By the time Prince Henry, called “the Navigator,” third son of John I of Portugal, established a school for navigational studies at Sagres, Portugal in the third decade of the fifteenth century (around 1433), the Chinese had been engaged in navigational exploration under the Ming Dynasty for more than thirty years. In 1369 the last of the Mongol invaders, who had controlled China since 1294, was defeated by the founder of the Ming Dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang. Zhu chose the name “Ming” or “bright” for his dynasty rather than his family name, Zhu, which means “pig” and called himself “Hong Wu,” which translates to “vast military.”

Hong Wu ruled China from 1368 to 1398, during which time he concentrated on defeating and controlling the last of the Mongols (they were driven out in 1420), expanding the military, and ruling over a diverse kingdom of Confucians, Muslims, and Christians. During the Ming dynasty, the Chinese expanded their rule into Mongolia and Central Asia, and for a brief time, Vietnam. When Hong Wu died, the throne passed to his son, Shu Di, who took the name Yung Lo; he is also called the Yongle Emperor. Yung Lo had spent much of his youth undertaking expeditions against the remaining Mongol strongholds, and, when he became emperor, continued Chinese expansion, assisted by the Muslim eunuch, Zheng He, or Cheng Ho. After moving the capital city of his empire to Beijing, he constructed a new, splendid palace, the Forbidden City, the Temple of Heaven, and an impressive observatory. The construction of the Forbidden City took fourteen years to complete and employed 100,000 artisans and one million workers. Yung Lo also began dredging and reconstructing the Grand Canal. In 1417, the Emperor left Nanking for the last time, moving to his new capital city. The Court officially established itself there in 1421.

Not only was Yung Lo intent on creating a splendid new capital city for his empire, he also wanted to expand China’s military and economic control into the areas surrounding the Indian Ocean. Malacca, the third largest state in Malaysia, had become the center of a thriving Indian Ocean trading network in which porcelains, silks, and camphor from China, pepper, cloves, and other spices from the Moluccas, and cotton from India came into the port of Malacca. Yung Lo saw
in this area an opportunity for Chinese expansion, and shortly after he became Emperor he chose Zheng He to lead a series of naval voyages from China into the Indian Ocean. Dispute exists among historians about his motivation in this endeavor. Historian John K. Fairbank maintains that “these official expeditions were not voyages of exploration in the Vasco da Gama or Columbian sense. They followed established routes of Arab and Chinese trade in the seas east of Africa.”

On the other hand, some historians of the twenty-first century have been influenced by the theories of Historian Gavin Menzies, whose best seller, *1421: The Year China Discovered America*, contends that the Chinese did indeed go well beyond the familiar trade routes, not only rounding the Cape of Good Hope, but also traveling to Australia and Central and South America. Menzies supports his theory with the diaries of fifteenth century Portuguese and Spanish conquistadors who encountered “Chinese people” when they arrived in the Americas, as well as with archaeological evidence, such as remains of the familiar blue and white Ming porcelain along the western coast of South America. Menzies believes that Yung Lo’s purpose was two-fold: “to sail the oceans of the world and chart them” in order to inspire awe in the countries of the world and to bring them “under China’s tribute system.”

Although the theories of Menzies have created interest among historians, most scholars hold the view that the Chinese were mainly seeking new tributary nations, generally agreeing with Anatole Andro who comments in The *1421 Heresy* that, though Menzies’s theories are compelling, additional concrete evidence is needed before his contentions can be accepted as fact.

Whatever his motivation, Yung Lo did in fact commission the construction of a grand fleet. According to Andro Anatole, “The Ming maritime voyages were set in motion the very moment [Yung Lo] ascended the throne. Although the first ships did not set sail until 1405, more than two years into the new reign, preparations for the voyages were underway from day one.” He points out that the project was immense and complicated. Raw materials were not readily available and many were “procured from distant districts.” Artisans came from all parts of the empire, and Zheng He himself had to be trained in navigational methods and cartography, or map reading.

One shipyard near Nanking alone built 2,000 vessels, including almost a hundred large treasure ships. The latter were approximately 400 feet long and almost 200 feet wide. Dragon eyes were carved on the prows to scare away evil spirits. Anatole reminds us that “The large Chinese ships, majestic and impressive, and more than enough to fill with awe a country of lesser stature than the mighty Ming, were first and foremost built for military personnel transport.”
In addition to these large ships were junks belonging to merchants that were, in turn, protected by warships. As the Chinese flotilla progressed, the ships of other nations joined it, in order to secure the protection of the armada’s warships. By the time the armada reached India, seeking such spices as pepper, salt, ginger, and cinnamon, there were 800 ships in the flotilla. According to Fairbank, the armada of 1405-1407 set out with 317 ships. Of these, 62 were treasure ships. In comparison, the famous Spanish Armada that sailed against England in 1588 was made up of only 137 ships.

Zheng He made seven voyages between 1405 and 1433, and, according to historian Louise Levathes’s When China Ruled the Seas: the Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, Yung Lo probably had in mind the expansion of the tributary system and the acquisition of information about distant lands and rare plants and animals. She comments that Zheng He went as far west as Egypt in order to gather herbs that might be used to fight a smallpox outbreak that plagued China.

Although the Chinese were interested in the products of other cultures, and though Zheng He brought to China an Arab book on medical remedies, a giraffe, and “300 virgins,” Yung Lo’s successor, Zhu Zhanji, decided in 1433 to disband this naval effort and “never again were the expeditions resumed.” Several possibilities explain this occurrence: the Chinese found nothing in the cultures visited that they could not obtain through trade; after Zheng He’s death, no admiral rose to his stature as a sailor; or, according to Fairbank, "anti-commercialism and xenophobia won out." Whatever the reason, the Chinese armada was allowed to fall into disrepair, service personnel were placed elsewhere, and a minister of war, Kiu Daxia, burned the navigational charts. Interestingly, the Chinese did not follow up on these voyages of trade and/or exploration, even though they were the inventors of gunpowder and the cannon, instruments necessary for European expansion as they struck out to find an all-water route to India.
What remains is this question: why did the Chinese take this approach, becoming in essence isolationists? Menzies suggests that superstition got the best of the culture as a series of natural disasters portended future catastrophe. Historian Ray Huang blames it on the extravagances of Yung Lo, and Fairbank, on Neo-Confucian prejudice against expansion. Historian L. Carrington Goodrich concedes that “the expeditions ceased as suddenly as they began, again for reasons only guessed at,” though the expense and the “spirit of isolationism” that “penetrated the Court” were certainly factors. Most scholars concede that, while various explanations exist, the “abrupt discontinuance” of China’s outreach remains “one of the most fascinating enigmas in the history of the culture.” Whatever the reason, the Chinese did reap the benefits of expanded tribute, and the Chinese people participated in a “vast immigration” into Southeast Asia, taking with them Chinese knowledge and culture.

2.3.1: Before You Move On...

Key Concepts

The establishment of the Ming Dynasty in China in 1439 brought an end to Mongol rule and began a new era. The Forbidden City, the seat of Chinese rule in the following centuries and a lasting symbol of Chinese power, was built during this period. It was during this time also that the Chinese first undertook substantial oceanic voyages, far earlier than their European counterparts. Zheng He’s massive fleet dwarfed European expeditions of the era, both in the number and the size of ships. The armadas explored much of the Indian Ocean region, as far as Africa, mapping, charting, trading, and incorporating a great part of the region into a Chinese tributary system. Although a few historians have suggested that Zheng He’s fleet sailed as far as Australia and the Americas, compelling documentary evidence for this is lacking.

When the Ming Emperor Yung Lo died, Chinese participation in naval expansion died with him. The succeeding emperors did not follow up on the voyages of the early fifteenth century, and by the end of the century had begun a policy that would typify Chinese attitudes toward trade with overseas cultures: if foreign powers wanted to trade with China, they could bring their goods to her shores, in their own ships. And eventually, even this trade was limited to the port of Canton only.
Test Yourself

Exercise \(\PageIndex{1}\))

Zheng He’s goals for exploring the Indian Ocean included

a. exploring and mapping the region.

b. establishing trade with port cities.

c. incorporating new areas into the Chinese tribute system.

d. all of the above.

e. none of the above.

Answer

d

Exercise \(\PageIndex{2}\))

One possible reason for Zhu Zanji’s decision to end the voyages of Zheng He was

a. a spirit of isolationism in the Chinese court under Zhu Zanji.

b. to save money and avoid the expense of the voyages.

c. to end competition with the French, who were entering the Indian Ocean trade.

d. A and B.

e. all of the above.

Answer

d