

The History of Zheng He (aka Admiral Cheng Ho)

The Origin of Zheng He

Ma San Bao (aka Ma He), more popularly known as Zheng He, was one of the greatest explorers in Chinese history. Born in 1371 to a Muslim family, he grew up in Kunyang, Yunnan in southwestern China. He lived during the early 15th century in the Ming Dynasty. In 1381, a Ming army entered Yunnan to kill the last few rebels of the kingdom. Ma San Bao's father was killed in battle, and he was captured by Ming Soldiers to later serve in the imperial court of Zhu Di (fourth son of the Emperor Hongwu), as a eunuch. He was castrated to ensure he would never be allowed to found his own dynasty and start a rebellion. The Emperor HongWu (aka Zhu Yuanzhang) was then the first Emperor and founder of Ming Dynasty.

At a young age, Ma San Bao was quickly recognized for his diplomatic and strategic skills and rose through the ranks. By the age of 20, he was a recognized military commander in the camp of Zhu Di. In 1398, Emperor Hongwu died and his grandson, Jianwen, took the throne. Not long after, a civil war broke out between Zhu Di (uncle) and Emperor Jianwen (nephew), which ended with Zhu Di capturing the throne and became the new Emperor under the era of Yongle. Ma San Bao, having played a significant role in the victory, was promoted to the most important position in the court by becoming Great Eunuch, and was later conferred by the Emperor Yongle as Zheng He.

From there, he gained the trust of the Emperor Yongle. Between 1405 and 1433, Zheng He was chosen to organize and led a total of seven sea voyages throughout the South China Sea, Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea. Each voyage had many goals. The important goals were to establish cross-border diplomatic ties, overseas trade and promote regional peace.

To do this, Zheng He was put in charge of the construction of a massive fleet of more than 300 ships. During his expeditions, Zheng He had helped to restore much peace in the Borneo and Sumatra continents amid civil wars but never had once colonized any countries throughout his voyages.

Before he set off, Zheng He knew that the real struggles he would face were language barriers and cultural conflicts, so he always made sure to set off prepared. He understood that respecting others was a key foundation to earning the respect of the world. Zheng He's ships carried premium Chinese goods to other lands such as precious ceramics, cotton, embroidery etc while he also brought back rare items such as spices, gemstones, ivory, bird nest and exotic animals. These goods were highly valued in China and re-wrote the Chinese history with many new findings.

To improve the mutual diplomatic ties, Admiral Zheng He met with foreign rulers and offered them gifts from the Ming Emperor. In return, many of these rulers sent ambassadors / emissaries back to China, showing respect and forming peaceful relationships. The Emperor Yongle wanted to show China's power and build strong relationships with other countries. According to history record, those foreign ambassadors / emissaries that followed the returned voyages and visited China were from Sulu (Southern Philippines), Semarang, Palembang, Melaka, Ceylon, Mecca etc.

The First Great Departure (AD 1405)

After receiving the decree from the Emperor Yongle, Zheng He was conferred with the title Admiral of fleet and he spent a year preparing the expedition including the sea-route, manpower, rations and building the ships in Longjiang shipbuilding factory (Nanjing). The docks of Nanjing roared with life and eventually, the ships were pushed along the Yangtze river and canal to Taicang city for setting off. Over 300 ships — including the colossal *treasure ships* (the modern scholar study believes to be estimate 70 meters long) finally prepared for departure. It was recorded that these floating vessels carried estimate 27,800 men, including sailors, soldiers, interpreters, geologists, astronomists, physicians, officials, businessmen, butchers, chefs and artisans. Their holds were filled with silk, tea leaves, embroideries, porcelain, and fine lacquer ware, destined as gifts for foreign rulers.

On 11 July 1405, the first voyage took the fleet down the South China Sea to Champa (South Vietnam), bypass East Malaya and across to Java and Sumatra, through the busy entrepôt of Melaka (West Malaya), then into the Indian Ocean toward Calicut on India's Malabar Coast. At every port, Admiral Zheng He established strong diplomatic ties and presented lavish gifts while received tributes in return. The Ming fleet's grandeur left lasting impressions on local courts, securing China's place in the region's diplomacy.

On his first three voyages, Admiral Zheng He invited along a then famous Chinese physician named as Kuang Yu, who passed down the practice of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) to the Central Java and Melaka vicinities, which had left a legacy till now. Kuang Yu also discovered bird-nest, spices (eg. peppercorn, anniseeds etc), agarwood and many tropical fruits (eg. durians, rambutans, mangoes etc). He brought back to the China with the permission of Admiral Zheng He.

Expanding the Horizon

Over the next decades, Admiral Zheng He commanded six more voyages — each one longer and more ambitious than the last.

- **Second & Third Voyages (1407 – 1411):** He reaffirmed alliances in Southeast Asia. He also confronted a hostile ruler in Ceylon that tried to rob the colossal vessels. Admiral Zheng He restored peace within that country, then brought the ruler back to China for trial. Emperor Yongle granted an amnesty and released him — a display of both might and mercy.
- **Fourth & Fifth Voyages (1413 – 1419):** He engaged a renowned Muslim advisor, Imam Hasan, from Xi'an, and together they ventured farther west to **Hormuz** into the Persian Gulf, then along the Arabian coast to **Aden**, and finally to the bustling East African ports of **Mogadishu** and **Malindi**. The fleets returned with exotic animals like giraffes, lions and ostriches, which caused great wonder in the Ming court.
- **Sixth Voyage (1421–1422):** He focused more on consolidating relations, bringing back more envoys from foreign kingdoms to pay tribute to the Emperor Yongle.
- **Seventh Voyage (1431–1433):** The final and perhaps most symbolic journey, retracing earlier routes to reaffirm China's position as a great maritime power. Admiral Zheng He was over 60 years old and fell sick on his final voyage. He was unable to walk healthily but finally fulfilled his wish by assigning his trusted comrade

Ma Huan to lead a team of crew men and entered the Red Sea by smaller vessels for the holy pilgrimage.

Ma Huan was a Muslim and could speak Persian and Arab language, hence he embarked onto Jeddah and finally paid his pilgrimage at Al Kaaba, Saudi Arabia on behalf of Admiral Zheng He and fulfilled his wish. Ma Huan wrote down many archives on Islam and local practices and brought it back to China. The Royal envoys and local Arabs also followed the vessels back to meet Emperor Xuande.

The Change of Emperor Rule

While Admiral Zheng He was out at sea on the sixth voyage, the situation became complicated as it was becoming too expensive to sustain Zheng He's diplomatic expeditions, alongside the numerous construction sites in Beijing (the capital migrated from Nanjing to Beijing) and the military expeditions against the Mongols. The diplomatic expeditions were temporarily suspended as a result. In the North, the Mongols took advantage of the instability and started military raids against China. Being an experienced battlefield general in the past, Emperor Yongle led an army to fight the Mongols, but died on his returned trip from a military campaign on 12 August 1424.

As the son of Emperor Yongle, Hongxi came to power but died the following year, which was succeeded by his own son, Xuande (grandson of Emperor Yongle). In 1431, Emperor Xuande ordered the seventh and final voyage to inform all the allied kingdoms of the power changes in the Ming Empire. Admiral Zheng He was ordered to lead the expedition again by following the same route. At that time, Admiral Zheng He has turned 60 years old and suffered weak health. On this final voyage, he made a goal to visit the Al Kaaba after the huge colossal vessels failed to enter Red sea previously. Unfortunately, he did not make it personally but part of the crew has fulfilled his bucket wish-list. On the way back to China, Admiral Zheng He died on-board and was buried in Calicut (India), at the age of 62.

After the death of Admiral Zheng He, instability remained high in China. Diplomatic expeditions and construction of large ships also became prohibited. The huge imperial fleet was also dismantled, and the archives and other documents mentioning Admiral Zheng He's expeditions were also destroyed or lost. The later rulers believed China should focus more on internal matters rather than exploring overseas. For the next two centuries, Ming court terminated the sea travels and banned the shipbuilding technology, which ended the diplomatic ties with many overseas kingdom. It was recorded that Admiral Zheng He established diplomatic ties and strong relationships with 30 plus countries at that time, and he had successfully initiated cross-border trades among the regions.

On 11 July 2005, 600 years after the departure of the first expedition, the Beijing Government of China decided to make 11 July as the Maritime Day of China, in honor of Admiral Zheng He's legacy and contributions to the establishment of Maritime Silk Road.

Today, Admiral Zheng He is remembered as a symbol of exploration and friendship. His voyages proved that peaceful trade and diplomacy could connect different parts of the world.

He taught us that true power does not equate the possession of assets, but in sharing the resources for mutual flourishing. For the past six centuries, there have been many people who are willing to cross great distances to learn, trade and connect with others, while the life story of Admiral Zheng He continues to inspire those who desire to understand the wider world beyond their own borders.

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郑和的历史（又称三宝太监）

郑和的起源

马三宝（又名马和），更广为人知的名字是郑和，是中国历史上最伟大的探险家之一。他于 **1371** 年出生在一个穆斯林家庭，在中国的西南部——云南昆阳长大。他生活在 **15** 世纪初的明朝。**1381** 年，明朝军队进入云南，消灭该王国的最后几股叛军。马三宝的父亲在战死，而他本人则被明军俘虏，随后被送入朱棣（洪武皇帝的第四子）的燕王府充当太监。他被施以宫刑，以确保他永远无法建立自己的王朝或发动叛乱。此时的洪武皇帝（又名朱元璋）是明朝的开国皇帝。

马三宝在年轻时就因其出色的外交和战略才能而迅速受到赏识，并不断获得晋升。到 **20** 岁时，他已成为朱棣阵营中备受认可的军事将领。**1398** 年，洪武皇帝驾崩，其孙建文帝登基。不久后，朱棣（叔叔）与建文帝（侄子）之间爆发了内战（靖难之役），最终以朱棣攻占南京、夺取皇位而告终，并开创了永乐盛世。马三宝在这次胜利中立下了汗马功劳，因此被提升为宫廷中最重要的职位——内官监太监，随后被永乐皇帝赐姓为“郑”，改名郑和。

从此，他深得永乐皇帝的信任。在 **1405** 年至 **1433** 年期间，郑和被委以重任，组织并率领了总共七次远洋航行，足迹遍及南海、印度洋和阿拉伯海。每一次航行都肩负着诸多目标，其中最重要的目标是弘扬国威、建立外交关系、开展海外贸易以及促进地区和平。

为了实现这些目标，郑和奉命主管一支拥有 **300** 多艘舰船的庞大舰队的建造工作。在他的远征期间，郑和在战火纷飞的婆罗洲和苏门答腊大陆帮助恢复了大量和平，但在其所有的航行中，他从未殖民过任何一个国家。

在出发之前，郑和深知他将面临的真正挑战是语言障碍和文化冲突，因此他总是做好充分的准备。他明白，尊重他人是赢得世界尊重的关键基石。郑和的船队向其他土地运送了中国的高级商品，赢得厚彼薄来的美誉，如珍贵的瓷器、棉布、刺绣等，。同时他也带回了香料、宝石、象牙、燕窝和珍禽异兽等稀有物品。这些商品在中国备受珍视，并以许多新的发现改写了中国的历史。

为了促进双边外交关系，郑和下西洋时会见了外国统治者，并向他们赠送了明朝皇帝的礼物。作为回报，许多统治者派遣使节随船队返回中国，以示敬意并建立和平关系。永乐皇帝希望以此展示中国的国威，并与其他国家建立强有力的联系。据历史记载，那些跟随返航船队访问中国的外国使节分别来自苏禄（菲律宾南部）、三宝垄、巨港、满刺加（马六甲）、锡兰、麦加等地。

第一次伟大的启航（公元 1405 年）

在接到永乐皇帝的圣旨后，郑和被钦命为正使太监（舰队总指挥）。他花了一年的时间为远征做准备，包括规划航线、召集人员、筹备口粮，并在南京龙江船厂建造船只。南京的码头登时人声鼎沸，生机勃勃。最终，船只沿着长江和运河被推向太仓市准备出发。由 300 多艘船只组成的船队——其中包括巨大的宝船（现代学者研究认为其长度估计达 70 米）——终于准备就绪。据记载，这些漂浮的巨舰搭载了估计约 27,800 人，其中包括水手、士兵、翻译、通事（翻译官）、地理学家、天文学家、医官、官员、商人、屠夫、厨师和手工艺人。船舱里装满了丝绸、茶叶、刺绣、瓷器和精美的漆器，旨在作为送给外国统治者的礼物。

1405 年 7 月 11 日，首航船队沿着南海顺流而下，抵达占城（越南南部），绕过东马来西亚，横渡至爪哇和苏门答腊，穿过繁忙的贸易港口马六甲（西马来西亚），然后进入印度洋，驶向印度马拉巴尔海岸的古里。在每一个港口，郑和都建立了稳固的外交关系，奉上丰厚的礼物，并接受了各国的朝贡。明朝舰队的宏伟气势给当地朝廷留下了深刻的印象，巩固了中国在该地区外交中的地位。

在前三次航行中，郑和邀请了当时著名的中医名家匡愚随行。匡愚将传统中医药（TCM）传入了中爪哇和马六甲一带，这门中华艺术一直流传至今。匡愚还发现了燕窝、香料（如胡椒、八角等）、沉香以及许多热带水果（如榴莲、红毛丹、芒果等）。在征得郑和的同意后，他将这些物品带回了中国。

拓宽海运地平线

在接下来的几十年里，郑和又指挥了六次航行——每一次都比上一次更远、更具雄心。

第二、三次航行（1407 – 1411 年）：他巩固了在东南亚的盟友关系。他还在锡兰惩治了一位企图劫掠大明宝船的敌对统治者。郑和恢复了该国的和平，随后将该国统治者押解回中国受审。永乐皇帝对其网开一面并予以释放——这既展示了威严，又彰显了仁慈。

第四、五次航行（1413 – 1419 年）：他聘请了来自西安的著名穆斯林学者马欢及哈桑阿訇作为顾问，他们一同向西探索得更远，进入波斯湾的忽鲁谟斯，然后沿着阿拉伯海岸到达阿丹，最后抵达东非繁忙的港口木骨都束和麻林迪。舰队带回了长颈鹿（当时被称为麒麟）、狮子和鸵鸟等珍禽异兽，在明朝宫廷引起了极大的轰动。

第六次航行（1421 – 1422 年）：这一次他更侧重于巩固关系，带领更多来自海外王国的使节前往中国向永乐皇帝朝贡。

第七次航行（1431 – 1433 年）：这是最后一次、或许也是最具象征意义的旅程，它循着先前的航线重温，以重申中国作为海洋大国的地位。此时的郑和已年过六旬，在最后的航程中积劳成疾。他已无法正常行走，但最终他通过指派他信任的同伴马欢率领一支船员分队，乘坐较小的船只进入红海进行圣地朝圣，从而实现了自己的夙愿。

马欢是一名穆斯林，精通波斯语和阿拉伯语。因此，他登上了吉达口岸，并最终代表郑和在沙特阿拉伯的克尔白（天房）进行了朝圣，圆了郑和的心愿。马欢写下了许多关于伊斯兰教和当地习俗的档案记录并带回中国。皇室使节和当地的阿拉伯人也跟随船只一同返回中国谒见宣德皇帝。

帝王更迭与政策转变

当郑和率领船队在外进行第六次航行时，国内的局势变得复杂起来。由于当时北京有大量的建筑工程（首都从南京迁至北京），加之对蒙古的连年征战，维持郑和的外交远征变得过于昂贵。结果，外交远征被暂时搁置。在北方，蒙古人乘虚而入，开始对中国进行军事侵扰。作为一名久经沙场的宿将，永乐皇帝亲自率领军队征讨蒙古，但在 1424 年 8 月 12 日从军营返回的途中驾崩。

作为永乐皇帝的儿子，洪熙皇帝继位，但他在次年便驾崩了，由其子宣德皇帝（永乐皇帝的孙子）继承皇位。1431 年，宣德皇帝下令进行第七次也是最后一次远征，以向所有盟国宣告明帝国君主的更迭。郑和再次奉命率领远征队循原路出行。此时，郑和已年满 60 岁，身体虚弱。在这最后一次航行中，他定下了一个目标：鉴于此前巨大的宝船未能进入红海，他希望这次能前往克尔白朝圣。不幸的是，他未能亲临其境，但他的部分随从替他完成了这一人生遗愿清单。在返回中国的途中，郑和在船上逝世，享年 62 岁，据传葬于古里（印度）。

郑和去世后，中国的动荡局势依然严重。外交远征和大船的建造开始被严令禁止。庞大的皇家舰队被拆毁，提及郑和远征的档案和其他文献也被销毁或遗失。后来的统治者认为，中国应该将更多精力放在内部事务上，而不是探索海外。在接下来的两个世纪里，明朝朝廷终止了海上航行并取缔了造船技术，从而切断了与许多海外王国的邦交关系。据记载，郑和在当时与 30 多个国家建立了外交和深厚的友谊，并成功启动了该地区的跨国贸易。

2005 年 7 月 11 日，在第一次远征出发 600 周年之际，中国政府决定将每年的 7 月 11 日定为“中国航海日”，以纪念郑和的丰功伟绩以及他对建立海上丝绸之路所做出的贡献。

今天，郑和作为探索与友谊的象征被人们铭记。他的航行证明了和平贸易和外交可以连接世界的不同部分。他教会了我们，真正的力量并不等同于对财富的占有，而是在

于共享资源以实现共同繁荣。在过去的六个世纪里，无数人愿意远涉重洋去学习、贸易并与他人建立联系，而郑和的人生故事也持续激励着那些渴望了解自己国界之外，还有更广阔世界的人们。

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