

## The Legacy of Zheng He and the Ming Dynasty Sea Voyages

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A model of one of Zheng He's treasure ships. Source: *Stephens and Kenau* at <https://tinyurl.com/y9w59cae>.

This module was developed and utilized for a seventh-grade world history and geography class. It is designed to teach the Tennessee state social studies standard 7.07—“Analyze the achievements of the Ming Dynasty and reasons for its isolationism, including building projects (e.g., the Forbidden City and reconstruction of the Great Wall) and Zheng He's sea voyages.” The module is suitable for a variety of social studies classes (grades six through nine) that include early Chinese history.

**Estimated module length:** Approximately three fifty-five-minute classes

### Overview

During the early years of the Ming dynasty, a young Chinese Muslim boy by the name of Ma He (1371–1433) was captured by the Chinese army, along with other children. At the young age of thirteen, Ma was castrated and made a servant to one of the emperor's sons. Ma grew into a strong warrior and favorite officer of the prince. With the help of Ma, Prince Zhu Di, fought and took the throne from his nephew to become the new emperor in 1402. Zhu Di who assumed the title of Chengzu and became the third Ming emperor (reign name Yongle), rewarded his faithful servant by giving him the new surname Zheng. It was alleged in official records that Zheng He

was an imposing figure, standing seven feet tall. As was the case with many eunuchs, he served the emperor in numerous high-ranking positions in his government. His most famous role would be as commander/admiral of China's treasure ship fleet. The primary role of the Ming dynasty's treasure fleet was to display the power and majesty of the dynasty while collecting tributes. Zheng He organized and supervised seven sea voyages (1405-1433) where Zheng He and the fleet traveled through the South China Sea, Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea, The Red Sea, and the East coast of Africa. During this famous period in China's maritime history, many scholars think the larger expeditions included at least 200-300 and 28,000-30,000 ships. The treasure ships, which were alleged to be 400 feet in length (this is a disputed estimation but the ships were enormous), were the pride of the fleet.

Students will be asked to investigate and report (as if they were journalists) on the life and legacy of Admiral Zheng He and his seven sea voyages. They will also be asked to analyze the reasoning behind the Ming dynasty's ending of the sea voyages and the policies that resulted in their retreat into a period of isolationism. They will also reflect on how these isolationistic policies influenced future world events.

This module is designed to be implemented during the teaching of an imperial China or East Asia unit.

### **Objectives**

Students will:

Investigate China's great sea voyages made by the Ming dynasty during the fifteenth century.

Research and investigate the life of Zheng He and his role in the Ming dynasty's treasure fleet sea voyages.

Design and create short film productions reporting on the events and influences the seven treasure fleet sea voyages had on China and the countries to which they sailed.

Interpret and explain the events that led to China's government ending the famous Ming voyages.

Analyze how China entering into a period of isolationism influenced and potentially changed world history events.

### **Prerequisite knowledge**

Before the beginning of this module, students should be able to locate China on a map and know where the general location of the South China Sea and Indian Ocean, along with Southeast Asia, the Indian subcontinent, and Africa. They should be able to define the following terms: emperor, dynasty, eunuch, tribute, fleet, voyage, and isolationism. Because Confucian-trained bureaucrats influenced changes in Ming government policies, an understanding of some of Confucian's ideas would be helpful but is not required.

## Module Introduction

*The worksheets and other materials for this module appear in both the module narrative and at the end of the module for the convenience of teachers wishing to use all or part of these digital materials.*

*Class No. 1*

*Warmup:*

Students should be provided a short reading titled “[The Emperor and His Ambitions](#)” prior to the first class. The reading is based on Professor Sue Gronewald’s *Asia for Educators* secondary student reading “The Ming Voyages” and is abridged and modified for middle school students. All teachers are highly encouraged to read Professor Gronewald’s complete but succinct reading, and the link to the complete reading appears first in the *Asia for Educators* entry in the references and resources section of the module.

“The Emperor and His Ambitions” can be assigned as homework prior to Class No. 1. Students should review the reading at the beginning of class, and teachers should pose the question, “In what ways did the early Ming emperors plan to maintain control of China and display its power?”



The Yongle emperor. Source: *Wikipedia* at <https://tinyurl.com/ycqndvqo>.

### “The Emperor and His Ambitions”

The Ming dynasty (1368-1644) represented a return to power of Chinese rulers after the conclusion of the Mongol emperors who ruled China in the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1468.) In order to demonstrate Ming power, the first emperors started battles to defeat any threat. The third emperor of the Ming Dynasty, Chengzu, also referred to by his reign name, the Yongle Emperor, was aggressive and led major battles against Mongolian tribes to the north and west. He also wanted other countries to be aware of China’s power and see it as the strong country he believed it had been in the past. He emphasized the traditional tribute system. In the tribute system countries on China’s borders agreed to recognize China as their superior and its emperor as lord of “all under Heaven”. These countries gave gifts of tribute in exchange for certain benefits like military posts and trade treaties. In this system the benefit of peace and trade was guaranteed. The emperor realized the major threats to China were from the north (the Mongols) so he personally led those military battles. He sent his most trusted generals to deal with the Manchurians, Koreans, Japanese, and Vietnamese threats. For the ocean expeditions to the south and west he decided that China should make use of its advanced technology and all of the riches the state had to offer. Lavish expeditions should be organized in order to overwhelm foreign peoples and convince them of the Ming dynasty’s power. For this special purpose, he chose one of his most trusted military leaders, Zheng He.

#### Warm-up Question

In what ways did the early Ming emperors plan to maintain control of China and display its power?

Students should take note of the discussion of the Ming emperors initiating campaigns against their perceived enemies in order to ward off potential threats. They should also make note of the return of the traditional tribute system. Discuss with students how this system was seen as a highly regulated and ritualistic series of exchanges between China’s imperial court and other countries’ leaders for the purpose of commercial and political diplomacy.

Zheng He video (estimated time, ten minutes)

Next, show students the [four minute and thirty-four second PBS video](#) on the life of Zheng He. While students view the video, they should answer the questions posed on [the video worksheet](#). Upon completion of the video, discuss the answers to the video questions.





Source: Screen capture from *PBS World Explorers' "Zheng He"* at <https://tinyurl.com/ycqndvqo>.  
*Research and video report activity*

Explain to students that they are to imagine they are reporters tasked with the job of researching and then reporting on the sea voyages made by Zheng He during the time of the Ming dynasty. They must research several aspects of the voyages, compile the gathered information into organized notecards, and finally create a video report on their findings. It is recommended that the teacher encourage students to consider utilizing visual props in the videos, such as printed maps of the sea voyage routes, pictures of Zheng He, and pictures of the ships that sailed on the voyages. These are some of the suggested questions you may pose to students in order to begin their research:

Who was Zheng He? What was the purpose of the voyages? How many trips were made? Where were the ships built and who built them? Where were the destinations of the trips? How many ships sailed on each voyage? What supplies and people went on the trips? What items and people returned to China on the voyages?

Discuss these sample questions with students. These questions are only suggestions and teachers can create additional questions. The videos should be timed to last a minimum of three minutes and a maximum of five minutes. Students must have a focus of their research and report in order to fulfill the requirements of the assignment. The purpose of creating student videos is so students may place their own unique spins on the reporting of the sea voyages and Zheng He. It might be suggested that teachers have students write their own questions they would like answered in the videos. Teachers should review and have final approval of the student questions; that way, teachers can make sure students cover a variety of information in the video reports.

The remainder of Class No. 1 time should be used for students writing report questions, and once approved by the teacher, they may begin their research.

*Technical considerations and suggestions:*

There are several ways students may create video reports. One suggestion is a website called [Flipgrid](#). It is very popular with educators and a convenient way for students to record, post, and view student videos. It is also safe because once a teacher creates a Flipgrid page, only people whom the teacher gives the access code to can view the videos. Teachers must create an account in order to use the app, and it is free to use.

Another video option is to use [Google Slide](#). Students may record videos by use of a Chrome book video app and then download the video into a Google Slide presentation. Another option is to allow students to utilize their own smartphones and record their video reports on their phones. Splice is an example of a phone app that allows students to record and edit their videos on their phones or iPads. There are numerous video apps students may choose to create their videos. The recorded videos may then be sent by text or email and then loaded into Google Slide.

The creation of a [Google Classroom](#) page assignment would be an excellent way for the teacher to keep up with all the videos if they are sent using Google Slide.

A nontechnical option for this assignment could be the research and writing of a standard report or essay, as if written by a newspaper reporter for a news article.

*Student research resource link suggestions*

Although there are some historical discrepancies about the voyages including the actual size of the treasure ships, suitable student research links are provided below (see References and Resources section for extended descriptions) as possible suggestions for students to use as resources for their research. Although, student research need not be limited to just these suggestions, teachers should attempt to evaluate the credibility of other links students might offer.

[“Facts about Asia: Two Significant Maritime Achievements”](#)

[“Zheng He”](#)

[“The Seven Voyages of the Treasure Fleet”](#)

[“Biography of Explorer Cheng Ho”](#) (“Zheng He” spelled “Cheng Ho” here)

[“Ancient Chinese Explorers”](#)

*Class No. 2*

Students should begin the class period with the teacher reviewing the project parameters and focus. Discuss expectations and any questions or concerns students may have at this point in the projects.

Students should spend the bulk of Class No. 2 completing their research on Zheng He and the Ming sea voyages, organizing their information for their video report onto notecards, and then recording and editing their videos.

*Author's note*

During the field-testing of this module, some students were very reluctant for their faces to appear on video. It is assumed the shyness and fear exhibited by the students were due to the adolescent age of the participants (eleven and twelve years old). The use of props such as maps and pictures were suggestions offered to these reluctant students, which helped alleviate some of their fears.

Videos should be completed and turned in by the end of Class No. 2.

*Class No. 3*

Begin Class No. 3 of the module by having students read the following excerpt from an inscription that Zheng He commissioned and placed in 1431 placed on a tablet outside the Tianfei Temple in Changle harbor in Fujian before the last voyage set sail (from the *OmniAtlas* website).

*The Imperial Ming Dynasty unifying seas and continents, surpassing the three dynasties even goes beyond the Han and Tang dynasties. The countries beyond the horizon and from the ends of the earth have all become subjects and to the most western of the western or the most northern of the northern countries, however far they may be, the distance and the routes may be calculated. Thus, the barbarians from beyond the seas, though their countries are truly distant, "with double translation" have come to audience bearing precious objects and presents.*  
—Stone inscription Tianfei Temple, Changle, 1431

After students read the inscription, ask them what they think it is saying about China's relationship with other countries and how China sees itself in comparison to other countries



Tianfei Temple. Source: *Nanjing Travel* at <https://tinyurl.com/y8y56xdq>.

### *Video viewing and discussion*

How the teacher chose to have students record their video reports will determine how students are able to view and comment on fellow student videos. If [Flipgrid](#), an online classroom video discussion platform, was used, students may log into the Flipgrid page set up by the teacher and view fellow student videos. The program allows fellow students to also comment on viewed videos, engaging in a fluid class discussion about the information in the videos. The Flipgrid app allows the teacher to view and monitor student comments.

If the teacher chose to utilize [Google Slide](#) as a source for sending in video reports, the teacher can randomly choose videos to show to the class. An excellent discussion strategy is to have students do a timed “turn and talk” after viewing each video. A final class discussion and question session may best serve to wrap up the video viewing.

### *Culminating activity*

Students should be presented with a copy of the [culminating activity handout](#) (also below). Have students silently read the primary source excerpts that focus upon aspects of the voyages:

Source No. 1:

*Due to so many unexplained difficulties and bad omens, the Majesty is humbled and concerned ... To alleviate the situation, all policies that cause the public inconvenience, if not urgent, should be stopped ... policies temporarily stopped include the voyages to foreign countries, horse trading with the remote western and northern areas.*

—Excerpt from a speech by Emperor Yong Le explaining the decision to stop the voyages of Zheng He: 1433 (Source: *Asia for Educators* at <https://tinyurl.com/kw52z43>).

Source No. 2:

*Riches and honors are what men desire. If it cannot be obtained in the proper way, they should not be held ... The superior man understands what is right; the inferior man understands what will sell ... The superior man is aware of righteousness, the inferior man is aware of advantage ... The virtuous man is driven by responsibility, the non-virtuous man is driven by profit ...*

—Excerpts from chapters 2 and 4 of *Analects* (approximate publication dates (400–100 BCE))

Source No. 3:

*... deceitful exaggerations of bizarre things far removed from the testimony of people’s eyes and ears... the expeditions of San Bao [meaning “Three Jewels,” as Zheng He was called] to the West Ocean wasted tens of myriads of money and grain and moreover the people who met their deaths may be counted in the myriads. Although he returned with wonderful precious things, what benefit was it to the state?*

—Excerpt from a discussion between the Ministry of War to emperor of China in 1477, response to attempts by eunuch factions to begin more voyages (Source: *Asia for Educators* at <https://tinyurl.com/kw52z43>).

Directions: Read and answer the following three questions for each source.

What is the author’s point of view?



What claim does the author make about the sea voyages? (Confucius obviously made no claim but it is important that students think about how the greatest sage in Chinese history might have reacted to the Ming voyages had he lived at the time they occurred.)

What words or phrases are used to convince the reader of their argument?

After students read and answer the three questions as they apply to each of the three excerpts, discuss how the ideas expressed in each excerpt might have contributed to the Ming dynasty's decision to end China's sea voyages.

Ask students if, in their research for their video reports, they found any other events or factors that may have influenced the decision to end the sea voyages. Make a list on the board as students discuss the factors. After a list of possible factors that contributed to the end of the Ming sea voyages is written on the board or overhead, ask students to rank the listed factors on their own paper from the most influential factor to the least influential factor. Discuss the results, and, as a class, decide what factors were the most influential in ending the sea voyages.

#### *Extension activity*

We know the Ming dynasty stopped sending out their magnificent treasure fleet and retreated into a period of isolationism, but what if they had not? How do you think world history might have turned out differently if Ming emperors had not turned to a policy of isolationism and had instead pursued a vigorous colonialization policy?

The teacher should make sure students understand that not too long after Ming China ended the sea voyages and retreated into a period of isolationism, Europe moved forward with their exploration and colonialization of the "New World."

The above question can be posed to students in one of several ways. Students love to blog! Pose this question as a blog question for students to read and respond to in the blog. Check with one of your school's language arts teachers and ask if they have a student blog. If not, you can easily and safely set up your own blog page for students on a website called [Kidblog.org](http://Kidblog.org). Check with other teachers at your school; they may have experience with this or other sites. On educational blog sites, students may write, read, and respond, interacting with fellow students in a way that can be monitored by the teacher during the activity.

#### *Author's note on students' reactions*

It is interesting that some students referred back to our study of the fall of the Roman Empire in an attempt to answer the extension question. Several students discussed the concept of overexpansion and eventual invasion by foreign powers as a possible result if China had attempted to compete as a colonizing power instead of retreating into isolationism. It was a struggle for many of the middle school-age students to envision possible changes to current world events and cultures. The depth of the question appears to be a challenge to students with limited worldviews.

The other nontechnical option to complete this extension question is to have students do a free write on their own papers and then pass their papers, writing comments and responses onto

papers as they are passed in a timed round robin activity. There is no talking during the activity. Papers eventually end up back with the original student, and then the teacher leads a whole-class discussion on possible answers to the question to end the activity.

### References and resources

[http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/china\\_1000ce\\_mingvoyages.htm](http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/china_1000ce_mingvoyages.htm)

<http://www.learn.columbia.edu/nanxuntu/html/economy/ming.pdf>: “The Ming Voyages” by Sue Gronewald on *Asia for Educators* summarizes Zheng He and the Ming sea voyages, along with providing alternative classroom activities. It is also the resource for the modified warmup reading. The second link is for a PDF version of “The Ming Voyages”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_DJkE3zh6RE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_DJkE3zh6RE): This is a *YouTube* video by CCTV9 that introduces the Ming dynasty, discussing in detail the construction of the royal treasure fleet.

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2212682116300099#b0095>: This is a link to Li-sheng Huang, “The Issues of Islands Governing in Early Ming Dynasty,” *Journal of Marine and Island Cultures* 5, no. 1 (2016): 5–10. This is an article on sea travel and trade during the early Ming dynasty.

<https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/library/magazine/millennium/m3/kristof.html>: This is a link to Nicholas Kristof, “1492: The Prequel,” *New York Times Magazine*, June 6, 1999. This is a great teacher resource from *The New York Times* where a researcher and reporter explore and search for current-day evidence left behind by the Ming sea voyages.

[http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/active\\_learning/explorations/1492/1492\\_zhenghe.cfm](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/active_learning/explorations/1492/1492_zhenghe.cfm): This is an entry on Zheng He by the University of Houston’s *Digital History* website. This site is a basic short summary and comparison of Zheng He and Columbus’s ships.

[http://vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1093&context=undergrad\\_rev](http://vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1093&context=undergrad_rev): This is a link to Mark Dwinnells, “Lost Leviathans: The Technology of Zheng He’s Voyages,” *Undergraduate Review* 4 (2008): 127–131. This is an excellent article for the teacher to better understand the political and military strategies under consideration during Ming rule, as well as the superior shipbuilding techniques needed to build such grand sailing vessels.

[http://omniatlas.com/blogs/cause\\_and\\_effect/countries-beyond-horizon/](http://omniatlas.com/blogs/cause_and_effect/countries-beyond-horizon/): This is a link to Rick Westera, “Why China Didn’t Discover America,” *OmniAtlas*, last modified October 14, 2011. This is the source of Class No. 3’s warmup quote.

<http://factsanddetails.com/china/cat2/sub4/entry-5603.html>: This is the entry on the Yongle emperor of the Ming dynasty by the website *Facts and Details*.

Jakub J Grygiel, “The Geostrategy of Ming China,” *Great Powers and Geopolitical Change* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 123–163: This resource text is an excellent source for reading and understanding the influence and effect of Asia’s geography on political decisions, and its influence on social and cultural changes.

Stewart Gordon, “Treasure and Treaty,” *When Asia Was the World* (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2008), 117–136: This resource text shares excerpts and personal perspectives from the diary of a member of the crew (Ma Huan), who sailed on three of Zheng He’s voyages.

Below are suggested resources for student research:

<https://www.utc.edu/asia-program/pdfs/factsaboutasiacolumbuszhenghe.pdf>: “Facts About Asia: Two Significant Maritime Achievements,” from *Education About Asia* 10, no. 3 (2005): 46–47.

[http://staff.imsa.edu/~esmith/treasurefleet/treasurefleet/zheng\\_he.htm](http://staff.imsa.edu/~esmith/treasurefleet/treasurefleet/zheng_he.htm): Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy entry on Zheng He

<https://www.thoughtco.com/the-seven-voyages-of-the-treasure-fleet-195215>: Kallie Szczepanski, “The Seven Voyages of the Treasure Fleet,” *Thought Co.*, March 8, 2017.

<https://www.thoughtco.com/cheng-ho-biography-1435009>: Article by Matt Rosenberg, “Biography of Explorer Cheng Ho,” from *Thought Co.*, June 5, 2017. (“Zheng He” is spelled “Cheng Ho” in the article.)

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/ancient/ancient-chinese-explorers.html>: Article by Evan Hadingham, “Ancient Chinese Explorers,” from *PBS Nova*, January 16, 2001.

Digital Materials for the Module: “The Legacy of Zheng He and the Ming Dynasty Sea Voyages”

The Emperor and his Ambitions

<https://www.utc.edu/asia-program/docs/modules2/hill/theemperorandhisambitions.docx>

Zheng He PBS video questions worksheet

<https://www.utc.edu/asia-program/docs/modules2/hill/zhenghevideoworksheet.docx>

Culminating Activity Handout

<https://www.utc.edu/asia-program/docs/modules2/hill/culminatingactivityhandout.docx>