

EVERYONE LIKES PRESENTS

ZHENG HE

BORN IN YUNNAN PROVINCE, CHINA, 1371(?)

DIED IN CALICUT, INDIA, 1433

Chinese commander of seven voyages to thirty countries

It was good to be trusted by the emperor Yongle, who tended to execute anyone who challenged him. No one was more reliable than Zheng He. He had lived in the emperor's household since he was ten, when he had been captured by generals of the Ming dynasty of China, the richest and most populated country on earth.

Zheng became trusted both inside the palace (he rose to director of the palace servants, which entitled him to wear robes of red, not blue like the others) and outside the palace, as a courageous officer in the army.

Some say he was seven feet tall, with a waist five feet around. He had a voice like a gong, rough skin like an orange peel, and a powerful gaze with eyebrows like swords. He grew up a devout Muslim, later became a devout Buddhist, and also worshiped the Taoist sea goddess Tianfei, protector of sailors against the giant dragons believed to live under the surface.

Finally the emperor rewarded the thirty-five-year-old Zheng with a plum job: commander in chief of a most unusual voyage, bearing gifts and gathering information in Asia, India, Arabia, and Africa. Chinese scholars gave Zheng the latest Arab and Hindu discoveries about navigation and geography.

No expense was spared for his fleet of sixty ships. They may have been the

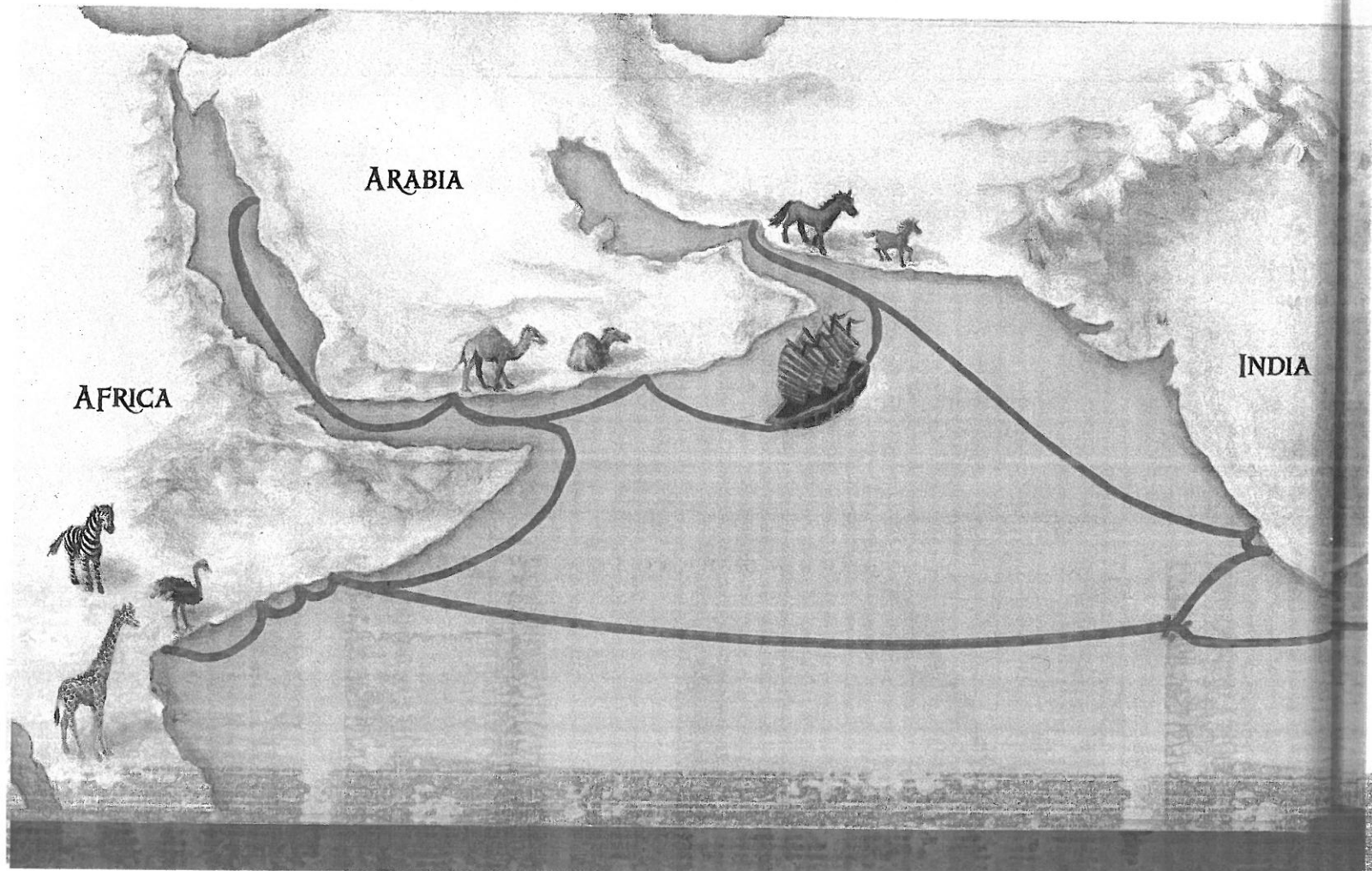
LIVES OF THE EXPLORERS

biggest wooden boats ever built—huge “treasure ships” (filled with the gifts) guarded by smaller ones. A complex system of flags, lanterns, gongs, drums, and carrier pigeons enabled the ships to communicate with one another.

Zheng’s crew was massive—about thirty thousand men, mostly professional soldiers, living in comfortable quarters. Also aboard were 180 doctors to collect medicinal herbs wherever they went; judges to settle disputes and punish those who broke rules; translators; farmers to grow vegetables and keep everyone healthy; and one officer whose only duty was to tell fortunes.

The countries Zheng visited got the finest silks and brocades with dragon and phoenix designs, paper money, and more. Countries also sent back their own presents, such as pepper, worth its weight in gold, and animals unknown in China: ostriches, zebras, camels, Arabian horses. Elegant giraffes caused the biggest sensation.

Zheng and his men were showered with money and promotions when they returned to China. The emperor hosted banquets in their honor, with more food and drink than was humanly possible to consume.



ZHENG HE

Zheng took a total of seven voyages, the goal always to inspire awe at Chinese accomplishments. He was not out to conquer; his ships had names like *Lasting Tranquility* and *Pure Harmony*. They were fully armed with guns, explosives, grenades, bows, and flaming arrows, but Zheng preferred to avoid trouble and used force only three times in order to repel attacks.

Zheng did have enemies: officials who deemed the extravagant voyages in bad taste and a waste of resources. They accused him of lying about what he saw, lies that ordinary citizens couldn't prove one way or the other.

Zheng ultimately owned a huge house near the main mosque in Nanjing, with seventy-two rooms and lots of land. When he died at age sixty-two and was buried at sea, all of it went to his adopted nephew.

Had the voyages continued, the world might look very different today due to China's influence. But Emperor Yongle had also died. The records of Zheng's voyages were "lost," the treasure ships rotted, and China withdrew from the sea and stopped exploring.

