

“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?