When China Ruled the Seas
THE TREASURE FLEET OF THE DRAGON THRONE 1405–1433
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Kingdom desired: ivory, rhinoceros horn, tortoiseshell, rare woods and incense, musk, pearls, and precious stones. Accompanying the large junks on their mission were nearly a hundred supply ships, water tankers, transports for cavalry horses, warships, and multi-oared patrol boats with crews numbering up to 28,000 sailors and soldiers. It was a unique armada in the history of China—and the would-be-not-to-be-surpassed until the invasion fleets of World War I sailed the seas.

In the brief period from 1405 to 1433, the treasure fleet, under the command of the eunuch admiral Zheng He, made seven epic voyages throughout the China Seas and Indian Ocean, from Taiwan to the Persian Gulf and distant Africa, China’s El Dorado. The Chinese knew about Europe from Arab traders but had no desire to go there. The lands in the “far west” offered only wool and wine, which had little appeal for them. During these thirty years, foreign goods, medicines, and geographic knowledge flowed into China at an unprecedented rate, and China extended its sphere of political power and influence throughout the Indian Ocean. Half the world was in China’s grasp, and with such a formidable navy the other half was easily within reach had China wanted it. China could have become the great colonial power a hundred years before the great age of European exploration and expansion. But China did not.

Shortly after the last voyage of the treasure fleet, the Chinese emperor forbade overseas travel and stopped all building and repair of oceangoing junk. Disobedient merchants and seamen were killed. Within a hundred years the greatest navy the world had ever known willed itself into extinction and Japanese pirates ravaged the China coast. The period of China’s greatest outward expansion was followed by the period of its greatest isolation. And the world leader in science and technology in the early fifteenth century was soon left at the doorstep of history, as burgeoning international trade and the beginning of the Industrial Revolution propelled the Western world into the modern age.

In 1498, when Vasco da Gama and his fleet of three battered caravels rounded the Cape of Good Hope and landed in East Africa on their way to India, they met natives who sported embroidered green silk caps with fine fringe. The Africans scoffed at the trinkets the Portuguese offered—beads, bells, strings of coral, washbasins—and seemed unimpressed with their small ships. Village elders told tales of white “ghosts” who wore silk and had visited their shores long ago in large ships. But no one knew anymore who these people had been or where they had come from. Or even if they had really come at all. The treasure fleet had vanished from the world’s consciousness.

Zheng He and Vasco da Gama missed each other in Africa by eight years. One wonders what would have happened if they had met. Realizing the extraordinary power of the Ming navy, would da Gama in his eighty-five to a hundred-foot vessels have dared continue across the Indian Ocean? Seeing the battered Portuguese boats, would the Chinese admiral have been tempted to crush these snails in his path, preventing the Europeans from opening an east-west trade route?

This book will explore how China rose as a maritime power and why after the wide-ranging voyages of the treasure ships, it systematically destroyed its great navy and lost its technological edge over Europe. At the heart of the matter is China’s view of itself and its position in the world, which has changed little to the present day. Today there is still the same ambiguity toward foreigners and foreign influence.
Context:

2 Confucians and Curiosities

To Confucius in the sixth century B.C., China was the entire world. He called it “The Middle Kingdom,” “The Multitude of Great States,” or simply “All under Heaven.” Beyond the borders of the empire lay, as far as he knew, only wilderness and lawless, barbarian tribes. For time and again, out of the steppes and bleak western deserts, came marauding herdsmen, wild men dressed in animal skins who brought destruction and despair. To the east, across the endless oceans, lay only the fantasies and dreams of foolish rulers.

Once, feeling unappreciated in his native Shandong in northern China, Confucius announced to his disciples that he was going to live with the “wild tribes.” “How can you do such a thing?” one follower asked. “They are rude.” He replied that as the superior man among them, he would tame their rudeness. But, aside from this boast, as his writings make clear, Confucius thought foreign travel interfered with important familial obligations and believed trade was inherently mean and debasing. There was nothing to be gained from contact with foreigners or strange things. He wrote in the Analects:

While his parents are alive, the son may not take a distant voyage abroad. If he has to take such a voyage, the destination must be known.

The mind of the superior man dwells on righteousness: the mind of a little man dwells on profit.

From the second century B.C., with the rise of the Han dynasty, Confucianism became the moral code for the upper classes of Chinese society and the foundation of the emerging feudal bureaucracy. The Han, who incorporated most of southern China into the empire for the first time, embraced Confucianism as a way of strengthening the moral and political authority of the emperor and keeping the powerful nobility in check. Confucius had not only put forth the ancient Shang notion that the emperor was the link between man and the heavenly spirit, but he had said that the true ruler could “transform society with his virtue.” The Han emperors set up an academy to transmit the teachings of Confucius formally, and under the influence of the great sage, government service and farming were quickly elevated as the honored professions for virtuous men, while commerce and the barter of goods were shunned as inherently exploitative and corrupt. Merchants were ranked below artisans and were forbidden by sumptuary law to wear the finest-quality silk.

In the chaotic times that followed the downfall of the Han dynasty in the third century A.D., trade in north China was severely limited, if not nonexistent. Whatever curiosity the Chinese may have had about people and places beyond their borders was stifled in a struggle for survival. The fragmented states of the old Han empire remained in an almost constant state of war for four hundred years. Finally, at the beginning of the seventh century A.D., the Li family rose to power and displaced the Sui empire, establishing the Tang dynasty in 618 A.D. The Tang armies went on to conquer the eastern Turks in Mongolia and the kings of southern Manchuria and Korea. The victors then turned west and overran the Turks in what is now the Chinese province of Xinjiang.

Within the borders of this new and enormous empire, there were thus a large number of “barbarians”: Turks, Uighers, Persians, Arabs, and Hindus. China was a melting pot, and the Tang ruling family itself was part Turkish. The Chinese could not suppress their fascination with these different peoples, but their curiosity was tempered by a Confucian suspicion of foreigners. The two emotions battled each other like waves in a turbulent sea, shifting without warning. Nowhere was this more evident than at the Tang court in Chang’an, which both imitated foreigners and resented them, lavishly entertained them and ultimately persecuted them.

Though it was sacked several times in power struggles after the fall of the Han, Chang’an emerged in the seventh century as the greatest city in the world at that time—a mighty metropolis covering thirty square miles in the heart of the Yellow River valley in north China with more than two million taxable residents. Surrounding
The sixteenth-century reproduction of Zheng He's twenty-one-foot-long sailing map is known as the Wu bei zhi chart (1621), after the military treatise in which it is preserved. The center portion of the map (above) shows the west coast of India along the top, the island of Ceylon on the right, and the African coast along the bottom. Proper scale and north-south orientation have been ignored; the chart served mainly as a compendium of sailing directions between important ports. Thus, to navigate from the Maldives (above center) to India the instructions read: “steer exactly 75 degrees; after 45 watches the ship makes Quilon.” Skilled pilots would have been necessary to direct the large fleet in and out of harbors.