Although construction of the northern walls had commenced under the Qin and Han dynasties, much of the brick and stone work of the unified Great Wall was completed during the Ming era. Today, nearly 4,000 miles of the Wall remain. Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Wall_of_China.

NGCSU E-Text for History 1112
Essay Module
The Ming Dynasty in China, 1368-1644

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Unit Goals:
1) Describe how Zhu Yuanzhang envisioned the Ming Empire he founded, and how this vision was subverted by history.
2) Describe the socio-economic changes that occurred in China and how they clashed with established ideals.
3) How have historians explained the reasons behind the voyages of Zheng He? How do these voyages compare with the voyages of discovery by the Iberians?

Part 1: Utopian Plans

During the last decades of Mongol rule over China, the country was plagued by disease, natural disaster and a destabilized economy. Rebel groups rose up, often inspired by religious longing for a better world. Eventually, **Zhu Yuanzhang**, the leader of the Red Turban sect, won the civil war that had erupted between the rebel groups over who would succeed the Mongols. The new dynasty he founded in 1368 would be called the Ming.

Ming China was, in its day, the **largest empire in the world**; one in four people on earth lived in it. (Today, only one in seven humans live in the People's Republic of China.) It was a Ming Emperor who ordered the construction of a fleet of ships that contained the largest vessels made before the industrial period. But even after the voyages of this fleet were terminated on the order of the Emperor, the Ming remained a global presence. Its famous **Ming porcelain** was a luxury product spread across the globe by networks of global trade. You could have found it on tables of rich Spanish American merchants in Lima, as decoration on the ceiling of European palaces, or on the walls of mosques on the Swahili coast of Africa. Most of the silver mined in the New World ended up—eventually—in the Ming empire. But the story of the Ming is also one that never should have happened if it had been up to its founder, Zhu Yuanzhang, who had quite a different ideal in mind when he came to power.

[For two images of the first Ming emperor, see
http://www.mingtombs.eu/emp/01hongwu/img/hongwu2.jpg
and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Hongwu1.jpg.]

In the links above, you can see the Ming Founder in two portraits. His detractors might have called him ugly—but imperial portraits were more flattering as you can see in the second picture. Note that as emperor, Zhu Yuanzhang is sometimes also referred to under the titles **Taizu** or **Hongwu**. Emperors took and received a number of names. Taizu was Zhu Yuanzhang's Temple Name, which is given after the death of a ruler. In this case, Taizu means "Great Ancestor," which was a title normally given to the founder of a dynasty or a new line. So Taizu means something like Founder. Most Emperors of the Late Imperial Period, however, are not known by their posthumous temple name but by their era name. This was a title chosen by an

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Emperor at the beginning of his reign, which was more like a motto. Zhu Yuanzhang's era name was Hongwu—"Great Military Prowess." Also note that the Chinese put their family name first—in this case Zhu—not last as is customary in the West.[*]

When Zhu founded the Ming Dynasty, for the first time in 250 years China was unified again—north and south—under a native Chinese dynasty, instead of the division of China between different states, or rule by conquerors from the steppe. The new regime also emphasized this "Chinese-ness"—for instance, in the dress code that it ordered its subjects to follow. What was also very traditional was that Zhu Yuanzhang chose to rely on the traditional Chinese elite of 'Confucian' administrators to govern China—despite the fact that he had risen to power as leader of a religious sect that combined different strands of religious beliefs such as Buddhism, Daoism, and Manichaeism.

For more context, we need to go back in time, to the foundations of the Chinese imperial structure. Since the Han Dynasty (third century B.C. to third century A.D.), but especially under the Tang (seventh century to tenth century A.D.) an elite of administrators had developed that was key to running any unified Chinese empire. These *literati* would train themselves in the classics of Chinese political philosophy and ethics, a tradition that is usually referred to as **Confucianism**. Confucius himself was a thinker (who called himself only a collector of existing knowledge) who had lived in the sixth to fifth century B.C. Only half a millennium after the death of Confucius did the Han Dynasty start to draw on Confucian scholars for their official doctrine. Many elements of this doctrine did not come from Confucius himself—Confucianism throughout Chinese history was not set in stone but evolving, just like the West harked back to its ancient past in many periods and in many different ways for many different purposes. As important was the invention under the Tang of a key tool to select the most able to govern: the **examination system**. This was the first time in history that tests were used to determine who would be appointed to government positions (a common practice nowadays in all modern states). Back then it was revolutionary, since most pre-modern states (and even modern states) select their elites on the basis of family (nobilities). In fact, the system developed as *an attempt to eliminate the power of nobility*. The body of material candidates were tested on also included the classics of government and ethics. Often the Chinese examination system is said to have bred rote learning. But even today governments find it difficult to develop criteria on which to base administrative recruitment.

Zhu Yuanzhang renewed the connection between an Imperial house and this elite of administrators educated in the classics. When the other rebel contenders for the throne were eliminated, Zhu renounced his alliance to the sects through which he had risen to power, and even suppressed them to secure his own family's hold on power. The name he adopted for his dynasty was, however, cleverly ambiguous. *Ming*, Chinese for Brightness, could refer to the

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[*] **Chinese names are romanized in this text according to the Pinyin system. Note that older publications use different romanizations, resulting in differently spelled names.**

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popular Buddhist notion of a saviour prince of Brightness—*Ming* Wang—who would come to bring a better world, as well as to an important Confucian value, that of perfect—"bright"—understanding.

But, and this is the second reason Zhu Yuanzhang is so important for Chinese history, the government system set up by the Ming Founder was *not only* a restoration of the traditional Chinese system of rule. Zhu Yuanzhang introduced a number of changes that had lasting and profound effects on Chinese politics and society down to the twentieth century. To understand this, we need to know a bit more about the personality and life history of the Ming Founder.

Zhu Yuanzhang was the only founder of a Chinese dynasty born to a genuinely poor peasant family. He was the only child among six siblings who was *not* given up for adoption or given away in marriage at a very young age. He witnessed his parents' death when he was only 16, during one of the disease epidemics that plagued China in the late Mongol period. It was only after a period as a Buddhist monk and beggar that he joined one of the rebel bands in the 1350s to become eventually a rebel leader.

His traumatic childhood convinced him of the importance of agriculture and would shape his vision of government. The Ming Founder wanted to resurrect the ideal agricultural society of a past that was in fact imaginary. A favourite passage of Zhu Yuanzhang from the *Dao De Jing*—the sacred book of Daoism—can give us a feeling for the vision he had in mind.

Let the state be small and the people few:
So that the people...
fearing death, will be reluctant to move great distances
and, even if they have boats and carts, will not use them.
So that the people...
will find their food sweet and their clothes beautiful,
will be content with where they live and happy in their customs.
Though adjoining states be within sight of one another
and cocks crowing and dogs barking in one be heard in the next,
yet the people of one state will grow old and die
without having had any dealings with those of another

Having lived through a childhood of intense poverty, the Ming Founder regarded the idea of living and growing old in one's home village without ever going to the next village, even if it was only a dog's bark away, as a heaven he had never known. Through the person of Zhu Yuanzhang such popular utopian ideals became a template for the government of the empire. As emperor he would do anything to realize this ideal, even if this meant intervening in people's lives in the harshest ways.

Of course, what must be realized is that the Ming Founder came to power in a land devastated by plague and warfare. People had fled their homes, leaving the land uncultivated, especially in

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the northern Yellow River Valley. This was disastrous since the dikes of the Yellow River—crucial to Northern China's economy—constantly have to be maintained to avoid disasters. The new Ming regime needed to restore order and call people back to the land. For this it also relocated people, sometimes voluntarily, sometimes coercively. But the vision of the Ming Founder was much more long-term than the restoration of order. To protect this order, for eternity, he wanted to freeze society into a collection of closed, self-sufficient rural communities, who would only have to pay modest taxes to a minimalist state which would protect the realm. To accomplish this he compiled a new law-book—the **Ming Code**—which had to command this vision into being.

Cultivators would be tied to their villages, artisans would be bound to serve the state, merchants would be allowed to move only the necessities that were lacking, while soldiers would be posted on the frontiers for protection. To create this ideal society, the Ming Founder needed first of all to immobilize the realm. People were to stay put and could move only with the permission of the state. The Emperor imagined 20 *li*—that is, around 7.5 miles—to be the farthest distance anyone should go. Into law an outer limit of 100 *li*—36 miles—was written: one needed a certificate to go any farther. But the Ming Code sought to block not only physical but also social mobility. The son of an artisan was an artisan, a soldier's son a soldier, and the penalties for switching occupations were just as severe as those for jumping physical barriers.

This was, of course, only possible when the central government possessed detailed information about all individuals. To bring this vision of a righteous society into practice—in which all the evil he had experienced himself would be extirpated—the Ming Founder would intrude deeper in people's lives than ever before in Chinese history. He spent the three decades of his reign devising regulations more interventionist than any predecessor. All this Zhu Yuanzhang did with the tireless energy you can expect from somebody who climbed up from beggar to Emperor.

Once he was secure in power, the Ming Founder initiated a series of far-reaching reforms which would give the central government access to this information. One of them was the **household register** which had information on all households, from occupational category of the head to land and animal holdings. This was in fact a continuation of the Mongol practice of recording the occupations of individual families in the registers and of requiring them to perform their labour obligations towards the state. Four copies were made, so that each level of government had one, with the central government keeping its copy in yellow-colored covers—hence the name it got: Yellow Register. Families retained one copy of their household registration, which could be checked against the government copy, and they were responsible to fill in the registers correctly.

In the vision of the Ming Founder, commerce and money would play only a marginal role. Most of the revenues would come from agricultural taxes, in kind. In theory, soldiers stationed on the border would directly receive a part of these taxes. The result was a fiscal system designed for a frozen, unchanging agrarian economy. But the reliance of the Ming on agrarian revenue was actually a departure from the past. Since the eighty century, agrarian revenue had proved to be

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insufficient as an income for the state—this had forced the central government of the earlier dynasties to develop commercial taxes levied via money.

The Ming Founder was determined to bring about an agrarian utopia. To be able to collect enough taxes from the land, all cultivated land in the Empire was registered (similar to the households). This was done in the **fish-scale registers**, so called because the sketches of plots resembled the overlapping scales of a fish. The problem was that the sheer size of the Empire made it impossible to follow the model that was first put forward by some officials. It turned out to be impossible to rank the farmland according to categories of productivity—instead, everybody who owned a certain part of land had to pay the same amount of tax no matter how productive or unproductive this land was. In the longer run, it would also prove to be impossible to update the registers, so that the amounts paid by each province in 1390 would be the basis of all subsequent taxation under the Ming for the following two and a half centuries, regardless of inflation or agricultural changes.

Originally these Ming reforms were a success. Ending the chaos and registering people made it possible to rely solely on agricultural proceeds. In the long run, however, this tax-system would be very vulnerable to economic changes, which would affect the income of the state under Zhu Yuanzhang's successors. Other elements of the utopian vision of the Ming Founder did not survive, either.

Many did not hold themselves to the role which they had been accorded. Even if the Ming Code dictated that sons had to follow the same occupation as their fathers, many people found ways around such rules—for instance, hiring other people to fulfil the original obligation given to their family. There was a very good reason for this. Zhu Yuanzhang had been successful in restoring order after the chaos of the Mongol period, giving a strong new momentum to agricultural development. But through this, the Ming Founder had inadvertently created the environment in which a commercial market economy could take off again. So the century after the Ming Founder would see a new commercial drive, at least in certain parts of China. Together with this commercial revolution would come a social mobility that would completely wreck the static model of society envisioned by the Ming Founder.

In other words, the program of the Ming Founder completely backfired. It turned out that Zhu Yuanzhang made an enormous contribution to restarting China's commercial engine. It was the Ming Founder's own economic recovery program which made the expansion of commerce possible.

Once rural stability had been restored, those producing for their own subsistence found that in good years something was left over, and they were willing to trade their surpluses. Another unforeseen result of the restoration of agriculture by the Ming founder was a rapid increase in the size of the population: in 1400, just after the death of the Ming Founder, China had a population of 65 million; by 1600, this had more than doubled to 150 million. The economic centre of gravity moved to the south of China (a process that also predated the Ming), where

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the many rivers provided cheaper water transportation, and the climate and soil made more intensive rice-cultivation possible. Many rural people began to produce for the market, and depended on the market for their livelihood. Despite Zhu Yuanzhang's attempts to do away with money, silver became the means to pay state taxes under his successors. Because of the economic boom of Ming China, silver was in high demand. Most of the silver mined in the Spanish colonies of the new world eventually ended up in China.

The striking thing about Zhu Yuanzhang is the absolute ruthlessness with which he pursued his ideal. But there was a strong ethical component to the utopian vision of the Ming Founder— he strongly believed that if all his subjects would be virtuous, his model society would work. However, it turned out to be impossible to hold up the people or even his officials to such high standards of morality. Out of despair, the Ming Founder oscillated between periods of relative lenience and excessive violence to punish infractions among his subjects, making him look erratic. The Ming Founder was also notoriously suspicious of intellectuals among his officials—maybe a result of his low birth and career as rebel leader. At his most brutal, the First Ming Emperor's actions fully deserve the label "purge." In 1380 more than thirty thousand officials were eliminated, including the Chancellor, the highest official of the state. In 1385 and 1393, tens of thousands more were sentenced to death.

The **elimination of the office of Chancellor** was also an important departure from tradition. In previous dynasties, the Chancellor had headed the bureaucracy and balanced the power of the emperor. Removing him created a more autocratic government structure. All executive direction now had to come from the palace. For a man with Zhu Yuanzhang's energy this was no problem, but in the long run it would prove impossible for one person to handle the running of an empire. So the later Ming emperors would appoint officials to handle various administrative tasks—but within the palace, not the older administration. Unlike the earlier system, where Emperor and administration had been split, there would be no checks and controls to limit these palace bureaucrats. This would often result in corruption—for which the Ming also became famous.

But with his ruthlessness Zhu Yuangzhang had also **centralized authority** beyond anything seen in earlier Chinese Dynasties. His **style of leadership** became a kind of template for some later Chinese rulers, even after the fall of the Empire: harsh punishments, voluminous regulations, appeals to morality to foster a harmonious society, an extreme dislike of intellectuals, and a poor ability to take criticism. No wonder Mao Zedong was a great admirer of the Ming Founder.

Part 2: The Lifestyle of Elites

Zhu Yuanzhang restored Chinese rule after the Mongols, but as you can see it was not exactly a restoration of tradition. A similar argument could be made for Ming culture. For many Chinese and Westerners interested in Chinese civilization, Ming culture would become the hallmark of

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“traditional” Chinese civilization. For instance, Ming vases—the famous Blue and Whites—came to epitomize Chinaware to collectors from the West.
[See an example of Ming ceramics here: http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/37.191.1.]

However, this view of the Ming as a traditional Chinese civilization is also very deceptive. In reality the Ming era was a period full of change, with a strong impact on society and culture.

The Ming period saw a rise in commercial activity. This made it possible for some to make rapid fortunes. This, however, stood in stark contrast with traditional official categories, as they had been defined both by the Ming Founder as well as Confucian social theory. According to Confucian principle, since the Han Dynasty, society was divided into four categories by occupation, with merchants in the lowest category after artisans, farmers, and scholars. The Ming Founder had proclaimed that the people of the four categories should keep to their proper trade. In this view of society, commerce was the lowest way of life.

In this moral system, at least from the perspective of the scholars supposedly at the top, commerce was shameful. One Ming Emperor (Zhengde) punished his officials by ordering them to act out the role of merchants in a mock commercial district built for this purpose in the palace. No wonder this Emperor was remembered for his bad character—it was, after all, the scholars who wrote history.

In this traditional view, it was assumed people would only take up the life of trade if they couldn’t survive by staying at home and tilling the fields. Merchants were depicted as peddlers—wandering the roads carrying their entire stock and all the goods they possessed with them.

[See a stereotypical, derogatory image of a Chinese peddler here, complete with all his possessions: http://depts.washington.edu/chinaciv/painting/4pmtkni3.gif.]

However, the commercial growth under the Ming negated this model of society in which the merchant was the lowest category. You can sense this in the painting above. This toy merchant is indeed shown as a peddler, with all his belongings. But it all seems effortless, and he brings happiness to his customers. In reality, successful Ming traders did not wander the roads, but directed their enterprise from the luxury of their homes. With the rise of commerce some of them became much richer than the *literati* who made up the first class in the Confucian moral system.

In fact, the dwellings of the successful merchants were designed and decorated following the taste of the scholarly elite. Rich merchants indulged in the same pastimes, like reading and collecting art.

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You can get a sense of this literati lifestyle, which was adopted by rich merchants, from a painting of a gathering in the garden of a mansion.
[http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1989.141.3
→ explore the four possible views]
The garden in China was mostly within the walled compound of the mansion, in the form of a network of courtyards which were all small, connected gardens. These miniature gardens would be planted with rocks, bamboo, and trees. Chinese gardens do not include large vistas of flowerbeds or the grass lawns of the Western palace garden. Instead, the many aspects of a Chinese garden were meant to be revealed only over time. A typical element in these gardens was the juxtaposition and blending of opposites: irregularly shaped rocks were placed next to smooth surfaces; moss was allowed to grow on rocks; some parts would be shadowy, others full of sunshine. The Chinese garden was in fact interwoven within a whole elite lifestyle in which art played a key role. In the painting we can see the brushes laying ready, and servants bring scrolls which the guest will admire.

Such artful pastimes were considered inimical to commerce. But merchants who got enormously rich in the commercial boom of the Ming Dynasty bought themselves into this lifestyle. It was often merchants who collected the most exquisite collections of arts, who collected more art pieces than a government official could ever possess.

Reaction to the influx of the new-rich sophistication increased, making it harder to acquire this cultural standard. Guides on connoisseurship were written which prescribed the minutiae of how to collect art, decorate a house, or spend time in a sophisticated way. To be part of this *literati* class, you were expected to know, for example, which type of plants were to be appreciated as rare and exotic enough for one's garden, what images should be hung at what times of the year, etc. Possessing impressive things alone was not enough anymore; instead, they had to be displayed in the right ways.

This increasing sophistication of the *literati* life was, on the one hand, a reaction to the commercial revolution. At the same time the proliferation through print of such guides to connoisseurship and good taste was a response to the large demand exactly from those who had only recently become wealthy through trade. They felt it was necessary to know what was elegant, to be able to move up on the social ladder, too. When the number of wealthy people who had the means to buy status symbols increased, guides of this type also became indispensable to avoid being cheated, since forgeries of antiques were produced in large numbers to rip people off.

So the creation of Ming high culture, which would later be seen as the embodiment of a “traditional” and harmonious China, in fact happened into a world that was in great flux. It was shaped by the clash between ideals, economic changes, and social transformations. But the scholars and the merchants were NOT two clearly separate groups, of whom the scholars represented tradition and the merchants progress. These processes were much more

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interrelated. To become part of the elite *literati* a family needed to be wealthy, and the easiest way to do this was through commerce.

At first sight this might be surprising, since under the Ming the civil service examination became for the first time the *sole* route to office. Recommendation by respected administrators, which had been still possible under earlier dynasties, was now ruled out. Thus, more people than ever before participated in the examinations. But passing the examination did not guarantee—as it had in the past—that the successful examinee would occupy the highest ranks of society. For this one needed to pass the extremely difficult highest examination. Only elite families that built up and maintained fortunes outside government service could invest enough funds in the education of their offspring to guarantee that—generation after generation—at least one of their clan could pass these highest examinations. So in reality, the worlds of the *literati* and of commerce were much more intertwined than Confucian theory could admit.

The centrality of the examination system to the Ming elite also exerted its effects on philosophy. The curriculum for the examinations followed the teachings of **Zhu Xi**, a philosopher who had lived in the tenth century. His pedagogical idea argued that the student, through the careful study of the classics and the rational examination of the world around him, would be able to comprehend the world and man's place in it. Zhu Xi saw this as a project that would take many years of study, and which thus restricted philosophical activity to people who could devote themselves to study for a large part of their life. Furthermore as the subject of the state exams, the study of Zhu Xi's canon had become corrupted to a career path. People studied to pass the exams without much interest in philosophical insight. It had merely become a way to gain status and respectability.

One philosopher who reacted against this was Wang Yangming, the most important Confucian philosopher of the Ming period.
[An image of Wang Yangming: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/3a/Wang-yang-ming.jpg.]

Contrary to Zhu Xi, Wang Yangming believed that everybody had the potential to understand the world and distinguish between good and evil, thanks to an *innate* understanding that existed before any study. Zhu Xi had called for the investigation of things external to the individual—the ancient texts and the world. Wang Yangming advocated turning one's gaze *inward* on oneself, to an innate understanding of the world that for him each person possessed. Wang believed each person was capable of becoming a sage, whether or not he studied the classics and held office in the government. Although Wang developed his ideas in exile, this was not a philosophical program which propagated retreat in the self. On the contrary, instead of a life of book-learning, Wang advocated the "unity of thought and action." Philosophy had to stand in the middle of the world.

Wang's ideas also led to some interesting pedagogical tips. Wang believed this innate understanding was still stronger in children who had not yet been corrupted by the world. Wang

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argued that parents should look at their children to get an insight in human nature. From this perspective, Wang also advocated a much freer education than was usually practiced.

So far for this rapid overview of Ming Culture. Summing up the main message of this essay: the Ming were not a traditional—motionless—civilization that later connoisseurs of the East have seen in them. In reality it was a world whose ideals, for instance those of the Ming Founder or the Confucian teachings, were heavily tested by reality.

Part 3: The Ming in the World

On a global level, the sixteenth century was of course the age of discoveries, the beginning of Western overseas exploration and colonization—even if the West did not dominate the world yet as it would do after the industrial revolution. But there were also non-Western attempts at maritime expansion. The most famous (but not only) example is Ming China. In fact, they sent out one of the largest fleets ever to sail the oceans.

[See a comparative size image of the Zheng He treasure ships with European caravels here: http://www.vancouvermaritimemuseum.com/sites/vmmuseum/uploads/treasure_fleet_1.jpg.]
It was a fleet of enormous so-called treasure ships. In this image—which is a modern reconstruction—you can compare the size of one of these ships with the ships used in European voyages of exploration a few decades later. Under the command of the Muslim eunuch admiral, Zheng He, a fleet of these ships undertook a number of voyages to the Indian Ocean, reaching as far as the East Coast of Africa.

The story behind this fleet begins after the death of the Ming Founder in 1398. Despite clear instructions that the founder had left to his family, a civil war broke out. The designated successor, a grandson of the Founder, was overthrown by one of his uncles. This uncle became the new Emperor and chose as his reign title Yongle—"eternal happiness."
[Yongle: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/fe/Anonymous-Ming_Chengzu.jpg]

The Yongle era would be one of great and ambitious projects—maybe because the new Emperor had come to power in a coup and wanted to prove that he possessed the Mandate of Heaven. One of these large projects was Yongle's decision to name as capital, instead of the Southern city of Nanjing, the Northern city of Beijing. Of course, this is still the present-day location of China's capital. The size of this project becomes clear, when we see that the move of the military and civil administration to Beijing, swelled the population of the city to two million—larger than any European city of that age. The Grand Canal—built originally in the first millennium—had to be restored to provision the mass of people associated with the new centre of government with grain from the agriculturally more productive Southern region.

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The image above shows a Ming-era depiction of the Forbidden City in Beijing, first established as the national capital of China in 1420. Source: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/6e/Verbotene-Stadt1500.jpg.

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In Beijing itself, the famous **Forbidden City** was constructed under Yongle, which for almost five centuries would serve as the home of the Emperor and his household, and the ceremonial and political center of Chinese government.

But while these things all left an imprint, nothing is left of the great fleet built during Yongle's reign.

The treasure ships were extremely magnified versions of large ocean-going junks built by Chinese engineers in the tenth and eleventh centuries. The sails of the Treasure Ships were made out of bamboo. Another interesting aspect of the Treasure Ships was their division into separate watertight compartments divided by bulkheads. This technology allowed that in case of a leak, only one part of the ship took water. But watertight compartments in ship-construction were not a new invention. It also dated from the time of the Song dynasty—it is even mentioned by the famous thirteenth century European traveller Marco Polo.

A replica of a Zheng He treasure ship, built to commemorate the 600th anniversary of the start of the voyages, located in Nanjing's Baochuan shipyards. Source: http://www.alrahalah.com/2010/09/zheng-he/.

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The treasure ships—at the heart of the fleet—were at least 400 feet long and carried 2,200 metric tonnes. Compared to Columbus's fleet of three ships, Zheng He commanded around 300 ships: a handful of giant Treasure Ships accompanied by hundreds of support ships, often with specialized functions, for instance carriers of foot, smaller patrol boats, and tankers with fresh water. The total crew of such expeditions might have been around 27,000 men, most of whom were in fact banished criminals. On board were also specialists in protocol, astrologers, judges to solve disputes, and even translators. The doctors and herb-specialists of the fleet numbered 180—which was the size of about the entire crew commanded by Vasco da Gama on his voyage to India.

Before we can understand the meaning of the expeditions with these giant ships, we have to clear away one popular myth. Some people have claimed that these expeditions discovered America before the Europeans. These expeditions did not do that. In fact these expeditions were not intended as a voyage of discovery into the unknown: they were sent into the Indian Ocean which had been known to the Chinese for centuries, through overseas and overland trade.
[Map A: http://qed.princeton.edu/getfile.php?f=Voyages_of_Zheng_He_1405-33.jpg]
But this was not different from Columbus, who also though he knew where he was going when he was looking for a different route to the East—to China and Japan. Zheng He even had ancestral connections to the Persian Gulf region. His family had settled in China under the Mongols. Probably he was chosen for these connections, since it could help to make contacts with the peoples of these regions. Persian was in fact a common language for the conduct of trade in the Indian Ocean in this period. Furthermore, this eunuch Admiral was also—privately—a Muslim.

A total of seven expeditions took place. By the time of the seventh expedition, the Chinese fleet had established a regular series of ports they visited in Vietnam, Java, Sumatra, and Sri Lanka, and along the West Coast of India. On the last voyage they even reached East Africa. When da Gama reached the East coast of Africa several decades later, local rulers permitted him to build a trading post at the same point where the Chinese had earlier stored their goods.

Normally, Zheng He's fleet would make contact with the rulers of the regions he visited, moor in their harbours, and exchange gifts with them. Unlike the Western conquistadores, Zheng He does not seem to have been intent on conquering new lands. Still, we know of some atrocities committed by Zheng He's men. They did not hesitate to plunder on foot when the local people were not forthcoming enough. In one instance they also extinguished a pirate base in Sumatra which tried to control the crucial Malacca Strait—an action in which five thousand pirates were killed. At another point, the fleet became involved in a dispute between two rulers in Siam.

But these military campaigns were exceptions—and not part of a military plan for overseas conquest. What were, then, the motives for these expeditions?

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One reason most often given by historians was prestige. They were a statement to the world about the power of the new Ming Dynasty. The expeditions did not engage in regular trade, but did exchange gifts with the rulers of the countries they visited. Such tribute collected from across the world conveyed prestige to the Yongle Emperor, who had come to the throne in an irregular way.

Most interpretations of the Ming voyages boil down to explaining them as prestige projects, which in hindsight look a bit pointless. This fits with some stereotypes that exist about the Chinese: they were ceremonial and non-original, because they did not look for the unknown as Western voyagers supposedly did. There is, however, one more possible motivation, which sees these voyages as a more urgent geopolitical response.
[Map B: http://www.worldhistorymaps.info/images/East-Hem_1400ad.jpg]

By the beginning of the fifteenth century, a figure arose in Western Asia who set out to restore the glory days of the Mongol Empire. This was **Timur**, or Tamerlane as Westerners called him. Timur was more Turkic than Mongol, but he presented himself as the successor of Chinggis Khan. Like Chinggis, his great ambition, of which he made no secret, was to conquer China. We now know that Timur would die too early to put these plans into motion. But to the Ming it must have seemed a very real threat. They definitely knew about him. Timur had a reputation of extreme violence. After the chaos of the Mongol period, they would have gone to great lengths to prevent another nomadic invasion. This could well have been the motivation to construct this fleet in the very early 1400s. Since Timur controlled the Asian heartland, it would have made sense for the Ming to outflank him by sea, and make contact and establish alliances with other states threatened by him. The move of the capital closer to the steppe as well as the voyages to establish relations in the Indian Ocean were both measures to protect China from its nomadic enemies.

In that sense the Ming voyages are comparable with the Western voyages of discovery. A main reason for the Portuguese and Spanish to start exploring new routes was the rapid rise of another Turkish Empire in the Eastern Mediterranean: the Ottomans. The Westerners were looking for alternative trade routes bypassing the Ottomans and potential allies against this new threat. Maybe the Ming voyages were a response to a similar threat. In that sense the Great Age of sea voyages was put in motion by a burst of expansion by different Turkish conquerors from Central Asia!

The expeditions with the Treasure Ships were abandoned by an order of the court in 1433. This too can be best explained by shifts in the nomadic threat to the Ming Empire. Timur was by then dead, and his successors much less powerful. But to the north of China, the Mongols were reorganizing themselves. Reorganized and under a new leader, the Mongols started to plunder Chinese territory again on a regular basis.

Ming Emperors undertook expeditions against the Mongols, but defeating a mobile enemy in the steppe was extremely hard. In 1449 disaster happened when a Chinese army commanded

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by the Emperor in person was lured too far, cut off, and completely defeated, the Emperor himself being captured.

This ushered in a new period in Ming foreign policy towards the steppe threat. A few years earlier it had still seemed possible the Ming would manage to extend their control over the steppe. Now the Ming would be restricted to the borders of China proper. This would mean that the Ming Dynasty would continuously face the threat from the steppe. The Ming court went through intense debates on how to handle this challenge, between advisors who advocated engagement with the Mongols to control them and others who advocated a pure defensive policy. This debate was decided by 1540 in favour of those who pleaded for the defense. The result was the creation in its present form of one of the most famous icons of China: the Great Wall.

[See images of the Wall here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Greatwall-SA3.jpg
and here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:20090529_Great_Wall_8185.jpg]

After 1540, the Ming put their resources into the construction of the Great Wall as we know it today. The Chinese had built defensive walls already in ancient and medieval times, some of which were now incorporated in the Ming wall. But contrary to popular wisdom, the wall we know today was built in the sixteenth century.

Wall-building was not a smart strategic choice. It was very expensive, and did never offer full-proof protection. A smart enemy would concentrate his forces and strike by surprise—so he would find the defence spread out. To prevent its nomadic neighbours from coalescing, the Ming would have needed to engage with the peoples beyond the wall, trading with them and forging alliances with some of them to keep them divided. But the strategic decision of wall-building was also a decision to shield China from all contact with these barbarians. It was a decision made under the influence of *literati* whose study of the Classics made them particularly look down upon the non-Chinese steppe people. This attitude led to an isolationist defensive policy which—even if it did not work—cost a lot of money.

Together with the climate chance of the seventeenth century (the “little ice age”), these costs contributed to the decline of the Ming political system. Still, it would be internal rebellion that would overthrow the Ming. But this opened the door for the semi-nomadic Manchu people who had built a strong state north of the wall to come in and take power—establishing the Qing Dynasty in 1644.

Further Reading:

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Brook, Timothy. *The Confusions of Pleasure*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.
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