**Cheng Ho: The Famous Chinese Admiral-Explorer of the 15th Century**

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Decades before Christopher Columbus sailed the ocean blue in search of a water route to Asia, the Chinese were exploring the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific with seven voyages of the "Treasure Fleet" that solidified Chinese control over much of Asia in the 15th century.

The Treasure Fleets were commanded by a powerful admiral named Cheng Ho. Cheng Ho was born around 1371 in China's southwestern Yunan Province (just north of Laos) with the name Ma Ho.

Cheng Ho, who was said to have been seven feet tall, was given great power when Zhu Di became emperor in 1402. One year later, Zhu Di appointed Cheng Ho admiral and ordered him to oversee the construction of a Treasure Fleet to explore the seas surrounding China.

**First Voyage (1405-1407)**

The first Treasure Fleet consisted of 62 ships; four were huge wood boats, some of the largest ever built in history. They were approximately 400 feet (122 meters) long and 160 feet (50 meters) wide. The four were the flagships of the fleet of 62 ships assembled at Nanjing along the Yangtze (Chang) River. Included in the fleet were 339-foot (103-meter) long horse ships that carried nothing but horses, water ships that carried fresh water for the crew, troop transports, supply ships, and war ships for offensive and defensive needs. The ships were filled with thousands of tons of Chinese goods to trade with others during the voyage. In the fall of 1405 the fleet was ready to embark with 27,800 men.

The fleet utilized the compass, invented in China in the 11th century, for navigation. Graduated sticks of incense were burned to measure time. One day was equal to 10 "watches" of 2.4 hours each. Chinese navigators determine latitude through monitoring the North Star (Polaris) in the Northern Hemisphere or the Southern Cross in the Southern Hemisphere. The ships of the Treasure Fleet communicated with one another through the use of flags, lanterns, bells, carrier pigeons, gongs, and banners.

*First voyage went to Calicut, southwestern coast of India*

*Second voyage also to India*

*Again to India; established warehouses along the route; fought and defeated Sri Lanka forces*

The destination of the first voyage of the Treasure Fleet was Calicut, known as a major trading center on the southwestern coast of India. India was initially "discovered" by Chinese overland explorer Hsuan-Tsang in the seventh century. The fleet stopped in Vietnam, Java, and Malacca, and then headed west across the Indian Ocean to Sri Lanka and Calicut and Cochin (cities on the southwest coast of India). They remained in India to barter and trade from late 1406 to the spring of 1407 when they utilized the monsoon shift to sail toward home. On the return voyage, the Treasure Fleet was forced to battle pirates near Sumatra for several months. Eventually Cheng Ho's men managed to capture the pirate leader and take him to the Chinese capital Nanjing, arriving in 1407.

**Second Voyage (1407-1409)**

A second voyage of the Treasure Fleet departed on a return trip to India in 1407 but Cheng Ho did not command this voyage. He remained in China to oversee the repair of a temple at the birthplace of a favorite goddess. The Chinese envoys on board helped to ensure the power of a king of Calicut. The fleet returned in 1409.

**Third Voyage (1409-1411)**

The fleet's third voyage (Cheng Ho's second) from 1409 to 1411 consisted of 48 ships and 30,000 men. It followed closely the route of the first voyage but the Treasure Fleet established entrepots (warehouses) and stockades along their route to facilitate trade and storage of goods. On the second voyage the King of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) was aggressive; Cheng Ho defeated the king's forces and captured the king to take him to Nanjing.

**Fourth Voyage (1413-1415)**

In late 1412, Cheng Ho was ordered by Zhu Di to make a fourth expedition. It wasn't until late 1413 or early 1414 that Cheng Ho embarked on his expedition with 63 ships and 28,560 men. The goal of this trip was to reach the Persian Gulf at Hormuz, known to be a city of amazing wealth and goods, including pearls and precious stones much coveted by the Chinese emperor. In the summer of 1415, the Treasure Fleet returned with a bounty of trade goods from the Persian Gulf. Detachments of this expedition sailed south along the eastern coast of Africa almost as far south as Mozambique. During each of Cheng Ho's voyages, he brought back diplomats from other countries or encouraged ambassadors to go to the capital Nanjing on their own.

*to the Persian Gulf; seeking jewels; also to coast of Africa; brought back diplomats*

*Returned to places from fourth voyage; returned ambassadors home.*

*to Southeast Asia, India, Persian Gulf, Africa; brought back riches*

*to Malacca and Siam to repair relationships with these countries*

**Fifth Voyage (1417-1419)**

The fifth voyage was ordered in 1416 to return the ambassadors who had arrived from other countries. The Treasure Fleet departed in 1417 and visited the Persian Gulf and the east coast of Africa, returning envoys along the way. They returned in 1419.

**Sixth Voyage (1421-22)**

A sixth voyage was launched in the spring of 1421 and visited Southeast Asia, India, the Persian Gulf, and Africa. By this time, Africa was considered China's "El Dorado," a source of riches. Cheng Ho returned in late 1421 but the remainder of the fleet didn't arrive in China until 1422.

Emperor Zhu Di died in 1424 and his son Zhu Gaozhi became emperor. He canceled the voyages of the Treasure Fleets and ordered ship builders and sailors to stop their work and return home. Cheng Ho was appointed military commander of Nanjing.

**Seventh Voyage (1431-1433)**

The leadership of Zhu Gaozhi did not last long - he died in 1426 at the age of 26. His son and Zhu Di's grandson Zhu Zhanji took Zhu Gaozhi's place. Zhu Zhanji was much more like his grandfather than his father was and in 1430 he resumed the Treasure Fleet voyages by ordering Cheng Ho to resume his duties as admiral and make a seventh voyage in an attempt to restore peaceful relations with the kingdoms of Malacca and Siam. It took a year to gear up for the voyage which departed as a large expedition with 100 ships and 27,500 men.

On the return trip in 1433 Cheng Ho is believed to have died; others state that he died in 1435 after the return to China. Nonetheless, the era of exploration for China was soon over as the following emperors prohibited trade and even the construction of ocean-going vessels.

It's likely that a detachment of one of Cheng Ho's fleets sailed to northern Australia during one of the seven voyages based upon the Chinese artifacts found as well as the oral history of the Aborigine.

After the seven voyages of Cheng Ho and the Treasure Fleets, Europeans began to make headway toward China. In 1488 Bartolomeu Dias rounded Africa's Cape of Good Hope, in 1498 Vasco da Gama reached China's favorite trading city of Calicut, and in 1521 Ferdinand Magellan finally reached Asia by sailing west. China's superiority in the Indian Ocean was unrivaled until the 16th century when the Portuguese arrived and established their colonies along the rim of the Indian Ocean.

