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Years later while rummaging
through some old boxes
I heard a soft clink
amongst shorts, shirts, and soxes
the jar, I remembered
inside was a map
still cryptic, yet clearly
a beckoning trap



Chapter 7 - 鄭和 Zhèng Hé – Explorer Extraordinaire

15th century, the “Age of Exploration.” When I was in secondary school, I marvelled at the stories of Christopher Columbus, Fernando Magellan, and Vasco de Gama and imagined myself as a member of their crews. I devoured Robinson Crusoe, Gulliver’s Travels, and Homer’s Odyssey. It wasn’t until adulthood that I first discovered 鄭和 Zhèng Hé (pronounced Jung Huh). When I began learning about him, the word, “explorer”, took on a whole new dimension. It was like jumping from little leagues into the majors. Zheng He didn’t explore with a small fleet of ships like European explorers. He commanded an armada of over 300 ships and more than 25,000 men. His largest ship was about the size of a professional football pitch. The Santa Maria (Columbus’s flagship), on the other hand, was a mere 25 metres in length. I wondered what maps and other information about the rest of the world Zheng He used when he and other pioneers and adventurers from different parts of the globe traversed their world during the “age of exploration”.

The Zheng He voyages



Born near Kunming, Yunnan in southwestern China, into a Muslim family, Zheng He's birth name was 馬和 Mǎ Hé. As a young boy, he was captured by soldiers of the Ming Dynasty. Like other boys and men who were taken prisoner, Ma He was castrated so he could not pose a threat to the women of the imperial court. Ma He served the Ming court loyally, and his outstanding service was rewarded by his being sent to Beijing (then called 北平 Běipíng), where he gained favor with 朱棣 Zhū Dì, the 4th son of the founder of the Ming Dynasty. Zhu Di later went on to become the 永樂 Yǒng Lè emperor. Ma He proved to be a great warrior and respected commander, and after fighting fiercely in several military campaigns for the Ming, he became a favorite of Yong Le. Emperor Yong Le showed him great honor by bestowing upon him the surname of Zheng. There are several stories as to the origin of the name, but my favorite is that "Zheng" was the name of Yong Le's beloved horse who had been killed during a siege in Nanjing. Maybe since the "Ma" in Ma He's name meant "horse", Emperor Yong Le honored him by giving him the name of his favorite horse and the title of Admiral. It was his new name, "Zheng He", and not "Ma He" by which he is now remembered.

In his sea voyages, Admiral Zheng He travelled south through what is now Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines and west to India continuing south down the eastern coast of Africa. Five of Zheng He's seven long voyages occurred during the reign of the Emperor, Yong Le. Some writers and historians believe that Zheng He could have sailed even well beyond Africa but evidence for that is sketchy.

