
Should We Celebrate the Voyages of Zheng He?

EV



Overview: More than 60 years before the voyages of Christopher Columbus, a Chinese admiral by the name of Zheng He (“jeng-heh”) sailed the western seas from China to the east coast of Africa and other points in the Indian Ocean. The size of his treasure ships and the number of boats in his fleet were breathtaking. The distances he sailed were greater than any recorded before that time. Despite this, the voyages of Zheng He were barely known to the world until recent years. This Mini-Q asks if he deserves better.

The Documents:

- Document A The Voyages of Zheng He (map)
- Document B: Zheng He vs. Christopher Columbus and Others
- Document C: Zheng He’s Fleet By the Numbers
- Document D: Envoys and Tribute
- Document E: The Changle Inscription

A Mini Document Based Question (Mini-Q)

Hook Exercise: Navigating the Open Seas

Directions: In the years between 1405 and 1433, Zheng He (“jeng-heh”) led seven voyages from China to distant ports in the Indian Ocean. With more than 200 ships under his command, Zheng He needed great navigational skills. Below are descriptions of four tools he and his pilots used to steer an accurate course. With a partner, examine the notes. Then, in the third column, explain how the navigators of Zheng’s fleet might have used each device to gather information as they sailed from China into the unknown.

Device	Description	Purpose
Lead and line	Line was up to 120 feet long with a ten- to 16-pound lead weight tied to one end. Knots or marks were made at regular intervals along the line.	
Wooden float	A piece of scrap wood was all that was needed. Hint: The same piece of wood was probably never used twice.	
Magnetic compass	The first recorded use was during Zheng He’s voyages, though this Chinese invention was possibly used in navigation as early as 850 CE. The compass was floated in a bowl of water so it could work properly on a ship.	
Cross-staff	Used properly, a cross-staff could tell a navigator how many degrees the North Star sat above the horizon. At midday, it could do the same for the sun. But why was this information valuable?	

Should We Celebrate the Voyages of Zheng He?

In 1381, a ten-year-old boy from Yunan Province in southwestern China watched his father die at the hands of the **Ming Dynasty's** invading army and was then taken prisoner. The boy, named Ma He, was castrated and forced to join the thousands of **eunuchs** who made up the governmental and household staffs of the royal family.

As a young man, Ma quickly rose through the ranks of the military and became a trusted advisor of the emperor.

To recognize Ma's loyalty, Emperor Yongle gave him wealth, power and a noble new name: Zheng He ("jeng-heh").

The emperor also gave him a huge task. In July of 1405, Zheng He received orders to lead a fleet of ships down the coast of China, then across the ocean to India. It was to be the first of seven such voyages. For the next 28 years, Zheng He crisscrossed the Pacific and Indian oceans at the helm of the largest fleet of wooden ships the world has ever known.

Emperor Yongle had several reasons for sending Zheng He on this epic mission. He wanted to explore new lands and establish new trade relationships. The emperor also had a strong desire to show the world the greatness of both China and himself. What better way to do this than to appear on the horizon with hundreds of gigantic ships, thousands of soldiers, bundles of Chinese silk, and the promise of friendship? To avoid military conflict, local leaders typically responded by offering **tribute** in the form of gifts and sending **emissaries** to pay their respects to the emperor. On only three occasions

during the seven voyages did Zheng He's fleet encounter serious armed resistance—once from pirates.

Despite these glories, Zheng He's story ends with obscurity. Not long after both Zheng He and Emperor Yongle died, Chinese officials dismantled the fleet and destroyed the records of the seven voyages. One explanation is that building and maintaining the fleet while fighting costly wars against the Vietnamese and the



Zheng He often received animals as tribute

Mongols had bankrupted the Ming treasury. Also, there was strong feeling by some in government that China did not need trade and diplomatic contact with the world. Zheng He's expeditions, they concluded, were a big mistake.

How different was this from Spain's behavior 60 years later after the four voyages of Christopher Columbus. Seeing the chance for trade and treasure, Spanish ships began to pour into the Americas. European **colonialism** soon followed. Columbus may not have discovered

America, but he started something big. Compared to this, were Zheng He's voyages simply a lost opportunity?

In 2004, port cities such as Singapore and Semarang in Indonesia recognized the 600th anniversary of Zheng He's voyages, but the event didn't make much of a ripple around the world. But now back to our question. Using three measuring sticks – scale (size), skill, and significance – *Should we celebrate the voyages of Zheng He?*

Background Essay Questions

1. Describe Zheng He's childhood.
2. How did Zheng He become an official in Emperor Yongle's government?
3. How many voyages did Zheng He command?
4. What were three possible reasons for the voyages? Which do you think was the main one?
5. Why was there opposition in China to Zheng He's journeys?
6. How was the Spanish response to Columbus's voyages different from the Chinese response to Zheng He's?
7. Define these terms:

Ming Dynasty

eunuch

tribute

emissary

colonialism

Timeline

- 1368** – Beginning of the Ming Dynasty
- 1371** – Birth of Zheng He
- 1381** – Ten-year-old Zheng He kidnapped by government soldiers.
- 1399** – Zheng He wins major battle for Prince Yan near Beijing.
- 1402** – Prince Yan, known as Yongle, becomes Emperor of China.
- 1403** – Zheng He given highest eunuch rank. Serious shipbuilding begins.
- 1405-1433** – Zheng leads seven expeditions to India and beyond.
- 1433** – Zheng He dies toward the end of his seventh voyage.
- 1905** – An article written by the Chinese scholar Liang Qichao is first modern-day recognition of Zheng He.

Understanding the Question and Pre-Bucketing

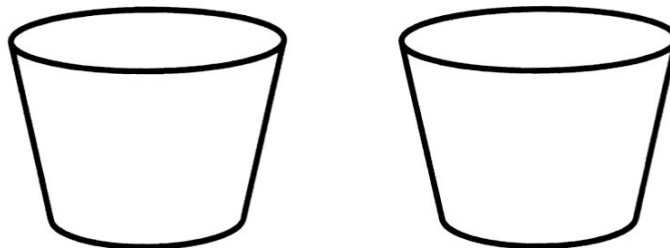
Understanding the Question

1. What is the analytical question asked by this Mini-Q?
2. What terms in the question need to be defined?
3. Rewrite the question in your own words.

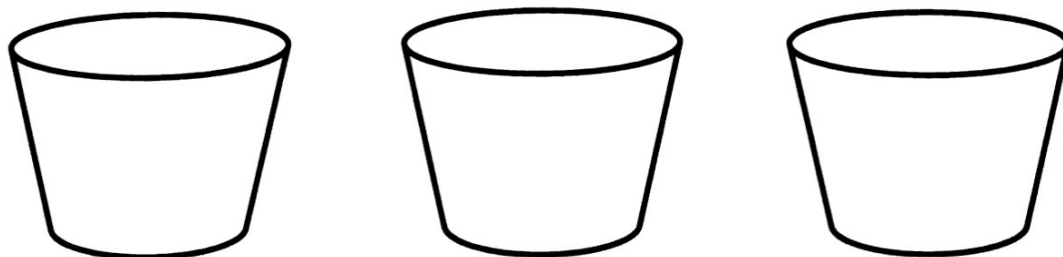
EV

Pre-Bucketing

Directions: Using clues from the Mini-Q question, suggest possible labels for the buckets. We suggest a two-step process. First, create two “working buckets” for collecting all possible reasons on both sides of the question. Then pick one side and develop three reasons for arguing that side.



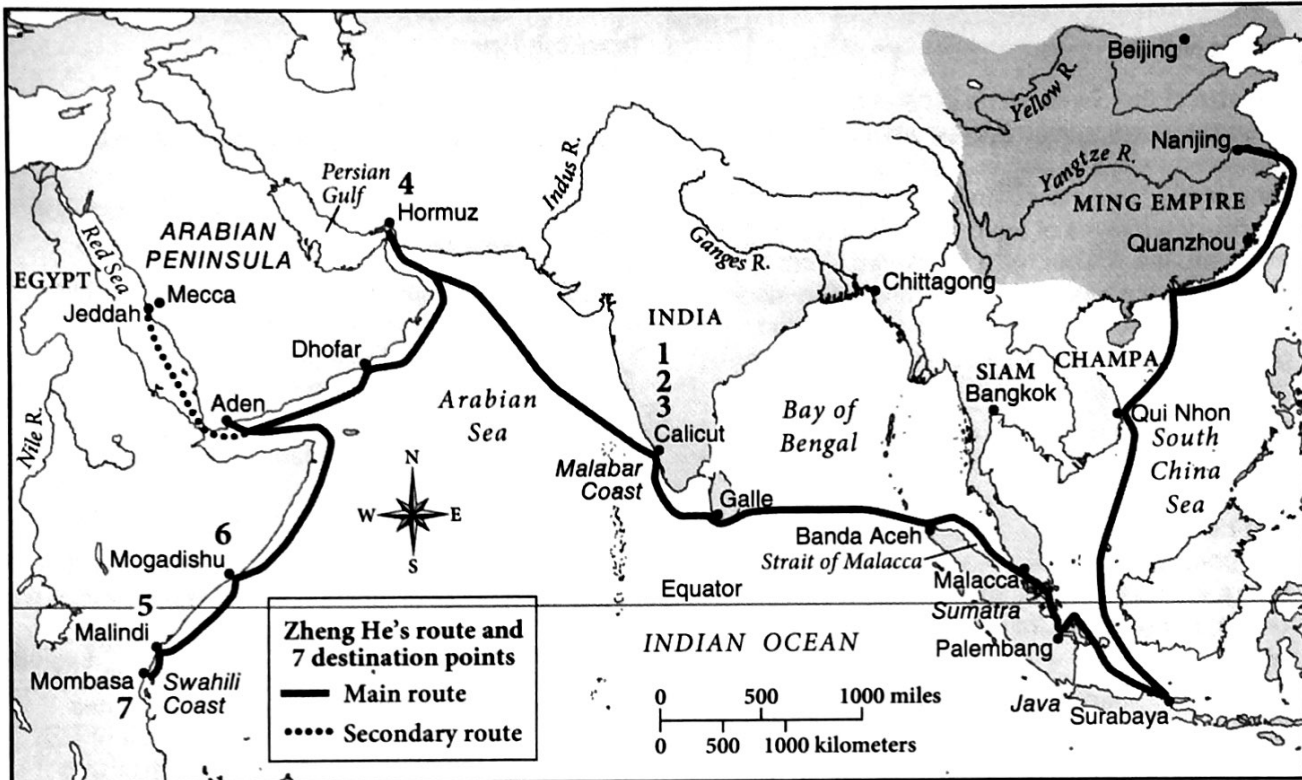
THEN



Document A

Source: Map adapted from "China's Great Armada," *National Geographic*, July 2005.

The Voyages of Zheng He: 1405 - 1433



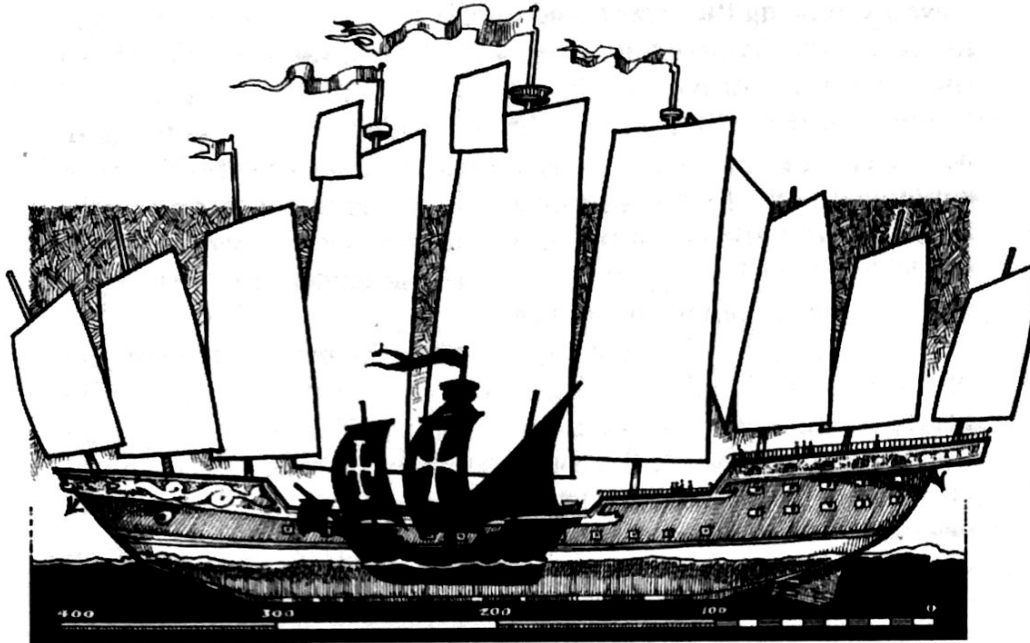
Voyage	Date	Furthest Port of Call	Approx. Miles Roundtrip (from Nanjing, China)
1	1405-07	Calicut (India)	11,600
2	1407-09	Calicut	11,600
3	1409-11	Calicut	11,600
4	1413-15	Hormuz (Iran)	14,500
5	1417-19	Malindi (Kenya)	19,000
6	1421-22	Mogadishu (Somalia)	18,000
7	1431-33	Mombasa (Kenya)	19,000

Document Analysis

1. What was the final destination of each voyage?
2. In all seven voyages combined, how far did Zheng He travel?
3. What was the sailing distance, one way, from China to Mombasa?
4. Does it appear that Zheng He was traveling to unknown lands or to well established ports?
5. How can you use this document to argue that Zheng He's voyages should be celebrated?
6. How can you use this document to argue that Zheng He's voyages should not be celebrated?

Document B

Source: Illustration from *When China Ruled the Seas* by Louise Levathes, Simon and Schuster, 1994.



Zheng He's treasure ship (400 feet) and Christopher Columbus's Santa Maria (85 feet)

Source: Chart and note compiled from various sources.

	Zheng He	Christopher Columbus
Size of Fleet	255 ships	3 ships
Size of Crew	27,500	90
Voyages	7 (1405-1433)	4 (1492-1502)
Legacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Soon after Zheng He's death, sea exploration was banned in China. • The fleet was dismantled. • All records of Zheng He's voyages were destroyed by Chinese officials. • Zheng He was more or less lost to history for 500 years. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • After Columbus' first voyages, European exploration took off. • North and South America were conquered and colonized. • The Columbian exchange followed, marked by the trading of plants, animals, ideas, and people, including slaves.

Document Analysis

1. What was the size of the treasure ship compared to the Santa Maria?
2. Compare Zheng He and Christopher Columbus. What generalization can you make about size of fleet and size of crew?
3. How can you use this document to argue that Zheng He's voyages should be celebrated?
4. How can you use this document to argue that Zheng He's voyages should not be celebrated?

Document C

Source: Chart compiled from various sources.

Zheng He's Fleet By the Numbers

Approximate size of fleet on each voyage:

Treasure Ships	62
Tenders*	193

*Tenders were smaller ships that serviced each treasure ship. These included ships dedicated solely to carrying fresh water for crew and animals.

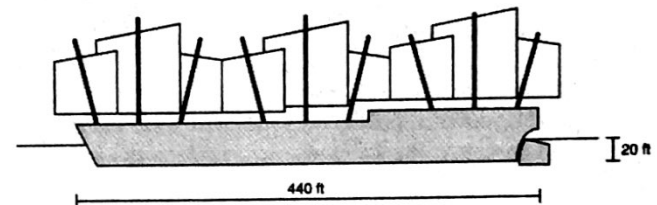
Crew (on each voyage)

Fleet commanders	7
Commander assistants	70
Military officers	302
Ceremonial officers	2
Doctors	180
Chief purser (financial officer)	1
Fortune tellers	5
Soldiers, petty officers, sailors, sail makers, caulkers, anchormen, horse groomers, rudder operators, business managers, cooks, servants, interpreters	26,803

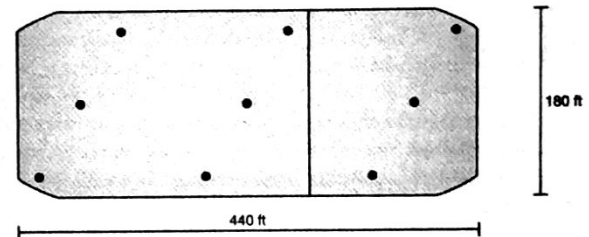
Source: Illustration from Edward L. Dreyer, *Zheng He* by Edward L. Dreyer, Pearson Education, Inc., 2007.

Note: No one knows what Zheng He's treasure ships looked like, but this drawing illustrates the dimensions reported in historical documents, along with the off-center and off-vertical arrangement of the nine masts. With their broad beams (widths) and flat bottoms, the treasure ships would have resembled enormous river barges rather than true oceangoing ships. *Draught* (draft) is how deeply a ship sits in the water.

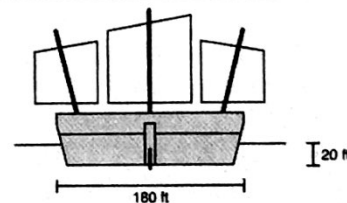
Port Elevation, length in proportion to draught



Beam, in proportion to length



Aft elevation, showing beam in proportion to draught



EV

Document Analysis

1. Compare the deck dimensions of Zheng's treasure ship with an American football field. (The length of a football field is 300 feet; the width is 160 feet.) Which was bigger? Show your math.
2. The doctor-to-patient ratio in the United States today is about 1 to 400. What was the ratio of doctors to total crew members in Zheng's fleet?
3. Judging by the crew's make up, was this a military expedition, a trade expedition, or both? Use evidence to support your thinking.
4. How can you use the document to argue that the voyages of Zheng He should be celebrated?
5. How can you use the document to argue that the voyages of Zheng He should not be celebrated?

Document D

Source: Chart compiled from various sources.

Envoy's Homeland	Year	Gift*
Calicut (India)	1407	local products
Aru (Sumatra)	1407	pepper
Champa (north of Vietnam)	1407	local products
Bengal (northeast India)	1408	
Palembang (Sumatra)	1416	horses, rhinoceroses, elephants
Malacca	1416	
Hormuz	1417	lions, leopards, Arabian horses
Aden (Arabia)	1417	giraffes
Brava (East Africa)	1417	camels, ostriches
Mogadishu (East Africa)	1417	zebras

*blank space means gift unknown

Note: Foreign officials, or envoys, often traveled with Zheng He's fleet when it returned to China. They brought tribute. Tribute is usually money or goods given by a weaker country to a stronger country as a sign of submission and sometimes respect. Emperor Yongle almost always offered local kings and ambassadors gifts in return. Often these were bolts of silk, paper money, and copper coins.

Source: Qing Dynasty historian, after 1644

“[Emperor Yongle acquired] goods and treasures without name that were too many to be accounted for. Yet they did not make up for the wasteful expenditures of the Middle Kingdom”

Document Analysis

1. What is an envoy?
2. What is tribute?
3. Judging from the document, what was an important purpose of Zheng He's voyages?
4. How can you use the document to argue that the voyages of Zheng He should be celebrated?
5. How can you use the document to argue that the voyages of Zheng He should not be celebrated?

Document E

Source: The Changle Inscription, 1431.

Note: The Changle Inscription was carved into a stone pillar near the city of Changle on the east coast of China just before Zheng He departed on his last voyage. This excerpt was followed by short descriptions of each of the first six voyages and the plan for the seventh. It is the closest thing historians have to a document revealing Zheng He's words and ideas.

EV

The Imperial Ming [Dynasty] has unified [the lands within the four] seas and under the canopy of heaven.... From the edge of the sky to the ends of the earth there are none who have not become subjects and slaves.... [T]hus the barbarians from beyond the seas, even those who are truly distant, [so that their languages require] double translation, all have come to court bearing precious objects and presents.

The Emperor has delighted in their loyalty and sincerity and has ordered [Zheng] He and others to take command of several thousands of imperial officers and soldiers ... to go to their countries and confer presents on them by displaying our power while treating distant peoples with kindness. From the third year of Yongle [1405] until now we have seven times received commissions as ambassadors to the countries of the Western [Indian] Ocean.

...When we arrived at the foreign countries, barbarian kings who resisted ... we captured alive and barbarian bandits [pirates] who invaded and plundered we wiped out. Because of this the sea routes became pure and peaceful and the foreign peoples could rely upon them.

Document Analysis

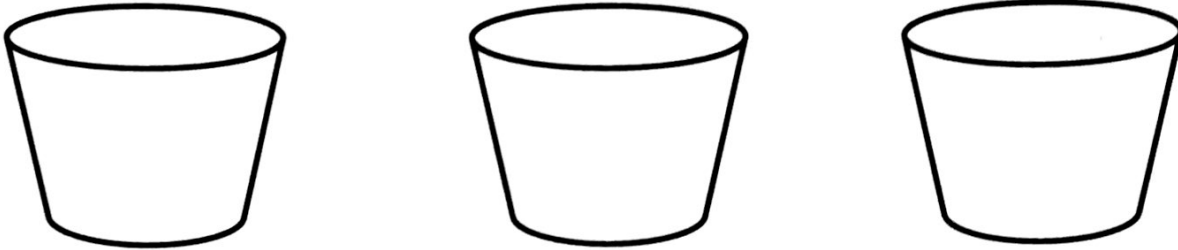
1. Who is likely to have ordered the writing of the Changle Inscription? When was it done?
2. What is the meaning and the significance of the phrase "double translation"?
3. According to the Changle Inscription, what appears to be the emperor's purpose for ordering these voyages?
4. How can you use this document to argue that Zheng He's voyages should be celebrated?
5. Is there any way to use this document to argue that Zheng He's voyages should not be celebrated?

Bucketing – Getting Ready to Write

Bucketing

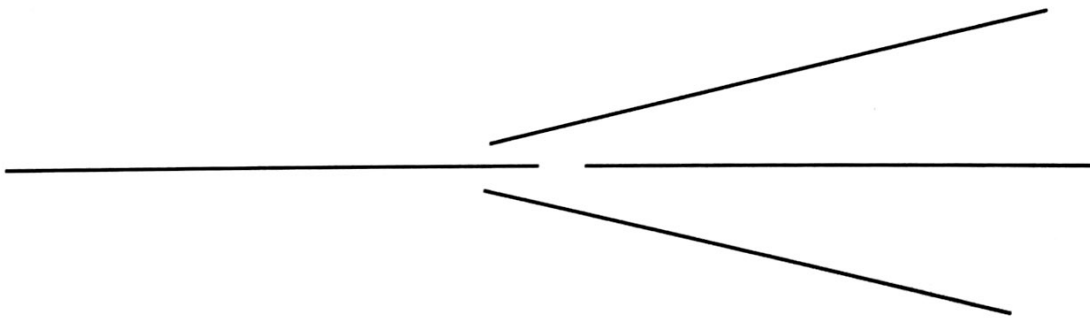
Look over all the documents and organize them into your final buckets. Write labels under each bucket and place the letters of the documents in the buckets where they belong. In this Mini-Q, lots of multi-bucketing is expected. Remember, your buckets are going to be your body paragraphs.

EV



Thesis Development and Road Map

On the chickenfoot below, write your thesis and your road map. Your thesis is always an opinion and answers the Mini-Q question. The road map is created from your bucket labels and lists the topic areas you will examine in order to prove your thesis.



From Thesis to Essay Writing

Mini-Q Essay Outline Guide

Working Title

Paragraph #1

Grabber

Background

Stating the question with key terms defined

Thesis and road map

Paragraph #2

Baby Thesis for bucket one

Evidence: supporting detail from documents with document citation

Argument:

Paragraph #3

Baby Thesis for bucket two

Evidence

Argument

Paragraph #4

Baby Thesis for bucket three

Evidence

Argument

Paragraph #5

Conclusion: Restatement of main idea along with possible insight or wrinkle

EV