

THE OVERSEAS MARITIME EXPEDITIONS OF IMPERIAL CHINESE ADMIRAL ZHENG HE (CHENG HO)

by

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Summary

In a lecture held at the Royal Geographical Society in London, submarine ex-captain Cavin Menzies stated that Chinese admiral Zheng He (ca. 1371-1435 AD) had visited America with his ships, 72 years before Columbus. Menzies' dates for the admiral's maritime expeditions to the American continent, however, cannot possibly be correct because, during these years, the admiral's fleet had sailed towards the West, as far as Africa.

In this article I describe some of the pioneering maritime expeditions of Zheng He, which had the consequence that China's Great Power status was made known also to overseas countries as late as the 15th century. Not until the ban on further maritime expeditions towards the West (which may have become too costly) became it possible for the Europeans to colonize the world, so to speak. In 1567, when the Ming emperors lifted the ban on overseas expeditions, it had become too late for China to establish itself as a navel power able to hold the Europeans in check. Until quite recently it never dawned on the Europeans that the Chinese had already established, even in distant BC times, commercial transpacific contacts with America, long before Columbus.

IN MARCH 2002 an almost sensational lecture was held at the venerable Royal Geographical Society of London by Cavin Menzies, a British researcher and submarine ex-captain. According to him, the Chinese admiral Zheng He (ca. 1371-1435 AD) visited America with his fleet, 72 years before Christopher Columbus. Menzies intends to present definite evidence for his thesis in a book to be published soon.

Menzies' dates for the admiral's maritime expeditions to the American continent, however, cannot possibly be correct because, during these years, Zheng He had been involved, as commander, in maritime

expeditions to the Far West during which, however, he did not reach the Americas.

His first expedition to the West took place during the years 1405-1407. Zheng He with his imperial fleet sailed, from Nanking, to Indo-China (Champa, Chen-Lakhmer, Shien-Losiam), Java, and Sumatra, and from Lambri on the northwestern tip of Sumatra reached Sri Lanka (Ceylon). With his fleet he doubled Cape Comorin, the southernmost tip of India, and ultimately visited the harbour of Calicut, today's Kozhikode on the Arabian Sea coast of southwestern India (Kerala).

Other maritime expeditions towards the West

followed up this first one, e.g. the fourth expedition 1413-1415, and the sixth expedition 1421-1422. Altogether Zheng He organized seven maritime expeditions to the Farther West. In the course of one of them he reached the Horn of Africa where he was able to acquire some giraffes for the zoo in Peking. His greatest expedition comprised more than 300 ships and almost 28.000 men.

AFTER THE sixth expedition and the death of Ming emperor Yüing-lo (1424), his successor prohibited, on pain of death, any farther overseas expeditions. Orders were given to burn all existing ships, and to destroy all relevant documents. He died soon, however. His successor, in 1430, became his son Hsüan-tsung (as emperor 1426-1435 Hsüan-te). On his orders the seventh expedition of admiral Zheng He towards the West (1431-1433) took place. Subsequently Zheng He became again defender of Nanking, where he died, aged 65, in 1435.

No further commercial expeditions to the West were implemented. Enormous new profit possibilities had been opened up for the merchants. But now Peking, under the influence of the Confucianists, wanted a reorientation towards China itself. Besides it had become necessary to defend the inland waterways against Japanese pirates, and to check the inroads of nomadic invaders on the northern frontiers of the empire. Financial problems may have been the main reason to prohibit further expeditions with the imperial fleet, as the Sinologist Herbert Franke told me. He had taken the trouble to find out the true reason for this ban on such maritime expeditions. In Vol.1 of the History of the Ming Dynasty of the CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF CHINA he found that several times financial problems were mentioned. Certain ministers were against such expeditions at the time when Zheng's fleets were active in the Indian Ocean as far as Africa. They had become too costly. Therefore at last these activities were stopped under the Ming.

During later times Zheng's pioneering maritime expeditions, which had dramatically signalled the maritime Great Power status of China to all nations concerned as late as the 15th century, were completely forgotten. Only when, after Columbus' discovery of America, the Europeans began to colonize distant continents, Peking perceived its mistake and tried to correct it. In 1567 the Ming imperial government lifted the ban on large maritime expeditions. But after more than 100 years there were no longer any navel architects competent enough to construct such giant ocean-going ships as Zheng He had had at his disposal. In 1962 incidentally an enormous rudder of such a giant ship was excavated at Nanking.

Some time ago the Peking Research Center for Ancient Ships declared that Zheng's flagship had had a length of more than 120 meters. Great sailing ships as well as smaller sailing vessels had been built by the Chinese for several millennia. In several of my publications I have emphasized that, at the time of Marco Polo, the solidly constructed Chinese ships were preferred by all overseas merchants for their voyages. The Chinese navy, too, was held in high regard and respected.

CHINA REDISCOVERED Zheng He and his fleets only in 1932 when accidentally two stone inscriptions of Zheng He were discovered in the Yamen (residence) of Ch'ang-lo southeast of Fuzhou in Fujian province, with dates from December 5, 1431, to January 3, 1432. The stelae originally had been situated, at the same place, in the temple precinct of T'ien Fei, the goddess of sailors. Overturned, it had been used as pavement. On the other, then lower side were found inscriptions, the texts describing Zheng's maritime voyages and the countries visited by the admiral.

Zheng took the same routes to the West (one might even call them sea-lanes), which earlier Chinese mariners had established, and

with which Marco Polo had become acquainted 120 years before the admiral. The Polos on their return voyage in 1292 had travelled with fourteen ships, which possessed one mast each, and up to nine sails. Four or five of these Chinese merchant ships had crews of from ca. 250 to 260 men each. In addition there was an escort of 2.000 men. Provisions for two years had been taken on board, as ordered by Kublai Khan.

ONE OF THE Polos' fellow travelers on that journey had been a princess with her retinue, which the king of Bagdad wanted to marry, because his deceased wife had recommended as her successor a relation from her family. Bagdad at that time belonged to the Mogul empire in Persia. Hulagu, grandson of Genghis Khan (d.1227), in 1258 on orders of his brother Möngke, then Great Khan, conquered Bagdad, destroyed the caliphate, and established the empire of the Ilkhans. In 1260 Kublai became Great Khan, and relocated his capital from Karakorum to Peking. Möngke and Hulagu were his brothers.

The Mogul rulers of Iran, around 1298, had devised a plan to attack, in a joint campaign with the king of France, Muslim Egypt. As a reward or price for this French assistance, Jerusalem was to eventually become, towards the end of the Crusades, the Holy City of Christendom. Marco Polo in his capacity of Kublai Khan's ambassador was authorized to enter into negotiations with the Pope in Rome, and the kings of France and Spain. These facts do attest once more the status of a Far Eastern Great Power towards the end of the 13th century. And they remind us of the difficulties, even then, to establish a lasting peace in the Near East. At this time it seemed possible only with the assistance of the emperor of China, of European kings, and of the Vatican diplomacy.

WE SEEM to discern here repetitions of a very ancient pattern. The overseas voyages of these times have indeed been dependent upon

far earlier experiences and accumulated practical knowledge acquired during long past centuries. Already in rather early BC times, Chinese and other merchants travelled to distant overseas coasts over the Indian Ocean and adjacent seas. From later times we know that Sīrāf on the Persian Gulf flourished during the 8th and 9th century AD as a center for international maritime trade, for commodities from Africa, India, and China.

China's overseas maritime expeditions began somewhere in late prehistoric times. The unimaginably rich Shang rulers (1766-1122 or 1111 BC) were especially active in this field. Their ships sailed not only to Japan and the Philippines, but also to the west coast of America. After the crushing defeat of the Shang by the Chou, when the latter began the forced resettlement of the former, many a Shang prince with his henchmen preferred to disengage from the enemy by risking the escape over sea to the East.

In several languages of pre-Columbian nations of the Americas we still find words of Chinese origin. In this field a rewarding task is waiting for competent linguistics.

IN CHAVIN DE HUANTAR a remarkable golden crown has been found. Chavin is a ruined temple complex in a remote mountain massif southeast of the city of Huaraz, situated at an elevation of 3.200 meters near a tributary of the Marañon. This crown (height 8 cm, diameter 20 cm), which shows animal-like motifs, is now on display in the Museo del Oro in Lima, Peru. The temple complex is dated to somewhere around 1000 BC, i.e. to a time when it had been possible for Shang members to escape from China.

This Chavin golden crown shows an enched 'taotie', which in this form is known only from Shang China. So we seem to have evidence here of the presence of Chinese in the Americas in remote pre-Columbian times. It is therefore highly

superfluous to state that the Chinese have been in America 72 years before Columbus, and to trumpet this statement over the media, as has been done in the case of Menzies' lecture.

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Zusammenfassung

Anlaß zu dieser Publikation war ein Vortrag des ehemaligen U-Boot-Kommandanten Cavin Menzies in London vor der Royal Geographical Society. Menzies vertrat die Ansicht, Admiral Cheng Ho (ca. 1371 bis 1435) sei 72 Jahre vor Christoph Kolumbus mit seinen Schiffen in Amerika gewesen. Die Daten, die Cavin Menzies für die Amerikareisen des Admirals nennt, können nicht stimmen, da zu der Zeit die Flotte des Admirals in Richtung Afrika segelte.

In meinem Artikel stelle ich einige der bahnbrechenden Expeditionen des Cheng Ho vor, die die Großmacht Chinas bis ins 15. Jahrhundert hinein aller Welt bewußt werden ließen. Erst ein Verbot weiterer Expeditionen in den Westen, die vielleicht zu kostspielig geworden waren, machte es den Europäern möglich, die Welt zu erobern. 1567, als die Ming-Kaiser das Verbot großer Schiffsexpeditionen aufhob, war es den Chinesen nicht mehr erreichbar, eine Seemacht aufzubauen, die die Europäer in ihre Schranken gewiesen hätten. – Die Europäer erfuhren nicht, daß die Chinesen schon weit vor der Zeitenwende Handelsbeziehungen über den Pazifik nach Amerika hin unterhalten hatten, ehe Kolumbus Amerika für Europa entdeckte.

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