

Chinese Whispers

Zheng He's Treasure Ships in the context of Chinese Maritime Policy in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644)

In 1405, early in the Ming Dynasty, Emperors' Hsuan Te and Yong Le (lasting joy) dispatched grand eunuch Admiral Zheng He (Cheng Ho) on the first of seven voyages to the 'Western Ocean'. Travelling across the Indian Ocean and along the east African coast (Figure 1) in vessels reported to be 44 zhang 4 *chi* (~120m to ~ 125m) in length and 18 zhang (~50m) in breadth, Zheng He's maritime exploration was an immense achievement at that time (Fang & Li 2005: 37). Despite ending abruptly when China turned in on itself, closing its doors to foreigners in 1433, these voyages are collectively considered some of the greatest of maritime history and yet remain virtually unknown in the western world.

Conjecture surrounds many aspects of these voyages, notably the size and construction of Zheng He's Treasure Ships, so named because of the vast quantities of 'treasure' that could be carried in their holds (Fang & Li 2005: 29). The principal issue is whether, given the level of technology and available materials at that period, it would have been possible to build ships between 120m and 125m in length, by ~50m in breadth (Levathes 1994: 80). If these dimensions are anywhere near correct, these were by far the largest wooden ships ever built (Gould 2001a: 198). Debate centres on whether ships built before the age of iron and steel could have the longitudinal strength and structural integrity necessary to successfully carry out ocean voyages as recorded in the Ming Veritable Records (*Ming Shi-lu*) and other sources. The viability of wooden vessels of such size has been questioned largely on the basis of Western analogues, however, Gould (2001a: 198, citing Lambert 1984: 122) believes that the use of internal iron strapping to support the hull, along with the construction and use histories of these ships, suggests that the vessels were already pushing or had exceeded the practical limits for wooden ships. If they did exist, how and why, did the Chinese build and operate wooden vessels that were 40% longer and 65% wider than the largest wooden ships known elsewhere in the world?

This paper will consider the ~ 44 zhang vessels in the context of maritime policy in the Ming Dynasty – a time of far reaching cultural and economic development in China. It is argued that Zheng He's voyages of diplomacy were an extension of the same military strategy successfully employed along Ming China's northern border and that the Treasure Ships, symbolic of Ming social and political ideals were, like *Mary Rose* and *Vasa* after them, as much an expression of imperial might and power, and a manifestation of the maritime needs and aspirations of society (Adams 2001: 300; Gawronski 1991: 83), as the Carracks of the Portuguese (Finlay 1997: 322).

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