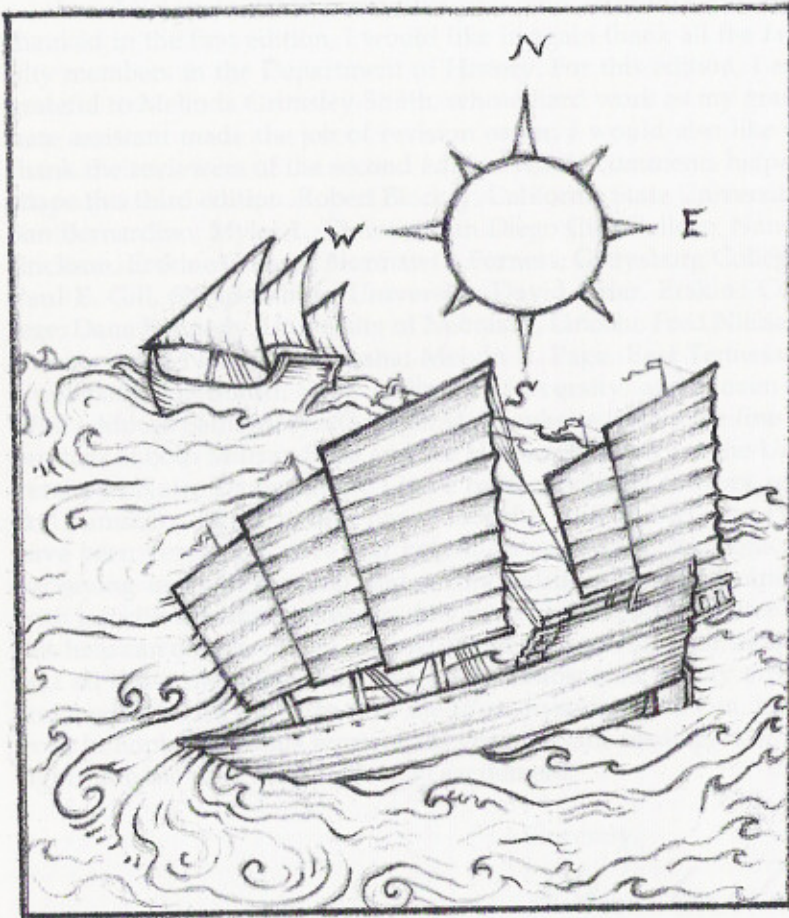


Prince Henry and Zheng He: Sailing South

How do the structures and values of a society affect the way people view contact with other cultures? Why did Europeans benefit more from the voyages of Prince Henry than the Chinese did from those of Zheng He?

It somehow doesn't seem fair. Prince Henry of Portugal (1394–1460), who was land-bound, is known to history as Henry the Navigator, while Chinese admiral Zheng He (ca. 1371–1433), who commanded fleets with hundreds of ships, is remembered as a eunuch [castrated male]. Of course, Henry's personal ability to navigate—if he had any—is not what made his life significant. Zheng He's condition as a eunuch did not affect his ability to lead men or manage fleets. Each man is remembered as he is because of the conditions and values of his society. These conditions and values helped to determine how the Chinese and Portuguese reacted to the voyages of their remarkable explorers.

Between 1405 and 1424, the Ming dynasty ruler Yongle created a fleet and ordered it to make seven expeditions into the "Great Western Sea," or Indian Ocean. The man selected to command these voyages, the most ambitious in Chinese history, was born Ma He, a member of a Muslim family of Mongol descent in the province of Yunan. When the first Ming emperor incorporated this Mongol province into his empire in 1381, Ma He was captured, castrated, and taken to the imperial capital of Nanjing, probably to serve as a harem guard. At age twenty, Ma He entered the service of the royal prince, Zhu Di, and very soon distinguished himself as a junior officer in a civil war that brought Zhu Di to power as the new Yongle emperor. The new ruler promoted Ma He to the position of superintendent of the office of eunuchs and honored him



with the Chinese surname Zheng. The new head eunuch was described as tall and handsome, with "glaring eyes, teeth as white as well-shaped shells, and a voice as loud as a huge bell." He was a man who "walks like a tiger and talks in a commanding voice."¹

It was this commanding figure whom the emperor chose to lead his new fleet. In this role, Zheng He was to undertake seven voyages, each of which lasted nearly two years. On his first voyage, in 1405–1407, he commanded twenty-eight thousand men on 317 ships, many of them large "treasure ships" 400 feet long and 160 feet wide. By contrast, Columbus "discovered" America 85 years later with 120 men and a fleet of three ships, one of which was 75 feet long.

Zheng He's first expedition traveled to India, with stops at Java and Ceylon. The fourth expedition, in 1413–1415, reached Aden and Hormuz on the Persian Gulf, and on the seventh expedition, in 1431–1433, the Chinese sent a small group to visit Mecca; they also touched the east coast of Africa as far south as Malindi near the modern state of Kenya. At each stop, Zheng He presented lavish gifts to the local rulers from "their" emperor and recorded information about interesting customs and creatures he encountered. An "Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores Annotated" was written by Zheng He's fellow Muslim, Ma Huan; it was based on a diary that Ma Huan kept during several voyages.² Ma Huan's book shows the great interest the Chinese took in the dress, food, language, marriage and death rituals, and flora and fauna of the countries they visited. According to most modern historians of China, however, anthropological research was not the primary purpose of these costly trips.

There were a number of reasons the court of the Son of Heaven initiated these voyages, discounting for the moment the exuberance of a young ruler and a natural curiosity about his neighbors to the south and west. To consolidate his power won in a civil war, the emperor decided to send what the Chinese called tribute missions to all neighboring countries to set up diplomatic and economic exchanges. Owing to their advanced civilization, the Chinese, like other people before and since, believed that all other cultures were inferior and that, once foreigners became familiar with Chinese culture, they would realize it was the source of all wisdom and political power. While some representatives of foreign states felt the Chinese claim was unwarranted, many kowtowed [bowed] before the emperor because they either regarded it as appropriate or because

it enabled them to establish trade relations with the Chinese. Zheng He's voyages, then, were part of the Yongle emperor's effort to demonstrate his own power. Perhaps more important was his desire to bring money into the imperial treasury by expanding foreign trade. The voyages were also designed in part to curb Japanese piracy along the eastern coast of China, to check on possible Mongol activity in western Asia, to search for needed medicinal herbs and spices, and to overawe a few "barbarians."

Zheng He accomplished these aims in visits to at least thirty-seven countries, many more than once. At the end of his fourth voyage, in 1415, he brought back the envoys of thirty states to do homage to the Chinese emperor.³ He also brought back a giraffe and a zebra to astonish the court; this latter creature, whose Swahili name sounded similar to the Chinese word for unicorn, was celebrated at court as a good omen for the dynasty and as an "emblem of Perfect Virtue, Perfect Government and Perfect Harmony in the Empire and in the Universe."⁴ Zheng He's work had clearly boosted Ming prestige, as well as increased Chinese trade with south and west Asia.

Therefore, from a Western perspective, it is surprising that Chinese overseas voyages were abruptly halted at the end of the seventh voyage, in 1433, and were never resumed. Zheng He himself had died on this last voyage and was buried at sea. The exact date of his death, like that of his birth, is uncertain. After this, the Chinese went back to fighting nomads on the northern land frontier, something they had done for centuries. Japanese pirates soon reappeared along the southern coast. Zheng He's name lived on as the name of a Buddhist temple in Thailand and as the name of a well in Malacca.⁵ In China, however, Zheng He and his travels to the "Western Ocean" were soon forgotten. A generation after his last voyage, an official in the Ministry of Defense even burned the log books of the expedition, whether deliberately or by accident, whether at the command of the emperor or on his own, no one seems to know. By 1500, it had become a capital offense to even build a boat of more than two masts, and in 1525 an edict ordered the destruction of all remaining ocean-going vessels. "In less than a hundred years the greatest navy the world had ever known had ordered itself into extinction."⁶

We do know that a far different fate awaited the work of Prince Henry of Portugal, a man who became a legend in European history.

Born in 1394 as the third son of King John I and Queen Philippa of Portugal, Henry became famous as the man whose sailors explored the west coast of Africa during the first half of the fifteenth century. Every grade school student knows that, without the pioneering explorations of Prince Henry the Navigator, Bartholomeu Dias would not have been able to round the Cape of Good Hope in 1487–1488, Vasco da Gama would not have sailed to India and back in 1497–1499, and Columbus would not have sought a sea route to the Indies in 1492.

Although he never personally navigated any ships south, Henry did make it his life's work to send out ship after ship from his rocky outpost of Sagres on the Atlantic coast of Portugal. Henry either outfitted the ships himself or granted a license to private captains who would repay him with a fifth of everything valuable they brought back. In the early years, when his ships were hugging the African desert lands, Henry usually spent far more than he earned. Although his ships were much smaller than the government-built and -outfitted vessels of Zheng He, Henry's record was impressive for his time and place. Men working under his direction settled in the Madeiras and discovered and settled the Azores and some of the Cape Verde Islands. In 1434, Gil Eanes finally sailed beyond Cape Bojador on the west coast of Africa after other Portuguese sailors had refused or been unable to do so on fourteen earlier trips. Many men feared sailing too far south. Current rumors included the belief that anyone passing Cape Bojador would turn black, that the sea boiled in the tropics, and that the sun's rays descended in the form of liquid fire as you approached the equator. Once the Portuguese passed Cape Bojador, a barrier more psychological than physical had been breached.

The Portuguese caravels [light, fast, maneuverable ships that could be sailed inshore] continued their journeys south in the late 1430s and 1440s. Alfonzo Goncalves Baldaia went 300 miles beyond Bojador in 1435, and in 1441 Nuno Tristao went down as far as Cape Blanco, halfway between Sagres and the equator. It was in this decade that Cape Verde was rounded, although it was not until the year of Prince Henry's death in 1460 that Pedro de Sintra reached Sierra Leone. In the early years, Henry constantly had to urge his sailors "to go back and go further." It was easier and more profitable to pirate Muslim vessels in the north than it was to take the more fearful route southwest along the barren desert coast.

However, after several blacks were brought back to Portugal as slaves in 1441, the number and willingness of Henry's sailors grew. The slave trade and African exploration became intertwined, and Henry built the first European trading post used for slaves on Arguin Island in 1448.

While Prince Henry did not set out to secure slaves, the new trade in human beings did not trouble him greatly. Slaves had souls that could be saved, and that appealed to Henry as much as did the selling and "civilizing" of them. Unlike his Chinese counterpart, whose voyages had no religious aims at all, Henry had a strong desire to spread his faith and fight the infidel Moors [Muslims in northwest Africa]. Zheng He, by contrast, made no attempt to offend the religiosity of those he encountered. Personally, he offered sacrifices to a Chinese sea goddess before each voyage, but, on a tablet he placed in Ceylon in 1409 with inscriptions in Chinese, Persian, and Tamil, he offered thanks to Buddha, Allah, and the Hindu god Vishnu—all of whom were worshipped on that island. Writing such an "ecumenical" inscription would have been literally unthinkable to Henry of Portugal. Indeed, his early interest in West African exploration was stimulated by the Portuguese conquest of the Muslim city of Ceuta on the North African coast in 1415; in 1437, Henry and his brother Fernando unsuccessfully attacked the city of Tangier, near Ceuta in Muslim Morocco.

The word *crusader* has medieval associations that contrast with our image of Henry as one of the first modern explorers, but the objectives of Henry the Navigator make him a crusader in the typical Iberian fashion. A major objective of his African expeditions was to "get behind," or outflank, the Moors by sea. Like other medieval Christians, he had heard about the legendary Prester John, a Christian king in Africa somewhere south of the Sahara. If the Portuguese could reach Guinea, as they called black western Africa, they might be able to find an ally who could attack the infidel Muslims from the south. His desire to secure military allies contrasts with that of Zheng He, who sought only a formal acknowledgment of Chinese sovereignty, trade in rare goods, and political and nautical information.

Although his explorations failed to secure Henry's military and diplomatic objectives against the Moors, they provided new geographical knowledge that improved future map-making and encouraged further Portuguese exploration. They also allowed him to promote trade, control many Atlantic islands, and increase Portugal's

political power at Spain's expense. In sum, Henry the Navigator's program mixed religion with economics in a way designed to appeal to the various components of Portuguese society, all of whom, unlike their Chinese counterpart, were strongly driven by the expectation of profits. His brother, King Duarte I, supported Henry's work by granting him several royal monopolies. These gave him a fifth of everything of value brought back from south of Cape Bojador and made him the "landlord" of the Madeiras, the Azores, and Cape Verde. Henry also held the monopoly on all fishing and coral gathering along the Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts of Portugal and received all fees paid by fishermen to fish in these areas. He was reputed to be the "richest man in Portugal" after the king, but he probably died in debt because of the money he spent on exploration. The Portuguese merchants supported Henry's work because of the potential profits to be gained from exploration and the slave trade. Even Portuguese pirates were pleased by the opportunity his work gave them to raid and plunder under the cover of "exploring." The Catholic Church supported Henry's missionary efforts to convert the heathen and fight the infidel, and the aristocracy generally liked both the idea of crusading and the idea of increasing Portuguese power. The loyal peasants, we must assume, enjoyed Portuguese greatness vicariously, as most peasants in most places enjoy most forms of greatness.

Because of the broad-based support for Henry's work that existed within Portuguese society, he did not need to be a navigator. One modern historian, critical of the myth of Henry as a nautical genius who ran a "school" for geographers and sailors at Sagres, put the matter quite simply: "Henry harnessed his own talents and energies to those of his family and country. He did not need to invent ships, train sailors, educate pilots or give courage to his men. He found all these at his command. What he needed to do, and what he did, was to give focus to Portuguese energies."⁷

It was this focusing of energies already there by Prince Henry of Portugal that began the "age of discovery and exploration" that we read about in our texts, while the voyages of Zheng He, the Ming admiral, remained "mere exploits."⁸ We should not forget the interesting similarities between Henry and Zheng He. Both sought power for their respective rulers, though in different ways. While neither favored outright conquest of the lands he explored, both found the idea of economic domination by the "mother country" acceptable. Both had sailing vessels suitable for long ocean voy-

ages. Yet Henry's voyages marked a beginning and those of Zheng He an ending of maritime activity. Why?

One reason this question is so intriguing is that we have the benefit of hindsight. We know what came of the voyages of Prince Henry. We know how, in the words of one of his biographers, "he set a nation's steps upon a path that led to the world's end."⁹ And we know as well what happened to China—and we wonder what might have happened. Chinese vessels were not only larger but also technically superior to Western ones. Chinese sailors had the magnetic compass in the eleventh century, perhaps two centuries before their European counterparts. They also had watertight storage compartments and a "balanced rudder" that could be raised and lowered, creating greater stability. Europeans had neither of these until the late eighteenth century.¹⁰ Given all this, it would not have been difficult for the Chinese to have dominated all of Southeast Asia, portions of India, and perhaps even the east coast of Africa.¹¹ There was already a substantial overseas Chinese population in Southeast Asia, and it showed every prospect of growing when the voyages were ended. If the Chinese had followed up on the voyages of Zheng He, what would the world be like today?

They did not do this, of course. Instead, China began to suffer from the intrusions of European sailors as early as the sixteenth century, just a century after Zheng He's voyages. China became prey to the West by 1850; it might have been Europe's strongest competitor. So much for speculation. What is certain is that the very structure of Chinese society in the fifteenth century made it difficult for Zheng He to be the pioneer that Henry was, even assuming that he wanted to be such a pioneer. Zheng He was a skilled administrator, diplomat, and seaman, but he was, above all, a servant of his emperor. His advancement in society depended on the emperor, not on any skills he might possess. There was little place in Ming society for a private or an independent entrepreneur [risk-taking capitalist]. Trade was a government monopoly. The Son of Heaven employed servants such as Zheng He to do his will; he would never "contract out" exploration, as the Portuguese king did.

There were also clear anti-commercial and anti-foreign biases in Chinese society during this time. The government got its money from taxes on land, not from taxing private traders and merchants. In addition, farming was considered more virtuous than business (as it was in medieval Europe until about this same time). Both Confucian and Christian ideologies glorified those who worked the

land over those who soiled their hands with money. In the West, however, the diversity of states and their competition with each other, as well as the perceived need for outside goods “from the East,” stimulated the rise of capitalist towns and trade after 1150. The crusades of this century also helped break down traditional biases against commerce in Europe. China was more self-sufficient and, thus, faced no real pressure to change the traditional attitude toward either trade or outsiders. Besides, some Confucian scholars felt that the very idea that China needed anything that was elsewhere, even medicinal herbs from Sumatra or Arabia, was itself demeaning.¹² The inhabitants of the Middle Kingdom (Ma Huan’s translator calls it “the Central Country”) did not look down upon outsiders because they were genetically programmed to do so; they did it because they could afford to; they did have a more prosperous country than their neighbors in the fifteenth century. Therefore, it is logical that the Chinese would simply view sea power as less important than maintaining a strong land army. It was. The chief threat to fifteenth-century China came from the northern barbarians; they, not Japanese or Malayan pirates, were to overrun the country in the seventeenth century. All this means that both the Chinese and the Portuguese were quite sensible in choosing the course of action they did.

Yet, given the wonderful benefit of hindsight available to historians, we can see clearly that the desire for riches of the European entrepreneurs meant that their voyages would have a much greater economic and political impact on the world than those of the Chinese, who were driven not so much by profit but by the will of one man and the immense resources of a large state. The story of these mariners and their respective countries did not play out the way anyone living in 1430 might have predicted.

Notes

1. B. Martin and S. Chien-lung, “Cheng Ho: Explorer and Navigator,” in *Makers of China: Confucius to Mao* (New York: Halstead Press, 1972), 112; Louise Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1405–1433* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 64. Cheng, although his surname, is placed first in Chinese. (The new spelling of Zheng He [pronounced “Jung Huh”] used here represents the Pinyin system of transliteration adopted by scholars only in recent years.)

2. Ma Huan, *Overall Survey of the Ocean’s Shores Annotated*, edited and introduced by J. V. G. Mills (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).
3. Jung-pang Lo, “Cheng Ho,” in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th ed. *Macropedia*, vol. 4 (Chicago: Macmillan, 1974), 193–194.
4. Nora C. Buckley, “The Extraordinary Voyages of Admiral Cheng Ho,” *History Today* (July 1975): 468.
5. Ma Huan, *Overall Survey of the Ocean’s Shores*, editor’s introduction, 7.
6. Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas*, 174–175.
7. Bailey W. Diffie and George D. Winius, *Foundations of the Portuguese Empire 1415–1580* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 122.
8. Ma Huan, *Overall Survey of the Ocean’s Shores*, editor’s introduction, 34.
9. Elaine Sanceau, *Henry the Navigator: The Story of a Great Prince and His Times* (New York: Norton, 1947), 247.
10. Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas*, 81–82.
11. Fernand Braudel, *Capitalism and Material Life, 1400–1800* (New York: Harper, 1973), 308, says that a Japanese junk, constructed much like those of Cheng Ho, traveled from Japan to Acapulco in 1610.
12. See Lynda Schaffer, “China, Technology, and Change,” *World History Bulletin*, vol. IV (Fall, Winter 1986–1987), 1, 4–6; also Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas*, 179–180. Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500–2000* (New York: Random House, 1987), 8, notes that members of the Confucian ruling class (mandarins) distrusted merchants because they had less control over them. The mandarins hindered foreign trade by confiscating the property of merchants or banning their businesses on occasion.

Further Reading

- LEVATHES, LOUISE. *When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1405–1433*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). This readable explanation of the career of Zheng He and his times also includes fascinating information on earlier seafaring exploits of the Chinese people.
- MA HUAN. *Overall Survey of the Ocean’s Shores Annotated*, edited and introduced by J. V. G. Mills. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970. This is an interesting look at what fifteenth-century Chinese thought important.
- SANCEAU, ELAINE. *Henry the Navigator: The Story of a Great Prince and His Times*. New York: Norton, 1947. Flowery hero worship in places but still useful and interesting reading.