In 1381, a ten-year-old boy from Yunnan Province in southwestern China watched his father die at the hands of the Ming Dynasty's invading army and was then taken prisoner. The boy, named Ma He, was castrated and forced to join the thousands of eunuchs who made up the governmental and household staffs of the royal family.

As a young man, Ma quickly rose through the ranks of the military and became a trusted advisor of the emperor. To recognize Ma's loyalty, Emperor Yongle gave him wealth, power and a noble new name: Zheng He (“jeng-heh”).

The emperor also gave him a huge task. In July of 1405, Zheng He received orders to lead a fleet of ships down the coast of China, then across the ocean to India. It was to be the first of seven such voyages. For the next 28 years, Zheng He crisscrossed the Pacific and Indian oceans at the helm of the largest fleet of wooden ships the world has ever known.

Emperor Yongle had several reasons for sending Zheng He on this epic mission. He wanted to explore new lands and establish new trade relationships. The emperor also had a strong desire to show the world the greatness of both China and himself. What better way to do this than to appear on the horizon with hundreds of gigantic ships, thousands of soldiers, bundles of Chinese silk, and the promise of friendship? To avoid military conflict, local leaders typically responded by offering tribute in the form of gifts and sending emissaries to pay their respects to the emperor. On only three occasions during the seven voyages did Zheng He’s fleet encounter serious armed resistance—once from pirates.

Despite these glories, Zheng He’s story ends with obscurity. Not long after both Zheng He and Emperor Yongle died, Chinese officials dismantled the fleet and destroyed the records of the seven voyages. One explanation is that building and maintaining the fleet while fighting costly wars against the Vietnamese and the Mongols had bankrupted the Ming treasury. Also, there was strong feeling by some in government that China did not need trade and diplomatic contact with the world. Zheng He’s expeditions, they concluded, were a big mistake.

How different was this from Spain’s behavior 60 years later after the four voyages of Christopher Columbus. Seeing the chance for trade and treasure, Spanish ships began to pour into the Americas. European colonialism soon followed. Columbus may not have discovered America, but he started something big. Compared to this, were Zheng He’s voyages simply a lost opportunity?

In 2004, port cities such as Singapore and Semerang in Indonesia recognized the 600th anniversary of Zheng He’s voyages, but the event didn’t make much of a ripple around the world. Does Zheng He deserve more recognition?

**In your Journals, answer the following questions in complete sentences. Label your Journal with today’s date and title it: “Zheng He DBQ”**

1. How did Zheng He become an official in Emperor Yongle’s government?
2. How many voyages did Zheng He command?
3. What were three possible reasons for the voyages? Which do you think was the main one? Why?
4. Why was there opposition in China to Zheng He’s journeys?
5. How was the Spanish response to Columbus’s voyage different from the Chinese response to Zheng He’s?
The Imperial Ming [Dynasty] has unified [the lands within the four] seas and under the canopy of heaven.... From the edge of the sky to the ends of the earth there are none who have not become subjects and slaves.... [T]hus the barbarians from beyond the seas, even those who are truly distant, [so that their languages require] double translation, all have come to court bearing precious objects and presents.

The Emperor has delighted in their loyalty and sincerity and has ordered [Zheng] He and others to take command of several thousands of imperial officers and soldiers ... to go to their countries and confer presents on them by displaying our power while treating distant peoples with kindness. From the third year of Yongle [1405] until now we have seven times received commissions as ambassadors to the countries of the Western [Indian] Ocean.

...When we arrived at the foreign countries, barbarian kings who resisted ... we captured alive and barbarian bandits who invaded and plundered we wiped out. Because of this the sea routes became pure and peaceful and the foreign peoples could rely upon them.