

Admiral, explorer, diplomat

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AGE OF SEA: Zheng He and his armada visited more than 35 countries during a 28-year period.

THE Cheng Ho private museum in Malacca which was opened on Sept 28 is believed to be the only other museum outside China dedicated to the great admiral also known as Zheng He.

It is but a small tribute to a man who led the largest naval expedition in history 600 years ago.

It was an expedition of dignified diplomacy, trade and understanding forged between the Ming dynasty and the Malacca sultanate, and, later, faraway Africa and Arabia.

It was in 1405 that Zheng He was chosen to command the seven fleets of the Ming dynasty.

Originating from Nanjing, the fleets passed through the Malay archipelago from the so-called "Western Oceans" or the Xi-yang.

For much of the early part of the 15th century, Ming China and the Malacca sultanate remained cordial and intimate.

This resulted in the growth of a port state in Malacca, with the establishment of world renowned trading depots.

The most detailed account of his voyages in the Straits of Malacca, published by Ma Huan, a Chinese Muslim in 1451, recorded that the passage through the Straits of Malacca was not plain sailing.

In 1407, two years after commencing the first voyage, Zheng He fought the notorious Cantonese pirate Chen Zu-yi operating out of Sumatra.

Thousands of pirates were killed and their fleets destroyed. Chen was captured and publicly executed in Nanjing.

Overall, between 1405 and 1433, Zheng He made no less than seven voyages to this part of the world and beyond.

He visited more than 35 countries during a 28-year period.

Zheng He's first leg around Asia could be traced, among others, to Champa, Siam, Java, Palembang, Malacca, Galle (in Sri Lanka), the Malabar Coast of India and also the Maldives.

This phase ended in 1411. From there, after establishing a firm Indian Ocean trade passage, Zheng He proceeded to Iran and the Arabian peninsula until 1415.

From 1417 to 1433, he covered the African continent, making a side trip to Mecca. Many of the destinations he visited were dotted with Muslim communities.

All in all, Zheng He chalked up 10,000 miles, befitting the fleets' literal description as "treasure ships" — from the Chinese word *boa-chuan* — a name referring to the Ming armada.

Aptly, on leaving China, the fleets were loaded with silk, ceramics and copper coins.

On the return journey, they were packed with goods ranging from spices, fruits, food and minerals to birds and other animals, including the first giraffe China had seen.

Throughout, many words were accumulated by local languages and foreign ones accepted into the Chinese language.

The fleets were even dubbed as an encyclopaedia-in-progress — a compilation of all that was worth knowing between Nanjing and Africa — by Frank Viviano in *The National Geographic* (July 2005).

Some biographers like Viviano contend that Zheng He returned to China where he died two years later in Nanjing in 1433. Others say Zheng He died on the way back and was buried at sea.

Nevertheless, at the southern outskirts of Niushou, in Nanjing, stands his tomb, with the inscription "Allah is great".

In Nanjing, there is also the Zheng He Park where the statue of the man stands.

It is said there is no one like Zheng He in today's China.

Zheng's demise marked the end of the "Age of Sea" explorations started by the Ming dynasty.

By then, the new Chinese leadership was divided between the Confucian scholar officials and the eunuch administrators.

The administrators had generally lost interest in geographical science and maritime techniques.

Some cited the high cost as a reason, while others considered the trips to be wasteful.

The void was quickly filled by the European mariners. As Magellan circled the world between 1519 and 1522, China gradually lapsed into isolationism.

With that Zheng He's sophisticated combination of peacekeeping, trade and diplomacy came to an end, Viviano says.

Although some level of coercion was suggested by other writers, admittedly Zheng He's voyages did not amount to the "gunboat" diplomacy generally associated more with the Europeans.

Later, this turned into hegemony and colonisation in their war with Islam and working for profit.

This was despite the fact that the combined European navies were dwarfed by Zheng He's armada.

According to several sources, Zheng He, who was born in 1371, was brought up as a Muslim in the Ma family in Yunnan Province.

The name Ma is the Chinese transcription of the name of the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad.

He was captured by the Ming, at the age of 11, during an invasion of the Mongols in 1382 and later castrated to serve as a palace eunuch.

According to Viviano, Zheng He was not even Chinese. He was by origin a Central Asian Muslim, born Ma He, the son of a Mongol official.

His father was Ma Haji who died at the age of 37, on Aug 12, 1382. Ma Haji was described as a paragon of instinctive nobility who by nature was "especially fond of doing good".

This was reflected in Zheng He, who was also a virtue of humility, coinciding well with his type of diplomacy.

The surname "Zheng" was an honorific name given by the Ming after the battle of Zheng-lunba near Beijing.

He then became close to the third Ming emperor, Zhu Di, as a key strategist. Then he was accorded the title of Prince of Yan.

Earlier, in July, Malaysia celebrated the 600th anniversary of Zheng He's voyages to the western seas by organising an exhibition in Kuala Lumpur of his epic voyages.

Artifacts, charts and illustrations were exhibited. One of the charts showed Penang as a port of call — some 350 years before it was "discovered" by the British in 1786.

It was called Pin NanYue in the maps of the time.

Now that there is the Cheng Ho cultural museum in Malacca, located near to the site of the ancient trading depot, Malaysians can enjoy various highlights such as an audio-visual show featuring Zheng He and a gallery on agro-industrial practices in 15th century Malacca.

All these are exhibits that serve as important reminders that today China is once again engaging the world as a potential superpower.

In so doing it is vital that China emulates the level of engagement demonstrated by the admirable Chinese admiral of Islamic descent as an explorer, diplomat, trader and, most of all, as a person of humility.

These are values very much needed in today's world.

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