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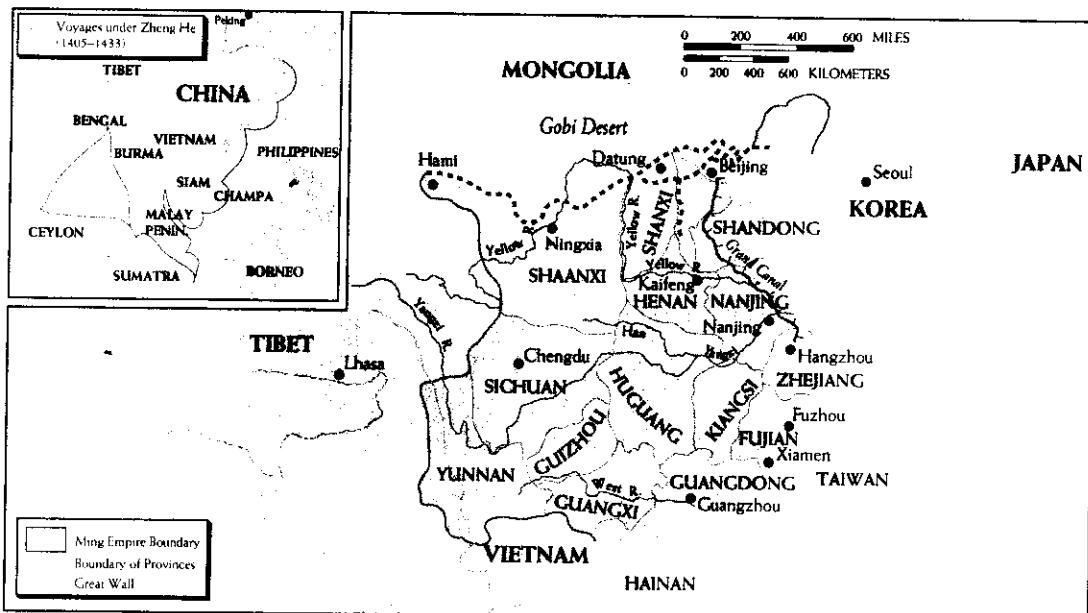
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MING FOREIGN RELATIONS

In the past, scholars often contended that in Ming (and Qing) times, Chinese character was neither aggressive nor warlike. They cited the Chinese inability to resist foreign conquest; the civility, self-restraint, and gentlemanliness of officials; and the Song adage that good men should not be used to make soldiers just as good iron is not used to make nails. The actions of early Ming emperors convincingly disprove this contention. Hongwu inherited large numbers of troops that had formerly served the Mongols. He oversaw the vigorous expansion of China's borders. At his death, China controlled the northern steppe from Hami at the gateway of Central Asia to the Sungari River in Manchuria and had regained control of the southern tier of Chinese provinces as well. Yongle continued the policies of the Ming founder: He personally led five expeditions into the Gobi Desert against the Mongols. He also ordered the invasion of Vietnam and for twenty years attempted to make that country a part of China. (Vietnam, we recall, had been a part of China for the millennium from 111 B.C. to 939 A.D.)

A second enterprise of Yongle was to send maritime armadas to Southeast Asia, India, the Arabian gulf, and east Africa between 1405 and 1433 (see Map 4-2). Their commander was Zheng He, a eunuch and a Muslim from Yunnan. The first armadas had sixty-two major ships and hundreds of smaller vessels and carried 28,000 sailors.

Map 4-2 Ming empire and the voyages of Zheng He. The ships of Zheng He, venturing beyond Southeast Asia and India, reached the coast of east Africa.



soldiers, and merchants. Navigating by compass and star maps, the expeditions followed the sea routes of Arab traders. Trade was not the primary purpose of the expeditions, although some eunuchs used the opportunity to make fortunes, and records show that giraffes, zebras, and other exotic items were presented to the emperor. Their purpose, rather, was to make China's glory known to distant kingdoms and to enroll them in the tribute system. Zheng He's soldiers installed a new king in Java, captured and brought back to China hostile kings from Borneo and Ceylon, and signed up nineteen other states as Chinese tributaries. The expeditions ended as abruptly as they had begun. They were costly and offered little return at a time when the dynasty was fighting in Mongolia and building the new capital at Beijing. What is remarkable is not that these expeditions came a half-century earlier than the Portuguese voyages of discovery, but that China possessed the maritime technology needed to explore the globe and decided not to use it. China lacked the combination of restlessness, greed, faith, and curiosity that would motivate the Portuguese.

After Yongle, the Chinese court was primarily concerned to secure its expanded frontiers. One means was "to use the barbarian to control the barbarian." Even after the collapse of the Yuan dynasty, the chief threat to China came from the Mongols,



Giraffe with attendant. Some emperors had private zoos and gladly received exotic animals as gifts from tribute states. A painting by Shen Du (1357–1438).

[1977-42-1. Tu, Shen. "The Tribute Giraffe with Attendant". Philadelphia Museum of Art: Gift of John T. Dorrance, 1977]

who had broken into eastern, western, and southern divisions. The Chinese made allies of the southern Mongols (those settled just north of the Great Wall) against the more fearsome grassland Mongols. This policy worked most of the time, but twice the Mongols formed confederations—pale imitations of the war machine of Genghis—strong enough to defeat Chinese armies. In the 1430s, they captured the emperor, and in 1550, they overran Beijing. The Mongol forces involved in the latter attack were defeated by a Chinese army in the 1560s and signed a peace treaty in 1571.

The second means of handling potentially hostile forces beyond China's borders was the "tribute system." In this system, the ambassadors of foreign vassal kings ceremonially acted out their political subordination to the universal ruler of the celestial kingdom. An ambassador approached the emperor respectfully, performed the kow-tow (kneeling three times and bowing his head to the floor nine times), and presented his gifts. In return, the kings they represented were sent seals confirming their status, given permission to use the Chinese calendar and year-period names, and appointed to the Ming nobility.

Few countries (Korea is a possible exception) on China's borders accepted the system at face value. They participated to obtain its benefits and to placate their powerful neighbor. While in Beijing, the ambassadors were housed and fed in a style appropriate to their status. The gifts they received were often more valuable than those they gave. (A study of Korean embassies, however, demonstrates that at times they gave more than they got.) In addition, they were permitted to trade private goods in the markets of the city. So attractive were these perquisites that some Central Asian merchants invented imaginary kingdoms of which they appointed themselves the emissaries. Eventually, China set limits on the size, frequency, and cargos of these missions.

THE PATTERN OF QING RULE

The late Ming was weakened by wars with the Mongols, by the Sino-Japanese pirate state of Koxinga in Taiwan, by war with the Japanese on the Korean peninsula, and by internal revolts. The final foreign threat was the Manchus—the mouse that swallowed the elephant.

In the late sixteenth century, an extremely able leader had unified the Manchurian tribes and proclaimed a Manchu dynasty. While still based in Mukden (more recently, Shenyang), the dynasty established a Confucian type of government with six ministries, a censorate, and other Chinese institutions. When rebel forces arose and the Ming was failing, the Manchus were invited into China to support the Ming, but they stayed to rule. They presented themselves as the conservative upholders of the Confucian order. Chinese gentry preferred Manchu to Chinese rebel leaders, whom they regarded as little more than bandits. A few Chinese scholars and officials became famous as Ming loyalists, but most quietly shifted their loyalty to the new dynasty. The Qing as a Chinese dynasty dates from 1644, when the capital was moved from Mukden to Beijing.



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