



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.

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