

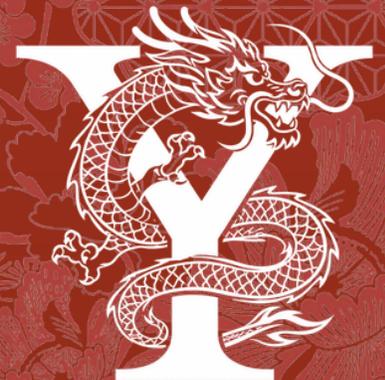


Specialized  
Topic Guide

# The Ming Treasure Fleet

*Yale Model United Nations China III*

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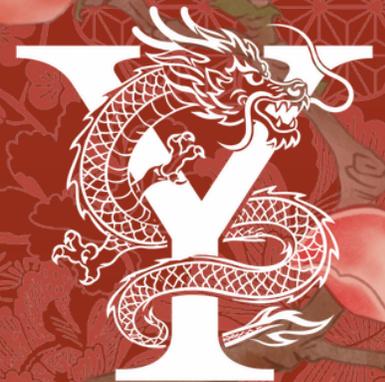
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# Letter from the Dais

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Dear Delegates,

Welcome to YMUN China III! I am thrilled to be chairing **The Ming Treasure Fleet** at this year's conference to welcome you into a committee that explored the intrigues of ambition, power, and political uncertainty.

My name is Baala (she/her), and I am a sophomore from San Antonio, Texas, studying History and Political Science with a certificate in Medieval Studies. I have previously served on the secretariat for YMUN LI & LII, and this year I am also honored to serve as the Under-Secretary-General of Branding for YMUN China. Outside of Model UN, I enjoy hiking, writing, and photography. If you have any questions about the committee or your preparation, please feel free to reach out to me at [baala.shakya@yale.edu](mailto:baala.shakya@yale.edu).

In this committee, I invite you to step into one of the most ambitious — and contested — moments in Chinese history: the era of the Ming treasure voyages and the political battles they ignited within the imperial court. Under Admiral Zheng He, the Ming dynasty projected its power across the Indian Ocean world, forging diplomatic and trade connections on an unprecedented scale. However, these voyages also exposed deep divisions within the state, raising questions about governance, authority, and China's place beyond its borders.

Across our two topics, delegates will confront a court at a crossroads. The first examines the final expedition of the treasure fleet and challenges court officials to decide whether continued maritime expansion truly served the empire's long-term interests. The second turns inward, exploring the intrigue, factional rivalry, and deliberate sabotage that shaped the fate of maritime China and ultimately determined whether the empire would look outward or retreat from the high seas.

To reflect the complexity of Ming court politics, this committee includes figures who would not always have convened together formally, encouraging dynamic debate, creative coalition-building, and strategic maneuvering. As delegates, you are not only advisors, but powerful courtiers, officials, and instrumental brokers whose decisions will shape the future of the Ming dynasty itself.

I am so excited to work with you over the coming months and to support you throughout your preparation. Please do not hesitate to reach out with any questions, ideas, or concerns — I am always happy to help. I look forward to meeting you soon and seeing how you chart the future of Ming China.

Kindest regards,  
Baala Shakya



# Committee History

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YMUN China III's Ming Treasure Fleet committee is modeled on the imperial institutions and political networks that governed Ming China's (1368-1644) maritime expeditions in the early fifteenth century, with deliberate adaptations to reflect the complexity of court politics during the height and decline of the treasure voyages (1405-1433).

Rather than simulating a single bureaucratic office, this committee represents a convergence of imperial authority, eunuch command, civil bureaucracy, and military leadership that collectively shaped the fate of Ming maritime policy.

In the early 1400s, under the reign of the Yongle Emperor, the Ming dynasty launched the treasure voyages as a state-sponsored maritime project of unprecedented scale. Commanded by Admiral Zheng He and overseen largely by the eunuch establishment, the voyages served multiple purposes: projecting imperial prestige, securing maritime trade routes, incorporating foreign polities into China's tributary system, and reinforcing the Yongle Emperor's legitimacy following his seizure of the throne. Between 1405 and 1433, seven major expeditions sailed from China through Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Persian Gulf, and East Africa, carrying diplomatic envoys, military forces, and immense quantities of wealth.

Although outwardly unified and a sign of imperial strength, the treasure voyages were deeply embedded in internal political struggle. Eunuchs, trusted personal agents of the emperor, held operational control over the fleet, while civil officials increasingly opposed the expeditions, criticizing their cost, their empowerment of the eunuch faction, and their departure from Confucian ideals of governance.. These tensions intensified after the death of the Yongle Emperor, when shifting priorities and bureaucratic resistance led to the gradual dismantling of China's naval infrastructure and the suspension of further voyages.

This committee reflects that contested political environment. Members include figures who historically operated across overlapping spheres of influence — court officials, military commanders, fiscal administrators, and imperial confidants — many of whom would not normally deliberate together in a single forum. This structure allows delegates to recreate the unstable balance of power that defined Ming decision-making. Historically, the fate of the treasure fleet was not decided by a single decree, but by years of rivalry, sabotage, rumor, and shifting alliances. In this committee, delegates will confront those same pressures as they debate whether maritime expansion was central to Ming strength or a dangerous overextension of imperial ambition.

Please note that in this committee, the chair will act as a representative of the reigning Emperor.

### Confidential Tasks

This simulation reflects the political dynamics that shaped the Ming treasure voyages: immense individual influence exercised beneath the shadow of absolute imperial authority. While the Emperor retains ultimate power, the fate of the treasure fleet was historically determined through private counsel and bureaucratic maneuvering. Accordingly, delegates may receive confidential instructions at any point during committee through written notes.

These instructions may originate from the Emperor, senior court factions, military command, or foreign powers connected to the maritime world. Tasks must be carried out in accordance with each delegate's assigned character and must remain strictly confidential unless explicitly revealed through in-committee action. Assignments may range from discreet diplomatic initiatives and intelligence gathering to efforts aimed at redirecting resources, undermining rivals, or influencing imperial perception of the voyages themselves.

The success or failure of these tasks will directly shape the evolution of the committee's "world." Just as in Ming history, effective maneuvering may strengthen one faction's influence, secure imperial favor, or preserve maritime expansion, while missteps can provoke scandal, fiscal crisis, or imperial backlash. Delegates are expected to balance outward loyalty to the Emperor with personal ambition, factional allegiance, and character-driven priorities. All actions should be grounded in the political position, institutional interests, and historical constraints of each role.

### Trials

Secrecy, rumor, and political suspicion were central to Ming court life, particularly during debates over the treasure voyages. Accusations of corruption, sabotage, or disloyalty were powerful tools used to eliminate rivals and reshape imperial policy. This dynamic will play a central role in committee. Delegates may accuse one another of acting against imperial interests, abusing authority, or secretly undermining the treasure fleet. To initiate a formal investigation or trial, an accuser must secure the support of at least one other committee member and formally petition the Emperor for approval. Only with imperial sanction may proceedings begin.

Trials will test delegates' ability to marshal evidence, deploy rhetoric, and navigate factional politics under intense scrutiny. Outcomes may include political disgrace, removal from office, restoration of favor, or dramatic shifts in the balance of power within the court.

# Committee Members

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- **Admiral Zheng He** - Zheng He is the grand eunuch admiral whose career defines the treasure voyages and their global reach. He believes the seventh voyage can restore strategic influence, though he recognizes the court's growing concern over cost and control.
- **Wang Jinghong** - Wang Jinghong is a senior palace administrator who keeps large expeditions functioning when court politics grow hostile. He favors continuity and wants the voyage framed as a controlled project with measurable returns. He distrusts oversight regimes that expand paperwork while shrinking responsibility. His influence comes from inner-court access and his ability to move resources when ministries hesitate.
- **Hou Xian** - Hou Xian specializes in logistics, crews, and supply systems that make the fleet viable. He views the treasure fleet as an administrative machine rather than a stage for spectacle. He supports the voyage as long as it stays properly resourced and operationally credible. In crisis, he prioritizes seaworthiness and provisioning over political comfort.
- **Hong Bao** - Hong Bao supports the seventh voyage as a targeted effort to renew tributary relationships that cool quickly when Ming ships stop appearing, especially in contested maritime nodes where piracy and rival powers thrive. He aligns with palace advocates in that the treasure voyages are integral to statecraft.
- **Yang Zhen** - Yang Zhen is a eunuch officer tasked with gathering intelligence on maritime routes, piracy networks, and foreign ports. He built his career by compiling reports from sailors, merchants, and coastal officials into actionable information for the palace. He believes that without regular expeditions, the court will lose sight of conditions beyond China's shores and govern in ignorance. Quiet and methodical, he distrusts factional politics and prefers decisions grounded in firsthand knowledge.
- **Li Xing** - Li Xing serves as a eunuch quartermaster responsible for securing food, materials, and pay for fleet personnel. He rose through the palace supply offices by proving he could keep large projects functioning despite shortages and delays. Known for his blunt assessments, he warns that symbolic policies collapse when they ignore basic logistics. Though loyal to the throne, he openly resents officials who demand results while cutting the resources needed to achieve them.
- **Zhu Liang** - Zhu Liang is a eunuch commander in charge of the marines assigned to protect the treasure fleets and suppress piracy along key routes. He earned distinction during earlier expeditions by enforcing discipline and maintaining order in dangerous foreign ports. He believes that ritual diplomacy only works when backed by credible military force. Direct and uncompromising, he often clashes with civil officials who prefer to speak of harmony without preparing for violence.

- **Grand Secretary Yang Shiqi** - Yang Shiqi is a senior scholar-official serving in the Grand Secretariat, renowned for his mastery of administration and precedent. Educated through the imperial examination system, he represents the civil bureaucracy's belief in orderly procedure and fiscal restraint. He views large eunuch-led projects with suspicion, fearing they undermine ministerial oversight and stability. Though loyal to the emperor, he works quietly to limit policies he considers reckless or institutionally corrosive.
- **Grand Secretary Yang Rong** - Yang Rong is a pragmatic grand secretary who balances strategic concerns with bureaucratic caution. He recognizes the diplomatic value of the treasure voyages but worries about their cost and the power they grant to palace institutions. Known as a mediator, he often tries to craft compromises that satisfy both the emperor and the ministries.
- **Grand Secretary Yang Pu** - Yang Pu is a meticulous administrator whose career has been built on drafting regulations and enforcing procedure. He believes that strong governance depends on rules that bind even the palace to consistent standards. To him, the treasure fleets are acceptable only if they operate under strict oversight and documented authority. Calm and exacting, he prefers to reshape policy through regulations rather than open confrontation.
- **Minister of Revenue** - The Minister of Revenue oversees taxation, census records, and the empire's finances during a period of growing fiscal strain. Trained as a classical scholar but hardened by budgetary reality, he measures policy in silver, grain, and long-term sustainability. He worries that ambitious projects will drain resources needed for frontier defense and disaster relief.
- **Minister of Rites** - The Minister of Rites is responsible for state ceremonies and tributary relations. Educated in the Confucian classics, he sees the treasure voyages as floating extensions of the court, supporting expeditions that reinforce clear status relationships and produce proper records and tribute missions. However, he distrusts missions that drift into commerce or military adventurism.
- **Minister of War** - The Minister of War oversees military appointments and garrisons across the empire. With constant threats along the northern frontiers and recurring coastal unrest, he views resources as permanently scarce. He accepts maritime expeditions only if they clearly contribute to security and intelligence. His cautious stance often puts him at odds with other commanders.
- **Investigating Censor** - The Investigating Censor serves in the Censorate, traveling to inspect officials and report misconduct directly to the throne. Trained to value moral governance and institutional discipline, he sees large projects as fertile ground for corruption and abuse. He treats the treasure fleet preparations as a test case for accountability in both palace and ministerial offices. Feared by many, he believes exposure and documentation are the emperor's strongest tools of control.
- **Eastern Depot Liaison** - The Eastern Depot Liaison is a eunuch who coordinates surveillance reports, informants, and case files tied to shipyards, transport depots, and provincial officials involved in fleet preparation. He built his influence by knowing which rumors are real, which are planted, and which will matter once they reach the emperor's desk. In crisis, he can open investigations, disappear documents, or "discover" misconduct.

- **Senior Palace Eunuch** - The Senior Palace Eunuch oversees day-to-day coordination between the emperor's private offices and the many directorates that serve them. He supports palace control over major projects like the treasure fleet because it keeps authority concentrated and responsive. In crisis, he can reshuffle staff, redirect information, and decide which voices reach the throne.
- **Deputy Minister of Revenue** - The Deputy Minister of Revenue reviews expense claims, supply contracts, and provisioning requests tied to the expedition. He is trained to distrust optimistic projections and to assume that every large project hides waste. He supports the voyage only if spending is limited and auditable. In crisis, he can freeze payments, demand new audits, or expose irregular accounts.
- **Chief Eunuch Archivist** - The Archivist maintains logs, cargo lists, expense reports, and diplomatic records from earlier voyages. He tends to highlight past successes to justify continued palace leadership of maritime policy. In crisis, he can surface or withhold documents that redefine what the court believes is normal or dangerous.
- **Coastal Defense Commissioner** - The Coastal Defense Commissioner oversees anti-piracy patrols and port security in key maritime provinces. He sees firsthand how smuggling, corruption, and local unrest distort imperial policy. He supports the fleet if it strengthens coastal stability and improves intelligence rather than draining resources inland. In crisis, he can declare emergencies, redirect forces, or elevate coastal threats to force court attention.
- **Maritime Trade Intendant of Quanzhou** - A career civil official who manages one of the empire's key coastal trade hubs and sees first-hand how order at sea shapes prosperity on land. He supports the fleet because pirate suppression and predictable routes keep merchants paying taxes and ports calm. He argues that absence at sea invites smuggling and disorder. In crisis, he can report trade disruptions, merchant unrest, or revenue drops.
- **Governor of Fujian** - Responsible for a coastline exposed to piracy and foreign contact, he views the fleet as an extension of provincial security. He supports Zheng He because large imperial deployments deter both pirates and local strongmen. He also knows coastal populations trust visible imperial power more than distant edicts. In crisis, he can request escorts, declare maritime emergencies, or mobilize provincial resources.
- **Director of the Nanjing Armories** - A military-industrial administrator responsible for weapons production and storage near the shipyards. He supports the fleet because naval deployments justify steady funding, testing, and modernization of equipment. He worries that idle arsenals breed corruption and decay.
- **Court Chamberlain** - Responsible for safety inside the palace complex and during major court gatherings. He views factional conflict as a physical as well as political risk. He supports policies that lower tensions and prevent plots. In crisis, he can increase security, restrict movement, or isolate suspects.
- **Regional Military Governor of the South** - A senior commander responsible for multiple coastal garrisons. He supports Zheng He because forward maritime presence reduces pressure on his own troops. He prefers projecting force outward instead of absorbing raids and unrest at home. In crisis, he can shift troops and request joint operations.

- **Northern Frontier Defense Commissioner** - A senior military official tasked with monitoring Mongol and Oirat threats. He believes resources sent south weaken defenses north of the Great Wall. He frames maritime policy as strategic distraction. In crisis, he can report raids, demand troop transfers, or argue the frontier faces imminent danger.
- **Director of the Great Wall** - A Public Works official overseeing fortifications and garrisons in the north. He supports channeling labor and funds into walls, roads, and supply depots. He views the fleet as consuming skilled labor needed for permanent defenses. In crisis, he can claim construction failures or labor shortages.
- **Commander of the Jinyiwei** - Head of the imperial guard and investigative service that works alongside the Eastern Depot. Unlike the eunuchs, he comes from a military-security tradition loyal to the throne but wary of palace overreach. He sees the fleet as a security risk and an intelligence opportunity. In crisis, he can arrest suspects, secure facilities, or clash with the Eastern Depot over jurisdiction.



# The Ming Treasure Fleet

## *Topic Guide*

# 1



# Topic One



# The Final Expedition

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## *Introduction*

The seventh and final expedition of the Ming treasure voyages represented both the height of Chinese power and, simultaneously, the beginning of the nation's retreat from the high seas. As Admiral Zheng He ventured across the Indian Ocean, reaching the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, the Ming court was forced to question whether the global influence of naval expansion strengthened the empire or threatened its own internal stability.

## *Glossary*

- **Yongle Emperor** - The Yongle Emperor was the Ming ruler who launched and championed the treasure voyages. Having seized the throne in 1402, he used Zheng He's fleets to project authority across the Indian Ocean, expand the tributary system, and demonstrate Ming supremacy. Under his reign, six major expeditions sailed, and the maritime project became tightly linked to eunuch administration and imperial prestige. (r. 1402–1424)
- **Xuande Emperor** - Successor to the Hongxi emperor, the Xuande Emperor inherited a court deeply divided over the legacy of the treasure voyages and the power of eunuch institutions. Although he initially maintained the suspension of large-scale expeditions, in 1430 he authorized a final, seventh voyage to restore weakened tributary ties and reassert Ming prestige. (r. 1425–1435)
- **Hongxi Emperor** - The Hongxi Emperor, successor to Yongle, was openly opposed to the treasure voyages and ordered their suspension immediately upon taking the throne. He viewed the expeditions as fiscally burdensome, politically destabilizing, and contrary to Confucian ideals of governance that prioritized internal administration and agrarian stability. (r. 1424–1425)
- **Tributary System** - The Ming Dynasty managed its foreign relations through gift exchanges instead of territorial conquest. Foreign rulers acknowledged the Ming emperor's superior status by sending tribute and performing ceremonial submission, in return receiving gifts, recognition, and political protection. The treasure voyages served as the primary instrument for enforcing and expanding this system across the Indian Ocean world.
- **Tribute** - Tribute refers to the goods, envoys, and symbolic acts of submission sent by foreign polities to the Ming court as part of the tributary order.

- **Investiture** - The formal recognition by the Ming emperor of a foreign ruler's legitimacy and status within the tributary hierarchy. Through seals, titles, and ceremonial decrees, the court could confirm, reshape, or even override local successions, as seen in places like Calicut, Cochin, and Palembang.
- **Monsoon Winds** - Seasonal wind systems in the Indian Ocean and South China Sea that determined the timing, routes, and logistics of the treasure voyages. The fleet's departures, crossings, and regroupings were carefully planned around these predictable wind patterns.
- **Hormuz** - Hormuz was a major port at the entrance to the Persian Gulf and one of the westernmost destinations of the Ming treasure voyages. It served as a critical hub linking Indian Ocean trade with the Middle East and Central Asia
- **Calicut** - Calicut, located on India's Malabar Coast, was one of the most important commercial centers in the Indian Ocean and a frequent endpoint or transit hub for the treasure voyages.
- **Nanjing Shipyards** - The Nanjing shipyards, especially the Longjiang Shipyard near the Yangtze River, were the primary construction and refitting centers for the treasure fleet. Here, massive resources were mobilized to build and maintain hundreds of ships, including the giant treasure vessels.
- **Memorial System** - The memorial system was the formal bureaucratic channel in the form of long essays through which officials submitted reports, criticisms, and policy recommendations to the emperor.
- **Censorate** - The Censorate was a high-level supervisory agency within the centralized bureaucracy, standing alongside the Six Ministries and the Chief Military Commissions and reporting directly to the emperor. Its investigating censors were known as the "eyes and ears" of the throne, charged with monitoring officials at every level to detect corruption, abuse, and administrative failure. The institution was divided into three branches: the Palace Branch, which scrutinized officials' conduct at court; the Admonishment Branch, which was empowered to remonstrate with and correct the emperor himself; and the Detection Branch, which sent touring censors through the provinces to inspect local government.
- **Impeachment** - Formal charges brought against officials for corruption, misconduct, or disloyalty, often initiated through the Censorate or memorials to the throne.
- **Patronage Networks** - Patronage networks were systems of personal loyalty, favor, and reciprocal obligation that connected officials, eunuchs, military commanders, and court elites. Control of the treasure fleet created powerful patronage opportunities through appointments, contracts, and access to imperial favor.
- **Ministry of Rites** - The Ministry of Rites was responsible for managing diplomacy and the reception of foreign envoys within the tributary system. It oversaw ceremonies, titles, gifts, and protocol, and often clashed with economic or administrative concerns
- **Ministry of Revenue** - The Ministry of Revenue managed taxation, state finances, and budgetary oversight for the Ming government. It was deeply concerned with the enormous costs of shipbuilding, provisioning, and diplomatic gift exchange required by the treasure voyages.

- **Forbidden City**- The imperial palace complex that served as the center of Ming governance after the capital's relocation from Nanjing. The city's construction and maintenance were massive projects that competed directly with maritime spending for state resources.
- **Eunuch Establishment** - The eunuch establishment was a powerful group of palace officials who served in close proximity to the emperor
- **Civil Bureaucracy (Scholar-Officials)** - The civil bureaucracy consisted of Confucian-educated officials selected through examinations and responsible for routine governance, finance, and law. Many scholar-officials opposed the treasure voyages, viewing them as economically wasteful.
- **Haijin** - A Ming policy restricting private maritime trade and overseas travel in the form of a sea ban. While the treasure voyages represented a state-controlled exception to this ban, many officials favored stricter enforcement to curb smuggling and the rise of independent merchant power.

## *Topic History*

Between 1405 and 1422, six voyages were dispatched, primarily during the reign of the Yongle Emperor. The first three expeditions (1405–1407, 1407–1409, 1409–1411) focused on consolidating Chinese presence in Southeast Asia, the Bay of Bengal, and the Indian subcontinent, with Calicut serving as the principal western terminus. The fourth voyage (1413–1415) marked a significant expansion of range, reaching Hormuz in the Persian Gulf and incorporating ports in the Maldives and the western Indian Ocean. The fifth (1417–1419) and sixth (1421–1422) voyages extended Chinese activity further into the Arabian Peninsula and East Africa, including visits to Aden, Mogadishu, Brava, and Malindi. Throughout these expeditions, the fleet followed established monsoon routes, assembling at key hubs such as Malacca and northern Sumatra before crossing the Indian Ocean.

These voyages served multiple, interrelated purposes. Diplomatically, they announced the Yongle Emperor's rule and sought to incorporate foreign polities into the Ming tributary system. Rulers who acknowledged Ming suzerainty were rewarded with gifts, trading privileges, and, in some cases, political or military support. Militarily, the fleet was heavily armed and intervened directly in regional conflicts, most notably, according to *Britannica*, in Palembang (1407) against the pirate Chen Zuyi, in Ceylon (1411) against King Alakeshvara, and in northern Sumatra (1415) against the usurper Sekandar. Economically, the voyages aimed to regulate maritime trade by channeling exchange through state-controlled mechanisms, combining tribute, fixed-price transactions, and the distribution of Chinese manufactures such as silk and porcelain. Administratively, they generated extensive geographical, navigational, and ethnographic knowledge, recorded by participants such as Ma Huan, Fei Xin, and Gong Zhen.

Despite their scale and apparent success, the treasure voyages were politically controversial within the Ming court. They were organized and commanded by eunuchs, who traditionally stood in tension with the civil official bureaucracy. The

civil officials, many of whom emphasized fiscal restraint and agrarian priorities, criticized the expeditions as costly and as instruments of eunuch power. While the voyages did not impose an unsustainable burden on the imperial treasury and may even have generated net revenue through trade and tribute, their symbolic and institutional implications were significant. The voyages represented a form of policy-making and fiscal management that bypassed normal bureaucratic channels and concentrated authority in the hands of the emperor and his eunuch agents.

The death of the Yongle Emperor in 1424 marked a turning point. His successor, the Hongxi Emperor (r. 1424–1425), was openly opposed to the maritime expeditions and ordered their suspension on the day of his accession as he believed the voyages to be contrary to his Confucian vision of good government and too expensive. Although the fleet was retained as a garrison force at Nanjing, no further voyages were launched during his short reign. The subsequent Xuande Emperor (r. 1425–1435) initially maintained this policy, but in 1430 he authorized a final expedition, partly to restore tributary relations that had lapsed during the hiatus.

The seventh voyage departed in early 1431 and returned in 1433. The fleet visited at least seventeen, and possibly up to twenty, foreign polities, including ports in Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Peninsula, and East Africa. Hormuz once again marked the westernmost point reached by the main fleet, while detached squadrons traveled to Bengal, Aden, and, according to some accounts, Mecca. The voyage reaffirmed Ming diplomatic presence across the Indian Ocean world and returned with numerous foreign envoys, including representatives from Mecca, Hormuz, Calicut, and Ceylon.

The ideological framework of the voyages rested on the concept of *tianxia* (“all under heaven”), which structured foreign relations around imperial hierarchy and ritual subordination. Within this order, foreign rulers were expected to acknowledge the Ming emperor’s superior status through tribute, investiture, and ceremonial exchange. The treasure voyages translated this worldview into practice through the circulation of fleets, the issuance of imperial proclamations, and the transport of foreign envoys to and from China. These operations placed overseas diplomacy, military force, and commercial regulation under the direct authority of the throne and its eunuch agents, rather than under the routine supervision of the civil bureaucracy.

The fleets carried three broad categories of goods: imperial gifts for foreign rulers, exchange media (including gold, silver, copper coins, and paper money), and Chinese monopoly products such as silks, ceramics, and musk. Over time, Ming agents also took over the transport of goods that had previously moved mainly through Indian, Arab, and Southeast Asian merchants. Chinese ships carried Southeast Asian sandalwood and Indian pepper to Aden and Dhofar, shipped patchuk and pepper to Hormuz, delivered sandalwood and rice to Mogadishu, and transported iron cauldrons and pans to Mecca. These activities expanded the commercial role of the state and increased the fiscal and logistical scale of the maritime program.

The return cargoes had visible effects inside China. Zheng He's fleets brought back silver, spices, sandalwood, precious stones, ivory, ebony, camphor, tin, coral, kingfisher feathers, tortoise shells, gums and resins, rhinoceros horn, sapanwood, safflower, Indian cotton cloth, and ambergris, along with exotic animals such as ostriches, elephants, and giraffes. The volume of Persian cobalt oxide imported for porcelain production was large enough to supply Jingdezhen for decades, and the influx of black pepper turned a rare luxury into a common commodity in Chinese society. In some Indian ports, contemporary accounts report that it took months to unload and price the goods brought by Chinese ships. The voyages contributed to a flourishing Ming economy and even generated price disruptions in Eurasian markets in the early fifteenth century.

These material gains, however, intensified political tensions at court. The treasure voyages were administered largely through the eunuch establishment, with Zheng He and his senior officers holding palace appointments that bypassed the normal civil bureaucracy. Shipbuilding, logistics, diplomacy, and military command flowed through institutions closely tied to the emperor's household. This arrangement suited the Yongle Emperor's governing style, which favored direct control, large-scale projects, and reliance on trusted palace agents. Between 1403 and 1419, provincial governments and military garrisons received repeated orders to construct and refit ships, mobilizing labor and resources on a massive scale and making the fleet one of the most ambitious state enterprises of the early Ming period.

Civil scholar-officials viewed this system with growing alarm. Their objections focused on fiscal strain, administrative bypassing, and the expansion of eunuch power into domains traditionally overseen by the bureaucracy. These concerns did not remain abstract, and they were reinforced by the concrete political consequences of the voyages across the maritime world, where military intervention and court-sponsored regime changes bound overseas policy even more tightly to palace politics.

In Palembang, for example, a Ming record dated 12 August 1406 notes that Chen Zuyi and Liang Daoming sent envoys to the Ming court. During the return leg of the first voyage in 1407, Zheng He defeated Chen Zuyi's pirate fleet, which had dominated the Malacca Strait, and the Ming court recognized Shi Jinqing as Grand Chieftain after Chen's capture. After Shi's death, his daughter Shi Erjie reportedly became wang (king), an unusual succession that highlights how Ming-backed arrangements could override local norms. Later, on 27 February 1425, Zheng He was again sent on a diplomatic mission to confer ceremonial regalia and a silver seal on Shi Jisun, formalizing succession under Ming authority. These actions tied the control of strategic ports directly to court-managed patronage and ritual.

A similar pattern unfolded in Ceylon, where during the third voyage the fleet confronted King Alakeshvara in 1411, captured him, and installed Parakramabahu VI, reshaping regional politics in favor of Ming interests and securing maritime routes for trade and diplomacy. On the Malabar Coast, rivalry between Calicut and Cochin prompted Ming intervention during the fifth voyage (1417–1419), when

Zheng He was instructed to confer a seal on Keyili of Cochin and enfeoff the Zhenguo Zhi Shan (“Mountain Which Protects the Country”), a proclamation attributed to the Yongle Emperor. As long as Ming protection held, Calicut refrained from invasion, a situation that later reversed after the voyages ended.

The court’s strategic and commercial priorities also intersected clearly in Malacca. Before Ming intervention, Malacca was a minor port and a vassal of Siam. In 1404, the eunuch envoy Yin Qing visited Malacca, and in 1405, the Ming court dispatched Zheng He with a stone tablet enfeoffing the Western Mountain of Malacca and an imperial decree elevating its status, while also establishing a fortified government depot as a base for the fleet. In 1411, King Paramesvara paid tribute in person to the Ming emperor. Later, in 1431, when Malacca complained that Siam was obstructing tribute missions, the Xuande Emperor sent Zheng He with a threatening message to the Siamese king. These episodes show how overseas policy functioned as an extension of court authority and imperial command rather than as routine diplomacy.

Further west, the voyages deepened the political entanglement of the Ming court in Indian Ocean affairs. Bengal sent tribute missions in 1408, 1414, 1438, and 1439, including a famous giraffe in 1414 from King Jalal-ud-Din. In 1420, when Bengal sought protection against the Sultan of Jaunpur, the Ming court dispatched Hou Xian with a military force that maintained peace without battle. In Yemen, the fleet visited between 30 December 1418 and 27 January 1419, delivering gifts valued at 20,000 miscals and receiving luxury goods in exchange. A later account dated 21 June 1432 describes two Chinese ships seeking permission to dock at Jeddah after instability in Aden disrupted unloading, illustrating how late-voyage commerce and diplomacy were shaped by regional disorder.

African tribute missions further reinforced the court’s prestige economy. Malindi presented a giraffe in 1415, with its last known mission in 1416. Brava sent four tribute missions between 1416 and 1423, presenting camels and ostriches, while Mogadishu presented zebras and lions. These exchanges mattered politically because they strengthened the symbolic capital of the eunuch-led maritime project at court, even as they increased its fiscal and administrative footprint.

Yet this impressive display of maritime reach coincided with the effective end of the treasure voyage program. Zheng He died shortly after the expedition, in either 1433 or 1435. More importantly, the political conditions that had made the voyages possible no longer existed. After the death of the Xuande Emperor in 1435, the civil officials consolidated their influence at court, particularly during the minority of the Zhengtong Emperor. They moved to dismantle the institutional foundations of the maritime enterprise: shipyards were closed or repurposed, offices responsible for overseas expeditions were abolished, production of export goods for state trade was curtailed, and regulations on foreign missions were tightened. By the mid-fifteenth century, the Ming state had effectively withdrawn from large-scale, state-directed naval expansion due to unsustainable financial costs, intense political opposition from Confucian bureaucrats, and a shift in military focus to land-based defense

against the Northern Mongols. The death of the pro-voyage Yongle Emperor (1424) allowed these conservative factions to halt the costly voyages, which were seen as wasteful, while the capture of an emperor by Mongols in 1449 further solidified a defensive, inward-looking policy.

The cessation of the treasure voyages did not end Chinese maritime activity. Private trade continued, and Chinese merchants remained active throughout Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean. However, the nature of China's engagement with the maritime world changed fundamentally. The state no longer sought to project power through massive fleets or to organize overseas exchange primarily through the tributary system. Instead, maritime commerce increasingly shifted into the hands of local elites and private actors, reducing the central government's direct control over long-distance trade due to the state's strict sea ban (*haijin*), which created a high-profit, illegal smuggling market that the government could not effectively police.

## *Current Situation*

### **Where the Empire Stands**

It is the early 1430s, during the reign of the Xuande Emperor. The Ming treasure fleet, once the most visible symbol of imperial maritime power, has been largely inactive since the sixth voyage returned in 1422. Shipyards remain in operation, crews still exist, and institutional memory has not disappeared, but the political environment that sustained the earlier expeditions has significantly changed.

In 1430, the Xuande Emperor authorized preparations for a seventh voyage, scheduled to depart in 1431. This decision does not represent a simple continuation of the Yongle-era policy. Instead, it reopens unresolved debates at court about:

- The proper scope of imperial power abroad
- The balance between maritime projection and continental defense
- The role of eunuch institutions versus the civil bureaucracy
- The fiscal and administrative sustainability of large-scale expeditions
- The future of the tributary system in the Indian Ocean world

The court must now determine not only how to conduct this voyage, but what it represents. Is it a revival of oceanic strategy, a limited diplomatic mission, or a final assertion of Ming prestige before strategic withdrawal?

### **Strategic Responsibilities of the Ming Court Regarding the Treasure Fleet**

The Ming state, in authorizing and managing the seventh voyage, assumes responsibility for the following:

- To reaffirm the Ming tributary order and ensure that foreign polities continue to recognize imperial supremacy;
- To maintain security of maritime routes, including suppression of piracy and protection of allied ports;

- To organize and provision the fleet, including ship repair, crew mobilization, supply chains, and scheduling around monsoon winds;
- To manage diplomatic protocol, including reception of envoys, distribution of gifts, and performance of ritual hierarchy;
- To supervise fiscal expenditures, including shipbuilding, provisioning, and tribute-gift exchanges;
- To coordinate military readiness, including the deployment of marines, weapons, and deterrent force;
- To oversee information gathering, including geographic, political, and commercial intelligence from overseas regions;
- To control the political consequences at court, particularly the balance of power between eunuch command structures and the civil bureaucracy;
- To determine post-voyage policy, including whether the fleet will be maintained, expanded, reduced, or dismantled.

These responsibilities are divided across different institutions and factions within the Ming state, each with its own priorities and incentives. The Ministry of Revenue focuses on cost containment and fiscal sustainability. The Ministry of Rites emphasizes ritual order and tributary hierarchy. Military commanders stress security and deterrence. Eunuch administrators, drawing on their proximity to the emperor, emphasize operational flexibility and imperial prestige. Scholar-officials, in contrast, increasingly argue for retrenchment, moral governance, and reallocation of resources toward agrarian stability and frontier defense.

As with any large, complex state project, decisions in one domain inevitably create pressures in others. A larger fleet improves deterrence but increases costs. A reduced mission saves money but risks signaling imperial retreat. Empowering eunuch commanders ensures operational unity but deepens bureaucratic resistance. Prioritizing ritual diplomacy may preserve prestige but fail to address strategic vulnerabilities.

## **The Broader Strategic Context**

The seventh voyage takes place against a backdrop of long-term structural tensions within the Ming state. Since 1405, the treasure voyages have served multiple purposes simultaneously: projecting imperial authority, enforcing the tributary system, regulating maritime trade, suppressing piracy, and reinforcing the Yongle Emperor's political legitimacy after his 1402 usurpation. They have also empowered eunuch institutions, bypassed normal bureaucratic oversight, and required extraordinary mobilization of state resources.

Under Yongle, these costs were politically acceptable because maritime expansion was tightly bound to regime consolidation and imperial self-presentation. Under Xuande, that consensus no longer exists. The dynasty now faces rising pressure on its northern frontiers, persistent fiscal strain from earlier mega-projects such as the relocation of the capital to Beijing and the construction of the Forbidden City, and an emboldened civil bureaucracy determined to curb eunuch influence.

At the same time, the Ming court cannot ignore the strategic implications of withdrawal. The Indian Ocean world remains a dense network of trade and competition. Ports such as Malacca, Calicut, Hormuz, and Aden continue to serve as critical nodes linking East Asia, South Asia, the Islamic world, and East Africa. The tribute relationships established by Zheng He's fleets are already weakening in the absence of regular naval presence, so a complete retreat risks not only loss of prestige but also loss of influence over maritime routes and regional politics.

Looming over is the question of institutional authority rather than in the technical details of shipbuilding or navigation. The treasure fleet concentrates administrative power, resources, and symbolic prestige in a single enterprise. Influence over the fleet carries implications for appointments, budgetary priorities, information channels, and access to the emperor's attention, which makes maritime policy inseparable from larger struggles over governance.



Stamp depicting the Ming treasure fleet (*Britannica*)

Eunuch institutions, most visibly represented by Zheng He's career, have shown their ability to organize operations that extend across vast distances and multiple regions. Zheng He (1371–1433) rose within a court environment that increasingly relied on eunuchs for high-trust assignments, and his command of the voyages placed him at the center of an imperial project that combined logistics, diplomacy, and military deterrence. Eunuch administrators mobilize personnel through patronage networks, manage logistics through palace-linked structures, and maintain direct channels of communication with the throne. During the Yongle reign, this arrangement supported rapid decision-making, unified command, and close imperial supervision

of a project that functioned as a public expression of dynastic authority after Zhu Di seized the throne as the Yongle Emperor in 1402.

This institutional pattern emerged from earlier Ming political design. The Hongwu Emperor (r. 1368–1398) attempted to restrict eunuch influence and consolidate authority in the person of the ruler, culminating in a decisive restructuring of the central government after the execution of Chancellor Hu Weiyong in 1380. Hongwu abolished the Chancellery/Secretariat structure and assumed direct control over the Six Ministries, which reduced intermediary power and made court access, documentation, and fiscal reporting even more politically charged. Over time, later rulers rebuilt coordinating mechanisms through the Grand Secretariat, while eunuch offices developed their own parallel administrative capacity inside the palace. The result is a court in which debates about the fleet are also debates about whose paperwork counts, whose intelligence reaches the throne, and whose authority is treated as legitimate state action.

Within the civil bureaucracy, the same configuration raises persistent concerns about procedure, documentation, and fiscal accountability. Scholar-officials ground their authority in memorial review, record-keeping, and budgetary oversight, and large palace-directed expeditions place significant portions of decision-making beyond these routines. Even when overseas missions yield diplomatic or commercial returns, the distribution of credit and influence tends to follow the chains of command that operate closest to the emperor, shaping how different offices assess the political consequences of continued voyages and how they evaluate the political risk of empowering palace institutions as a standing administrative counterweight.

These tensions became more pronounced after 1424, when a change of reign altered the coalition that had sustained the voyages. The Jianwen Emperor (r. 1398–1402) had already tried to curb the power of imperial princes, triggering the Jingnan campaign that brought Yongle to power, and Yongle's reign subsequently relied on governance tools designed to secure the throne and project authority. Yongle announced Beijing as the capital in 1403, demoting Nanjing to a secondary capital, and the state undertook a vast construction program from 1407 to 1420 that culminated in the Forbidden City and a rebuilt administrative center. This mattered for maritime policy because it entrenched a model of government that treated large, resource-intensive projects as instruments of dynasty-making, with eunuch management and direct imperial supervision as core features rather than exceptions.

The Hongxi Emperor's suspension of the fleet in 1424 reflected a reorientation of priorities as well as a shift in factional influence. The Xuande Emperor's authorization of a new expedition in 1430 signals a willingness to reopen the maritime option without fully reestablishing the earlier institutional settlement. As a result, the seventh voyage proceeds in an environment where the practical question of how to conduct the mission remains linked to the unresolved issue of who should direct it and under what administrative framework at the very moment when "grand coordinator" (xunfu) assignments were being institutionalized around 1430, strengthening the state's capacity to monitor officials and provinces while also

sharpening the politics of central oversight.

## State capacity and resources

The early Ming had been built on an extraordinary mobilizational foundation. The Hongwu Emperor had envisioned a realm of self-sufficient agrarian communities tied to a hereditary military system, with a standing army that exceeded one million troops and dockyards in Nanjing that were the largest in the world. That vision produced an administrative culture accustomed to thinking in terms of scale. Large construction projects, mass troop movements, and long-distance supply chains were not anomalies in the early dynasty, as they were part of how imperial authority had been made visible and credible following the collapse of Yuan rule.



*Artistic reconstruction of Admiral Zheng He's fleet*

<https://mingdynastyhistory.com/zheng-he-introduction-greatest-navigator-history/>

The Nanjing shipyards between 1403 and 1419 were constructed on the order of two thousand vessels to support Zheng He's expeditions, including the largest ships the dynasty would ever deploy.

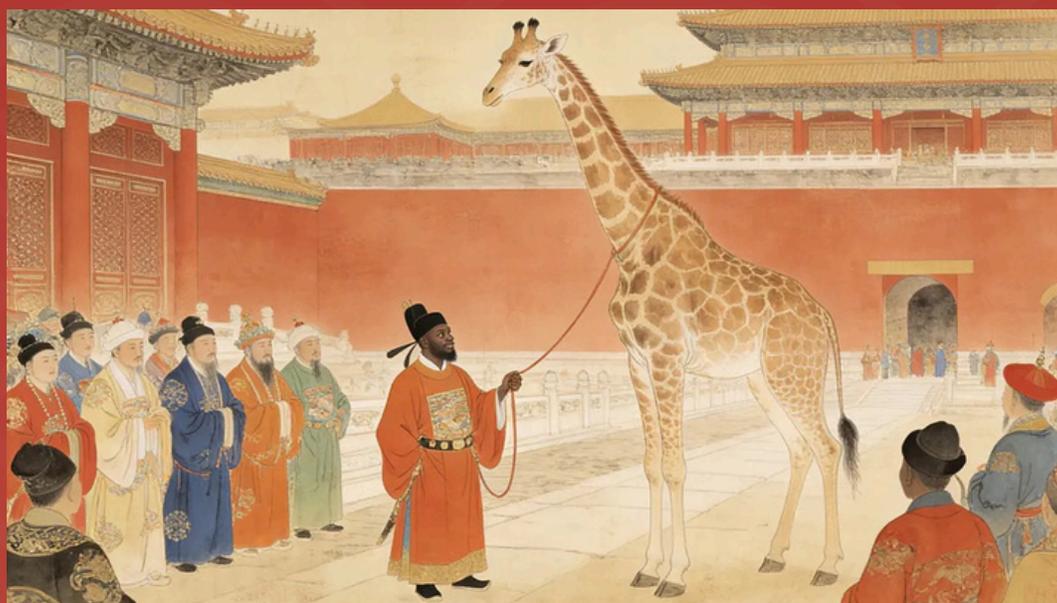
## Sabotage & Intrigue

One of the most reliable methods of internal sabotage in Ming governance was procedural suffocation. Since the Hongwu Emperor abolished the Chancellery in 1380 and concentrated authority in the throne and the Six Ministries, major projects depended on coordination across the ministries of Revenue, Rites, War, and Public Works, with the Grand Secretariat and the Censorate layered on top as reviewing

bodies. By the early fifteenth century, this meant that any large undertaking could be slowed by multiplying demands for documentation, recalculation, and verification. In the case of maritime expeditions, officials skeptical of eunuch-led ventures could insist on repeated reviews of shipyard inventories, labor drafts, grain transport schedules, and tribute-gift valuations. Each request was defensible in the language of good governance, yet the cumulative effect was to stretch timelines, increase uncertainty, and create the appearance of administrative disorder.

Control over information was another potent tool. The Ming court ruled through memorials, compiled reports, and summarized intelligence rather than through direct inspection, especially in matters involving distant regions such as the Indian Ocean world. Ministries and censorial offices could shape policy simply by choosing which facts to emphasize. Reports could foreground piracy risks, provisioning shortfalls, or unrest in coastal regions while treating evidence of stable conditions or prior successes as secondary. The same mechanism worked in reverse for palace-linked administrators, who could stress favorable tributary exchanges and downplay logistical strain. In a system already struggling with unreliable census data and incomplete fiscal records, selective presentation of evidence did not require falsification to be effective.

Economic supervision also created additional pressure points. The Ministry of Revenue controlled tax collection, currency offices, and the release of funds, and it operated in a fiscal environment already strained by underreported populations and long-standing difficulties in measuring the real tax base. Officials concerned about the precedent of large palace-directed projects could apply especially strict standards to expeditionary budgets or delay disbursements pending further review. None of this required opposing the voyage in principle, but it reframed the enterprise as financially precarious and administratively risky, while strengthening the hand of those who argued that resources should be redirected toward agrarian stability and frontier defense.



*Depiction of Admiral Zheng He presenting a giraffe to the Ming court*  
<https://mingdynastyhistory.com/zheng-he-introduction-greatest-navigator-history/>

## **The Eunuch Establishment as an Administrative State Within the State**

By the early 1430s, the eunuch establishment had developed into a parallel administrative system embedded inside the imperial household and increasingly intertwined with core functions of governance. This was not an accidental development. The Hongwu Emperor had originally attempted to confine eunuchs to palace service and explicitly barred them from literacy and political participation, yet the institutional structure he created after 1380 unintentionally made access to the emperor the central political resource of the state. Once the Chancellery was abolished and the Six Ministries were placed under the direct authority of the throne, proximity to the ruler became as important as formal rank. Over time, eunuchs, who staffed the inner palace and controlled key household directorates, occupied precisely this space of access.

During the Yongle reign (1402–1424), this pattern accelerated as the Yongle emperor relied heavily on eunuchs as trusted agents in sensitive or high-risk assignments, including military logistics, diplomatic travel, and the supervision of major construction projects. By this period, eunuchs were no longer confined to domestic service. They commanded workshops, managed imperial estates, supervised arsenals, and, in the case of Zheng He, led the largest maritime expeditions in the world. The Yongle Emperor is recorded to have placed some seventy-five eunuchs in charge of foreign affairs missions, sending them not only to Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean but also to Korea, Mongolia, and Tibet. This practice embedded eunuchs directly into the empire's external relations and tied palace institutions to the conduct of diplomacy and war.

Administratively, the eunuch establishment was organized into a complex set of directorates, offices, and bureaus that mirrored the functional divisions of the civil government. The Directorate of Palace Attendants sat at the apex, but beneath it were offices responsible for seals, documents, stables, weapons, clothing, silverwork, food supplies, and ceremonial objects. Crucially, eunuchs also worked alongside civil officials in institutions such as the Seal Office, which handled the authentication of edicts, tallies, and official orders. This meant that eunuchs did not merely execute imperial commands; they increasingly participated in the processes that made commands administratively valid. In a political system where a missing seal or an improperly registered order could halt an entire chain of action, this gave palace institutions leverage that extended well beyond the inner court.

### **At the current moment**

The Ming state still holds the material capacity to move men, resources, and authority across oceans, and it still carries the institutional memory to organize an expedition on this scale. At the same time, the political environment surrounding that capacity has shifted, shaped by tighter oversight, more assertive ministries, and a eunuch establishment whose influence remains essential and contested. Every option before the court carries consequences that reach across economic policy and internal governance. A larger fleet strengthens deterrence and symbolic authority while deepening fiscal and bureaucratic strain. A narrower mission preserves resources while testing the credibility of Ming power in the wider maritime world. Changes in command structure promise administrative discipline while reshaping the balance of power inside the state. In this way, the question before the court extends beyond the fate of a single voyage and into the long-term direction of Ming strategy and imperial authority, precisely the set of tradeoffs delegates must weigh as they debate the future of the treasure fleet and the empire.

## *Questions to consider:*

1. As the Ming state faces rising fiscal and security pressures, how should it decide the appropriate scale and purpose of future treasure fleet expeditions?
2. How can the court balance maritime projection in the Indian Ocean with the need to prioritize defense against threats on the northern frontier?
3. In what ways should the administration of overseas expeditions be reformed to reduce costs while preserving imperial authority and prestige?
4. How should the Ming government redefine the tributary system in the Indian Ocean world in an era of shifting regional power and changing court politics?
5. To what extent should military force remain an acceptable tool for enforcing tributary relations and securing maritime routes?
6. How can the Ming state maintain influence over overseas trade and diplomacy without relying exclusively on massive, state-funded fleets?
7. What role should eunuch institutions and the civil bureaucracy each play in shaping and controlling maritime policy going forward?
8. What risks to imperial legitimacy and regional stability might follow from a reduction or termination of the treasure voyages, and how can those risks be mitigated?
9. How should the seventh voyage be framed domestically and internationally to serve the long-term strategic interests of the Ming dynasty?
10. How can the Ming state ensure that maritime policy aligns with broader goals of fiscal sustainability, social stability, and effective governance?
11. In what ways might changes to maritime policy reshape relations between the imperial court, coastal elites, and private merchants?

## *Additional Resources:*

[https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/art\\_sci\\_etds/1719/](https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/art_sci_etds/1719/)

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Zheng-He>

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ming-dynasty-Chinese-history>

<https://blogs.uoregon.edu/lanterns/miscellaneous-and-ordering-a-cd/the-ming-dynasty-1368-1644/>

[https://www.worldhistory.org/Yongle\\_Emperor/](https://www.worldhistory.org/Yongle_Emperor/)

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b015p8c2>

<https://www.education.maritime-museum.org/training/north-gallery-2/asian-history/admiral-zheng-he-and-the-chinese-treasure-fleet/>

<https://history.princeton.edu/undergraduate/princeton-historical-review/winter-2025-issue/art-policy>

<https://academic.oup.com/book/11842/chapter/160947477>

[https://vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1093&context=undergrad\\_rev](https://vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1093&context=undergrad_rev)

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/bulletin-of-the-school-of-oriental-and-african-studies/article/impact-of-zheng-hes-expeditions-on-indian-ocean-interactions/9A9712436B63AA7E3DDE983B1E18B62B>



The Ming Treasure Fleet  
*Topic Guide*

2

Topic  
Two



凤凰  
特色黄牛粉

羊肉粉

我随巷

家路棧

化慶棧

# Court Politics & The Fate Of Maritime China

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## *Introduction*

Behind the splendor of the imperial treasure fleets, the Ming court grew increasingly divided by factional rivalry and personal ambition. As eunuchs and scholar-officials competed for power and influence, the empire was forced to decide whether the maritime project served long-term stability or merely intensified the internal political conflicts that would bring it to an end.

## *Glossary*

- **Yongle Emperor** - The Yongle Emperor was the Ming ruler who launched and championed the treasure voyages. Having seized the throne in 1402, he used Zheng He's fleets to project authority across the Indian Ocean, expand the tributary system, and demonstrate Ming supremacy. Under his reign, six major expeditions sailed, and the maritime project became tightly linked to eunuch administration and imperial prestige. (r. 1402–1424)
- **Xuande Emperor** - Successor to the Hongxi emperor, the Xuande Emperor inherited a court deeply divided over the legacy of the treasure voyages and the power of eunuch institutions. Although he initially maintained the suspension of large-scale expeditions, in 1430 he authorized a final, seventh voyage to restore weakened tributary ties and reassert Ming prestige. (r. 1425–1435)
- **Hongxi Emperor** - The Hongxi Emperor, successor to Yongle, was openly opposed to the treasure voyages and ordered their suspension immediately upon taking the throne. He viewed the expeditions as fiscally burdensome, politically destabilizing, and contrary to Confucian ideals of governance that prioritized internal administration and agrarian stability. (r. 1424–1425)
- **Tributary System** - The Ming Dynasty managed its foreign relations through gift exchanges instead of territorial conquest. Foreign rulers acknowledged the Ming emperor's superior status by sending tribute and performing ceremonial submission, in return receiving gifts, recognition, and political protection. The treasure voyages served as the primary instrument for enforcing and expanding this system across the Indian Ocean world.
- **Tribute** - Tribute refers to the goods, envoys, and symbolic acts of submission sent by foreign polities to the Ming court as part of the tributary order.

- **Investiture** - The formal recognition by the Ming emperor of a foreign ruler's legitimacy and status within the tributary hierarchy. Through seals, titles, and ceremonial decrees, the court could confirm, reshape, or even override local successions, as seen in places like Calicut, Cochin, and Palembang.
- **Monsoon Winds** - Seasonal wind systems in the Indian Ocean and South China Sea that determined the timing, routes, and logistics of the treasure voyages. The fleet's departures, crossings, and regroupings were carefully planned around these predictable wind patterns.
- **Hormuz** - Hormuz was a major port at the entrance to the Persian Gulf and one of the westernmost destinations of the Ming treasure voyages. It served as a critical hub linking Indian Ocean trade with the Middle East and Central Asia
- **Calicut** - Calicut, located on India's Malabar Coast, was one of the most important commercial centers in the Indian Ocean and a frequent endpoint or transit hub for the treasure voyages.
- **Nanjing Shipyards** - The Nanjing shipyards, especially the Longjiang Shipyard near the Yangtze River, were the primary construction and refitting centers for the treasure fleet. Here, massive resources were mobilized to build and maintain hundreds of ships, including the giant treasure vessels.
- **Memorial System** - The memorial system was the formal bureaucratic channel in the form of long essays through which officials submitted reports, criticisms, and policy recommendations to the emperor.
- **Censorate** - The Censorate was a high-level supervisory agency within the centralized bureaucracy, standing alongside the Six Ministries and the Chief Military Commissions and reporting directly to the emperor. Its investigating censors were known as the "eyes and ears" of the throne, charged with monitoring officials at every level to detect corruption, abuse, and administrative failure. The institution was divided into three branches: the Palace Branch, which scrutinized officials' conduct at court; the Admonishment Branch, which was empowered to remonstrate with and correct the emperor himself; and the Detection Branch, which sent touring censors through the provinces to inspect local government.
- **Impeachment** - Formal charges brought against officials for corruption, misconduct, or disloyalty, often initiated through the Censorate or memorials to the throne.
- **Patronage Networks** - Patronage networks were systems of personal loyalty, favor, and reciprocal obligation that connected officials, eunuchs, military commanders, and court elites. Control of the treasure fleet created powerful patronage opportunities through appointments, contracts, and access to imperial favor.
- **Ministry of Rites** - The Ministry of Rites was responsible for managing diplomacy and the reception of foreign envoys within the tributary system. It oversaw ceremonies, titles, gifts, and protocol, and often clashed with economic or administrative concerns
- **Ministry of Revenue** - The Ministry of Revenue managed taxation, state finances, and budgetary oversight for the Ming government. It was deeply concerned with the enormous costs of shipbuilding, provisioning, and diplomatic gift exchange required by the treasure voyages.

- **Forbidden City** - The imperial palace complex that served as the center of Ming governance after the capital's relocation from Nanjing. The city's construction and maintenance were massive projects that competed directly with maritime spending for state resources.
- **Eunuch Establishment** - The eunuch establishment was a powerful group of palace officials who served in close proximity to the emperor
- **Civil Bureaucracy (Scholar-Officials)** - The civil bureaucracy consisted of Confucian-educated officials selected through examinations and responsible for routine governance, finance, and law. Many scholar-officials opposed the treasure voyages, viewing them as economically wasteful.
- **Haijin** - A Ming policy restricting private maritime trade and overseas travel in the form of a sea ban. While the treasure voyages represented a state-controlled exception to this ban, many officials favored stricter enforcement to curb smuggling and the rise of independent merchant power.

## *Topic History*

The political struggle over the Ming treasure voyages emerged from a broader transformation of the Ming state in the early fifteenth century, when imperial authority, bureaucratic governance, and maritime expansion became tightly intertwined. Between 1405 and 1433, the Ming dynasty dispatched seven state-sponsored maritime expeditions under the command of Admiral Zheng He, a senior eunuch and close agent of the Yongle Emperor (r. 1402–1424). At its height, the fleet comprised roughly 250 ships, including more than sixty treasure ships, and carried over 27,000 men. These expeditions connected Ming China to a maritime system extending from Southeast Asia through the Indian Ocean to Arabia and East Africa, while simultaneously embedding overseas policy inside ongoing struggles over power and authority at court.

The ideological framework of the voyages rested on the concept of *tianxia* (“all under heaven”), which structured foreign relations around imperial hierarchy and ritual subordination. Within this order, foreign rulers were expected to acknowledge the Ming emperor's superior status through tribute, investiture, and ceremonial exchange. The treasure voyages translated this worldview into practice through the circulation of fleets, the issuance of imperial proclamations, and the transport of foreign envoys to and from China. These operations placed overseas diplomacy, military force, and commercial regulation under the direct authority of the throne and its eunuch agents, rather than under the routine supervision of the civil bureaucracy.

From the start, the voyages functioned as both diplomatic and commercial enterprises. The fleets carried three broad categories of goods: imperial gifts for foreign rulers, exchange media (including gold, silver, copper coins, and paper money), and Chinese monopoly products such as silks, ceramics, and musk. Over time, Ming agents also took over the transport of goods that had previously moved mainly through Indian, Arab, and Southeast Asian merchants. Chinese ships carried Southeast Asian sandalwood and Indian pepper to Aden and Dhofar, shipped

putchuk and pepper to Hormuz, delivered sandalwood and rice to Mogadishu, and transported iron cauldrons and pans to Mecca. These activities expanded the commercial role of the state and increased the fiscal and logistical scale of the maritime program.

The return cargoes had visible effects inside China. Zheng He's fleets brought back silver, spices, sandalwood, precious stones, ivory, ebony, camphor, tin, coral, kingfisher feathers, tortoise shells, gums and resins, rhinoceros horn, sapanwood, safflower, Indian cotton cloth, and ambergris, along with exotic animals such as ostriches, elephants, and giraffes. The volume of Persian cobalt oxide imported for porcelain production was large enough to supply Jingdezhen for decades, and the influx of black pepper turned a rare luxury into a common commodity in Chinese society. In some Indian ports, contemporary accounts report that it took months to unload and price the goods brought by Chinese ships. The voyages contributed to a flourishing Ming economy and even generated price disruptions in Eurasian markets in the early fifteenth century.

These material gains, however, intensified political tensions at court. The treasure voyages were administered largely through the eunuch establishment, with Zheng He and his senior officers holding palace appointments that bypassed the normal civil bureaucracy. Shipbuilding, logistics, diplomacy, and military command flowed through institutions closely tied to the emperor's household. This arrangement suited the Yongle Emperor's governing style, which favored direct control, large-scale projects, and reliance on trusted palace agents. Between 1403 and 1419, provincial governments and military garrisons received repeated orders to construct and refit ships, mobilizing labor and resources on a massive scale and making the fleet one of the most ambitious state enterprises of the early Ming period.

Civil scholar-officials viewed this system with growing alarm. Their objections focused on fiscal strain, administrative bypassing, and the expansion of eunuch power into domains traditionally overseen by the bureaucracy. These concerns did not remain abstract. They were reinforced by the concrete political consequences of the voyages across the maritime world, where military intervention and court-sponsored regime changes bound overseas policy even more tightly to palace politics.

In Palembang, for example, a Ming record dated 12 August 1406 notes that Chen Zuyi and Liang Daoming sent envoys to the Ming court. During the return leg of the first voyage in 1407, Zheng He defeated Chen Zuyi's pirate fleet, which had dominated the Malacca Strait, and the Ming court recognized Shi Jinqing as Grand Chieftain after Chen's capture. After Shi's death, his daughter Shi Erjie reportedly became wang (king), an unusual succession that highlights how Ming-backed arrangements could override local norms. Later, on 27 February 1425, Zheng He was again sent on a diplomatic mission to confer ceremonial regalia and a silver seal on Shi Jisun, formalizing succession under Ming authority. These actions tied the control of strategic ports directly to court-managed patronage and ritual.

A similar pattern unfolded in Ceylon, where during the third voyage the fleet confronted King Alakeshvara in 1411, captured him, and installed Parakramabahu VI, reshaping regional politics in favor of Ming interests and securing maritime routes for trade and diplomacy. On the Malabar Coast, rivalry between Calicut and Cochin prompted Ming intervention during the fifth voyage (1417–1419), when Zheng He was instructed to confer a seal on Keyili of Cochin and enfeoff the Zhenguo Zhi Shan (“Mountain Which Protects the Country”), a proclamation attributed to the Yongle Emperor. As long as Ming protection held, Calicut refrained from invasion, a situation that later reversed after the voyages ended.

The court’s strategic and commercial priorities also intersected clearly in Malacca. Before Ming intervention, Malacca was a minor port and a vassal of Siam. In 1404, the eunuch envoy Yin Qing visited Malacca, and in 1405, the Ming court dispatched Zheng He with a stone tablet enfeoffing the Western Mountain of Malacca and an imperial decree elevating its status, while also establishing a fortified government depot as a base for the fleet. In 1411, King Paramesvara paid tribute in person to the Ming emperor. Later, in 1431, when Malacca complained that Siam was obstructing tribute missions, the Xuande Emperor sent Zheng He with a threatening message to the Siamese king. These episodes show how overseas policy functioned as an extension of court authority and imperial command rather than as routine diplomacy.

Further west, the voyages deepened the political entanglement of the Ming court in Indian Ocean affairs. Bengal sent tribute missions in 1408, 1414, 1438, and 1439, including a famous giraffe in 1414 from King Jalal-ud-Din. In 1420, when Bengal sought protection against the Sultan of Jaunpur, the Ming court dispatched Hou Xian with a military force that maintained peace without battle. In Yemen, the fleet visited between 30 December 1418 and 27 January 1419, delivering gifts valued at 20,000 miscals and receiving luxury goods in exchange. A later account dated 21 June 1432 describes two Chinese ships seeking permission to dock at Jeddah after instability in Aden disrupted unloading, illustrating how late-voyage commerce and diplomacy were shaped by regional disorder.

African tribute missions further reinforced the court’s prestige economy. Malindi presented a giraffe in 1415, with its last known mission in 1416. Brava sent four tribute missions between 1416 and 1423, presenting camels and ostriches, while Mogadishu presented zebras and lions. These exchanges mattered politically because they strengthened the symbolic capital of the eunuch-led maritime project at court, even as they increased its fiscal and administrative footprint.

The turning point came with imperial succession. The Yongle Emperor died in 1424, and his successor, the Hongxi Emperor, ordered the suspension of further voyages on the day of his accession. Although the fleet remained stationed at Nanjing, court priorities shifted toward fiscal restraint, internal administration, and northern defense. The Xuande Emperor authorized one final expedition in 1430, which sailed in 1431 and returned in 1433, reaffirming Ming diplomatic presence and bringing back envoys from Mecca, Hormuz, Calicut, and Ceylon. Soon afterward, Zheng He died, and the institutional coalition that had sustained the maritime program weakened.

After the Xuande Emperor's death in 1435, civil officials consolidated influence during the minority of the Zhengtong Emperor and moved to dismantle the foundations of the fleet. Shipyards were repurposed, offices connected to overseas expeditions were dissolved, export production for state trade was curtailed, and regulations governing foreign missions became more restrictive. Later accounts describe the destruction of voyage records and logbooks, a measure intended to foreclose any future revival of large-scale state expeditions.

## *Current Situation*

### **A Court Under Strain**

By the early 1430s, the Ming Dynasty occupied a position that appeared stable while concealing deep political stress. The Xuande Emperor sat securely on the throne. The frontiers remained quieter than during the founding decades. The central government continued to operate on a massive scale. The shipyards at Nanjing still possessed the capacity to build ocean-going vessels. Granaries, arsenals, and transport networks created under earlier reigns remained in service. The court retained the technical expertise and administrative experience required to organize large fleets. These facts, however, masked a steady shift in the internal balance of power. Court politics had come to revolve around rivalry, suspicion, and procedural obstruction. The treasure fleet, once a symbol of imperial command, had become a focal point of institutional conflict.

This conflict grew out of the dynasty's early design. The Hongwu Emperor attempted to construct a state governed through Confucian norms and a disciplined civil bureaucracy. He treated eunuchs as a political danger, associated them with palace intrigue, and barred them from administrative authority. His edicts limited their education and their access to state affairs. The Hongwu Emperor erected warnings against relying on the eunuchs and concentrated formal authority in the throne while binding ministers to law and precedent. At the same time, he built a vast military establishment and an enormous imperial household.

The civil war that brought the Yongle Emperor to power broke this arrangement. Yongle relied on force, factional support, and palace networks. He rebuilt the political center at Beijing and constructed the Forbidden City as a new seat of authority. He turned the court toward a more assertive style of rule. In this setting, eunuchs became central to the operation of the state. They managed workshops and supply systems, carried confidential orders, supervised military units, and handled sensitive missions that did not pass through the ministries. Zheng He's appointment as admiral of the treasure fleets marked this shift. The voyages reported through palace channels and drew resources from across the empire while remaining largely outside routine bureaucratic supervision.



*The Forbidden City*

<https://www.chinalocaltours.com/the-forbidden-city-7-intriguing-facts-about-chinas-imperial-palace/>

This system delivered results. The fleets carried imperial edicts across the Indian Ocean, returned with envoys and tribute, and displayed Ming power in ports from Southeast Asia to East Africa. They reinforced Yongle's authority at home and abroad, but also shifted influence within the state.

The political meaning of this arrangement became clear after Yongle's death in 1424. The Hongxi Emperor moved immediately to suspend the voyages and redirect resources toward domestic administration and frontier defense. While his reign was short, his policy signaled a change in priorities. The maritime enterprise now no longer possessed an institutional sponsor strong enough to override resistance within the bureaucracy.

Under the Xuande Emperor, this unresolved tension hardened into a struggle over authority and access to decision-making. The practical question concerned control of the machinery that made large projects possible. Eunuchs viewed the fleet as a route back to the center of imperial power, while scholar-officials viewed it as a revival of a system that had weakened ministerial supervision and concentrated authority inside the palace. Both sides understood what was at stake as control over the fleet meant control over budgets, appointments, communications, and the language through which imperial ambition was presented.

Within the civil bureaucracy, opposition took shape through fiscal and procedural arguments. Officials emphasized the cost of shipbuilding, provisioning, and transport. They pointed to the long financial shadow of earlier projects such as the relocation of the capital and the construction of the Forbidden City. They warned about pressure on northern defenses and the need to preserve reserves. These concerns had strategic weight, yet they also served a political function. Each audit, each demand for clarification, each revision of estimates slowed the pace of preparation and pulled authority back toward the ministries.

Eunuchs countered through palace networks. Their influence rested on access to the emperor, control of workshops, and supervision of sensitive channels of communication. They presented delays as evidence of bureaucratic obstruction. They described themselves as administrators capable of action in the face of excessive caution. They invoked the memory of Yongle's successes and the prestige attached to maritime power. Their aim focused on restoring a command structure that answered directly to the throne rather than to ministerial offices.

The disagreement reflected incompatible views of political authority as scholar-officials understood legitimacy as something produced through law and documented procedure, whereas eunuchs derived authority from service to the emperor and from their role in managing the imperial household and its enterprises. The examination system and the graded hierarchy of offices defined the status of officials, while palace service and personal trust defined the position of eunuchs. These two systems did not rest easily beside each other.

The institutional battlefield extended beyond the ministries and the shipyards into the court's security apparatus. Yongle had created the Eastern Depot (Dongchang) in 1420 as a eunuch-run spy and secret police agency designed to suppress political opposition after his 1402 usurpation. The depot monitored officials of every rank, along with soldiers, scholars, and civilians. It investigated and arrested suspects, then handed them to the Jinyiwei for interrogation. The existence of an organ like this changed court politics. A policy dispute could become an accusation of disloyalty; a budget memorandum could be reframed as obstruction; and a rival's network could be mapped through interrogations rather than debates. The fleet's revival brought these dynamics into sharper focus because it mobilized huge sums, created new appointments, and generated correspondence that could be monitored, copied, or selectively forwarded.

This surveillance capacity created incentives for preemptive maneuvering. Scholar-officials knew that a eunuch faction could use denunciations, rumors, and "investigations" to remove opponents from the decision chain at the moment preparations became urgent. That fear encouraged defensive behavior, and officials wrote with excessive caution. They buried criticism inside technical phrasing and demanded written orders for every requisition. They refused to approve transfers without complete documentation. They asked for multiple seals and countersignatures. These acts looked like prudence in the record. They also built a

paper shield against later accusations. If sabotage occurred, it often consisted of forcing every decision into a form that produced delay while protecting the official from being singled out by palace investigators.

The scholar-officials who staffed the bureaucracy understood where unchecked palace power could lead, and they feared it. That awareness shaped their approach to the treasure fleet. The issue turned on the distribution of authority within the state. A successful eunuch-led revival of maritime expansion would strengthen palace institutions, expand their control over resources, and establish precedents that bypassed ministerial review. Victories overseas, however, could therefore translate into losses at home.

From this perspective, obstruction became a method of governance. No official needed to attack the emperor's policy directly. Requests for documentation, questions about appointments, reviews of expenditures, and appeals to precedent slowed the process and redirected authority. Each step remained defensible within the scope of responsible administration, and each step reduced the palace's freedom of action.

Eunuchs described this pattern as sabotage. They argued that delay weakened imperial authority and encouraged doubts among foreign rulers. They pointed to ports such as Malacca, Cochin, and Calicut, whose political position had once depended on Ming protection. They cited the years of naval inactivity and warned that tribute relationships rested on memory rather than presence. Their case relied on examples drawn from earlier voyages, where court intervention reshaped local politics.



*The Eastern Depot*

Link: <https://www.grunge.com/218234/the-truth-about-the-ming-dynastys-secret-police/>

The Eastern Depot offered a way to separate loyalty to the throne from loyalty to the ministries. A eunuch could treat bureaucratic resistance as a security problem rather than an administrative disagreement. Delays could be presented as evidence of factional conspiracy. Questions about cost could be framed as attacks on imperial prestige. The fleet provided an ideal platform for this logic, since foreign missions were easy to define as matters of state security and imperial dignity. Once a debate moved into that register, ordinary bureaucratic tools became vulnerable. A minister who demanded accounting looked like a man obstructing the emperor's will.

In Palembang, Ming records dated 12 August 1406 note that Chen Zuyi and Liang Daoming sent envoys to the court. During the return leg of the first voyage in 1407, Zheng He defeated Chen Zuyi's fleet in the Malacca Strait. The court recognized Shi Jinqing as Grand Chieftain after Chen's capture. After Shi's death, his daughter Shi Erjie reportedly succeeded him as ruler, an outcome that departed from local custom and reflected Ming backing. On 27 February 1425, Zheng He was again dispatched to confer ceremonial regalia and a silver seal on Shi Jisun, formalizing succession under imperial authority. These interventions tied the control of a strategic port to palace-managed patronage and ritual.

Similar patterns appeared elsewhere. In Ceylon, Zheng He's forces intervened directly in local politics in 1411. In Cochin, Ming recognition shaped the balance of power against Calicut. In Malacca, court protection after 1405 supported the port's rise as a regional hub. Each case linked overseas arrangements to palace authority and reinforced the political weight of maritime policy inside the capital.

These precedents strengthened the eunuch argument that maritime power served as an extension of court authority, while also strengthening bureaucratic anxiety. Each success abroad expanded the scope of palace influence at home. Each mission created new appointments, new budgets, and new channels of communication that bypassed ministerial control.

By the early 1430s, this tension produced a politics of attrition. Preparations for a seventh voyage continued in principle, yet in practice, every stage invited dispute. Shipbuilding schedules raised questions about timber supply and labor quotas; provisioning plans triggered debates over grain reserves and transport priorities; personnel appointments reopened conflicts over chains of command; and ritual arrangements for receiving envoys drew the Ministry of Rites into jurisdictional disputes with palace offices. The project advanced and stalled at the same time.

At the center of this struggle stood the emperor. His authority depended on information shaped by competing institutions. Eunuchs and officials both sought to control how problems reached him and how solutions were framed. Memorials, reports, and recommendations therefore became instruments of political positioning.

## **Strategic Objectives of the Eunuch Faction**

In seeking to revive and control the treasure fleet, the eunuch faction pursues a coordinated set of objectives that extend far beyond maritime policy. These objectives include:

- Securing direct control over the command structure of the expedition, including authority over fleet commanders, logistics officers, and inspection personnel, in order to ensure that operational decisions flow through palace channels rather than through the ministries;
- Expanding palace oversight of imperial workshops, shipyards, arsenals, and transport networks, thereby strengthening eunuch influence;
- Dominating the flow of information to and from the emperor by supervising memorials, reports, and operational correspondence related to the fleet, which allows the palace to shape how successes, failures, delays, and risks are perceived at court;
- Rebuilding networks of patronage through appointments, promotions, and honors tied to fleet administration, military commands, and diplomatic missions, thus binding officials and officers to palace sponsors;
- Promoting a model of governance based on unified command and rapid execution, using the complexity of maritime operations to justify the concentration of authority in palace institutions;
- Restoring the symbolic association between the emperor and spectacular displays of maritime power, thereby reinforcing the image of the throne as the active center of a universal imperial order;
- Institutionalizing eunuch agencies as permanent instruments of state power rather than auxiliary organs of the imperial household, especially in areas related to foreign relations and large-scale projects;
- Using the success of the fleet to demonstrate the practical superiority of palace administration over civilian bureaucracy, thereby strengthening the political position of eunuchs in future struggles over policy and authority.

### **Strategic Objectives of the Scholar-Officials and Bureaucratic Loyalists**

In resisting palace dominance over the treasure fleet, scholar-officials and administrators who define their loyalty through institutional governance pursue a different but equally comprehensive set of objectives. These objectives include:

- Reasserting ministerial supervision over the planning, financing, and execution of the expedition, ensuring that major decisions pass through established bureaucratic channels rather than palace offices;
- Containing eunuch authority within the boundaries of the imperial household by preventing palace agencies from exercising independent control over military commands;
- Enforcing fiscal discipline through audits, budget reviews, and expenditure controls, with the aim of limiting extraordinary spending and preserving resources for frontier defense, disaster relief, and domestic administration;
- Preserving systems of accountability based on documentation, precedent, and regular inspection, so that responsibility for successes and failures remains traceable within the official record;

- Protecting the examination system and the civil service hierarchy by resisting appointment practices that favor personal access or palace patronage over bureaucratic seniority and evaluated performance;
- Slowing the tempo of decision-making through layered review and consultation, thereby preventing any single institution from monopolizing authority over a project of such scale and consequence;
- Prioritizing continental security and internal stability over expansive maritime commitments, especially in light of ongoing pressures along the northern frontiers

## *Questions to consider:*

1. As court factions compete for influence, how should the Ming state determine who controls overseas policy, budgeting, and command of the treasure fleet?
2. How should the court investigate accusations of corruption, inflated costs, and private accumulation of foreign luxury goods without turning oversight into a tool of factional retaliation?
3. In what ways should the balance of power between eunuch institutions and the civil bureaucracy be restructured to prevent paralysis in imperial decision-making?
4. How can the Ming court preserve strategic continuity when records, reports, and archives are subject to selective suppression or destruction for political ends?
5. To what extent should concerns about moral governance and fiscal restraint justify the dismantling of major state institutions like the treasure fleet administration?
6. How should the court weigh claims of financial waste against the diplomatic, strategic, and symbolic value of maritime presence in the Indian Ocean world?
7. What mechanisms can ensure that policy disagreements over maritime strategy are resolved through institutional process rather than rumor, impeachment, and court intrigue?
8. How should the Ming state respond if one faction uses budgetary control or personnel appointments to quietly disable imperial projects it opposes?
9. In what ways does the fate of the treasure voyages reflect deeper structural tensions between personal access to the emperor and bureaucratic governance?
10. How can the court design a decision-making framework that prevents future grand strategy from being reversed by shifts in imperial favor or factional dominance?
11. What risks to imperial authority and administrative coherence arise when major policies become symbols in factional power struggles rather than instruments of state strategy?
12. How should the Ming leadership decide whether the retreat from maritime expansion represents prudent consolidation or a failure of political governance?

## *Additional Resources:*

[https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/art\\_sci\\_etds/1719/](https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/art_sci_etds/1719/)

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Zheng-He>

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ming-dynasty-Chinese-history>

<https://blogs.uoregon.edu/lanterns/miscellaneous-and-ordering-a-cd/the-ming-dynasty-1368-1644/>

[https://www.worldhistory.org/Yongle\\_Emperor/](https://www.worldhistory.org/Yongle_Emperor/)

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b015p8c2>

<https://www.education.maritime-museum.org/training/north-gallery-2/asian-history/admiral-zheng-he-and-the-chinese-treasure-fleet/>

<https://history.princeton.edu/undergraduate/princeton-historical-review/winter-2025-issue/art-policy>

<https://academic.oup.com/book/11842/chapter/160947477>

[https://vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1093&context=undergrad\\_rev](https://vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1093&context=undergrad_rev)

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/bulletin-of-the-school-of-oriental-and-african-studies/article/impact-of-zheng-hes-expeditions-on-indian-ocean-interactions/9A9712436B63AA7E3DDE983B1E18B62B>

# The Ming Treasure Fleet

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