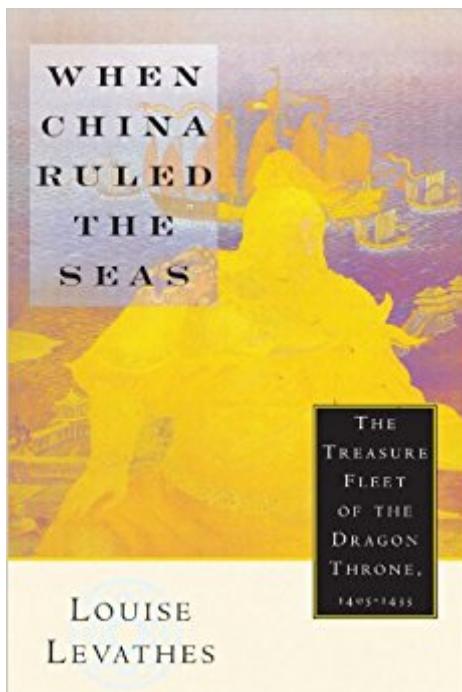


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# When China Ruled The Seas: The Treasure Fleet Of The Dragon Throne, 1405-1433



## Synopsis

A hundred years before Columbus and his fellow Europeans began making their way to the New World, fleets of giant Chinese junks commanded by the eunuch admiral Zheng He and filled with the empire's finest porcelains, lacquerware, and silk ventured to the edge of the world's "four corners." It was a time of exploration and conquest, but it ended in a retrenchment so complete that less than a century later, it was a crime to go to sea in a multimasted ship. In *When China Ruled the Seas*, Louise Levathes takes a fascinating and unprecedented look at this dynamic period in China's enigmatic history, focusing on China's rise as a naval power that literally could have ruled the world and at its precipitous plunge into isolation when a new emperor ascended the Dragon Throne.

During the brief period from 1405 to 1433, seven epic expeditions brought China's "treasure ships" across the China Seas and the Indian Ocean, from Taiwan to the spice islands of Indonesia and the Malabar coast of India, on to the rich ports of the Persian Gulf and down the African coast, China's "El Dorado," and perhaps even to Australia, three hundred years before Captain Cook was credited with its discovery. With over 300 ships--some measuring as much as 400 feet long and 160 feet wide, with upwards of nine masts and twelve sails, and combined crews sometimes numbering over 28,000 men--the emperor Zhu Di's fantastic fleet was a virtual floating city, a naval expression of his Forbidden City in Beijing. The largest wooden boats ever built, these extraordinary ships were the most technically superior vessels in the world with innovations such as balanced rudders and bulwarked compartments that predated European ships by centuries. For thirty years foreign goods, medicines, geographic knowledge, and cultural insights flowed into China at an extraordinary rate, and China extended its sphere of political power and influence throughout the Indian Ocean. Half the world was in China's grasp, and the rest could easily have been, had the emperor so wished.

But instead, China turned inward, as succeeding emperors forbade overseas travel and stopped all building and repair of oceangoing junks. Disobedient merchants and seamen were killed, and within a hundred years the greatest navy the world had ever known willed itself into extinction. The period of China's greatest outward expansion was followed by the period of its greatest isolation. Drawing on eye-witness accounts, official Ming histories, and African, Arab, and Indian sources, many translated for the first time, Levathes brings readers inside China's most illustrious scientific and technological era. She sheds new light on the historical and cultural context in which this great civilization thrived, as well as the perception of other cultures toward this little understood empire at the time. Beautifully illustrated and engagingly written, *When China Ruled the Seas* is the fullest picture yet of the early Ming Dynasty--the last flowering of Chinese culture before the Manchu invasions.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Levathes, a former staff writer for National Geographic, here tells the story of seven epic voyages made by unique junk armadas during the reign of the Chinese emperor Zhu Di. These "treasure ships" under the command of the eunuch admiral Zheng He traded in porcelain, silk, lacquerware and fine-art objects; they sailed from Korea and Japan throughout the Malay archipelago and India to East Africa, and possibly as far away as Australia. Levathes argues that China could have employed its navy--with some 3000 vessels, the largest in history until the present century--to establish a great colonial empire 100 years before the age of European exploration and expansion; instead, the Chinese abruptly dismantled their navy. Levathes describes the political showdown that led to this perverse turn of events, revolving around a clash between the powerful eunuch class and Confucian scholar-officials. Her scholarly study includes a section on the construction of the seagoing junks (the largest had nine masts, was 400 feet long and would have dwarfed Columbus's ships) and provides a look into court life in the Ming dynasty, particularly the relationship between the emperor, his eunuch and his concubines. Illustrated. Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

In the early 1400s China was poised to become the world's premier maritime power. Emperor Zhu Di (who also built Beijing's Forbidden City) planted vast orchards of tung trees to provide oil to seal his huge "treasure ships," which ranged the South China Seas and the Indian Ocean loaded with silks and porcelains traded for gemstones, coral, pepper, and the cobalt used to improve the very

porcelains for which his Ming dynasty would become known. But due to shrinking funds, foreign aggressors, and the Confucian distrust of trade and prosperity, the Chinese abruptly abandoned shipbuilding and began their long plummet into isolationism. A former staff writer for National Geographic, Levathes writes history in the praiseworthy tradition of Barbara Tuchman. There are substantial notes and a bibliography of works in Chinese, English, and French. Highly recommended. Jack Shreve, Allegany Community Coll., Cumberland, Md. Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

For those interested in why China viewed itself in the past and still views today itself as the center of the world, this book offers fascinating insights. I found it well-written and enjoyable to read. The footnotes include extensive annotations and bibliography. The expeditions of Admiral Zheng He make fascinating reading.

This book raises the counterfactual "What if the Ming had continued Zheng He's stunning beginning and utilized its incredible shipbuilding skills to become a maritime power just at the time the Europeans had unlocked their own isolation in the West. Confronted by massive Chinese fleets of heavily armored ships would they have so easily dominated the East?

This is a very thorough, and fascinating account. But gets a little tedious at times.

The history of the treasure fleet (1405-1433) during the Ming Dynasty is an amazing description of Chinese naval power at the time. There was no power on earth at the time that could compare to that of the Chinese navy. It is a story that is not well known but definitely one worth reading about.

After much sensationalist drivel had been written about the "Treasure fleet" it was a genuine pleasure to read an account of this piece of history by a genuine scholar. History often enough has its evidence gaps. Scholarship means that existing evidence is assembled, presented, weighted, and subsequent conjectures identified as such and ranked commensurately. And yet, Mme Levathes presents all this in such a fluid, readable style that the book makes for excellent recreational literature, without any recourse to "mysteries", "secrets of the far east" or other stupid glitter. After having read the book I felt I understood. And that's what I was looking for.

The author of this book has written and informed and straightforward narrative about the 15th

century and earlier Chinese treasure fleets. Her narrative is based primarily upon Chinese sources. Unlike Menzies (1421: The Year China Discovered America) the author does not make use of European maps of the 15th century and later which Menzies thinks gives accurate and detailed information of Chinese voyages to the Americas and the two poles which pre-date Columbus and other European explorers. In this book, claims for Chinese "discoveries" and trade are limited to Southeast Asia, East Africa, and possibly Australia.

This is an entertaining look at the voyages of Zheng Ho, a eunuch in the service of the Ming Emperor of China, in the fifteenth century C.E. China's navy was then the most powerful in the world, and Levathes helps us recognize this with some skillfully drawn comparisons between Zheng Ho's treasure ships (the largest wooden vessels ever built) and the puny Santa Maria. China was unquestionably the most advanced civilization in the world during Zheng Ho's time, and had the voyages been allowed to continue, resulting in permanent Chinese influence on and control of the Indian Ocean, Africa, and possibly America and Europe, our world today would be very different indeed. Levathes does a good job of explaining why Ming China decided to stop the voyages and its international trade, and points out that while Westerners tend to see this as a failure, to the Chinese at the time it seemed a success. This is probably the most valuable insight of the book, the illustration of a very wide gap between the psychological makeup of East and West.

This is an interesting brief History of the period of the early Ming exploration. It enhances your knowledge of the Chinese move out of mainland China to the areas of SE Asia. It shows why the Europeans were able to establish trade with the Spice Islands and India as trade was well established there. The Europeans were only the new comers not the instigators as is implied by Western Historians.

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