

When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1405-1433 Study Guide

**When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the
Dragon Throne, 1405-1433 by Louise Levathes**

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Plot Summary

"When China Ruled the Seas," by author Louise Levathes, is a historical chronology of China's eventual emergence to a position of dominance on the high seas. Around 1600 B.C., prior to the Ming Dynasty when China enjoyed maritime superiority, the Yi people of China were forced out of working the land and had to turn to the sea for their livelihoods. There is archaeological evidence that the Yi people traveled as far as South and Central America. The fact that the Chinese were able to construct sailing vessels that could withstand rough ocean waters so many centuries ago is a testament to their skills in design and building.

The Ming Dynasty began in the late-fourteenth century. The first Emperor of the Ming Dynasty was Zhu Yuanzhang who was greatly influenced by the teachings of Confucius who strongly opposed China's entering into trade relations with foreign countries. Confucians held the belief that dealing with foreigners held only peril for China. Further, they felt that trading with other countries would be an admission that China was not self-sufficient and needed items from other countries in order to survive. China would, therefore, lose prestige and appear weak. Zhu Yuanzhang ascribed to these Confucian views and did not develop a navy.

Zhu Di was the son of Zhu Yuanzhang and the third Emperor of the Ming Dynasty, also known as the dragon throne. While giving lip-service to his father's orders against trading with foreign nations, Zhu Di could not deny the potentially positive economics that strong trade relationships with other countries could bring to China. Zhu Di also felt that the people of China would prosper and be benefited by products that were not indigenous to their country. Zhu Di, therefore, ordered the building of a huge first-class naval fleet which consisted of cargo ships as well as warships. Zhu Di proved to be farsighted, as China's economy prospered and its prestige grew from the strong trade relations that were fostered with other countries. He also had good instincts about the importance of spreading Chinese culture. He saw to it that the fleet always had a supply of Chinese brass rulers, scales and other measuring devices as well as books on Confucianism and Buddhism to distribute in foreign lands.

First venturing out in the China Seas and reaching many strategic trading locations in Asia, the famous treasure fleet of the Ming Dynasty eventually voyaged as far as the African coast and the Middle East. Zhu Di enjoyed a lengthy reign and the treasure fleet ruled the seas during most of it. Not only did Zhu Di establish close trade relations with foreign countries, the warships of the fleet were mighty and able to control pirates, settle internal conflicts in foreign nations and keep the Mongols of Northern China at bay.

During the Zhu Di's declining years, he moved his capital to the newly constructed Forbidden City which caught fire soon after its completion. Depression over the loss of the Forbidden City and an economic downturn in his country, led Zhu Di to adjust some major policies. One change he made was to cut back on the voyages of the treasure fleet. China's dominance of the seas paralleled the reign of Zhu Di. His successors

either ascribed to the Confucians who were against trade or were unsuccessful in their bids to return China to a dominant force on the high seas.



Chapter 1, The Yi Peoples

Chapter 1, The Yi Peoples Summary and Analysis

Dating back as far as 4000 B.C., the seafaring tradition of China began with the Yi people of the southern regions who did not have farming land available to them and thus were forced to turn to the sea for their livelihood. The forefathers of the Yi peoples migrated from the highlands of central China to the shoreline. Some, who took boats to cross the narrow waters between Java to the island of Sulawesi, are considered the world's first boat people—those who cross a body of water by boat in order to settle in a new land. There is archaeological evidence that these migrants traveled to distant lands including New Guinea and Australia.

Northern Yi people migrated to Alaska and North America. Geologists theorize that the vast migrations occurring in China following the last Ice Age, were due in part to the dramatic shift caused by the ice of the Yangzi River of central China compelling the inhabitants of the region to seek more stable environments. The ice melted relatively quickly causing a rapid rise in the sea. The abundance of sea waters and the easy access by the southern Asians, created the ancestors of the great seafaring people of Indonesia and Polynesia. Evidence of migrating southern Asians between 9000 B.C. and 1300 B.C. can be found in Taiwan, the Philippines and Fiji. There are etchings of long boats on artifacts found in Laos dating back to seventh or sixth century B.C.

The skills of the early Chinese seafarers were so advanced that they were able to sail across the Indian Ocean to Madagascar and even across the Pacific to South and Central America. The vessels that were used are similar to the sailing rafts used in modern times. Spanish explorers to South America described the presence of scores of these ships. Indonesians possibly made the long journeys to escape the wrath of a volatile volcanic region active during the first or second millennia B.C.

The inland cultures around 1500 B.C. established the Shang, the first historic Chinese kingdom, a cultured and advanced society. The Shang flourished for 500 years, after which warring factions of the Zhou forced Shang from the inland region to the coastal areas. There is a similarity among artifacts found in Peru and Mexico to those of the Shang, indicating the probability of migration by the Shang to these regions.

The first unified empire in China was created in 221 B.C. By the first centuries A.D., the Chinese had gained knowledge of winds and currents of the Pacific. It was the descendents of the Yi people, however, who continued the seafaring tradition of their ancestors.



Chapter 2, Confucians and Curiosities

Chapter 2, Confucians and Curiosities Summary and Analysis

To Confucius in the sixth century, China was the entire world. He referred to it as the Middle Kingdom. Although Confucius hoped to tame the wild, marauding tribes threatening China, in the end he felt there was nothing to be gained by contact with foreigners. Confucianism became the basis of Chinese moral code from second century B.C. with the rise of the Han dynasty. One of the tenets of Confucianism is the concept that the Chinese Emperor is the link between man and god and that he is able to transform society by his virtue alone.

The Han Empire established academies based on the teachings of Confucius. The great master's intolerance of trade with foreign entities relegated those making their living from the sea to an inferior status. The chaos that followed the collapse of the Han Dynasty in the third century A.D., further compromised any interest the Chinese may have had in trade. The powerful Tang dynasty was established in 618 A.D. China became a melting pot by conquering the eastern Turks and regions of Manchuria and Korea. There was curiosity about the barbarians in these regions but the influence of Confucius' suspicion of foreigners dampened interest in them.

A vast city, Chang'an, emerged in the seventh century and was believed to be the world's greatest city. Interest in trade grew in this region as its people were desirous of resources not indigent in China, like black pepper from Burma or pistachio nuts from Persia. The Chinese began trading their silk and fine porcelains for items with locations as far away as Arabia. Tang emperors ordered expeditions to foreign lands to explore trade potentials. The Tang imperial gardens were filled with exotic birds from foreign lands. Trade for humans, including blacks and pygmies, developed under the Tang dynasty. The Tang culture was influenced by foreign clothing styles. Trade brought foreign artisans and craftsmen in the region creating internal conflicts.

During the Song dynasty (960-1279) a renewed interest in seafaring activity emerged. Emperor Gao Zong (1127-1162) understood the profitable results of trade and commerce. He was instrumental in the building of a fleet of vessels that challenged the supremacy of Persian and Arab traders in the Indian Ocean. The profits realized from the fleet led philosophers to espouse the merits of people working for the state. The major city of the Song dynasty, Hangzhou, was "greater than any city" in the world according to world traveler, Marco Polo.

To protect its wealth and sovereignty, the Song dynasty established a powerful navy. Innovations in ship design, led the Chinese to become the foremost shipbuilders by the early 13th century. Among the warships created for the Song navy were the "sea falcon" and the "flying tiger warship." In 1161, the Song navy had a formidable challenge from the Jin Empire in north China; however, they emerged victoriously. The Song navy was



stretched too thin and by the late 1200s, the fledgling Mongol navy began capturing Song towns and regions. The capital fell in 1276 leading the way for Khubilai Khan, called the "ruler of rulers, in 1279 to become master of a vast empire, stretching across four thousand miles of central Asia from the Adriatic Sea to the south China coast. Khan launched an invasion on Japan in 1274.

The Mongols began to lose a grip on their empire resulting in the takeover of the profitable grain trade by two corrupt Chinese merchants who were later executed. The actions of the merchants confirmed the long-held distrust of merchants and trade by Confucians. This distrust was greatly influential in China's future economic development.



Chapter 3, The Prisoner and the Prince

Chapter 3, The Prisoner and the Prince Summary and Analysis

Khubilai Khan lost half his army to malaria during an invasion of Burma. His weakened forces were defeated by the Chinese in 1368. In 1382, the Chinese took the provincial seat at Kunming with an army of three-hundred thousand. The Ming army butchered sixty-thousand tribesmen during the battle. As was the custom, young sons—even those of nine or ten years of age—were brutally castrated. Many died of infection but those who survived served as eunuchs in the imperial court.

The rebel leader Zhu Yuanzhang distinguished himself by not plundering and not killing civilians. He attributed the success of his rebellion to his spiritual connection to nature. He was the first Emperor of the Ming Dynasty. Yuanzhang had dozens of concubines and consorts and fathered 26 sons and 16 daughters. Zhu Di eventually usurped the throne and was thought to be the last son of a Mongol emperor. However, it was later determined that the woman Yuanzhang took as his wife was already pregnant and Zhu Di was the son of a consort. The woman was placed outdoors in an iron skirt and, unable to move, perished in the cold weather. The strong Confucian principal of filial obligation was taught to Zhu's sons through stories of sacrifice and loyalty.

Eunuchs were used in the Han dynasty to run the Emperor's household and to guard confidential matters from the general public. Eunuchs who were castrated before puberty were considered "pure from childhood" and were favored by the ladies of the court. As adults, they were said to have shrill voices and be very emotional.

Zhu Di, like his father, was an able soldier. His skills helped him to eventually win the throne. Before dying in 1398, Zhu Yuanzhang ordered that his sons not gather to attend his funeral, fearing that a fight for power would occur. By 1399, a year after Zhu Yuanzhang's grandson Zhu Yunwen acceded to the throne, his competitors who were five of the most powerful sons of Zhu Yuanzhang had been murdered and two others had died of natural causes. Zhu Di was still isolated having adhered to his father's orders to remain in his fiefdom.

Zhu Yunwen allowed Zhu Di's three sons to travel to his father's fiefdom. Allowing this reunion turned out to be a big mistake on Yunwen's part as Du and his sons soon took up arms against him. Zhu Di led a rebellion and claimed the throne in 1402. In 1403, Zhu Di ordered the construction of an imperial fleet of trading ships, warships and other vessels. He was compelled to renew trade due to the drain on the treasury from the long civil war. The fleet was known as the "treasure fleet."



Chapter 4, The Treasure Fleet

Chapter 4, The Treasure Fleet Summary and Analysis

In 1403, the Emperor ordered the Fujian province to produce 137 oceangoing ships. A short while later, other provinces were charged with producing another 200 ships. Many already existing ships were refurbished for the high seas. Since vast amounts of lumber had to be processed from the interior regions, the majority of the empire was taking part in this ambitious shipbuilding mission. Artisans and craftsmen were recruited to design and build the vessels which were built with great care and dedication. The Chinese were the first to establish dry-docks which they had developed in the tenth century.

During this period, a new kind of junk designed for travel in the south seas was developed. It had sharply pointed hulls which could withstand travel through rough waters. To show the world the strength of his empire, the Emperor commissioned the building of an enormous treasure ship, with dimensions of approximately 400 feet in length and 160 feet in width. The strength of the treasure ships can be attributed to other Chinese innovations including the development of watertight bulwark compartments and balanced rudders. The appearance of the treasure ships was impressive with their multiple staggered masts and square-shaped red sails.

The sophisticated fleet included special water tankers that supplied fresh drinking water for the crews. Many eunuchs were used in command positions on the fleet. The crew included medical officers who were charged with collecting medicinal herbs from other countries. So great were the needs of the vast fleet, that the strain was immediately felt on the general population. Although discontent and corruption began to emerge within the ranks, the ships were launched via the Yangzi. The Emperor was proud of his grand fleet and satisfied that the whole world would soon recognize the power and grandeur of his reign.



Chapter 5, Destination: Calicut

Chapter 5, Destination: Calicut Summary and Analysis

Zhu Di appointed his long-time friend and companion, Zheng He the principal envoy and commander in chief of the treasure fleet. It was the first time in history that a eunuch had been given such powers. The first destination of the newly launched treasure fleet was Calicut on the west coast of India, known for its spices and rare woods. Zhu Di wanted to be known for improving life in China by opening up trade with the rest of the world. Zhu Di's change in policy was welcomed in the region. Additionally, China's retreat from trade under Zhu Yuanzhang had created economic peril in Indonesia and the Malay Peninsula. Zheng He and his crew members prayed for their safe travel to Tianfei, a legendary goddess whose spirit wandered above the sea, helping to watch over and rescue mariners. For the success of his treasure fleet, Zhu Di had a temple erected in her honor.

The maiden voyage began in the East China Sea to a large harbor at the entrance of the Min River. The fleet waited there for several months until the monsoon season passed. They then ventured through the Formosa Strait and across the South China Sea toward what is now Viet Nam. The ship was navigated by water compass and time passage was measured by the burning of graded incense sticks. Latitude was determined by measuring the altitude of Southern Cross above the horizon with a measuring device called a qianxingban, which was used for the first time in history by the treasure fleet. Other innovative techniques were employed by pilots and navigators of the fleet.

Although pirates were encountered at the beginning of the journey, Zheng Di did not engage in conflicts with them, apparently deeming it an inappropriate undertaking at the time. The fleet discovered large colonies of wealthy Chinese merchants in Java who had migrated there during the trade embargo under Zhu Yuanzhang. The Chinese found the ruling zamurin of Calicut to be honest and trustworthy people. Trade negotiations between the Chinese and the Indians were confirmed through oral contracts. The fleet's warships had their first engagement with pirates in the Strait of Malacca where they defeated the forces of pirate chief Chen Zuyi. The treasure fleet depended on the cumulative wisdom passed on by astrologers and diviners to the fleet's meteorologists to avoid stretches of bad weather. However, the fleet did encounter unexpected typhoons which many thought were caused by giant dragons beneath the sea. The fleet returned in 1406 and a second voyage was immediately planned for departure in early 1408. However, Zheng He would not command that voyage.

Although trade was the most important reason for the voyages of the treasure fleet, many thought that Zhu Di wanted to ferret out his predecessor, Ahu Yunwen, who had reportedly escaped to a location somewhere in the region and who Zhu Di considered to be a threat to his regime. On the second voyage of the treasure fleet, trade relations were established with Siam. The second mission was smaller in scale with only 68 ships

and a minimum of warships since the seas were considered safer with the large decrease in the number of pirates. China had become a formidable presence on the high seas.



Chapter 6, The Strange Kingdoms of Malacca and Ceylon

Chapter 6, The Strange Kingdoms of Malacca and Ceylon Summary and Analysis

The third voyage of the treasure fleet was set to sail for the Indian Ocean in the fall of 1409. Their first destination was the kingdom of Malacca. The Malaccan ruler was Parameswara who had been driven out of Sumatra for his rebellious actions against the Javanese overlord of Palembang. Malacca's survival was dependent upon an aggressive trade policy. From China's point of view, the principal reason to nurture a relationship with Malacca was to bring stability to the region. Parameswara was having new problems having recently challenged Siamese authority. Nonetheless, Zheng He who was the commander of this mission, was able to establish trade relations with the fledgling empire.

After stops on the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra, the fleet made its way to the island of Ceylon. Zheng He carried an unusual trilingual tablet in Chinese, Tamil and Persian which he planned to leave on the island in a place of honor. However, upon the fleet's arrival, Ceylon was in deep internal conflict and was divided into three separate warring states. The most dominant leader among the factions was Alakeswara who refused to allow the tablet to be erected because he thought it represented Chinese sovereignty. After traveling to a few other locales the fleet returned to Ceylon to avenge Alakeswara's disrespectful actions. A conflict broke out and Alakeswara's forces were defeated. Alakeswara was brought before the Emperor who pardoned the king for his ignorance but replaced him with another ruler of Ceylon. The Chinese account of the episode was contradicted by other accounts that were more favorable to Alakeswara.

The fleet returned from its third voyage in 1411 which was followed by visits of representatives of many of the empires the fleet at visited. While their mission was to honor and pay tribute to Zhu Di, elaborate celebrations were held to welcome the foreign dignitaries to further enhance new trade relations. The most fascinating gift Zhu Di received from his guests was a rudimentary magnifying glass from a guest from the Middle East. The gift fascinated Zhu Di and led to an upstart glassblowing industry in China. Further trade negotiations were held during these festivities and their successes led Zhu Di to order the construction of an extravagant porcelain pagoda in tribute to his mother, further enhancing his claim to the throne. The elaborate structure stood over 240 feet high and was comprised of the finest white porcelain-glazed tiles and elaborated carved figures and animals. The structure remained intact until it was destroyed in the Taiping Rebellion of 1856.



Chapter 7, Emissaries of the Dragon Throne

Chapter 7, Emissaries of the Dragon Throne Summary and Analysis

Japanese representatives were among those to visit Zhu Di and were anxious to establish commercial relations with China. Flattered that his authenticity as Emperor and rightful heir to the "dragon throne" of the Ming Dynasty was being recognized by Japan, Zhu Di eagerly opened up trade negotiations. Trade missions arrived frequently from 1403 until the shogun's death in 1410. Though Zhu Di gave lip service to living up to Zhu Yuanzhang's restrictions regarding foreign trade, Zhu Di viewed such relationships as opportunities to keep a watchful eye on his neighbors.

Zhu Di also went to great diplomatic lengths to stabilize relationships with the Mongols. These outreaches occurred the same time as the treasure fleet was in high gear which together would prove to have repercussions for centuries. Zhu Di appeased the Mongols of the north near Beijing by allowing them to be in charge of large regions of inner-Mongolia. He also granted military titles to powerful Mongol chieftains in Manchuria.

Zhu Di infuriated the Timurids by referring to himself by the lofty title of "lord of the realms of the face of the earth." The leader of Timur was so outraged that he captured some of Zhu Di's emissaries and vowed revenge on the arrogant Chinese. In 1405, Timurid invaded China with an army two-hundred thousand strong. During the battle, Timurid died of natural causes and Zhu Di's forces defeated the advancing leaderless Timurids. Zhu Di was able to establish good relations with Timurid's successor.

Peace with the northern and eastern Mongols was a little more difficult to achieve. Zhu Di was able to drive back the Mongols and was able to establish only a very unstable peace with them. The Mongols' only motive for relations with the Ming Dynasty was the profits they could potentially derive. Zhu Di continued his orders that the envoys from foreign empires be treated in a grand manner. Zhu Di paid special attention to China's relationship with Tibet's religious leaders. He had an especially close relationship with the fifth karmapa, Bebshini Shegpa, who controlled southeastern Tibet. Their friendship was based on Zhu Di's support of Shegpa against rival Buddhist sects. Zhu Di had troops prepared to invade Tibet, but called them off at Shegpa's request.

Very little is known about the inner-workings of the Ming Dynasty as its emperors were not predisposed to share the information outside the walls of the Forbidden City. One thing that seems to be certain, however, was Zhu Di's quest for beautiful concubines. The Korean emperor requested Chinese herbal medicines for his father. In return, Zhu Di demanded hundreds of the country's young women to be made part of his harem. Among the Korean women selected was Kwon who became Zhu Di's favorite.



Adultery was not an issue in ancient China. Even the conservative Confucius spoke of the smooth running of polygamous households. Achieving "true yang" was considered essential in adding years to a man's life and was best achieved through relations with young women. Zhu Di was forty years old when he became emperor and was in ill health. Perhaps he thought young women would rejuvenate his health so he would be able to face the enormous tasks ahead of him.



Chapter 8, The Auspicious Appearance of the Celestial Animals

Chapter 8, The Auspicious Appearance of the Celestial Animals Summary and Analysis

The largest expedition of the treasure fleet was ordered in 1412. Zhu Di was satisfied that the "four corners" of the sea were quiet, and now wanted to venture into the Persian Sea. Zheng He appointed Ma Huan, a young Muslim, as translator and chronicler of the voyage. Zhu Di was intrigued by the rich Arab port of Hormuz and eager to establish trade relations there. Zhu Di was in the process of relocating his capital back to his former fiefdom and the conventional wisdom was that he wanted to gather exotic items for his new palace.

On its way to the Persian Sea, the treasure fleet was ordered to intervene militarily in the internal strife existing in Sumatra, the empire on which China depended for its sulfur supply. The Chinese won an easy victory over the warring faction. After brief visits to Ceylon and Calicut, the treasure fleet arrived in Hormuz. The Chinese eagerly traded their porcelain and silk for sapphires and rubies and other riches. The new King of Bengal was sent with an envoy to Zhu Di's court where he presented him with an elaborate gift—a giraffe. The envoy mistook the animal for the mythical qilin, an animal in Chinese lore that only appeared in time of prosperity and peace.

When the treasure fleet returned in 1415, the rebel Sumatran leader was presented to Zhu Di who ordered him executed. He was replaced with someone interested in establishing good trade relations with China. China's influence on the high seas was at its peak. Much time and labor was used to change the location of Zhu Di's capital. In 1416, Zheng Di was ordered to return all foreign envoys who visited the court to their homelands. Zhu Di nourished relationships with those leaders who ascribed to his philosophy that an emperor is the link between man and god. Leaders of other empires realized that prosperity was the reward for allegiance to the dragon throne.

A fifth expedition of the treasure fleet was ordered and the ships were loaded with porcelains and fine blue-and-white ware to trade for items desired by the Chinese. Stops were made in Champa and Java; Sumatra and Malacca; Ceylon; and, various locations in India. In Arabia, it was learned that the Sultan of Aden was a powerful figure who was intimidating to his neighbors. He was so rich that the Muslim women were all bedecked with fabulous jewels. The Chinese traded their ware for jewels and other riches. To honor Zhu Di, the sultan gifted him with lions, zebras, ostriches, white pigeons and a giraffe.

During this expedition the fleet traveled for this first time to the coast of Africa. There the Chinese encountered, among others, the Swahilis who were anxious to obtain the Chinese ware but apparently, out of fear, did not welcome the large fleet with open-



arms. The fleet returned to China in 1419 with the many gifts for the emperor and a number of foreign envoys. The animals were marched in front of Zhu Di's court and received with much curiosity. The foreign ambassadors stayed two years before they were ordered to return home by Zhu Di.

On the sixth voyage, the fleet divided at Sumatra. Some ships sailed on to Africa, while a small contingent led by Zheng He returned to China. Zheng He reportedly was to take part in the completion of the Forbidden City which was planned for 1420. On New Year's Day in 1421, the completion of the complex was celebrated by many officials, foreign envoys and military officers. It seemed as the prosperity would last forever; however, devastating fires would soon sweep through the Forbidden City.



Chapter 9, Fires in the Forbidden City

Chapter 9, Fires in the Forbidden City Summary and Analysis

After the Forbidden City was dedicated, bad luck seemed to plague the Emperor. Zhu Di's favorite concubine, Madame Wang, died. In his grief, the emperor became unreasonable and ill-tempered, ordering execution for the slightest of offenses. A sex scandal overtook the empire resulting in the slaying of a large number of concubines and eunuchs. Zhu Di suffered a serious injury when he fell off a horse. The horse had been a gift from a foreign envoy who he blamed for the accident.

In the spring of 1421, lightning struck the ceremonial halls of the newly completed Forbidden City. Fire spread quickly throughout the complex. The fire had reportedly been foretold by Hu, master of the water clock. Hu was shackled and imprisoned for his disrespect to the emperor and committed suicide just hours before his prediction came true. Zhu Di was devastated by the fire and the empire was plunged into dire economic straits. The emperor took on a more conservative approach to his rule. He provided financial assistance to those who suffered calamities during the past year and suspended future voyages of the treasure fleet.

Zhu Di made no attempt to repair the Forbidden City and his planned move to Beijing was met with wide criticism. Less than a year after the fires, Zhu Di made plans to launch an assault against the Tartars who were attacking China on its western border. He ordered grain to be delivered from provinces in the south to the troops in the north. It was an expensive operation and former loyalists began to abandon the emperor. Though very ill, the aging ruler led a successful campaign against the Uriyangqad Mongols.

Zhu Di died at the age of sixty-four in the summer of 1424. During the 100-day period of mourning for the deceased leader, marriages were forbidden, music couldn't be played and all religious ceremonies were forbidden. Sixteen concubines were buried with him and his tomb was to be guarded "forever." Zhu Di's eldest son, Zhu Gaozhi, ascended to the dragon throne. Zhu Gaozhi, nothing like his father, was fat and listless and had no interest in military operations or trade.

The new emperor released all of his father's imprisoned enemies and surrounded himself with Confucians. The focus of the nation was re-directed to agricultural. Expensive military campaigns were considered to be harmful to China and all voyages of the treasure fleet were discontinued. Agriculture was now thought of as the key China's prosperity. Zhu Gaozhi considered rescuing the poor from burdensome taxes as essential as saving them from a fire. Zhu Gaozhi had a brief reign. He suffered from heart failure and died in 1425.

China was left with two factions: those favoring the approach of the Confucians and those who wanted to restore the policies of Zhu Di. The question of the day was: Who would the new emperor side with?



Chapter 10, The Last Voyage

Chapter 10, The Last Voyage Summary and Analysis

Zhu Zhanji, grandson of Zhu Di and son of Zhu Gaozhi, was named the new emperor. He was considered to have the good qualities of both his antecedents: the expansionist views of his grandfather and the rigid Confucianism of his father. To re-establish China's global prestige, Zhu Zhanji ordered the seventh voyage of the treasure fleet in 1430. A goal of the mission was to restore peaceful relations between Siam and Malacca.

The treasure fleet departed Nanjing in January of 1431. The fleet made stops in the Malay Peninsula, Sumatra and India. It was the last voyage of Zheng He who died at sea at the age of 62. The fleet returned to China in 1433 and was commended by the Emperor. As in his grandfather's reign, many foreign envoys traveled to China to honor the Emperor. Zhu Zhanji died from a brief illness in 1435 and returned China's maritime dominance into question.

Zhu Zhanji had halted construction of new ships and returned China to frugal economic policies. As a result, China's maritime dominance began to fade. At its height in the early-15th century, the great Ming navy consisted of 3,500 vessels, 2,700 of which were warships. The deterioration was constant through the years following Zhu Di's death. By 1500, it became a capital offense to build a boat with over two masts. An edict called for the destruction of all ocean-going ships and for the arrest of the merchants who sailed them.

Zhu Zhanji was succeeded by "the boy emperor" Zhu Qizhen, who, at seven years of age, was not equipped to lead the nation. Eunuchs took control of the secret police and with it more power. The infamous eunuch Wang Zhen easily parlayed his position into one of de facto emperor. Wang was a greedy and aggressive man who foolishly led a half-million Chinese troops against the Mongols on the northwestern frontier. The Chinese forces were cut down by Mongol horsemen. Zhu Qizhen, by then twenty-two, was captured by the Mongols and Wang was killed.

The emperor's younger brother was installed as emperor. At his first court, the Confucians vowed to kill themselves unless the powerful eunuch network was dismantled. The Confucians won the day but several years later, Zhu Qizhen returned and reclaimed the throne. In 1477, there was a last attempt to revive Chinese seafaring led by a powerful eunuch named Wang Zhi. But again the Confucians tamped down the resurgence by arguing that China's strength is compromised when it admits that it is not self-sufficient and needs foreign goods.

At the same time, Europe was rising in dominance on the seas and took advantage of China's abandonment of its interests in Southeast Asia. Beginning in the early sixteenth century, China was plagued by attacks from Japanese pirates. They took over entire

Chinese villages, robbing and terrorizing the citizens. The former lord of the China seas was now living in fear of foreign thugs.



Chapter 11, The Sultan's Bride

Chapter 11, The Sultan's Bride Summary and Analysis

A legendary Malaccan tells of the beautiful Chinese woman, Hang Libo, who was brought to Malacca to become the bride of the Sultan Mansur Shah. So that she would not be lonely, her father sent along 500 maidens with her. Eventually they all married and had children and were the source of the large Chinese community that emerged in Malacca. However, there seems to be little veracity to the story. Hang Libo may have just been a lady of the court or a daughter of a Chinese official. The Chinese inhabitants of Malacca probably originated from the many Chinese sailors of the treasure fleet who visited the land. During the seafaring days of the Ming Dynasty, Chinese populations grew in Viet Nam, the Malay Peninsula, Japan and other lands. During the early Ming, emigration was banned; however, the Emperor could exercise his powers at will and offer Chinese people as gifts to other nations such as Japan. As the prestige of the Dynasty began to fade, tens of thousands of the Chinese people settled in the Philippines.

A weakened China saw threats from Japanese pirates and the Mongols of the north. The Mongols grew stronger as the Chinese grew weaker. They were a constant threat and often invaded towns, robbing and massacring its inhabitants. Even though during the next decade when the piracy was under control, many Chinese people remained bitter at losing family members and their lands to pirates.

The Chinese were able to spread their culture to many parts of the world during their peak seafaring days. The first Ming Emperor, Zhu Yuanzhang, saw to it that Chinese calendars, Confucian books, and Buddhist scriptures were spread to new lands by the treasure fleet. During this time, foreign countries would often request Chinese instruments, glass rulers, scales and other systems of measurement. Exchange of Chinese weapons was strictly forbidden since this weaponry could someday be used against them.

Although the treasure fleet's commander, Zheng He, was responsible for the deaths of many members of his crews, he emerged as a kind of patron saint for the expatriate Chinese. A temple to Zheng He was erected in 1795 at the base of Bukit China as a shelter for Chinese who came there to pray at the graves of family members. Throughout many centuries, He's countrymen worshiped him and prayed to him for resolutions to their problems.



Epilogue, A People Called Baijini

Epilogue, A People Called Baijini Summary and Analysis

Aboriginal songs record the arrival of a people called "Baijini," who were linked to the Chinese. They arrived by sea during the monsoon season. Archaeological evidence has been discovered that confirm these legends. The women who arrived there were remembered for their beauty and colorful clothing. Early Chinese history points to their knowledge of the Southern Hemisphere, making travel to Australia plausible. There are also indications that the Chinese traded quite frequently with Borneo in the 8th Century B.C. In one of Zheng He's navigation charts, a notation is made about visiting an island in the Antarctic Ocean which suggests that the fleet had sailed to the Southern Hemisphere.

Worlds away from Australia, there are light-skinned people of Kenya known as "Bajuni." Traveling up the coast of Africa, there is evidence of Chinese influence on the island of Pate. An anthropologist in 1935, recognized that the physical features of the "Banjuni" islanders of Pate were totally different from others in the region. These people were known as Washangas and told tales of their ancestors living in houses on stilts in watery areas.

There is anecdotal evidence of Chinese populations in other regions of Africa and Arabia. There was an Arab word, "ishra" which was used to describe the close relationship between the Chinese and the Swahili. The town of Shanga in eastern Pate has relics of Chinese pottery and other artifacts. It is significant that there is a similarity between the Australian word for the people known as "Baijini," and the African word for the people known as "Banjuni." Both cultures were reportedly secretive about silk and clothing making. If these people were not direct descendents of the Chinese, their ancestors were obviously greatly influenced by the Chinese culture.



Characters

Zhu Di

The third Emperor of the Ming Dynasty, also known as the dragon throne, was Zhu Di. When his father Zhu Yuanzhang, the first Ming Emperor, died he left orders that disallowed any of his sons from succeeding him. Instead, Zhu Yuanzhang's grandson, Zhu Yunwen, became the second Ming Emperor. Zhu Yunwen held the throne only a short time, when Zhu Di forced him out and reclaimed the dragon throne.

Zhu Yuanzhang had ascribed to the Confucian belief that China should remain isolated from other countries. They felt that developing trade relations with foreign countries was dangerous. They also felt that such relationships would be an admission that China was not self-sufficient and had to rely on others to survive. China would, therefore, appear weak and lose prestige. Zhu Di, however, had a more progressive view of what would serve China and its people well. He saw the economical benefits of establishing strong trade relationships with foreign countries.

Zhu Di ordered the construction of a large naval fleet, ultimately known as the treasure fleet. It was a large fleet, at its peak having some 3,500 vessels, 2,700 of which were warships. During Zhu Di's reign, China enjoyed dominance of the high seas and provided foreign goods to its citizenry that it would otherwise not have had. China became a well-respected power during this time due to its formidable fleet of warships. Zhu Di was honored by exotic gifts brought to him by envoys from the many foreign lands the fleet visited.

China's dominance of the high seas faded after Zhu Di's death. But his legacy lived on due to his visionary instincts in seeing that the treasure fleet distributed items from the Chinese culture including measuring devices and books on Confucianism and Buddhism.

Zheng He

Zheng He was a life-long friend of Ming Dynasty Emperor Zhu Di. As was very common in the time of the Ming, Zheng He was a eunuch. There were various reasons why some men were castrated; often it was to be made more loyal servants. It is not clear why Zheng He was made a eunuch. However, as witnessed by his friendship with the Emperor, eunuchs were not necessarily looked down upon. After the huge naval fleet ordered by Zhu Di was built, he named Zheng He as its commander-in-chief. It was the first time in Chinese history, that a eunuch was given such authority and power. However, Zhu Di trusted Zheng He's loyalty and ability. Zheng He did well, serving as the fleet commander on most of the treasure fleet's voyages, including its seventh and last mission.



Zheng He was not only an able sea captain; he was a successful negotiator and arbitrator as well. In his role, he often had to resolve internal conflicts existing in foreign countries with which China had established trade relationships. He also negotiated trade agreements, always with an eye toward those deals that would most benefit China. Since he was the highest ranking officers of the fleet, Zheng He was involved in strategies and tactics when the warships conducted in military invasions or were involved in attacks from pirates. During his tenure as fleet commander, the treasure fleet never lost a battle.

Although many sailors perished while on journeys of the treasure fleet under Zheng He's command, he became the patron saint of those who desired to visit foreign lands to visit the graves of their dead. Centuries after his passing, Chinese people were known to honor him and to pray to him for resolution to their problems.

Zhu Yuanzhang

Zhu Yuanzhang was the first Emperor of the Ming Dynasty. He was the father of Zhu Di who became the third Ming Emperor and the father of Chinese dominance of the sea.

Zhu Yunwen

Zhu Yunwen was the grandson of Zhu Yuanzhang and the second Emperor of the Ming Dynasty. His reign was very short as he was toppled by Zhu Di who reclaimed the dragon throne.

Zhu Gaozhi

Zhu Gaozhi was Zhu Di's son. He ascended to the dragon throne after Zhu Di's death. He was an ineffective leader and was nothing like his father, having no interest in trade relations nor China's economy.

Zhu Zhanji

After his father, Zhu Gaozhi, died, Zhu Zhanji became Emperor of the Ming Dynasty. He reportedly had good qualities of both his grandfather, Zhu Di, and great-grandfather, Zhu Yuanzhang.

Confucius

Confucius was the great philosopher admired and embraced by Chinese society. His endorsement of isolationism refrained China from enjoying robust trade relations for many years.



Sultan of Aden

The Sultan of Aden was a powerful figure who was intimidating to his neighbors. Zhu Di's men convinced the Sultan to trade his jewels and other riches for their porcelain and silk. To honor Zhu Di, the Sultan gifted him with lions, zebras, ostriches, white pigeons and a giraffe.

Kwon

Kwon was a young Korean woman who was given to Zhu Di as part of a trade deal with Korea. She became the Emperor's favorite concubine.

Parameswara

The ruler of Malacca was named Parameswara. He had been driven out of Sumatra for his rebellious actions against the Javanese overlord of Palembang. Despite the ruler's internal conflicts, Zheng He ultimately was able to establish good trade relations with Malacca.



Objects/Places

Yellow River Valley

The Yellow River Valley in north China is where the Neolithic tribes were centered in 1600 B.C. The Yi people lived in this region and were some of the first Chinese people to take to the high seas.

The Ming Dynasty

The years of high seas dominance by the Chinese was enjoyed during the reign of the third emperor of the Ming Dynasty, also known as the dragon throne.

The Treasure Fleet

The vast Chinese navy was referred to as the treasure fleet. It got its name from the treasures it would bring back to China after trade deals.

The Forbidden City

Zhu Di decided to build a new headquarters near the end of his reign. It was called the Forbidden City but only brought bad luck. In fact, soon after the city was dedicated, it was almost destroyed by fire.

Calicut

The Chinese were able to establish a strong trading relationship with the ruling zamurin of Calicut. The Chinese found the Indians to be honest and trustworthy people in their dealings.

The Malay Peninsula and Sumatra

The Malay Peninsula and Sumatra were two locations that the treasure fleet always visited on its trade missions.

Ceylon

When the treasure fleet landed on the island of Ceylon for the first time, the country was in deep internal conflict and was divided into three separate warring states. The rebellious leader was brought before the Emperor who pardoned the king for his ignorance but replaced him with another ruler.



Japan

Through the years, Japan was a trading partner of China. However, when China's power and dominance of the high seas began to fade, China was plagued by attacks from Japanese pirates

Mongol Invasions

There were on-going conflicts between the Ming Dynasty and the Mongols of the north. During the Zhu Di reign, the Mongols were kept at bay. However, as China's power began to wane, attacks by Mongols became commonplace.

Porcelain and Silk

Porcelain and silk were the main valuables traded by the Chinese for those desired items indigenous to other countries.



Themes

Why the Early Chinese Ventured onto the High Seas

Around 1600 B.C., the Yi peoples of eastern and southern China lived in tribes on the coastal region of China. They were separated from the fertile inland regions by mountain ranges. Without the ability to farm, these peoples were forced to turn to the sea for their livelihood. The Yi thus began a long tradition of seafaring Chinese. At the height of the last ice age, 50,000 years ago, China was linked by land with Taiwan, Java and other nearby countries. The abundance of land created an influx of immigrants from other regions of China due to the easy access to the other countries via narrow waterways. These migrants are sometimes referred to as the first "boat people."

However, when the ice melted, it melted relatively quickly causing a rapid rise of the seas and the region to be suddenly inundated with an excess of bodies of water. The inhabitants of the region were prodded by the abundance of water and large number of people to take to the sea once again. There is archaeological evidence in many lands including even as far away as South and Central America that the Yi people traveled vast distances. They could only have survived the rough ocean waters if they were able to travel in substantial vessels. There are historical references to the style of boat built by the Yi having been seen in South America. This being the case, it is a tribute to the superior design and construction skills that the Yi people had to possess.

Though the vessels built many centuries later in the Ming Dynasty were far superior to these first ships, the beginning of China's tradition of shipbuilding and seafaring can be traced directly to the Yi peoples.

The Impact of Confucianism on China's Maritime Trade

Confucius, who lived during the Han Dynasty in the sixth century, thought of China as the entire world. No other place could be as prestigious or as satisfying to live in than China. Confucius at one time held beliefs that the dangerous tribes threatening China could be tamed, but he was disillusioned and finally concluded that it was a hopeless cause and that there was no benefit in dealing with foreigners.

Many centuries later, Confucians' views became part of the newly established Ming Dynasty. The first emperor of the Ming was Zhu Yuanzhang who took as his counsel many followers of Confucian. These Confucians convinced the new Emperor that China should stay out of foreign entanglements and relationships. This policy of isolationism caused China to be left out of robust maritime trade taking place at the time.

When Zhu Di ascended to the throne after his father's death, he gave lip-service to the Confucians of the court but privately had a diverse view about trading with foreign



countries than did his father. Eventually Zhu Di ordered the construction of a vast fleet. The fleet, known as the treasure fleet, made some seven successful voyages and established trade relations with countries as far away as Africa and the Middle East.

Later after Zhu Di died, the new Emperor caved to the demands of the Confucians and suspended all seafaring trade missions. The Confucians held close to the Master's view that dealing with foreigners was dangerous and that by trading with other countries China would appear weak and lose prestige since trading for goods was an admission of not being self-sufficient.

How China's Dominance of the High Seas Spread Chinese Culture

Zhu Di, third Emperor of the Ming Dynasty, was the ruler who ordered the building of China's first navy. The naval fleet, which was commonly referred to as the treasure fleet because it brought treasures home to China from other lands, consisted of literally thousands of cargo and warships during the peak of its dominance of the high seas.

Zhu Di was a visionary who saw the benefits of China's entering into trade relations with foreign countries. Zhu Di displayed further insight when he insisted that the fleet carry supplies of Chinese innovations including the brass ruler, scales and other measuring devices. He also made sure that books on Confucianism and Buddhist scriptures were stocked on the ships. Zhu Di ordered his commanders and crews to distribute these items throughout their travels as a way of spreading Chinese culture.

Not only did the treasure fleet spread the culture of China, they helped to populate regions of the world. Sailors on the fleet visited many lands and, it is assumed, impregnated female inhabitants who had off-spring who were half-Chinese. Historical references in both Australia and Africa describe light-skinned tribes of slight built individuals who were experts at producing silk and clothing in the style of Chinese craftsmen. It would not be a leap of faith to connect these people to the Chinese. There were vast emigrations from China to the Philippines and other island nations. A segment of the population on the Island of Pate which is located off the coast of Kenya has Chinese descendants. An Arab word, "ishra," was coined to describe the close relationship between the Chinese and the Swahili, intimating that there were personal relationships between the two peoples.

Style

Perspective

"When China Ruled the Seas" is written by Louis Levathes, a staff writer for the National Geographic for ten years. She has written articles for the New York Times, Washington Post and other publications. Levathes certainly has the background and credentials to have penned the account of China's maritime dominance during the Ming Dynasty. She is an expert on Chinese history and served as a visiting scholar at The Johns Hopkins Center for Chinese and American Studies at Nanjing University in Jiangsu, China.

As evidenced by the material, Levathes has written with the detached manner and style of a teacher. Her goal, quite obviously, was to encompass the thousand year history of China's dominance on the high seas into one tome. Levathes based her book on eyewitness accounts, official Ming historical documents, as well as on African, Arab and Indian resources.

No person better than Levathes could have a more relevant background or be more prepared to write this book that covers the lengthy history of China's maritime trading missions. It is noted in the review section of the book that "When China Rules the Seas" received a New York Times Notable Book of the Year award. In her prologue, Levathes shows some passion by paying tribute to the early Chinese seafaring crews who set off on voyages in unknown and dangerous waters. Although they are never given credit, there is evidence that the Chinese had discovered the New World and had visited it several times before Columbus happened upon it.

Tone

"When China Ruled the Seas" is written in a professorial tone, accompanied by many historical references and details. The author has no apparent bias; rather, the writing is that of an educator, attempting to convey the substance of a subject that is probably obscure to many. The information, though sometimes heavy and cumbersome in nature, is in the main written with clarity. Even though the book covers roughly one-thousand years of Chinese maritime history, there is enough detail to understand what unfolded during that time but also not so much detail to cause one to get lost in the minutia. The author maintains a good balance between information and clarity and pace.

As in all educational tomes, there is a good amount of resource and reference material which is included to enhance the reader's comprehension of the historical revelations should he need further understanding on a topic. By including a list of the Chinese Dynasties and the years of their reigns, the reader is able to appreciate the years of China's dominance of the high seas during the Ming Dynasty versus the many Dynasties in which the Chinese did not present a powerful presence on the high seas.



Drawings of some of the vessels built by the Chinese are included which help the reader to visually appreciate the structure and design of the ships built by that society.

Structure

"When China Ruled the Seas," written by Louise Levathes, is a chronological account of China's maritime history. The structure of the book remains basically in chronological order beginning around 1600 B.C. through the demise of the Ming Dynasty in the mid-1600s A.D. The Ming Dynasty represents the peak of China's dominance of the high seas. Dynasty's decline in prestige and power can be directly connected to the suspension of their trade missions on the treasure fleet and it is with the description of this period that the book concludes. The book is divided into eleven named and numbered chapters and is followed by an epilogue which discusses recently found artifacts and peoples in both Africa and Australia that apparently have a connection to ancient migrating Chinese seafarers.

The book also contains some helpful sections including a pronunciation guide to major figures discussed in the book; a listing of Chinese dynasties; reference notes; and, an index. There is also a map of the region, entitled "The Expeditions of Zheng He, 1405-1433," that displays the countries surrounded by the South Atlantic Ocean, Indian Ocean, South China Sea, and the Pacific Ocean. The map encompasses most of the lands mentioned in the book where the Ming Dynasty's treasure fleet traveled on its trading missions.



Quotes

"By the first centuries, A.D., the Chinese had some knowledge of the winds and currents of the Pacific, though they thought the waters of the four oceans around them emptied into a great whirlwind or abyss from which no traveler could return." (Chapter 1: The Yi People, page 31)

"From the second century B.C., with the rise of the Han dynasty, Confucianism became the moral code for the upper classes of Chinese society and the foundation of the emerging feudal bureaucracy." (Chapter 2: Confucians and Curiosities, page 33)

"Profits from maritime commerce are very great. If properly managed, they can amount to millions [of strings of coins]. Is this not better than taxing the people?" (Chapter 2: Confucians and Curiosities, page 41)

"The Ming army showed no mercy, butchering an estimated sixty thousand Miao and Yao tribesmen during the Yunnan campaign, as well as countless Mongols. As was the custom since the first millennium B.C., young sons of prisoners were castrated." (Chapter 3: The Prisoner and the Prince, page 57)

"In order to obtain the pearl necklace from the dragon, it is first necessary to find the man to slay the dragon." (Chapter 4: the Treasure Fleet, page 77)

"Let not Your Imperial Majesty forget the saying, 'the old horse knows the way.' Indeed, like ginger and dates, there are things which become better with age." (Chapter 5: Destination: Calicut, page 87)

"Then they commenced their journey. They encountered gigantic waves for hundreds of miles, but these did not disturb the ships for it was as if the fleet were moving across dry land. The fierce dragons beneath the sea and dangerous fish let the ships pass. The men were happy." (Chapter 6: The Strange Kingdoms of Malacca and Ceylon, page 117)

"Hounded by enemies both in and outside the empire, the Ming founder viewed unrestricted private trade as inherently destabilizing and threatening." (Chapter 7: Emissaries of the Dragon Throne, page 123)

"At the 1416 dedication of the Jinghai Temple in Nanjing, the emperor had said the 'seas had been conquered and there was quiet in the four corners.'" Now Zhu Di wanted to venture into the Persian Gulf. . . ." (Chapter 8: The Auspicious Appearance of the Celestial Animals, page 137)

"As the Master, Confucius, said, 'He who offends against Heaven has none to whom he can pray.'" (Chapter 9: Fires in the Forbidden City, page 155)



"The emperor, who was very fond of dui shi, or 'matching verse,' asked the boy to think of a verse that corresponded in structure to the first line of the couplet he had just composed to mark the ambassadors' visit: 'Jade and fabrics from every corner meet the wind and clouds.' The boy thought for a moment and then replied, 'Mountains and rivers come together and the sun and moon shine brightly.'" (Chapter 10: The Last Voyage, page 167)

"After the mid-fifteenth century the exodus of Chinese coupled with an official ban on private trading gave rise to piracy and an illegal trade in the China seas to an extent previously unknown." (Chapter 11: The Sultan's Bride, page 185)



Topics for Discussion

What was Confucius' view on China establishing trade relations with foreign countries? How did Confucius' stance on trade and relationships with foreigners impact China's economy and prestige?

How did Zhu Di's policy on trade differ from that of his father Zhu Yuanzhang? Whose beliefs influenced Zhu Yuanzhang? Why did Zhu Di depart from his father's policies?

How did foreign emissaries honor Zhu Di for allowing trade relationships to develop with their countries? How were the foreign envoys treated at the Emperor's court? What gifts did Zhu Di receive from them?

What bad luck followed Zhu Di after the construction of the Forbidden City? What happened to the Forbidden City built by Zhu Di? How did the destruction of the Forbidden City contribute to the loss of China's prestige?

What valuables did China use to trade for items they wanted from other lands? In addition to trade relationships, what other items did the treasure fleet distribute throughout other lands during their voyages? How did items from the treasure fleet influence the lands and people they visited?

How many voyages did China's treasure fleet make? Who was the commander-in-chief of most of these voyages? What legacy did this commander leave behind with the Chinese people?

What signs exist that China traveled to faraway lands on the high seas? In what countries are there people who could be traced back to the Chinese? What evidence is there for these connections?