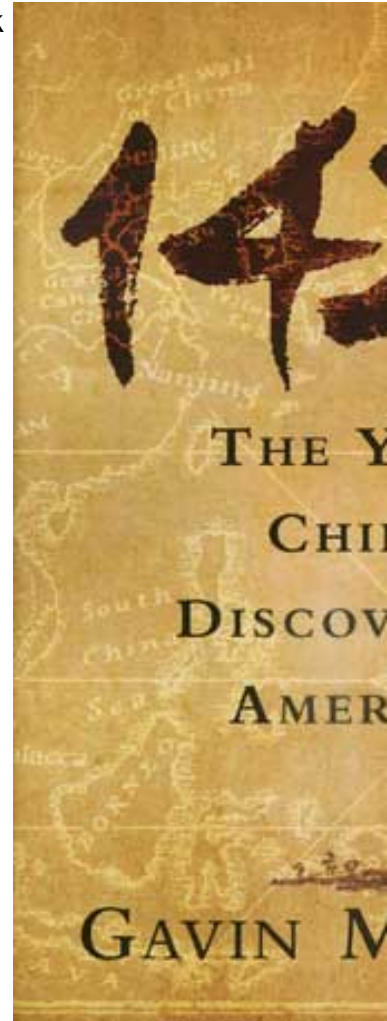


1421: The Year China Discovered America

Ancient maps and charts, first-hand accounts of voyages of discovery, sunken ships, inscribed markers and relics — these are among the data used to argue that the Chinese explored and mapped most of the world before Europeans set sail. A retired commander in the Royal Navy, Mr. Menzies' passion is old maps and charts, and anomalies he found in pre-Columbian European maps sparked his research. Written like a detective story, the book

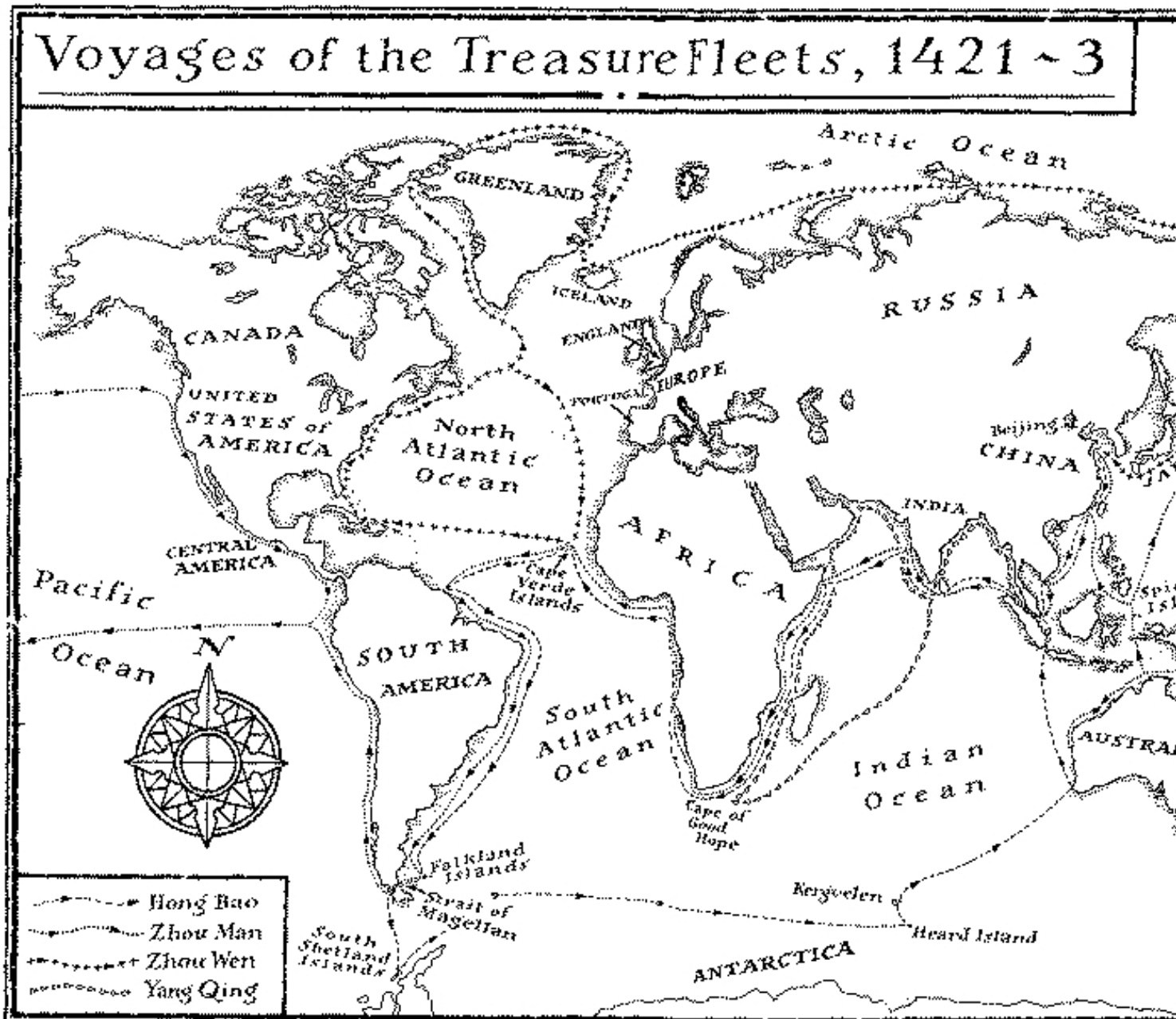


attempts to reconstruct the voyage undertaken between 1421 and 1423 by an immense Chinese fleet under Admiral Zheng He, with capital treasure ships 480 feet long and 180 feet wide. His mission in part was to travel to "the end of the earth to collect tribute from the barbarians beyond the seas" (p. 75) and bring them into the Chinese tribute system, and to prospect for minerals, search for useful plants, take astronomical observations, make accurate maps, and determine a way to navigate in the southern hemisphere. 1421 sets out the evidence for the author's reconstruction of the course of this sixth and last great voyage.

How could such a momentous event have been forgotten? Over several centuries the Chinese had built up a large military and trading fleet, and by 1400 were the dominant economic, political, scientific, and maritime power in the lands around the Indian Ocean. Emperor Zhu Di,

on taking power in 1402, began a series of formidable projects. He moved the capital from Nanjing to Beijing, enlarged the Grand Canal to the new capital, built the Forbidden City, repaired the Great Wall, founded a foreign language academy, summoned 2,180 scholars to compile a 4,000-volume encyclopedia to preserve all known literature and knowledge, and initiated a tremendous increase in shipbuilding so as to recreate a trading empire on par with that of the Tang dynasty 500 years before. On Chinese New Year in 1421 his new capital was inaugurated with international pomp, including envoys from 28 nations and the son and grandson of Tamerlane. But within two years Zhu Di had died a broken man, the country reeling under the economic and social cost of his ambitious programs. Led by the mandarins, his son and grandson repudiated and reversed his policies, and China entered a period of isolationism and xenophobia lasting for centuries. Overseas trade and travel were banned, at one point learning a foreign language or teaching foreigners Chinese was prohibited, and in 1644 all records of the voyages of Zheng He were burnt by the Minister of War as "deceitful exaggerations of bizarre things far removed from the testimony of people's eyes and ears." As Mr. Menzies says, their memory was "expunged so completely over the succeeding decades that they might never have existed" (pp. 55, 56). The one remaining monument to Zheng He, a carved stone overlooking the Yangtze estuary, states:

The emperor . . . has ordered us and others at the head of several tens of thousands of officers and imperial troops to journey in more than a hundred ships . . . to treat distant people with kindness . . . We have gone to the western regions . . . altogether more than three thousand countries large and small. We have traversed more than a hundred thousand li [forty thousand nautical miles] of immense water spaces. — p. 400



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