visited Mecca. Zheng He, who had probably stayed in Calicut, died on the return voyage and was buried at sea.

**1435** The Emperor dies.

**1436 - 1449** Zhu Qizhen, the emperor's seven year old son, becomes Emperor. Initially he is controlled by eunuch Wang Zhen.

**1449** Wang leads an expedition against the Mongols on the northwest frontier. During this campaign, the Mongols capture the Emperor Zhu Qizhen and hold him prisoner.

**1450** Emperor Zhu Qizhen escapes from the Mongols and is reinstated as Emperor. Tension and rivalry exist between Confucian scholars and other advisors, particularly the court eunuchs. Emperor Zhu Qizhen faces the urgent question: Should the court resume the voyages or end them?