

Ming Dynasty Sea Voyages

Student Reading

The Age of Discovery(1500-1650 CE) was a turning point in world history. Explorers from Portugal and Spain discovered a route around the southern tip of Africa to India, sailed west to "discover" the New World, and sailed around the world for the first time. The voyages were long and dangerous, and the major names are in all the textbooks - Vasco da Gama, Christopher Columbus, and Fernando Magellan. This was the beginning of imperialism and eventually led to western domination of the world. Less well known is Zheng He, a Chinese commander, whose fleets included more than 200 ships, manned by a crew of more than 20,000. The largest ships on these voyages weighed 3,000 tons. By comparison, Columbus' first voyage had three ships, an 87-man crew, and the largest ship weighed 200 tons.

Zheng He was China's Da Gama, Columbus, and Magellan all rolled into one. He was the admiral in charge of seven important voyages that Chinese fleets made between the years 1405-1433. Zheng He was born in Yunnan Province in 1371. He came from a Moslem family and served Prince Zhu Di, who became the third emperor of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). The voyages led by Zheng He covered most of the South China Sea, crossed the Indian Ocean, and even reached the east coast of Africa.

The Emperor sent Zheng He on these voyages not to explore, because most of the areas he visited were already known to the Chinese, but to display China's power and magnificence. In fact, the larger ships were known as "treasure ships" because of the silk, porcelain, and other luxury goods that they carried. The diplomatic purpose of the voyages was to convince as many countries as possible to sign up as tributary nations. This meant that the country acknowledged China's superiority and agreed to pay tribute to the Emperor. Fifty countries were sufficiently impressed to sign up and others, those that were reluctant, were convinced by a brief bombardment of the port city. The economic purpose was also satisfied because Zheng opened trade routes that supplied China with horses, sulfur, spices, copper ore, and precious stones.

One difference between the European voyages and the Chinese voyages was that the Chinese had technology that the Europeans lacked. One example of these technological advantages was the magnetic compass. This had been developed in China during the 900's, and made it possible for the ships to navigate across long stretches of open ocean because true direction could be determined. A second advantage was that the Chinese had developed a way to build water-tight compartments, which meant that ships could be much larger than before while still being safe. A third advantage was the stern-post rudder, which made it possible to steer more easily and accurately. The final advantage was that the Chinese had accurate maps of the areas in which they were to sail. This made it possible to plan and navigate longer voyages to more destinations.

The Chinese voyages did not continue because the next emperor was not interested in overseas expeditions. European countries soon took the lead in shipbuilding and trade. This was to have a major impact on China in the 1800's.