



When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1405-1433

Louise Levathes

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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.

When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1405-1433 **Details**

Date : Published January 9th 1997 by Oxford University Press, USA (first published May 19th 1994)

ISBN : 9780195112078

Author : Louise Levathes

Format : Paperback 252 pages

Genre : History, Cultural, China, Nonfiction, Asia, World History

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Kimberly says

Very interesting, as history books go. I prefer historical fiction, to avoid overwhelming with details and engage attention in a relatable story. I highly recommend this book to anyone seeking facts about the history of China.

John says

A delightful read that combines good storytelling with historical depth. While it's overshadowed by Gavin Menzies' spicy 1421: The Year that China Discovered America, When China Ruled the Seas is well worth a read. The drama of Zheng He's life and the court struggles of the early Ming dynasty unfold easily, peppered with side stories, myths, and cultural details that will please and enrich any reader who is not a professional historian of China. I'm glad I picked this one up.

Zorba says

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A. S. says

In high school all the freshmen had to do a project called The Top Thousand People of the Last Millennium. We had to draw a slip of paper, and on it was the name of a potential candidate for this list. Our job for the entire rest of the year was to research this person and find out what they did to impact the world and present an argument that they should or should not be on this hypothetical list. When I drew my slip, I got "Zheng He". I was not pleased. Why couldn't I have gotten someone famous and interesting, like Hitler or Isaac Newton instead of this no-name Chinese guy that my Chinese friends themselves hadn't heard of? Well, by the end of the year I totally changed my mind. Zheng He was an AWESOME person to have because his

voyages spread Chinese culture all over the world, way before the Europeans had any inclination to go seaward at all!

Louise Levathes' books popped up in many of the bibliographies of the books and papers that I read, but at the time my library's copy wasn't available, so I never got to read it in time for my project. Well, I was looking up books for one of my reading challenges in which I had to read something about seafaring, and I remembered the story of Zheng He's travels and I finally got the book in my hands.

Don't get me wrong, I loved Zheng He and Levathes' detailed descriptions of what Chinese boats looked like at the time, but I kept putting the book down, mainly because of the Chinese dynastic histories described in the book. I understand why that was in there--Zheng He's motivation to go to sea and his success at funding the voyages was dependent on who was in power--but I just could not dredge up the care for it. On the other hand, whenever Levathes described the battles He had to fight and the diplomatic maneuvers he employed to get foreign royalty to trade with the Chinese, I was riveted.

Overall, it's definitely worth a read. He's contribution to world trade happened decades before deGama, Columbus, and the others went exploring Africa and the Americas, and it's fascinating how after the last of He's voyages, the Chinese stopped trading and went through a long period of isolation that, well, seems to still be happening in certain areas of life. Imagine, if the Chinese had only built on He's trade and sea-faring skills, I might be writing this review in Chinese right now.

David Frazer says

Very well written and as detailed as account as can be made given the limited records on the voyages of Zheng He. Truly drove home the political motivations for the voyages and their eventual end. Definitely recommend for those interested in the age of exploration - Zheng He's voyages made those of Columbus, Gama and others look pathetic but their sheer scale.

Muhammed says

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Clivemichael says

Fascinating scholarly inquiry extensively researched. History brought to life.

Sean says

When China Ruled the Seas is an insightful work by Louise Levathes concerning a series of diplomatic trade missions that were dispatched from China across the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean in the early 15th century. The primary purpose of the work is to display that China originally had secured hegemony over the world's oceans, most particularly in the Asian oceans, well before the arrival of European merchants, explorers, and colonizers.

Louise Levathes is a journalist by trade who received her BA in English and Biology and a Master's in Journalism from Colombia University. Levathes often travels the country conducting a number of lectures on a variety of academic topics and is currently the Senior Editor at The Berkshire Review and New York Arts. Currently, Levathes is developing a non-fiction web book and studying to gain a Master's in Landscape Architecture from Virginia Tech. The importance of this background does display in her book—while it is an incredibly well-researched piece, there are elements that well-practiced historians might reject. For example, the evidence that the Chinese ever visited the Americas is incredibly sparse and dubious; Levathes mentions several times that the Chinese probably visited the Americas. Other than that, Levathes provides a very coherent account of Chinese hegemony in trade and diplomacy in the Asian Oceans during the 15th century. This is especially accurate in light that Levathes provides a very pervasive system of notes identifying her sources throughout the text. Overall, the work of Levathes is incredibly well-argued.

The major point of When China Ruled the Seas is: Chinese controlled trade hegemony in the Asian Oceans well before the Portuguese and Spanish ever managed to travel by ship across the oceans; they accomplished this by technological maritime superiority and by providing the impetus of supply for most of the trading taking place throughout the region. However, despite the incredible interest in the idea of the overall thesis, perhaps the most insightful revelation is that the Chinese never saw hegemony through direct physical control or even domination of the sea trade itself. As the Middle Kingdom, the Chinese thought that they already controlled all on Earth and that these diplomatic relations were peaceful extensions of that rule. The Chinese did not think they needed to physically control the sea trade, because it was already their own.

What eventually led to the decline of Chinese hegemony was the eventual abolition of the Chinese treasure fleets and the end of the exchange of diplomatic trade missions. This was partially due to the culture of Chinese Confucianism, which viewed merchant activity as greedy. However, there was also an interior power struggle created by the Yongle Emperor, who increasingly relied on eunuchs to administer and run his empire. After the emperor passed, a power vacuum ensued in which the Confucian ministers sought to diminish sea trade (where eunuchs primarily gained their power) by arbitrary restrictions on ships and maritime trading. This internal struggle, combined with a focus on creating large river-barges for transport rather than naval ships and the onset of Mongol raiding from the Northern interior led to the decline of any focus on maritime trading and sea diplomacy. Nevertheless, Chinese sea hegemony slowly declined and the Europeans moved into the region shortly thereafter.

Overall, Levathes's work is an excellent and insightful read. I would highly recommend it to anyone.

Jay says

I hate this book with a passion. Worst. Book I've ever read and I've read my fair share of terrible books

Jim says

See my review of 1421 and 1491.

This book actually makes a trilogy - even though the three were not written by the same authors.

This one is a tougher read because of the oriental names and place names, but it is worth sticking with it.

It's very interesting due to the author's style - a seaman with an interest in history who has done an excellent job of pursuing his curiosity.

Claire says

It's too bad Zheng He's voyages didn't leave behind more complete records, because it most likely would have been enlightening to read Levathes's full account of them. Behind what deceptively appears to be a narrative of the Treasure Fleet milked for all its worth is a tale of Chinese diplomacy, Sinocentrism, East Asian religion, and court politics that, despite the paucity of the sources concerning the actual fleet, leave us with a neat narrative of the Yongle Emperor's reign. Levathes does a fine job of extracting what little she can from scant Chinese sources on Zheng He and supplementing them with rich documents on the Ming Empire to create a convincing portrait of an Emperor who wanted to bring the glory of the Chinese Empire to the Indian Ocean while at the same strengthening China's diplomatic and military power vis a vis his new trading partners. As written, it's a convincing interpretation as to the purpose of the Treasure Fleet. Unfortunately, Levathes does not use the same subtle skill to explore China's subsequent abrupt isolationism. A book of deceptive depth that is also easy to read, it's a nice entry into the myriad of work on the Ming Empire that are contemporary to it.

Marty Reeder says

Louise Levathes had me at "Treasure Fleet." Those two words next to each other inevitably make for a winning combination. But, while she had me at Treasure Fleet, she soon lost me after that. Which is a shame, because the topic is so darn intriguing. What went wrong? I'm not sure. Throughout the reading of the book, I kept asking myself the same. I wondered if maybe it was the author or the sources or some other unknown factor. All in all, however, the book just was not that interesting--which frustrated me, since I thought it should be. Here's what it felt like. It felt like Louise Levathes had enough information for a nice long National Geographic article, but not near enough for a book. So, to fill in the missing gaps, she added a bunch of pre-history and cultural quirks--many of which had absolutely nothing to do with the era where China ruled the seas. On occasion such offenses are forgivable, especially if the asides are interesting, but I found them to be annoying divergences. Then, when Levathes gets to the meat of the tale, the actual Treasure Fleet, it is surprising how little she actually tells about the treasure fleet's voyages. Certainly, they take several chapters worth and destinations are revealed, foreign countries dabbled on, but it feels so empty of actual, researched material. I understand if Levathes is limited in the information she could have garnered about these expeditions, but if that is the case, it would have been nice to explain the lack of resources to the reader so that the scarcity of knowledge on the voyages can be explained. Here's what I would have liked to see. I would have liked the author to skip past the distant, pre-history of China--or at least summarized the essentials in one, short chapter, and then moved on to the Treasure Fleet, dwelling there for the rest of the book. This could be filled in with accounts from the fleet or from the countries visited or compared with European progress at the time. That is what I would have enjoyed reading. To give Levathes credit, she does drop interesting tidbits here and there, such as the constant philosophical struggles between the Confucians and the Eunuchs in the royal court and how the personalities of the Chinese rulers controlled the fate of the fleet. But those things are verdant oases in an otherwise colorless text. It's possible that there are books out there (or articles, even) that do a better job presenting the world of the Chinese treasure fleet, but it will probably take a while before I'll dare pick them up.

JoKo says

When China Ruled the Seas by Louise Levathes is an elegant, eloquently written account of China's Ming dynasty and its rise as a naval power throughout the 14th and 15th centuries. The book utilizes a broad range of vocabulary and consistently maintains a sophisticated tone throughout while incorporating meticulously researched evidence to show the grandeur of the Ming dynasty and its eventual decline towards the 16th century. After the first Ming emperor, Zhu Yuanzhang, overthrew the decaying Mongol-led empire, he reestablishes Chinese rule throughout the nation, slaughtering Khubilai Khan's forces. After Yuanzhang's death, his son Zhu Yunwen, a bookworm, succeeds the throne. However, he is soon overthrown by his half-brother, Zhu Di, who had been favored over Zhu Yunwen because of his soldier-like, adventurous qualities. Zhu Di then orders the construction of a naval fleet larger than any other before it in history, amounting to hundreds of supply ships, warships, and luxury treasure ships. With warships measuring up to 165 feet in length, mounting 24 cast-bronze cannons each, and the largest treasure ships measuring four hundred feet in length, the Ming navy was a force to be reckoned with. (In comparison, Christopher Columbus' St. Maria, which sailed centuries later, was only 85 feet in length.) Led by appointed commander-in-chief Zheng He, the treasure fleet had half the world in its grasp. China reopened trade routes and ports throughout the Indian Ocean, trading with kingdoms such as Malacca and Java. Yet this period of naval prominence did not last

long. As Zhu Di's health declined, so did his reign. His successor, Zhu Zhanji, sent China's government into political instability due to clashes with both imperial officers and Confucian advisors, and Zhanji's death led to a crisis that plunged China's naval supremacy into extinction, losing their technological advantage over the West, never to regain it.

Overall, I enjoyed reading the book because it contained an abundant amount of historical evidence and sources, ranging from texts of imperial officers themselves to archeological discoveries. For example, Ming author Lou Maotang is referenced to suggest that only about four 400-foot treasure ships actually accompanied the treasure fleet. Additionally, the vocabulary was exceptionally sophisticated, allowing for an eloquent tone and advanced interpretation of the topic at hand. (Personally, I was compelled to use a dictionary while reading many of the chapters.) Lastly, the main events, from the construction of the treasure fleet to the crumble of the Ming dynasty's power, are portrayed seamlessly, with extremely smooth transitions that connect one incident to another.

One thing I would add would be more comparisons to the West and other Chinese dynasties to show how Ming technology differed from European technology at the time. The book also makes the reader question what European trade was like at the time when compared to the expansive network of Chinese trade routes in the Indian Ocean, leaving the reader feel somewhat hungry for more. If the book could have included these comparisons, the portrayal of the Ming dynasty's power would have been more clear to the reader. One thing I would change would be the order in which certain events were presented, as some events seemed out of chronological order towards the end of the book, such as Zheng He's legacy and the Ming dynasty's crumble. If the chronological order was kept throughout the book, it would have made the ending easier to understand.

In conclusion, *When China Ruled the Seas* is a comprehensive book detailing the rise and fall of China's Ming dynasty, focusing primarily on the massive treasure fleet that established Chinese prestige and respect throughout kingdoms in the Indian Ocean. Personally, I would recommend this book to highly advanced readers ages 13 and up due to its wide usage of advanced vocabulary and its complex explanation of ancient Chinese politics and beliefs. Because archaic texts and sources are frequently referenced throughout the book, a higher level of grammatical understanding is needed to make sense of the text. *When China Ruled the Seas* is also a perfect example of how unstable politics, corruption, and lack of strict rule can lead to a nation's collapse, shown by the Ming dynasty's decline. This book shows the reader the glory of the treasure fleet, then meticulously describes how the Ming dynasty's weakening led to its dissipation. In conclusion, *When China Ruled the Seas* is an intricately written account of the rise of the Ming dynasty, how it dominated the Indian Ocean, and its unfortunate downfall.

Peter Goodman says

“*When China Ruled the Seas: the Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1405-33*,” by Louise Levathes (Simon and Schuster, 1994). In 1498 the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama, with a fleet of four small ships, sailed into the East African port of Malindi, where he hired a pilot who helped him navigate to Calicut. Da Gama was the first European to sail all the way from home, around the Cape of Good Hope, up the coast of Africa and finally to India. He opened the way for European explorers—and later imperialists---to expand their reach to Asia. What he did not know, and what few Europeans and Americans realize even today, is that 80 years before, the Chinese admiral Zheng He, with hundreds of ships far larger than anything the Europeans possessed, had already been there. This book (on which I will expand much further for a lecture at the Hofstra University Honors College) describes Zheng He's seven voyages at the beginning, not the end, of the 15th century. Zheng He, a Mongol Muslim who had been captured and castrated by soldiers of the early Ming Dynasty, was taken to the capital, raised and educated. He became the chief ally of Zhu Di, a nobleman who usurped the throne of China and became the Yongle Emperor. Zheng He was appointed admiral of a

series of expeditions that traveled along the coasts of Southeast Asia, to Ceylon, along the coasts of India, the Persian Gulf, Arabia, and Africa as far south as Mombasa. The fleets were huge---contemporary descriptions indicate the primary ships were more than 400 feet long and capable of carrying 1,000 men, supported by hundreds of other vessels. (There are serious questions about these dimensions; among other things, it's impossible to build a wooden ship more than 300 feet long.) The crews numbered nearly 30,000 men. The ultimate purpose of these voyages is contested: were they simply to spread knowledge of the generosity and wealth of the Chinese empire, or to expand Chinese military and naval control throughout the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. They clearly did both. But they were not voyages of discovery: Chinese, Indian and Arab traders had been along these coasts for centuries, and the ways were fairly well known. Zheng He's fleets brought trade goods to the ports they visited, and brought back spices, foodstuffs, and exotic animals (the giraffe he brought back from Mombasa was considered a qilin, a mythical beast on the order of the unicorn). The voyages were expansive but they were expensive. Millions of trees were cut down to build the ships, untold amounts of currency were needed to keep the expeditions going. Meanwhile, the Mongols continued to press southward, forcing the emperor to send large armies to the northwestern frontiers---another vast expense. The Yongle Emperor died in 1424, while Zheng He was on his sixth expedition. Zhu Di's eldest son succeeded him but lived only one more year. There was only one more voyage after that, and Zheng He appears to have died at sea. Succeeding emperors turned away from these seafaring expeditions, the ships rotted away, most of their records were lost or destroyed, and Zheng He's exploits were almost forgotten, until the 20th century. Levathes used newly translated documents to create a detailed description of the voyages. There are questions about some of her assertions, and the book itself is a bit sloppy (there are contradictory chronologies, for example). But it's a fabulous story. And it happened decades before Columbus.

<http://global.oup.com/ushe/product/wh...>

Victor Nobrega says

Detailed and professional

I bought this on impulse when Amazon suggested it in a book buying binge. I am very happy with that decision. This book was fantastic and detailed in the works of Zheng and his travels as well as the detailed politics and economics that lead to it both starting and ending. Strong recommend.
