

## When China Ruled the Seas The Treasure Fleets of the Ming Dynasty 1405-1433

This December the Ventura County Maritime Museum will premier the first American exhibit of, “When China Ruled the Seas, the Treasure Fleets of the Ming Dynasty: 1405-1433. Commanded by a eunuch, Admiral Zheng He, the fleets represent perhaps the single greatest accomplishment in navel history up until the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

And why you might rightly ask, should we care about events that occurred half a world and 600 years ago?

Because the decision to ground the fleet in 1433 and destroy most official records of its existence was perhaps the single greatest blunder of in all of modern history. This act, whose repercussions shaped the modern world order within which we all now live, plunged China into 600 years of decline and represents the ultimate triumph of partisan politics over common sense and the national welfare.

To understand how this one colossal act of petty partisanship destroyed an empire, one needs to first grasp how dominant China once was in world affairs.

By 1405 China had already been a powerful empire for nearly two thousand years, its initial unification coming at the same time as the early days of the Roman Empire. In scope, scale, population, wealth and technology, it equaled or surpassed every single one of its European contemporaries during those times.

The third emperor of the Ming Dynasty, Zhu Di, usurped the throne after defeating his own brother in battle. The young general commanding Zhu Di’s forces was Zheng He. To legitimize his regime and cement his power, Zhu Di undertook four extraordinary projects.

First he moved his capital from Nanjing to what is now the modern city of Beijing. There he employed thousands of workers to construct from scratch the Forbidden City, which still stands today as one of the worlds largest palace complexes.

To feed this army of workers with food from the fertile south, he built the thousand mile long Grand Canal, a feat akin to building a waterway from LA to SF and back again.

Next to insure the safety of his nation from the Mongols to the north, he rebuilt all three thousand miles of the Great Wall – a distance comparable to the entire US – Canadian border between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

Lastly, he commissioned the construction of the largest fleets the world would ever see up until the First World War and placed his loyal servant, Zheng He, in charge as its Admiral. Zheng He, who is also known by his given name, San Bao, built a navy and merchant fleet comprised some 300 ships and some 25,000 personnel.

The largest crafts in Zheng He's navy were the Treasure Ships. Some sixty of these behemoths were constructed in the boat yards of Nanjing. At over 400 feet in length these vessels built of teak and with water tight compartments were the size of World War Two aircraft carriers. The centerpiece of the Maritime Museum's exhibit is a recently and locally crafted scale model of one of these magnificent boats.

The ships Columbus sailed across the Atlantic eighty years later, the Nina, Pinta and Santa Maria, were so small by comparison that together they and their crew could have fit three times over on the deck of a single Treasure Ship. It was not until the very end of the age of sail in the late 1800's that any nation dared try building a single vessel that approached the size of the Chinese Treasure ships.

Ship construction was not new to the Chinese. They had sailed the Indian Ocean and engaged in trade with Africa, Arabia, Indian, Indochina, Indonesia and the Spice Islands for hundreds of years. Readers of history will remember that Marco Polo returned to Europe from his great journey aboard Chinese fleets two hundred years before Zheng He set sail on the first of seven voyages of trade and commerce.

Long before European ventured into the Atlantic, Chinese traders were bringing back trade goods from East Africa that included a giraffe as a present for the Emperor. The wealth that flowed into China from these voyages was staggering. Again a comparison is in order.

After the one surviving vessel of Ferdinand Magellan's fleet made its way back to Spain in 1522 filled with cloves and cinnamon, it contained enough of those spices in its hold to wipe out the entire debt of the Spanish government. In the days before refrigeration, spices represented one of the few methods of preserving food and feeding the growing population of a nation. That ship was little bigger than the Santa Maria. Each voyage of the Treasure Fleet brought back to China cargo many thousands of times more valuable than Magellan's.

Zheng He's fame was so great that even today he is still worshiped as a god throughout South East Asia in numerous temples named San Bao, that were built in his honor. Legends about him abound, the most famous of which are known to children around the world as "The Seven Voyages of Sinbad the Sailor."

But this fame and the influx of wealth into China was not without its problems. While the day to day administration of government in China was in the hands of the Mandarins, the entrenched bureaucrats of their time – the fleets and the army were controlled by eunuchs, such as Zheng He who were fiercely loyal to the Emperor.

During Zhu Di's reign the balance of power in the empire swung back and forth between the Mandarins and the eunuchs, who perhaps in their own way, representing the two political parties of their time. But when Zhu Di died his and his grandson assumed the throne, the Mandarins rose in influence.

Zheng He, who had died on the return trip of the seventh voyage and was buried at sea with honors, was unable to hold the influence of the Mandarins in check.

In a move to under cut the power of his political rivals, the chief Mandarin, Liu Ta Xia, decreed that the fleets were to be grounded, the records destroyed and further overseas trade forbidden.

The greatest navy in the world disappeared overnight and China began a six hundred year decline that only now is being reversed.

Fortunately not all the records vanished. Zheng He's charts made their way to Europe and enabled Prince Henry the Navigator to establish his sailing school.

The European Age of Discover and subsequent colonization of the world began only after the Chinese removed themselves from the game.

It's a know fact recorded in the journals of both Columbus and Magellan that each explorer set sail on their respective voyages with maps and charts of places no European had ever seen. Magellan even describes cruising along the South American coast looking for the Straits that would later bear his name, because he knew that the straits were there.

Had Liu Ta Xia not made this decisions based purely on partisan politics, the Chinese could have well been the nation that colonized the Americas, created vast trading empires and dominated world history instead of the Europeans.

We can only speculate what would have happened had the great fleets of the Ming Dynasty continued to sail...

**About the Author:** In addition to being member of VCCAA, Howard Smith is the Chairman of the Board of the Ventura County Economic Development Association and a Vice President and Financial Advisor at Morgan Stanley in Oxnard.