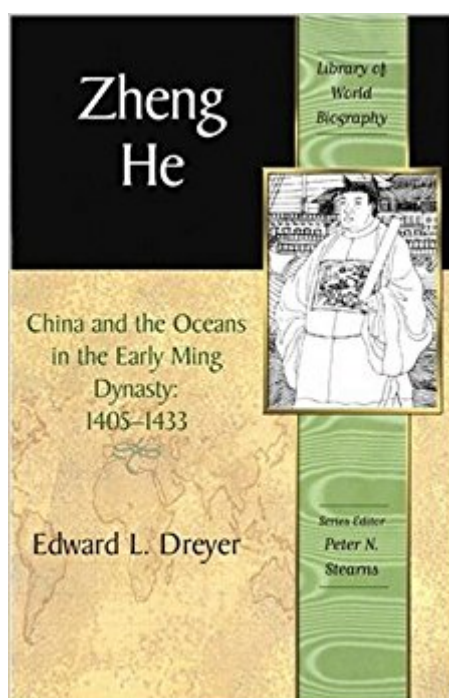


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Zheng He: China And The Oceans In The Early Ming Dynasty, 1405-1433 (Library Of World Biography Series)



Synopsis

This new biography, part of Longman's World Biography series, of the Chinese explorer Zheng He sheds new light on one of the most important "what if" questions of early modern history: why a technically advanced China did not follow the same path of development as the major European powers. Written by China scholar Edward L. Dreyer, Zheng He outlines what is known of the eunuch Zheng He's life and describes and analyzes the early 15th century voyages on the basis of the Chinese evidence. Locating the voyages firmly within the context of early Ming history, it addresses the political motives of Zheng He's voyages and how they affected China's exclusive attitude to the outside world in subsequent centuries.

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Customer Reviews

'This book is highly recommended to all those who really want to know how to evaluate what Zheng He did or did not do. The author does not advocate a point of view or exhort us in any way.' Wang Gungwu, East Asian Institute, Singapore

This new biography, part of Longman's World Biography series, of the Chinese explorer Zheng He sheds new light on one of the most important "what if" questions of early modern history: why a technically advanced China did not follow the same path of development as the major European powers. Written by China scholar Edward L. Dreyer, "Zheng He" outlines what is known of the eunuch Zheng He's life and describes and analyzes the early 15th century voyages on the basis of the Chinese evidence. Locating the voyages firmly within the context of early Ming history,

it addresses the political motives of Zheng He's voyages and how they affected China's exclusive attitude to the outside world in subsequent centuries.

First, although I have studied much of Chinese history, I claim no particular expertise in the Ming Dynasty or the history of Zheng He's voyages. However, I've been looking for a source to fix that for sometime and therefore read and liked this book. The author does a good job of sticking to the evidence and weighing the sources of evidence carefully. He makes a strong attempt to put the voyages, as well as the cessation of the voyages, and their motivations in historical context and argues things well. At one point, for instance, while trying to discuss the size of Zheng He's largest ships he carefully considers the sorts of ships that could and could not travel the river routes in China that the fleet traveled to get from Nanjing to the ocean. Although he concludes the largest ships were possibly the largest wooden vessels ever constructed, he also concludes that they were probably not nearly as large as some have claimed and not capable of some of the more fanciful sailing through hazardous areas that some authors have credited them with. One thing that surprised me about this work is how much about these voyages and their routes are actually known, particularly when some authors have claimed our lack of knowledge about them allows for extremely fanciful claims about their routes and accomplishments. All in all, although I have not studied these voyages in depth, I found this to be a good place to start if one wishes an account that carefully weighs what is and is not known about these voyages.

The table of contents, which I've reproduced at the end of this, gives a good idea of the book's coverage and organization. Dreyer is a professor of history at the University of Miami, where he teaches Asian history, Chinese history, and military history. His previous publications include studies of early Ming political history (based on his 1971 Harvard dissertation) and China's experience of war in the first half of the 20th century. The author surveys the secondary literature and draws upon some earlier reconstructions which he finds credible and consistent, particularly in the matter of the voyages' itineraries. However, he relies on the primary sources (and a smattering of archeological evidence) in every respect. Indeed, at the end of the book he provides his own critical translations of the key primary sources. He works through the background and issues in a methodical manner, carefully evaluating the evidence in light of his extensive knowledge of early Ming history. Naturally this does not make exciting beach reading, but Dreyer does a good job of making the exposition clear and straightforward. The glossary provides brief entries for all of the places and people mentioned, in the event one loses track. The only lapses I could see seem to be

in his knowledge of European history, where he repeats a few obsolete views: "[W]hat drew the Western powers into the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia in the first place was the wealth they could gain by controlling the seaborne trade of the region." (p. 8) "[B]roadside firing and line ahead tactics ... only began in European waters almost two centuries after Zheng He." (p. 56) These are minor issues of degree that do not materially affect the value of the book. One very welcome surprise is Dreyer's judicious and well-informed evaluation of the design of the ships of the Treasure Fleets. Dreyer does not address the speculations and assertions of Gavin Menzies regarding far-flung voyaging, except to remark dryly on pages 29-30 that they rest on an assumption that exploration was a major purpose of the voyages (an assumption Dreyer demolishes quite thoroughly) and on pages 182-3 that it is very unlikely that the ships could have gotten far along Menzies' track before coming to grief. Surely the Chinese, with their nautical knowledge and skills, would have gone about exploration in a very different manner, had they had the intent. Throughout, the author is skeptical in the best sense, carefully examining and weighing the evidence on each point, unswayed by preconceptions. This leads him to many conclusions that diverge from those of previous authors, always convincingly. Unless and until new evidence appears (possibly from marine archeology) this is likely to remain the definitive treatment of this interesting and revealing facet of Chinese history. One of the best services Dreyer performs is to cut through the layers of projection and romance that have been overlaid on these voyages in respect of their purpose, conduct, and consequences. He insists, with strong documentary support, that the purpose was "to enforce outward compliance with the forms of the Chinese tributary system by the show of an overwhelming armed force" [p. 163, and passim] as a means of bolstering the Yongle emperor's political position and perhaps self-esteem. Dreyer scotches the notion that these were voyages of discovery or exploration in the European sense, adventurous though they were in their own terms. He makes clear their astronomical expense and how they contributed to economic pressures on the empire, and stresses that there were very real practical reasons (in addition to the undoubted cultural and political ones) for the opposition to them expressed by many senior scholar-bureaucrats. And he shows that far from being peaceful and amicable diplomatic missions they involved heavy measures of coercive force. It certainly lay within China's power to have constructed an Asian maritime empire much as the Europeans later did, but not within China's powers of conception. It equally was open to the Chinese to have gone exploring at least as widely as the Europeans were to, but that also was unthinkable in Beijing. And no one in China could do such things without imperial command. The book is modestly but well produced, with good binding and stock. There is one overall map, a diagram showing Dreyer's concept of the design of a

"treasure ship," and a few relevant illustrations. Oddly the house style seems to eschew source notes, but it is usually possible to identify sources in the general notes at the back of the book. Overall, the publishers deserve thanks for a valuable and high-quality monograph issued at a reasonable price.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. The Enigma of Zheng He. The Chinese Tributary System and the Purpose of Zheng He's Voyages. Traditional Chinese Interpretations of Zheng He's Career. Zheng He's Voyages and Western Imperial Expansion. Zheng He's Voyages and the Course of Chinese History. Historical Problems in the Interpretation of Zheng He's Career.

II. Zheng He's Early Life and His Patron Emperor Yongle. The Fall of the Yuan and the Rise of Zhu Yuanzhang to 1368. The Reign of Emperor Hongwu, 1368-1398. Civil War, 1398-1402. Yongle's Reign as Emperor, 1402-1424.

III. China and the Asian Maritime World in the Time of Zheng He. The Purpose of Zheng He's Voyages. Patterns of Trade in the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. The Malay-Indonesian World in the Hongwu Era. Southern India and Ceylon in the Time of Zheng He.

IV. Sailing to India: Zheng He's First, Second and Third Voyages. The First Voyage, 1405-1407. The Second Voyage, 1407-1409. The Third Voyage, 1409-1411.

V. Sailing to Africa: Zheng He's Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Voyages. The Fourth Voyage, 1412/14-1415. The Fifth Voyage, 1417-1419. The Sixth Voyage, 1421-1422. The Last Years of the Yongle Reign, 1422-1424.

VI. The Ships and Men of Zheng He's Fleets. Dimensions and Displacements of the Treasure Ships. Masts and Sails. Shipbuilding Notices in the Taizong Shilu. Shipbuilding Costs. Numbers of Ships in Each of the Voyages. Personnel.

VII. Zheng He's Career after 1424 and His Final Voyage. Ming China in the Hongxi (1424-25) and Xuande (1425-35) Reigns. Zheng He's Career from 1424 to 1430. Zheng He's Inscriptions at Liujiagang and Changle. Zheng He's Seventh and Final Voyage, 1431-1433.

VIII. The Legacy of Zheng He. Appendix. Translations of Primary Sources. Zheng He's Biography in Mingshi 304.2b-4b. Zheng He's 1431 Inscriptions. Glossary. Note on Sources. Index.

Its style is dry and repetitive but i am convinced in his specific thesis and explanation of Zheng He's voyages. 4 instead of 5 only because of its style. The content is excellent.

Added to my collection of books concerning China. Good copy.

I liked reading the book.

Bought this for school and everything came in as needed! It's an academic book used for higher education. It might not be the cup of tea for the mainstream crowd!

This is a very historical piece and a fairly dry review of the life of Zheng He..It seems to be written from a european perspective and not from a Chinese point of view.Still it has a good deal of background info...

Very good book. I read all the others about this subject also. This was a good read for knowing more about the man.

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