

# Famous Explorers:

## Zheng He



Painting by Shen Du (1357-1434)

Zheng He was born in China 1371. He was a Chinese Muslim from the Hui **ethnic group**, or group of people with a shared background. His original name was

Ma Ho, the Chinese version of Mohammed, the name of Islam's most important prophet.

In the early 1400's, China was ruled by the Yongle Emperor, who was part of the Ming **Dynasty**, a series of rulers who all come from the same family. The Emperor assembled a fleet to explore the Indian Ocean and appointed Zheng He as admiral. This fleet included 317 ships, 62 of which were "treasure ships" that carried precious items like silk and porcelain to trade with the locals. The Chinese considered goods from foreign countries to be **exotic**, or unusual and hard to obtain. Even pepper was considered exotic to people in China back then, so Zheng He made sure to bring thousands of tons of it back home with him!

Some of Zheng He's treasure ships were said to be as big as 450 feet long and 185 feet wide, but today we think that this would have been impossible for boats made out of wood. His navigators used magnetic compasses like the Arabs and Europeans did, and they also figured out their **latitude**, or how far north or south they were, by looking at where the stars were in

the sky. They found how fast their ships were going by dropping a floating object overboard and timing how fast it moved along the length of the ship. To measure time, they would watch a stick of incense burn, a method similar to watching sand pour through an hourglass.

Zheng He conducted seven voyages, and landed in places like India, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Mogadishu in Africa, and Yemen in the Middle East. Zheng's fleet brought so many goods that when he first landed in India that it took Indian merchants more than three months to find out how much everything was worth. The ruler of Yemen, al-Malik al-Zahir, gave Zheng gifts for the emperor, including African animals that people in China had never seen before. These were a big hit in the emperor's court, and the paintings that court artists made of zebras and giraffes are still around today.

When a new emperor came to the throne in 1433, he put an end to Zheng He's voyages because he no longer wanted to pay for them. People in the government said that China wasn't making very much money from the trading, and that they should instead spend money patrolling eastern coastal waters to defend against Japanese pirates.



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## Define these Terms:

Ethnic Group

Dynasty

Exotic

Latitude

## Reading Comprehension:

Explain how Zheng He's navigators found out how fast their ships were going.

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Explain why the new emperor decided to put a stop to Zheng He's journeys.

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## Writing Prompt:

Zheng He's journey wasn't just about exploration and trade. In fact, the emperor paid for the journeys because he wanted to show the rest of the world how powerful China was in the 15th century. When Zheng He accepted the animal gifts from Yemen, the emperor thought that these gifts were given as "tribute," which is kind of like a fee or tax that a vassal state pays to its ruling state. A lot of people in Yemen thought this idea was funny, and that the Yongle Emperor didn't understand how the rest of the world worked. Why do you think this is?

*Write your response on a separate sheet of paper.*

What do you think about the new emperor's decision to stop funding Zheng He's journeys? Do you think it's more important to use money for practical things? Or do you think it's worth it to spend money on exploring and gaining knowledge? Why?

*Write your response on a separate sheet of paper.*