

ZHENG HE 1371-1433/1435

A MAN OF THREE NAMES, ZHENG HE WAS A MUSLIM CAPTURED BY THE MING DYNASTY WHO BECAME A VALUABLE OFFICIAL AND THEN A GREAT ADMIRAL. BUT WERE HIS FAMOUS EXPEDITIONS TRADING ENTERPRISES OR INSTRUMENTS OF WAR AND DOMINATION?

MA HE (馬和)

THE ADMIRAL WE KNOW AS ZHENG HE WAS BORN MA HE (馬和) IN YUNNAN, AS A SUBJECT OF THE MONGOLS WHO WERE RETREATING FROM CHINA. HE WAS CAPTURED AT THE AGE OF 10 BY THE FORCES OF THE GROWING MING DYNASTY, AND BECAME A SERVANT OF THE PRINCE OF YAN.

ZHENG HE (鄭和)

MA HE WAS FORTUNATE—HIS CAPTOR, THE PRINCE, TREATED HIM WELL. WHEN THE PRINCE SEIZED POWER, AND BECAME YONGLE EMPEROR, THIRD RULER OF THE MING DYNASTY, MA HE WAS AT HIS SIDE, AND SERVED HIM BY DEFENDING THE ZHENGLUNBA RESERVOIR. FOR THIS SERVICE, HE WAS AWARDED THE NAME ZHENG HE (鄭和).

SANBAO TAIJIAN (三寶太監)

ZHENG HE BECAME THE EMPIRE'S CHIEF DIPLOMAT AND ADMIRAL. STARTING IN 1405, HE LED SEVEN EXPEDITIONS INTO THE INDIAN OCEAN AND BEYOND, PROBABLY REACHING AS FAR AS THE COAST OF EAST AFRICA. IN THE PROCESS, HE GAINED THE NICKNAME SANBAO TAIJIAN (三寶太監), WHOM WE KNOW AS SINBAD THE SAILOR.

WHAT WAS THE PURPOSE OF THESE EXPEDITIONS?

THEY'RE USUALLY THOUGHT OF AS LARGE, PEACEFUL TRADING EXPEDITIONS, AND ARE SOMETIMES CONTRASTED TO THE MILITARIZED PORTUGUESE CONQUEST OF PORTS AND REGIONS THAT BEGAN DURING THE SAME PERIOD.

"THESE WERE THUS FRIENDLY DIPLOMATIC ACTIVITIES. DURING THE OVERALL COURSE OF THE SEVEN VOYAGES TO THE WESTERN OCEAN, ZHENG HE DID NOT OCCUPY A SINGLE PIECE OF LAND, ESTABLISH ANY FORTRESS, OR SEIZE ANY WEALTH FROM OTHER COUNTRIES."

—XU ZU-YUAN

AUTHOR—
TREVOR R. GETZ

ARTIST—
LIZ CLARKE

BUT SOME HISTORIANS SEE THEM AS WELL-ARMED MILITARY EXPEDITIONS THAT ENFORCED THE STRATEGIC GOALS OF THE EMPIRE. EACH EXPEDITION CARRIED OVER 20,000 SOLDIERS. ZHENG HE FOUGHT BATTLES IN JAVA (1407), SRI LANKA (1411), AND SUMATRA (1415), AND VIRTUALLY RULED SOME OF THE PORTS HE VISITED FREQUENTLY.

"THESE MISSIONS WERE INTENDED TO DISPLAY THE MIGHT OF THE MING AND BRING [NEIGHBORING STATES] TO SUBMISSION TO THE MING."

—GEOFF WADE

LIKE MUCH ABOUT HIS VOYAGES, ZHENG HE'S DEATH AND RESTING PLACE ARE UNKNOWN. HIS BODY MAY BE IN ONE OF TWO TOMBS—IN HIS BIRTHPLACE IN YUNNAN OR IN THE MING SOUTHERN CAPITAL, NANJING. BUT IT IS ALSO LIKELY THAT HE DIED ON HIS LAST EXPEDITION, AND HIS BODY WAS GIVEN TO THE SEAS HE SAILED.



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BIOGRAPHIES

ZHENG HE