Admiral Zheng He & the Ming “Treasure Ships”

During the first century of Chinese Ming dynasty (1368-1644), the government sent out a total of seven voyages into the Indian Ocean, and several voyages went as far as the east coast of Africa and the Red Sea. As a result, by 1415 the important trading ports from Japan and Korea to the east African coast acknowledged the power of the Ming court. Commanded by Admiral Zheng He, who was known as the "three-jeweled eunuch," these spectacular voyages established, demonstrated, and helped maintain China's political and cultural superiority. Yet after 1433 the Chinese decided to end the voyages, withdraw their ships, and forbid private overseas trading.

The Chinese decision to end their maritime voyages and scrap the fleet is one of the most important decisions in modern history.…

The Middle Kingdom thought of itself as not only the largest and oldest power in the world, but also as the source of all civilization. Written Chinese, the Confucian code of conduct, and leadership based on moral virtue were all signs of China’s cultural as well as material superiority. For centuries China had had a long-established tribute relationship with surrounding areas. Rulers of neighboring states, after acknowledging their "humble submission" and performing ritualized actions such as the kowtow (bowing so that the head touches the floor), exchange of envoys, and trade regulations, gained recognition and were given legitimacy by the Chinese court which might even send aid to them should the need arise.

After defeating the Mongols in 1368 and establishing the Ming dynasty, the Emperor attempted to reestablish the tribute relationship with neighboring states. In 1402, during a devastating civil war, Zhu Di seized the Dragon throne from his nephew. Since he had seized the throne by force, Emperor Zhu Di was especially anxious to demonstrate and prove his legitimacy.

In 1403 Emperor Zhu Di ordered construction of an imperial fleet that was to include trading ships, warships, the so-called "treasure ships," and support vessels and ordered the fleet, under the command of Admiral Zheng He, to embark on a major voyage that same year. The emperor and Admiral Zheng He had been friends since the admiral was in his teens, and they trusted one another.

The voyage had multiple objectives. It would permit the Chinese to explore new areas and expand commercial and diplomatic relations. The grandeur of the fleet would dramatize the superior majesty and power of the Ming empire to peoples of distant lands, causing states of South and Southeast Asia to be incorporated into the tribute system. The fleet expected to receive demonstration of submission from rulers of areas it visited, and many foreign countries surely would acknowledge China's superiority in order to increase their trade. If people did not recognize Chinese greatness, the admiral might have to use force, but the Chinese expected that the encounters would be peaceful since it was only fitting that as many people as possible should come under the sway of the Son of Heaven.

Opening trade routes and establishing trade through the exchange of tribute and gifts was a major goal of the voyage. Since Zheng He was a Muslim, he would be able to establish good relations with Muslim trading communities as well as with Chinese traders in the ports the ships visited. Medical research appears to have been another motivation for the voyages. Several devastating epidemics had swept through the Middle Kingdom, and many doctors and pharmacists went on the voyage, instructed to look for herbs and other medicines. Finally, Zheng He was to look for any signs of the deposed Emperor, whom some people believed was still alive and attempting to build up a power base somewhere in Southeast Asia.
The fleets were impressive, and many ambassadors and rulers from areas the fleet visited came to the Ming court with tribute, acknowledging Chinese superiority. However, several factors contributed to making many in the court, particularly the Confucian scholars around the Emperor, oppose the voyages. Once the tribute relationship had been reestablished, and the explorations completed, some questioned the need to send repeated voyages. Maintaining and manning the fleet was expensive. After the Grand Canal had been repaired, funds were expended to make it easy for grain to travel from the south to northern China on the canal, eliminating the need for war ships that would protect grain shipments from pirate raids. Was it really worth continuing these voyages?

**TASKS:**

- You will be divided into small groups or pairs. Each group will receive a small paper with advice from one of the Ming Emperor’s advisors concerning the possible docking of the “Treasure Fleet.”
- Each group will choose one spokesperson to make the brief group presentation to the entire class.
- Each group will briefly analyze the key points of that advisor and be ready to present that advisor’s suggestion, IN HIS/HER OWN WORDS, to the rest of the class.
- The class will then vote on the advice that they think is the best to submit to the Emperor.