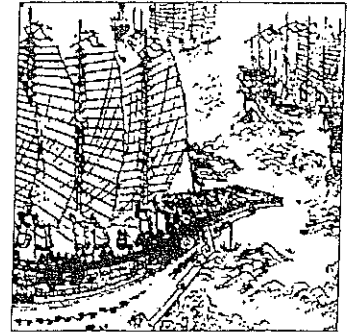


Zheng He Maritime Expeditions (Overview)

In the early years of the 15th century, decades before the Europeans began their great age of exploration, China stood poised to become the world's foremost maritime power. The third emperor of the Ming dynasty, the Yongle emperor, built an armada of ships the size of which the world had never seen. Those ships and the men who sailed them established diplomacy through trade, widely expanded Chinese influence and culture, and explored distant lands from the Pacific Ocean, the Indian Ocean, and the Arabian Sea, to the Persian Gulf and into the Red Sea.



That expansive effort was accomplished in seven voyages made between 1405 and 1433 under the capable leadership of the emperor's admiral, Zheng He. Less than 100 years after Zheng He's death, however, Chinese seafaring expeditions ceased and all of its ocean going ships were destroyed. China's brief but dramatic period of ruling the seas was over by 1525. The story behind China's rise to dominance followed by an abrupt change in policy is one of history's more interesting chapters.

The Muslim Captive and the Rebellious Prince



In 1368, a Chinese peasant leading an army of rebellion against Mongol rule defeated the Mongols, putting an end to the Yuan dynasty. Taking the reign name Hongwu, he established the Ming dynasty and set about unifying China. After a victorious battle in Yunnan in 1382, the army he had sent to the region did as had been Chinese custom for more than 1,000 years: it gathered the young sons of those they had taken prisoner, castrated them, and sent them to serve members of the imperial court.

One of those boys, a Muslim named Ma Sanbao, became the servant of the emperor's fourth son, Zhu Di. Zhu Di, who was in his twenties, was a well educated and energetic prince who was also a strong and successful soldier. The young Ma Sanbao traveled with Zhu Di on military campaigns for the next decade and a half, during which time the two of them developed a friendship and a lifelong respect for one another. Ma Sanbao rose to a position of great influence and was eventually given the name Zheng He when he distinguished himself in the Battle of Zhenglunba.

When the Hongwu emperor died in 1398, Zhu Di's nephew became the second Ming ruler under the name the Jianwen emperor. Civil war broke out when the new emperor eliminated five of his uncles, and Zhu Di—realizing he could be next—decided to rebel. In 1402, Zhu Di claimed victory and the imperial throne. Selecting as his reign name "Yongle" ("lasting joy"), he became the third emperor of the Ming dynasty. During his first year on the throne, the Yongle emperor ordered the building of a fleet of ships that would enable China to shift its focus from internal power struggles and civil war to international diplomacy and trade.

The Treasure Fleet

The purpose of the first expedition is not clear, but some sources indicate that the emperor's plan was to build a giant armada that would convey to foreign rulers the magnificence of China and its new emperor. Producing one of the largest fleets ever assembled, the imperial shipyards constructed some 2,000 vessels between 1403 and 1419: trading ships, horse ships, supply ships, troop ships, small patrol boats, and water tankers. The grandest of all were the baochuan, or "treasure ships," luxurious wooden sailing ships approximately 400 feet long and about 150 feet wide—some of the largest wooden ships ever built. Zheng He was designated chief envoy and given command of the fleet, which became known as the treasure fleet.



The fleet that Zheng He took on his voyages was, in essence, a floating city. In addition to the crews required to operate the ships, there were important government officials, secretaries, medical officers, pharmacologists, all manner of craftsmen, cooks, astrologers, interpreters, and merchants. The mighty naval force was clearly intended to awe those it visited and take care of any and all business that the Yongle emperor desired.

The Seven Voyages of Zheng He

Zheng He's first voyage began in July 1405. With a fleet of 317 ships, more than 27,000 men, and a cargo of porcelain, silk, and lacquerware, they left Nanjing and journeyed toward India. Along the way, they traded in such places as Champa (Vietnam) and the Indonesian island of Java. The people of Champa offered rare aloe wood (used for making incense), rhinoceros horn, and elephant ivory as tribute to the Chinese emperor. In Java, the Chinese traded silks and porcelain for spices. When they arrived in Calicut, India, the merchants there traded coral, pepper, pearls, and precious jewels for the goods offered by the Chinese.



During that first voyage, Zheng He also defeated one of the most notorious pirates in the Straits of Malacca, Chen Zuyi. After a battle at sea in which his fleet was sunk and most of his crew killed, Chen was captured, taken to Nanjing, and executed. Zheng He's victory was due in part to one of the Chinese inhabitants of Palembang, an important trading city in Sumatra that Chen had used as a base. That man was then installed as the new ruler, one loyal to the Ming, who could count on Chinese protection in turn. Zheng He's voyages created many such political relationships.

Over the course of the next 28 years, Zheng He made six additional voyages, traveling further and further abroad. His travels took him to the Arabian Peninsula and Africa, where he acquired such rare and exotic animals as Arabian horses, lions, leopards, elephants, zebras, and giraffes. The steady stream of trade goods and tribute from the countries visited in all the voyages brought precious stones, ambergris, cinnabar, herbs, spices, medicines, woolens, carpets, and precious metals flowing into the Yongle emperor's court.

In addition to developing a thriving trade, Zheng He's voyages also underscore the diplomatic success of the Ming. On his second trip (1407-1409), Zheng He picked up several ambassadors from the lands that he had visited previously and brought them back to China, strengthening the political ties established between the Ming and such places as Sumatra and India. During the third voyage (1409-1411), Zheng He engaged Tamil and Sinhalese forces, the only battle of note a Chinese army ever fought abroad up until that time. Zheng He set up a stela at Dondra Head in Sri Lanka with inscriptions in Chinese, Persian, and Tamil. The message is addressed to Allah, Buddha, and Shiva and exemplifies Zheng He's openness and sense of community in establishing ties with new peoples.

From Exploration to Isolation

Despite the success of Zheng He's missions, China's age of exploration did not last. After the Yongle emperor

died, his successors tended to be influenced by a group of conservative Confucian advisers who believed that agriculture and adherence to traditional ways—not trade, financial profit, and contact with foreigners—were the keys to the empire's security and prosperity. Although Zheng He set out on one final voyage in 1431 during the reign of the Xuande emperor (the grandson of the Yongle emperor), upon that emperor's death, the political support needed to maintain and outfit the treasure fleet quickly faded.

A number of economic factors combined with the growing power of the Confucian faction prompted China to turn inward. The Yongle emperor's massive projects—especially moving the capital to Beijing and building the Forbidden City—had been a drain on the imperial treasury. Inflation became a problem when China's trading partners began to demand payment in copper coins rather than paper money. The amount of taxes the empire was able to collect fell drastically when massive flooding of the Yellow River displaced millions of people in 1448 and left thousands of acres unable to produce. The completion of the Da Yunhe (Grand Canal) allowed grain from the south to be carried directly to Beijing on canal barges, so shipbuilding efforts eventually switched to the construction of barges instead of oceangoing vessels. In addition, a few of the emperors who ruled during that time thought the economic strain of continuing the voyages of the treasure fleet would be too much and that their first duty was to the welfare of the Chinese people.



The End of China's Maritime Era

Zheng He is believed to have died at sea in 1433 on the journey home of the final treasure fleet voyage. Roughly 40 years later, a government official destroyed the logs Zheng He had kept of his voyages. Then, beginning around 1500, after the Chinese government had firmly embarked on a policy of isolationism, a series of imperial edicts were issued that dismantled the network of trade and diplomacy established by Zheng He. First, the act of building vessels with more than two masts became a capital offense. Twenty-five years later, merchants who traveled oceangoing ships were placed under arrest and their vessels destroyed. By the mid-16th century, it became a crime to sail the ocean in any multimasted vessel. China's dominance as a maritime power was at an end, just as European dominance was beginning.

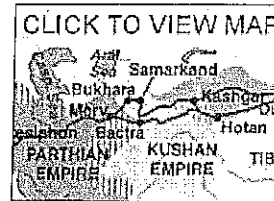
1. In what ways did the voyages of Zheng He and the treasure fleet benefit the people of China?
2. In what ways do you think the voyages hindered the welfare of the Chinese people?
3. China ended its voyages of exploration and trade about the same time that the European age of exploration and discovery began. What do you think would have happened if China had continued its policy of trade, diplomacy, and exploration?

East Meets West: The Silk Road (Overview)

History often seems to be all about the rise and fall of governments and shifts in political and military power. However, many of the most important developments of history—the ones with a lasting impact on human life and culture—come out of the peaceful exchange of goods and ideas along trade routes. One such important historical trade route is the romantically named Silk Road, which linked the East to the West and played a significant role in the transfer of knowledge from China to Europe.

What Is the Silk Road?

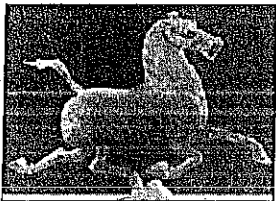
The "Silk Road" is a name historians use to describe the first trade route that connected China with the Mediterranean region in ancient and medieval times. It would probably be more accurate to use the term "Silk Roads" because the Silk Road was a 4,000-mile network of routes that passed through the entire Asian continent. The routes began in the ancient Chinese capital of Changan, split as they moved west to go around the Taklimakan Desert in Central Asia, and then came together again in the Near East. They ended at cities like Antioch and Tyre on the Mediterranean Sea.



Since most of the Silk Road passed through desert or mountains, travel was difficult and dangerous. Travelers journeyed in caravans and made their way from one desert oasis to the next. Goods traveled along with the people from Central Asia across the Mediterranean Sea into Europe. Side routes ran into the Indian subcontinent.

Over hundreds of years, trade and travel along the Silk Road grew and declined based on the conditions in the numerous regions through which it passed.

Who Paved the Way?



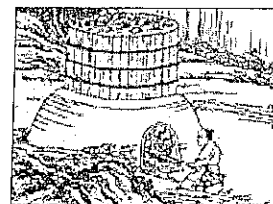
The Silk Road was probably first used as early as 300 BC, but the earliest recorded traveler was Chinese general Zhang Qian in the second century BC. At that time, trade of silk and other luxuries between central China and its borders was common, but the nomadic tribes who lived on the northern and western frontiers often raided trading parties. In 138 BC, Han dynasty emperor Wudi sent Zhang to the western nomads to attempt to create an alliance with them against the northerners. Although that mission was unsuccessful, Zhang traveled as far west as modern-day Afghanistan and returned to China with information about trade routes and new

products.

The Chinese were especially interested in Zhang's descriptions of the fine horses that were raised in Central Asia because of their military value. With Chinese silk, a valuable luxury, to be traded in exchange, the Chinese government launched western trading parties with military escorts for security. Since they could now travel in relative safety, private merchants often tagged along. They traded not only silk but also Chinese herbs, paper, spices, tea, and jade carvings for raw jade, gold, silver, wool, glass, ivory, grapes, and bamboo. All sorts of exotic animals were also exchanged between eastern and western Asia. As the Han dynasty began to decline in the early third century AD, so did state-sponsored trade along the Silk Road, although it never died out completely.

Because the routes passed through such difficult terrain, early traders were unable to travel the entire length.

Instead, they would travel a certain distance, trade their wares at a trading post or oasis, and then return home. In turn, traders at the oasis would travel farther on to the next oasis to trade their new items. Little by little, goods from the East and the West made their way to the other end of the trade routes. In that way, the West eventually learned of such Chinese inventions as paper.



Heavy Traffic on Cultural Highways



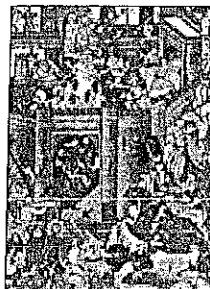
Once China was reunited under the Tang dynasty in AD 618, trade along the Silk Road began to grow again. The Tang not only encouraged trade but also protected and extended the routes. They imported new styles of clothing, such games as polo, new musical instruments, exotic plants, and spices.

Under the Tang dynasty, merchants, craftsmen, missionaries, religious pilgrims, entertainers, diplomats, entrepreneurs, artists, and adventurers traveled the Silk Road. Towns began to grow up around the main oases, and the Tang capital of Changan, located at the eastern end of the Silk Road, became a culturally diverse, bustling city. A census taken in 754 indicates the presence of Turks, Persians, Indians, and 20,000 other non-Chinese residents. In Changan, music, literature, poetry, calligraphy, painting, and dance from many cultures thrived.

Beliefs also traveled the Silk Road. During the latter period of the Han dynasty, Buddhist temples, shrines, and sculptures were built along the Chinese portions of the Silk Road. Buddhism continued to spread as monks came to teach in China and students of Buddhism traveled to India to learn more about the faith. During the Tang dynasty, Islam spread from the Near East into Persia and Central Asia, with outposts in China and India. Christianity also arrived in China by 635.

As the Tang dynasty weakened in the late ninth century, so did trade along the Silk Road. The Song dynasty, which followed, controlled a much smaller amount of territory and therefore never controlled the trade routes either.

Silk Road trade rebounded during the time of the Mongols following the conquests of Genghis Khan in the early 13th century. Although the invading Mongols initially destroyed many oases and trading centers along the routes, the relative peace that followed the establishment of the extensive Mongol Empire meant that the Silk Road was once again comparatively safe for travel.



Genghis' grandson Kublai Khan brought China under his control by 1279. The security of trade routes was extremely important to the Mongols. Trade between segments of the Silk Road grew as a result, and travelers could make their way from one end all the way to the other. The most famous European to make the journey was Marco Polo, who traveled to the court of Kublai. In addition to goods and people, new ideas, art, and literature traveled the Silk Road during Kublai's reign.

The End of the Road

By the late 1400s, the Silk Road was no longer the only avenue connecting the East and the West. Europeans and Asians both began making greater use of maritime routes, which were faster and therefore less expensive. Meanwhile, the Ming dynasty, which regained control of China in 1368, established a policy of isolationism that meant less contact with the West. Some trade via the Silk Road persisted, but it never was as active as it once had been.

East Meets West: The Silk Road: Discussion

1. It took years for Silk Road travelers and merchants, like Zhang Qian and Marco Polo, to reach their destinations. What kinds of preparations would have been needed at that time for such a journey? What sorts of resources would need to be available along the way for the trade routes to function successfully?
2. In 1998, world-renowned cellist Yo-Yo Ma brought together scholars, musicians, and others to form a foundation known as the Silk Road Project. The purpose of the project is to share music and other performing arts from all the cultures represented by the Silk Road. Yo-Yo Ma has called the ancient Silk Road the "Internet of antiquity." Discuss what you think he means by that metaphor.
3. Suppose that the Han dynasty, the Tang dynasty, and the Mongol Empire had been more like the Ming dynasty, which promoted isolationism. How do you think history might have been different?

Was Marco Polo a Fraud?

In his sweeping adventures, did this legendary figure really travel to the Far East?



KUBLAI KHAN WAS SO TAKEN WITH HIS VISITORS THAT HE FUNDED THEIR TRAVELS THROUGH CHINA. KHAN PRESENTS HIS GOLDEN SEAL TO THE POLOS IN A 1413 PAINTING (TOP). MARCO ALONE IS FEATURED ON THE TITLE PAGE OF THE FIRST EDITION (1477) OF *THE TRAVELS OF MARCO POLO* (ABOVE).

MARCO POLO'S ADVENTURE INTO THE HEART OF China and the Far East has long been a crowning achievement for the European Age of Discovery. The chronicles of his 13th-century journey became the definitive sourcebook for the customs and geography of Asia. Polo, with his father and uncle, had described in colorful, rich detail a vast region of the world, and his journeys became yet another feather in the cap of European ingenuity. But did Marco Polo actually make it to China?

THE ADVENTURER'S TRAVELS

Just 17 years old when he began the journey towards China (then called Cathay) with his father and uncle, Marco and crew began what would become a three-year journey. Marco's accounts report how they sailed to Palestine, rode camels to Hormuz (in modern-day Iran), and entered Kublai Khan's magnificent capital of Cambuluc (now Beijing). The apparently lonely Khan enthusiastically welcomed his new visitors and began to show off his lands—fresh spoils in the Mongol military conquest of China. So taken with Marco's charms was the Khan that he supposedly asked the multilin-

gual lad to take tours of the new lands, and to then report back on his observations. Travel Marco did, for 17 years, all around China, noting his escapades and encounters.

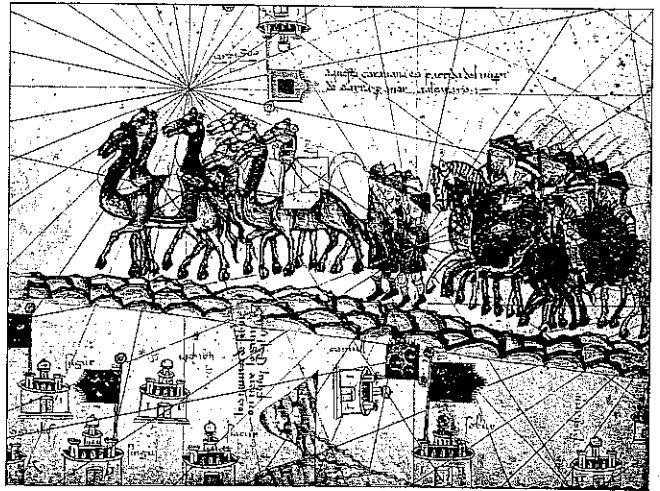
EXIT POLO, ENTER SKEPTICS

Toward the end of his expedition, Marco was also allegedly appointed to the position of governor of Yangzhou, a city in eastern China, acting as an objective foreign overseer. As the Polos grew weary of their stay, they requested their leave more often, but the clingy Khan was too enamored with them to allow it. They were finally granted departure in 1292. They reached Venice in 1295, whereupon Marco became an instant sensation for his fabulous tales of an unknown world. When Genoa went to war with Venice a few years later, Marco was imprisoned. He recounted his tales to Rustichello, an inmate and a romance writer who knew gold when he saw it. Exaggerating much in his friend's stories, Rustichello prepared Polo's adventures for release; it became a European hit immediately.

Yet no one can verify any of Marco Polo's tales. Skeptics of the Venetian merchant's journey have been quick to note his glaring omissions of Far East culture. The adventurer failed to mention the tea-drinking obsession; he overlooked the use of chopsticks; and he even neglected to point out the Chinese calligraphic written language. Perhaps more bizarre is Polo's lack of discussion on the art of binding girls' feet, which other explorers had found noteworthy. Or what about the oversight of the Great Wall, which, though not yet fully completed as it would be two centuries later, was undeniably impressive? Moreover, the versatile Marco, who by his own account was fluent in



EXPLORER MARCO POLO IS COSTUMED IN TATAR ATTIRE (LEFT). A CATALAN MAP SHOWS MARCO TRAVELING WITH HIS FATHER AND UNCLE IN A CARAVAN OF CAMELS (RIGHT).



four languages, didn't seem to pick up a word of Chinese in all of his time there. No documentation of the Polos' visit exists, despite a 17-year "official" stay in the region—and a government position to boot. Stir these omissions in with other errors and sprinkle in a poor sense of geography, and out comes what many skeptics call "bunk."

At the same time, the naysayers haven't offered any solutions to the truths that Polo's book related. One theory contends that Marco Polo just had a very good ear for stories: He made it no farther than his father's trading posts in Constantinople, and for close to two decades wandered around, meeting explorers who had visited the Far East. He took copious notes on their experiences, and subsequently produced his own "travels."

But Marco's accounts of China's large cities, the pleasant demeanor of Kublai Khan, and thousands of other observations are too personal and exact to be second-hand knowledge. Oversights may have been due to his preferential treatment; in the company of the nobility, he would not have been exposed to certain elements of society. And while it is difficult to prove that Marco Polo was in China, it's probably more difficult to prove he was elsewhere.

Chances are, Marco did make the journey, but because his prison mate Rustichello was a romance adventure writer, there was quite a bit of external editing and embellishment on points that weren't considered attention-worthy. Too, the glorious details recorded in Polo's tales are intricate enough to suggest an extensive journey in China. Exaggeration assuredly took place, but then again, what great autobiography hasn't had its share of hyperbole?

POLO AND PASTA

The myth of Marco Polo introducing pasta to Italy from China is a puzzling one; it seems to have originated, or at least been popularized, in a 1920s magazine article, but there is no real basis for the claim.

Much like geometry, pasta has had more than its share of inventors. While the Chinese had been savoring noodle dumplings for centuries, the Arabian culture had not



only been eating pasta but making it as a way of preserving flour on desert treks. But Italy is not to be overshadowed: Italians had been munching on ravioli for years before Marco Polo made his journey. In fact, it was the Etruscans of that region, way back in the 8th century BC, who began making noodles and lasagna from a Greek recipe for dough cakes (*laganon*).