**Chinese Exploration**

By A.D. 1050, Chinese navigators were using the float compass. In 1070 the Chinese developed dry docks. In the 1100s, Chinese junks reached the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. In the 13th century Chinese ships regularly ventured to India and occasionally to East Africa.

Africa had things the Chinese wanted: ivory medicine, spices, exotic wood and exotic wildlife. Zheng He brought back lions, orynxes, nilganias, zebras and ostriches from Africa, but the biggest commotion was caused when a giraffe was delivered as a tribute from a ruler in Bengal in 1414.

The Chinese Age of Discovery lasted for 28 years (1405-1433), and consisted of seven voyages led by the Muslim eunuch named Zheng He.

Zheng He (pronounced “jung huh”) embarked from China with a huge fleet of ships and journeyed as far west as Africa, through what the Chinese called the Western seas, in 1433, sixty years before Columbus sailed to America and Vasco de Gama sailed around Africa to get to Asia. Zheng also explored India, Indonesia, Southeast Asia, and Arabia with about 75 times as many ships and men as Columbus took with him on his trans-Atlantic journey.

The largest expedition utilized a crew of 30,000 men and a fleet of 317 ships, including a 444-foot-long teak-wood treasury ship with nine masts, the largest wooden ship ever made; 370-foot, eight-masted “galloping horse ships,” the fastest boats in the fleet; 280-foot supply ships; 240-foot troop transports; 180-foot battle junks, a billet ship, patrol boats and 20 tankers to carry fresh water. The expedition was nothing less than a floating city that stretched across several kilometers of sea. By contrast, Columbus' expedition consisted of three ships with 90 men. The largest ship was 85 feet long. The largest ships in Vasco de Gama's fleet had four masts and were about 100 feet long.

The crew included sailors and mariners, hundreds of Ming officials, 180 physicians, cooks, merchants, accountants, interpreters that spoke Arabic and other languages, astrologers that predicted the weather, astronomers that studied the stars, pharmacologists that collected plants, and ship repair specialists. To guide the massive ships, Chinese navigators used compasses and elaborate navigational charts with detailed compass bearings.

During the seven expeditions the treasure ships carried more than a million tons of Chinese silk, ceramics and copper coins and traded them for tropical species, gemstones, fragrant woods, animals, textiles and minerals. Among the things that the Chinese coveted most were medicinal herbs, incense, pepper, tropical hardwoods, peanuts, opium, bird’s nests, African ivory and Arabian horses. The Chinese were not interested in Europe, which only had wool and wine to offer—things the Chinese could produce for themselves.

Early European explorers to China were amazed by how much larger the Chinese ships were than their counterparts in the West. All the ships of Columbus and de Gama would have fit on the deck of Zheng He’s largest ship.