Appendix B

Travels of Cheng Ho

Famous voyages of the Chinese Admiral Cheng Ho constituted one of the most interesting chapters in the history of the Indian Ocean navigation before the arrival of the Europeans. He undertook seven voyages to explore the Indian Ocean coasts. He was born around 1371 AD in China’s southwestern Yunan province. His real name was Ma Ho. Ma Ho’s father was a Muslim hajji (who had made a pilgrimage to Mecca). When Ma Ho was ten years old, he was captured by the Chinese army which invaded Yunan to take control over the region. At the age of 13, he was castrated and placed as a servant of the Prince Zhu Di, the fourth son of the Chinese emperor. Ma Ho proved himself to be an exceptional servant. He was skilled in the arts of war and diplomacy. He served as an officer of the prince. Zhu Di renamed Ma Ho as Cheng Ho because the eunuch’s horse was killed in battle outside a place called Zhenglunba. Cheng Ho was also known as San Bao which means ‘three jewels.’

Zhu Di usurped the throne from his nephew and became the emperor in 1402 AD. Guided by the Confucian ideals of sovereignty, the new ruler needed reasons to display his strength and impress upon the public that he had ‘the Mandate of Heaven.’ He appointed Cheng Ho as the admiral and ordered him to oversee the construction of a Treasure Fleet to explore the seas surrounding China. Admiral Cheng Ho was the first eunuch appointed to such a high military position in China. Soon Cheng Ho undertook seven great voyages to explore the seas and force subjugation of other rulers before the Chinese emperor. A large fleet known as Treasure Fleet was ordered to be constructed.²

¹ Cheng Ho is also referred to as Zheng He but he is still most commonly known as Cheng Ho.

² The details of the Treasure Ship are derived from www.wikipedia.org.
Treasure Ship is the name of a type of vessel that the Chinese admiral Cheng Ho sailed in. His fleet included 62 treasure ships, with some reaching 600 feet (146 meters) long. The fleet was manned by over 27,000 crew members, including navigators, explorers, sailors, doctors, workers and soldiers. The 1405 expedition consisted of 27,800 men and a fleet of 62 treasure ships that were supported by approximately 190 smaller ships. The fleet included:

"Treasure ships", used by the commander of the fleet and his deputies (nine-masted, about 120 meter (400 feet) long and 50 meter (160 feet) wide. Some reached the length of 600 feet. The treasure ships weighed as much as 1,500 tons.3

"Horse ships", carrying tribute goods and repair material for the fleet (eight-masted, about 103 meters long and 42 meters wide)

"Supply ships", containing staple for the crew (seven-masted, about 78 meters long and 35 meter wide).

"Troop transports", six-masted, about 67 meters long and 25 meters wide.

"Fuchuan warships", five-masted, about 50 meters long.

"Patrol boats", eight-oared, about 37 meters long.

"Water tankers", with 1 month supply of fresh water.

First Voyage (1405-1407AD)

The first Treasure Fleet consisted of 62 ships; four were huge wooden boats, some being the largest ever built in history. Those were approximately 400 feet (122 meters) long and 160 feet (50 meters) wide. There were four fleets of 62 ships that were assembled at Nanjing along the Yangtze (Chang)

3 The largest European ships 80 years later only weighed 150 tons. wikipedia.org
River. It included the fleet of 339 feet (103-meter) long horse ships that carried nothing but horses, water ships that carried fresh water for the crew, troop transports, supply ships and war ships for offensive and defensive needs. The ships were filled with thousands of tons of Chinese goods to trade with others during the voyage. In the fall of 1405 AD, the fleet was ready to embark with 27,800 men. The fleet utilized the compass, invented in China in the 11th century, for navigation. Marked sticks of incense were burnt to measure time. One day was equal to 10 "watches" of 2.4 hours each. Chinese navigators determined latitude through monitoring the North Star (Polaris) in the Northern Hemisphere or the Southern Cross in the Southern Hemisphere. The ships of the Treasure Fleet communicated with one another through the use of flags, lanterns, bells, carrier pigeons, gongs and banners. The destination of the first voyage of the Treasure Fleet was Calicut, then known as a major trading centre on the southwestern coast of India. India was initially 'discovered' by the Chinese overland explorer Hsuan-Tsang in the seventh century. This fleet stopped in Vietnam, Java, and Malacca, and then headed west across the Indian Ocean to Sri Lanka and Calicut and Cochin (cities on the southwest coast of India). The visitors remained in India to barter and trade from late 1406 AD to the spring of 1407 AD, when they utilized the monsoon shift to sail towards home. On the return voyage, the Treasure Fleet was forced to fight against pirates near Sumatra for several months. Eventually Cheng Ho's men managed to capture the pirate leader and take him to the Chinese capital Nanjing, arriving there in 1407 AD.  

Second Voyage (1407-1409 AD)

The second voyage of the Treasure Fleet departed for a return trip to India in 1407 AD but Cheng Ho did not command this voyage. He remained in China to oversee the repair of a temple at the birthplace of a favourite goddess. The fleet returned in 1409 AD.

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Third Voyage (1409-1411 AD)

The fleet's third voyage was commanded by Cheng Ho from 1409 AD to 1411 AD. It consisted of 48 ships and 30,000 men. It followed closely the route of the first voyage but the Treasure Fleet established entrepots (warehouses) and stockades along their route to facilitate trade and storage of goods. On the second voyage the King of Ceylon had displayed aggression. Cheng Ho defeated the king's forces and captured the king to take him to Nanjing.

Fourth Voyage (1413-1415 AD)

In late 1412 AD, Cheng Ho was ordered by Zhu Di to undertake a fourth expedition. It was around late 1413 AD or early 1414 AD that Cheng Ho embarked on this expedition with 63 ships and 28,560 men. The goal of this trip was to reach the Persian Gulf at Hormuz. Hormuz was known to be a city of amazing wealth and goods, including pearls and precious stones much coveted by the Chinese emperor. In the summer of 1415 AD, the Treasure Fleet returned with a bounty of trade goods from the Persian Gulf. Detachments of this expedition sailed south along the eastern coast of Africa to reach Mozambique. It brought a giraffe from Africa, a rare site in China. The gift enhanced the stature of the Chinese emperor to a world ruler. During each of Cheng Ho's voyages, he brought back diplomats from other countries or encouraged ambassadors to come to the capital Nanjing on their own.

Fifth Voyage (1417-1419 AD)

The fifth voyage was ordered in 1416 AD to enable the ambassadors to return to their countries. The Treasure Fleet departed in 1417 AD and visited the Persian Gulf and the east coast of Africa, while the envoys kept on departing to their respective countries on way back. The fleet returned in 1419 AD.

5 www.chinapage.org.
Cheng Ho’s Map of the Indian Ocean
Source: wikimedia.org
Sixth Voyage (1421-22 AD)

A sixth voyage was launched in the spring of 1421 AD. It sailed to southeast Asia, India, the Persian Gulf and Africa. By this time, Africa was considered China's "El Dorado," a source of riches. Cheng Ho returned in late 1421 AD but the remaining fleet arrived in China in 1422 AD. Emperor Zhu Di died in 1424 AD and his son Zhu Gaozhi became emperor. He cancelled the voyages of the Treasure Fleets and ordered ship builders and sailors to stop their work and return home. Cheng Ho was appointed military commander of Nanjing.6

Seventh Voyage (1431-1433 AD)

The leadership of Zhu Gaozhi did not last long. He died in 1426 AD. His son and Zhu Di's grandson Zhu Zhanji took Zhu Gaozhi's place. Zhu Zhanji, encouraged by the exploits of his grandfather, ordered Cheng Ho to resume his duties as admiral and undertake a seventh voyage in an attempt to restore peaceful relations with the kingdoms of Malacca and Siam. It took a year to gear up for the voyage which departed as a large expedition with 100 ships and 27,500 men. On the return trip in 1433 AD Cheng Ho is believed to have died; others state that he died in 1435 AD after his return to China. Nonetheless, the era of exploration for China was soon over as the following emperors prohibited not only trade but even the construction of ocean-going vessels. It is likely that a detachment of one of Cheng Ho's fleets sailed to northern Australia during one of the seven voyages. This conjecture was based on the Chinese artifacts found as well as the oral history of the aboriginals.7

After the seven voyages of Cheng Ho and the Treasure Fleets, Europeans began to make headway towards China. In 1488 AD Bartolomeu Dias rounded Africa's Cape of Good Hope, in 1498 AD Vasco da Gama reached China's favourite trading city of Calicut and in 1521 AD Ferdinand Magellan finally reached Asia by sailing west. China's superiority in the Indian Ocean was unrivaled until the sixteenth

century when the Portuguese arrived and established their colonies along the rims of the Indian Ocean.