

Barbarians at the Gate Podcast Transcript

The Voyages of Zheng He

Jeremiah (00:11)

Hello and welcome to another edition of Barbarians at the Gate. This is Jeremiah Jenne, broadcasting from Geneva, Switzerland. And with me, as always, my intrepid co-host, the traveler, the man around the world, David Moser. David, tell us, tell the people, where in the world are you today?

David (00:30)

Well, yeah, anywhere but the USA is my motto. I happen to be in Addis Ababa, in Ethiopia. This is my second time here.

The first time was about 2015 when my wife was stationed in Djibouti. So my daughter and I came on a side trip here just to see what Addis Ababa looked like. And it was interesting because when we got off the plane and got into the cab, the driver noticed that we were speaking some Chinese occasionally. And he turned around and said, "We love Chinese, they're building our rail system and my daughter is taking Chinese in junior high." And so now, 10 years later, we're back here.

Interestingly enough, there's enough Chinese population here that the local businesses and services will accommodate the Chinese. We went to the outdoor market and most of the vendors can speak basic Chinese. I would walk up there and they'd say, "老板 老板" (lǎobǎn lǎobǎn) boss, boss, "买什么" (mǎi shénme) and then they would call my wife "大姐" (dàjiě) or "阿姨" (āyí) depending on how much they wanted to flatter her about her age. So that was kind of surprising and very interesting. Tonight we're going to try a Sichuan restaurant in that area of town. So China is still in Africa.

Jeremiah (02:02)

It's fascinating to hear you talk about that because of course this idea that China is in Africa. I think there are a lot of people who feel this is either a 21st century Belt and Road phenomenon or perhaps even maybe a 20th century non-aligned movement throwback, if you will. But of course there's been Chinese communities or merchant communities on the coast of East Africa going back centuries. I mean, we're talking six centuries, seven centuries, even more perhaps. And of course, one of the most famous visitors from China to the shores of East Africa, before David Moser, was the Chinese Admiral Zheng He, who is somebody that we're going to talk about today, because I find that thinking about Zheng He, even though it's a series of expeditions from China to East Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia that occurred going all the way back to the beginnings of the 15th century, there's so much about that story that's relevant to today. And we think about how the Indian Ocean as a center of the global economy, a center of trade where all the important trade routes connected some of the most important and established civilizations. And while that wasn't the case perhaps in the 19th or the early 20th century, as the rise of India, the rise of China, Africa making a comeback, you have this sense that perhaps that was the norm

and this is the bounce back. So let's talk a little bit about Zheng He today. David, when you do your Chinese class, your Chinese culture class, civilization class, what's the standard narrative, if you will, to give the student some sense on who this Zheng He was?

David (04:00)

I would certainly have to point out that he was, I guess, Hui nationality, Muslim, had connections to Mongolia, maybe even Uzbekistan, and he was a eunuch. So if that's not diversity, equality and inclusion, I don't know what is.

Jeremiah (04:21)

Yeah, because we talk about Zheng He, he's so famous for his expeditions that occurred in the early 1400s, but he had quite an interesting story prior to ever setting foot on one of these enormous ships of the treasure fleets. So as you pointed out, he was from a Muslim family. His original name was Ma He, so that Ma that you see a lot in Chinese Muslim surnames. There's some thought that he was born in what's today Kunming in Yunnan.

And there's some thought that his family was part of those Muslim garrisons that may have come from Central Asia or other parts of Asia that were brought in under the Mongol Yuan dynasty to garrison more restive parts of their empire, restive parts of China. And then when the Yuan transitioned to Ming, those garrisons, Ma He or Zheng He's family found themselves on the wrong end of that transition. Family members were executed. This young Ma He was captured and he was made a eunuch in the service of the Ming dynasty. And even though he was a eunuch, so this doesn't rank as high as the scholars or the generals or the officials, there was something about him that clearly caught the eye of members of the court, particularly one of the sons of the founding emperor of the Ming dynasty. And the son, Zhu Di, who later became the Yongle Emperor, Ma He becomes kind of an aide-de-camp. And this is important because Zhu Di himself is famous for usurping the throne, not from his father, but from his father's choice to succeed him, which was of course Zhu Di's nephew, the Jianwen Emperor. And there's a whole backstory there that's probably worth its own podcast.

But in the war between Zhu Di and his nephew, it's kind of a Game of Thrones style battle for the emperorship. Ma He was one of the key military aides to Zhu Di and when Zhu Di won, he rewarded Ma He with a place at court. He was allowed to change his name to Zheng He. And so as a result, he became kind of this fixture in the emperor's circle. And of course then, when Zhu Di becomes fascinated with this idea of proclaiming the Ming dynasty, proclaiming his new emperorship, trying to legitimize his claim to the throne. And also there were these weird rumors that the nephew, who most people think died in the final battle in the Imperial capital Nanjing, might have actually escaped and was roaming the Western regions, whatever those were, looking for allies to come back against his uncle. So there was all these kinds of reasons why Zhu Di, this new emperor who usurped the throne from his father, wanted to have somebody checking out what was happening out West in what's today we think of as the Indian Ocean basin.

There doesn't seem to be any particular reason why Zheng He should have been selected to lead these expeditions. It wasn't like he was a Navy guy, but he did have one feature that people remarked about in the historical record and that he was a big dude. He was freakishly tall, even by today's standard. And some of the stories make him sound like he was the size of an NBA

power forward or center, you know, seven feet tall. I don't think you had to be that tall in the Ming dynasty to be freakishly tall, but some people think he was like a solid six-six. So here's the thing. Maybe he doesn't have a Navy background, but if you need an ambassador to impress people, when somebody walks off the ship, this is going to be your guy. Because he was apparently a very tall, strapping, impressive looking eunuch.

David (08:18)

Well, now that you mentioned that, as an ambassador, from what you said, it sounds like maybe just a soft power advertisement for Chinese culture. What was the Yongle Emperor, Zhu Di's purpose for launching this project?

Jeremiah (08:40)

Zhu Di, the Yongle Emperor, part of it is, there was a certain projection of power, or at least projection of the majesty of the dynasty. It was about showing the colors. And I think there is also today a tendency, today we look at this and we compare it to what the Europeans did when they arrived in the Indian Ocean. And it's true, you could say that Zhu Di, the Yongle Emperor sends Zheng He and these massive ships. And while the size of these ships has been debated considerably, there's an idea that these may have been the largest wooden ships to ever sail the oceans. In some very, perhaps on the outer edge of the estimate, might have been some of the largest ships to sail before we get to the era of the great battle cruisers of like the late 19th century. And so these massive armadas, but he wasn't going to colonize, to conquer, to raid. And I think that part of it gets played up quite a bit today because China and all about the peaceful rise, contrasting their history with the history of European imperialism. And I get that, because that really wasn't the mission. This was very much more of an ambassadorial kind of mission, but they weren't afraid to mix it up either.

David (10:04)

So what sort of artifacts, cultural artifacts, products did they bring to as evidence of China's superiority?

Jeremiah (10:20)

Well, it's part of it. You have this gift giving protocol. Some people call it the tribute system. And there is a sense of enrolling other civilizations in this tributary system where gifts are brought from those places to the emperor. The idea that the emperor in China serves in a kind of paternal role over these other countries.

There is something to that, but I think that also gets significantly overblown. This idea that somehow China was the hegemon over these, or controlling these other areas, these other civilizations. Certainly they had greater control or greater influence as you were closer to China. But the idea of these gifts, part of this tribute, if you will, was also just part of a general gift-giving protocol that was part of international relations at the time. Zheng He brings all of these products of China, if you will. You think about all the things that China could produce at this time, ceramics, jade, all these wonderful valuable things. And then he would bring back gifts from the places he would visit. And some of these could be really exotic things like spices, or as we'll talk about later, giraffes.

David (11:38)

It's interesting that the gifts that they brought were sort of the same sorts of products that the Western powers and Great Britain needed during the Opium Wars. This is very similar, actually.

Jeremiah (11:53)

Well, I think a lot of the places, one of the reasons the Indian Ocean was such an important conduit of trade was because you have so many places around the Indian Ocean basin that were, at least at the time, the sole producers of some very important commodities, whether they were spices or they were certain kinds of minerals. In some ways you see that today. We think about all the agita over rare earth minerals. Well, in the time that we're talking about, the rare earth minerals weren't minerals, they were plant products. And they were spices, they were things like that that only grew in certain places. So yes, these were valuable commodities that were very much part of these trading routes. And as you point out, when the Europeans finally do get involved in the trade in this region, that's one of the things that draws them in. One of the things that keeps them there is my goodness, we've discovered all of these incredible things, pepper, cinnamon, that we really want back in Europe.

I love the fact that he's getting all of these gifts. He's getting gifts from places in what's today India, Sri Lanka, parts of Southeast Asia. And of course where you are, he arrives on the coast of East Africa. And one of the things that he's given as a gift is a giraffe. And I just don't even, I mean, can you even imagine what this would be like? This poor giraffe goes back and like wanders around the Forbidden City. One of the things I really wanted to talk about with you today was, as my favorite linguist, so tell the people, what is the word in Chinese for a giraffe?

David (13:31)

长颈鹿 (chángjǐnglù) long neck deer is really what it means.

Jeremiah (13:34)

Right. Now this is what I love about the Chinese language. People say it's so hard, but it can make so much sense. Can you imagine that first guy on the docks in the Ming dynasty, like checking off all the stuff from one of these many expeditions. You're like, okay, we got the one crate of spices, the one crate of pepper, the crate of silver and the, what the hell? Oh, it's a long necked deer. One long necked deer. Yeah, so that...

David (14:09)

It probably came from that. That's probably the origin of the name, yeah.

Jeremiah (14:12)

There's also a theory that it was labeled as a 麒麟 (qílín).

David (14:21)

That makes, yes, makes much more sense. That's right. Exactly.

Jeremiah (14:24)

Because you got those little horns at the top and I mean, a qilin that somehow somebody had stretched its neck to ridiculous proportions. But yes. So you have these giraffes wandering

around the botanical gardens in the Chinese capital first in Nanjing, and then I guess probably in Beijing too. Zebras. It's a really incredible exchange, if you will, of commodities. But I also think too, the fact we talk a lot about Zheng He as emissary, as I alluded to earlier, it wasn't like he always came in peace. I mean, these ships that he had, they were huge, first of all, and they had on them cannons, early rockets, they had soldiers.

And when they needed to, they mixed it up. So for example, here's an example. One of the earlier missions, there was a pirate named Chen Zuyi, pirate Chen, who was terrorizing the Strait of Malacca. Now the Strait of Malacca, for those of you who are a little bit unfamiliar, it's that narrow strait that goes between Malaysia and Indonesia today. It's still one of the most important shipping routes in the entire world.

At this time, the pirates had controlled this one strait. And many times the emissaries of the emperor, other emissaries had asked the pirates to back off and the pirates had either captured them or laughed at them. So Zheng He comes down in 1407, he sends a message to the pirate King Chen and is like, listen, you either have to surrender and stop piracy or else. And once again, Chen refused. And so then Zheng He sails on pirate Chen and you can imagine poor pirate Chen. He's thinking like, okay, it's going to be a couple of war junks. And then he just sees this massive fleet coming over the horizon. And it was such a decisive defeat that Malacca was safe for decades.

And then there was also my other favorite adventure of Zheng He, similar story, a little bit later in a different expedition, when Zheng He ends up in what's today Sri Lanka. Now Sri Lanka in 1411 was this island that had all these competing kings and whenever you have a situation with competing monarchs, they're always going to look for that little tiny advantage. And in this case, when Zheng He arrives, the kings all vie with each other to see how they can kind of play. It's almost like South Asia today. How can we get the Chinese on our side? And one of the Kings who was perhaps left out of this struggle decided to take a more direct approach to the problem and tried to have his soldiers attack Zheng He's ships and steal his ships or somehow actually try to coerce him into being on his side. Well, Zheng He did not take that particularly well. He marched inland, captured the King, and put the king in bondage, in chains to take him back to his ship. And when he gets there, Zheng He looks at him and says, listen, you have to apologize for what you've tried to do. So the Sri Lankan King looks at him and goes, well, I'm sorry. Zheng He says, well, whoa, no, whoa, whoa, dude, not to me. I'm just a eunuch. You need to apologize for upsetting the dignity of my emperor.

The King is like, well, where's your emperor? He's like, yeah, he's back in China. So they stick this dude on a boat and they sail him all the way back to Nanjing. They get to Nanjing and he gets off the boat, the Yongle Emperor, Zhu Di is there. They bring the guy over and Zhu Di is like, who is this guy? He's like, I'm the King of Sri Lanka. Excellent. Why are you here? I'm here to apologize. Okay. I'm sorry. Excellent. Well, here's a banquet, some lovely parting gifts. They put him back in a boat, sent him back to Sri Lanka. He finally gets home two years later, but he'd already lost his kingdom. So I think the point of this is that Zheng He is seen as an emissary of peace. And that's definitely true most of the time. And when you compare him to some of the things that occurred with the earliest Portuguese, Spanish, and other European explorers, that's definitely true. And certainly with that size of a fleet, he could have pushed his advantage quite a

bit. But if you were a pirate, if you were what he saw as a destabilizing influence, he was more than happy to bring to bear the full might of his armada.

David (18:46)

I have just a quick question because Africa is still on my mind. I haven't read about this very much, but I've heard that there's evidence that there's some in Kenya, I think it is, that some part of the population seems to have Chinese DNA, probably because of a shipwreck or something that you had Chinese soldiers that stayed behind and sired children in that country. Is that true? What do you know about that?

Jeremiah (19:20)

Well, I don't even think it was a shipwreck. I mean, I think that there were pretty well-established Chinese communities all along the Indian Ocean shoreline, if you will. The idea, Zheng He is often called an explorer, but I don't know if that's technically true because he was following routes that had been well-traveled before him by Chinese, particularly Chinese merchants. This idea that the emperors had restricted overseas trade. They had closed off China hidden behind a great wall. There is some truth to that if you look at the edicts, because it does seem that some emperors were very interested in trying to restrict the outward migration or the outward economic activities of Chinese. But just because you say it, doesn't mean it happens. And one of the things about edicts is the more edicts you see about something, it's not an indication that you are being strong on this policy. And so centuries before Zheng He, you have these communities in place in Southeast Asia, South Asia and in East Africa. The famous traveler Ibn Battuta talks about Indian and other Asian merchants, sailors who are in ports that he's exploring in East Africa, Persian Gulf, the Arabian peninsula. So it stands to reason that when Zheng He gets to these places, he's greeted by the Chinese community like, "Hey, how you doing? How's things back in Nanjing?" And the result of that, of course, is that just like in one of the ways we are understanding travel in the medieval and the early modern period becomes this idea that we can trace DNA of certain people, certain groups, and see how far back they go.

One of the realities of all stories of intercultural exchange, travel, exploration, sojourning, whatever you want to call it, down to the histories of colonialism and imperialism, is just how much of it occurs after midnight. It's difficult for me to think of any instance of this kind of cultural exchange that did not involve on some level either actual, always involving actual and sometimes also involving anxiety over those kinds of after midnight exchanges. So that it wasn't written about as much, or at least as far as I know, perhaps there's a scholar out there who studies more specifically the port communities of the Indian Ocean and can tell us that, point us to some primary documents. But the fact that we don't see as much of this in the Chinese sources is interesting. They just intuitively, you know what happened.

David (22:10)

Yeah, it's just normal human beings. Okay, well, you've got to ask the question, the big question that most of us have is here are these amazing voyages that were very consequential and probably were very effective soft power exercises and made other countries aware of China and its might. Why would they shut it down?

Jeremiah (22:40)

It's a great question. And it's one of the questions everyone asks when it comes to talking about Zheng He. Why didn't he go further? Why did it end? And what does this mean for the future of China, the future of the Indian Ocean? And I think that's probably a good place to wrap up our discussion. The why it ended, there's a lot of factors. It's hard to point to any one of them. The Yongle Emperor, Zhu Di, who was Zheng He's patron, if you will, he dies in, I think, 1424, and his son was less interested in these kind of expeditions. There's also this idea, the Hongxi Emperor, and the Hongxi Emperor was only around for a bit. He died pretty soon after taking the throne. I think there's one more expedition under Zhu Di, the Yongle Emperor's grandson, but then Zheng He himself dies in 1433.

So that's the end of the expeditions. Why they weren't continued. Well, you know, I kind of feel like a lot of the arguments about this at the time may have echoed what we hear today about space exploration. There's on one hand, there's one group that's like, this is a really important demonstration of who we are, what we can achieve. It shows our power. And also we get so much information. We're getting so much in all these goods, all these different things that we wouldn't ordinarily be exposed to through these expeditions. On the other hand, we have significant problems here back home. You may recall that this is the time when they're moving, or one of the things that Zhu Di did was to move his capital from Nanjing, the primary capital of the Ming Dynasty, move that primary capital up to what's today Beijing.

That's very expensive. You've got a Forbidden City to build. There's also, this is also the beginnings of some really energetic wall building. And as the old joke goes, they've got to build that wall and there was no evidence the Mongolians were going to pay for it. So there's fiscal problems there in the capital. And this was expensive. These were extremely expensive expeditions. I honestly think that there are probably ideological reasons there. Officials never trusted eunuchs. There are probably officials who thought this was a waste of time, but I do wonder if it comes down to just simply the finances of it all. It's like, this is really great, but what are we really getting from this on a return of investment? The giraffe is dead. So what's the point?

David (25:06)

Right. Yeah, that makes sense. That makes a lot of sense. And given the inertia of the very Confucian sort of ideology that was very strong there. But the sort of tributary kind of system, you know, why should we go out and show them and sell our shit to them? You know, let them come to us. Right. Yeah. All of that makes cultural sense and economic sense. It's a very good point.

Jeremiah (25:41)

If you'll allow me, one last thing I want to talk about with this too is sort of the counterfactual, right? The what if. So Zheng He's expeditions end, right? There's no evidence despite what some popular histories have tried to put forward that Zheng He discovered America, started the Renaissance, or really got any further than say the East Coast of Africa. It's not that he couldn't have, these ships probably could have made those trips. There's no evidence that he did. And part of that was probably because once you hit the East coast of Africa, you've hit the limit of what the civilized world, if you will. This is still the early 1400s. Europe isn't necessarily a

destination, especially compared to these sophisticated civilizations in Indian Ocean. So he never, Zheng He never takes them further, but what if he had, I mean, just take a moment, take a beat. Think about this. What if he had taken this fleet of ships around the Horn of Africa, up the coast and then, what would it be, 70 years before Columbus sails the ocean blue, does a flyby of the Iberian Peninsula, or shows up off the coast of Venice or Genoa, or for that matter, sailed up the Thames River. You have to think about what that would have meant because this is a time when the European maritime powers are getting ready to start expanding and exploiting trade routes themselves. But if you look at these ships and you see the size of one of Zheng He's ships compared to some of the size of say Columbus's ship. And yes, there's a lot of debate about the actual size of Zheng He's ships, but there's no debating that they were much larger and probably even more heavily armed, at least at that time. So you have to think that the Western European maritime powers probably wouldn't have been so quick to blast their way into the trade routes of the Indian Ocean if they knew those were the kinds of ships they'd have to tangle with.

The other thing about this is not a counterfactual, it's kind of a, that was what if, this is what did. You could make an argument that the ending, the decision to end these voyages, which occurred in China, created a power vacuum, a naval power vacuum in what at the time was the most important global trade routes. And the result is, as I said, he didn't go out to raid or conquer, they did. There's a certain amount of peace that's kept if you knew these giant expeditions were coming through every few years. So there's this power vacuum that all but sucks in the very first raiders, traders, explorers from places like Portugal, Spain, Holland. And so you could make an argument that the decision to end these voyages accelerated, kicked off, I mean, depends on how you really want to look at it, that new era of, if you will, the European age of discovery, or if you're from the global south, the European age of colonialism. And so I think there is some connections there. And the fact that these areas, Indian Ocean, where you are in East Africa, yes, they have their problems. But the reality is that for much of recorded history, these were the areas where much of the global GDP was concentrated. And it was only in the last few hundred years as a result of the age of discovery or the age of colonialism, that that GDP was reapportioned to a rather small group of Western countries.

We are seeing the re-emergence of the Indian Ocean basin, East Asia, as a major center of the world economy. And so whether it's cinnamon or rare earth minerals, or whether it's just the sheer volume of people who need things and are willing to buy them, there's much in Zheng He's story that has relevance in today's story of globalization and global shifts.

David (29:29)

It's an interesting counterfactual, really. And if it had come true, you as a historian, your class notes would be totally different now. There might not be a century of humiliation. There might not be the Opium Wars. And China probably wouldn't have needed Matteo Ricci's maps, because they probably have even better ones. Fascinating, Jeremiah. Really, really amazing. It's really interesting. I feel like I should, here I am in East Africa. I ought to go out and explore a little bit more.

Jeremiah (30:02)

Well, that's the great thing about travel, right? The great thing about living in all these different places. You end up in a place, you look around, you explore it, and then in our case, it feels like

you and I as digital hobos, or academic hobos, scholarly. I hate the term digital nomad because the people always use the term digital nomad. You look at them, I'm like, listen, I actually study nomads for a living. And if the nomads came through, you with your backpack and your little toy that's clinging to the side of the backpack, they would like feed you to their goats. Like you're not a nomad dude. So those of us who were digital hobos or scholarly hobos, it's one of the fun things is be able to explore areas where we find ourselves, whether it's Addis Ababa or in my case, the shores of Lake Geneva for the moment because David, I have news.

This is the last Barbarians at the Gate episode.

David (31:00)

No, no, don't say it. Tell me it ain't true.

Jeremiah (31:10)

I almost think there was a coded message there. Let me finish. The last Barbarians at the Gate episode to be recorded from our studio here above Lake Geneva, because as of two weeks from now, I will be relocating back to Asia, although not immediately back to the motherland, China. For many years prior to COVID and our move to Geneva, we used to spend the winters in warmer climates, in our case Thailand. And so that's where we'll be for the winter months coming up, the next at least six to eight months while I finish my book. And we'll be in Bangkok or somewhere in that general part of the world. So once you return to Beijing, we will again, at least be on the same continent and in the same time zone.

David (32:04)

Great. It seems like you're following me. I came from Thailand. And I'd love to go back. I really like Thailand. Can I crash at your place?

Jeremiah (32:15)

Absolutely, because you know, you, the wife, the cat, one bedroom apartment over in Lumpini Park, it'll definitely work out.

David (32:23)

Lumphini Park, that's right where we were, great. Good, I think you'll love it, Jeremiah, it's great.

Jeremiah (32:26)

That's where I'm looking. We're also looking in Jomtien near Pattaya, but nobody else in the podcast world really cares about this. So why don't we wrap it up? Thank you all very much for joining us on Barbarians at the Gate. You can find us on Twitter. You can find me on Instagram and on Substack at Jeremiah Jenne. You can find David on Twitter where he is quite active. I guess we now probably have to call it X. I know it's been a few years. I have trouble doing it. No, okay. You can find both of us on Twitter.

David (32:55)

No, no, no, no. It's Twitter, Twitter.

Jeremiah (33:00)

You can find me on Blue Sky and Substack at Jeremiah Jenne. Thank you all very much and we'll see you in a couple of weeks.