

# **Week 21: Social Policy and the Founding of Ming**

## **Section 1: A Comparison between the Ming and the 20<sup>th</sup> Century China**

### **1. A Historical and Political Assessment of Ming Founding**

In Chinese history there have only been two unifications of the empire that began with conquests coming out of the South. One was in the 1350's and '60s lead by Zhu Yuanzhang. It resulted in the founding of the Ming Dynasty, formally declared 1368 and lasting till 1644. The second was in 1927 when the Guomin Dang under Chiang Kai-shek, or Jiang Jieshi, lead the northern expedition and brought the northern warlords into line.

And there have been only two dynastic foundings in Chinese history where I think it's safe to say social policy was at the heart of the founding. One of those was in 1949 with Mao Zedong and the founding of the People's Republic of China. And the other was in 1368 the Zhu Yuanzhang and the founding of the Ming Dynasty.

Now a number of scholars and Mao Zedong himself, in fact, have noted that there was a good deal in common between Zhu Yuanzhang, the Ming founder, the Hongwu Emperor, known sometimes as Ming Taizu, the grand progenitor of the Ming, and Mao Zedong. Not necessarily always in a positive light.

Both rose to power via military conquest. Both came from agricultural families, from farming families. Both had Utopian visions of how society ought to be. Both tended to believe that they alone knew how things should be done and organized. Concerned with monopolizing power, sometimes to the point of seeming paranoia. Both were deeply suspicious of the very officials who served their government, and launched purges against them.

They've been called autocrats. They've been called despots, but we need to take these terms carefully. And we thought we might just ask you, for a moment, to consider a number of terms we use in talking about politics, and try to see the differences between them. So bear with us then when we ask you to review some words like this, like autocracy, and so on.

### **2. The Dynastic Founder**

There are people who have impact on history, on the course of history by nudging things a certain way and making certain choices for policy. And there are people who aim to have an impact on history by rewriting history, so to speak, by reorganizing the world, by transforming society along the lines that they see as truly important and enduring.

And unusually in Chinese history, there are rulers who see themselves as relating directly to the common people, that sort of in some sense bypass their officials, the bureaucracy, and see themselves as speaking directly to the people themselves. Now, it's really interesting to explore the words and deeds of a founder. They are, after all, figures in some sense larger than life whose biography we want to traverse in our own minds.

But we also-- and this is, after all, a history class-- want to put them into some historical context to see what the choices are that they're making, what they're responding to, what they perceive to be the problems of the time, and what solutions they choose to adopt among their various choices.

## **Section 2: Three Views of the Ming Founding**

### **The Recovery Story**

I want to talk about how Zhu Yuanzhang has been talked about. That is, there are different views, sometimes radically different views, of Zhu Yuanzhang as a person and as a ruler. And depending on which stance we take, we can see him in various lights.

I'm going to talk about three views. One is a view that says Zhu Yuanzhang was restoring Chinese traditions of governance and culture. Another is a view that says he was actually very much a man of Yuan Dynasty. He thinks like Yuan person under Mongol rule, and in many ways, he's continuing the situation that existed in Yuan. The third says he was a terrible despot who responded to the world out of his own paranoia.

Let's look at each one of these. And at the end of each one, we'll give you a chance to comment on how you see the value of explanation. Now our first is going to be what might be called the recovery story, the view of Zhu Yuanzhang as somebody who's returning back to Chinese traditions, who's undoing the work of the Mongols and returning to the Song style.

Remember, Zhu Yuanzhang comes from the southeast. He comes from an area that had been, until 100 years before, under Song control. And for him, this view would say, the Mongol Empire was devastating not only because of the way in which they ruled, but also because it was the first foreign conquest of all of China.

There had been conquest of Chinese territory before. The North China Plain have been lost to foreign conquest a number of times. But what we now see is with the Mongols that all of China is brought within the Mongol's empire. The Mongols had a government that was anxious to exploit all the resources of territory controlled in order to continue with its conquest of the world.

Whether it was attacking, sending fleets down to Java in the South Seas, or launching fleets against Japan, the Mongols saw China as a resource with which to pursue their grand vision of an empire. But among the Mongols, there was also a division.

There were those who have sometimes been called the steppe Mongols, people saw themselves as steppe warriors on horseback, who had no particular commitment to China, and were perfectly willing to withdraw from the steppe, and were focused very much on continued military conquest.

There was another group who have sometimes been called the civil party among the Mongols, people who said one moment civil government in the Chinese style, and the Song style, or the Tang style. This is actually a useful mechanism. And that it can pay our bills. It can let us lead a good life, but to do that we have to bring Chinese officials in, we have to regularize the civil administration and so on.

It turned out that Zhu Yuanzhang, in the 1350s, conquers an area in Central Zhejiang from which a number of officials had gone who had close relations to the Yuan court and the civil party of the Yuan court. Now the civil party eventually lost in the internal struggles among the Mongols. But it's perhaps not entirely by chance that these people, from this place, became part of Zhu Yuanzhang's early brain trust.

Now what did he do? He had come from the southeast and, although he was not from a literati family himself, clearly many of his advisers were people who are paragons of literati culture. He didn't make a point of saying that he was returning to Chinese traditions, that the Mongols had abandoned the morality, and the rituals, and the culture that were part of the middle country, the central country. And he was bringing them back. He had pushed them north again back into the desert. And he was restoring something from the past.

But it was not ethnic nationalism. It was not racism, I don't think, that dominated him, for many of the people around him who had been loyal officials in the Yuan, had, in fact, to the very end tried to maintain the Yuan dynasty, had worked hard to save the Yuan. So the Mongols are different, but they can stay in China as long as they get assimilated.

The other part of this story of recovering earlier tradition, pre-Mongol traditions, was centralization. Zhu Yuanzhang was very concerned with centralizing power. It's been argued that Mongolian government, which involved using both Mongols and central Asians, Khitans and Jurchens, as well as Han Chinese, but mixing officials from different ethnic backgrounds together, that the Mongols had, in fact, created a rather decentralized system where provinces had a great deal of autonomous powers, at least at the lower level to appoint their own officials.

And that Zhu Yuanzhang steps in to try to re-centralize authority. He certainly brings back, the argument goes, civil authority. Civil administration is one of the three arms of government: the civil administration, the military administration, and the censorate, which I'll talk about in a minute.

The civil administration is now paramount, it's been argued. But there's also a degree of over centralization. He abolishes the post of prime minister. He abolishes the chief military commission, the Censorate Tribunal, so all arms of government now report directly to the emperor.

He also strengthens and streamlines provincial government. And so one could argue that, in fact, he mitigates, to some degree, the over-centralization by strengthening the provinces. And it's argued that he limits the military, that he divorces the military system from the civil system, from the civil administration. And so the military no longer can make free call on the resources of society through the civil administration.

In fact, he creates a new system called the Weisuo System, in which garrisons, the wei, are placed around the borders. And these garrisons are expected to be self sufficient. The members in them are, in fact, expected to farm at the same time and raise their own resources. So they are not dependent on the local civil administration.

Finally, as I mentioned already, he centralizes the Censorate, removes the Censorate Tribunal and has it report to him. The Censorate is a very important institution in Chinese history. And it's really in the Yuan that it becomes-- and Ming, and Qing that it becomes a distinct arm of government, along with the civil administration and military administration.

The Censorate is a system in which officials are appointed to go out and inspect the work of other officials, to make sure that they're doing their paperwork right, to make sure that they're following the laws, to assess their accomplishments. To write reports on them, on their merit they've achieved and so on. And the Censorate thus are people who are sent out through the country to monitor what goes on at the local administration, the military administration, the civil administration, and also at the capital to look at what the various departments, and the central administration are doing.

That's the first story: return to tradition -- the centralization of government and the restoration of Chinese culture.

## **Section 3: Three Views of the Ming Founding**

### **The Continuity Story**

The second story, the second way of thinking about Zhu Yuanzhang is that in fact, he is very much a man of the Yuan dynasty. He's born under the Yuan. He is raised, in fact, in many ways as a military man.

He's a rebel commander. He rises to lead the strongest of the rebel groups, vanquishes his rivals. He sees himself as having the ultimate authority, but puts the military first, at least during these initial years.

Not only that, he adopts the Yuan notion that people have obligations to the state by birth. So one of the things the Yuan did was offer the notion of hereditary castes-- that people had certain rights by virtue of the family they were born into. And those families would have these obligations in perpetuity, particularly families or households that were called military households were expected to always provide sons for the military.

And Zhu Yuanzhang continues that. He creates, in fact, a military nobility, as well as a series of military households to supply the armies. And this works fairly well, in fact, into the 15th century.

He is willing to move large numbers of people from one place to another. He forces leading families, Suzhou, to move to another area, Anhui, which is poor, which doesn't have adequate population. And he sees himself as being able to just order the population about in a way that would strike some people as being reminiscent of the Mongols.

And finally, he continues the use of cruel punishments. He continues the use of paper money from the Yuan. There are all sorts of things he's doing, in fact, that look very much like a continuation of the Yuan.

There's more we can tell you about as well.

## **Section 4: Three Views of the Ming Founding**

### **The Autocracy Story**

#### **1. Introducing the Concept of Autocracy**

The last interpretation of Zhu Yuanzhang I want to introduce is Zhu Yuanzhang the autocrat, Zhu Yuanzhang the despot. Now we've already talked about what the term autocracy means.

And autocracy and despotism seem to be fairly close together. But think of autocracy-- recall autocracy, at the moment, is to be a situation in which one person rules without any other legal authority being able to limit his actions. The only limits that are there are rebellion, or invasion, or a coup d'état. So there are no legal constraints, nor regular mechanisms that will limit the authority of the autocrat.

But I would like us to make a distinction and talk about Zhu Yuanzhang, which is when we talk about him as an autocrat, does this mean that the Chinese system has become autocratic? That Chinese government has become, or was always, an autocracy? Sometimes they're compelling ways of talking about this.

The point has been made, for example, that in the Tang Dynasty, when the chief counselors came in to discuss matters with the emperor, that they would sit down and have a cup of tea together. In the Song Dynasty, they would stand in front of the emperor and discuss with him.

And when we get to the Ming Dynasty, they knock their head on the floor. They prostrate themselves. The notion then that we see the rise of a form of government in which the emperor has absolute power.

But let's make a distinction. Let's ask the question, what is the relationship between emperor and the officials? Is that autocratic? And what is the relationship between government and its institutions, and the population? Is that autocratic? I think we'll have to have a much more nuanced answer than a blanket statement that China was autocratic.

## **2. The Population and Economic Context**

This is the situation that Zhu Yuanzhang faced-- population, once 100 million at the end of the 11th century, had declined radically during the years of first the Jin then the Yuan. War on the northern frontier, civil war at points within the Yuan Dynasty, border regions suffering during continuous wars with the Song until the conquest of the Song, civil war at the end of the Yuan that devastated parts of the South, plague and disease, Yellow River floods. By 1393, there were only 65 million counted by the government. It may have been more, but only 65 million were counted.

And in fact, at this point, beginning with the reign of Zhu Yuanzhang, China enters a period, 100 years of economic stagnation. It's really not until the late 15th century that the economy begins to revive.

## **3. Zhu Yuanzhang and His Character**

Zhu Yuanzhang himself-- to talk about his biography-- is one of the few cases in Chinese history where a peasant, farmer, a very poor farmer, becomes a monk, becomes a rebel, and becomes an emperor. He was the youngest of seven children from a poor region of what's today Anhui Province. Most of his family dies from plague when he is young.

And he goes to join a monastery. But the monastery comes upon hard times. It's broke. He's forced out, and has to go begging on the streets.

After a few years, he returns to the monastery. He learns to read and write. But the monastery is destroyed when a government army comes through trying to suppress local rebels. Zhu Yuanzhang then leaves and joins, in fact, the rebels himself.

Eventually his rebel force, he becomes a commander in it. And he joins up with a larger rebellion force called the Red Turbans, also sometimes known as the Red Army-- a sect, a military and religious sect that believed that salvation was going to come, that they and they alone would be saved, and was going rampaging through the countryside.

The situation in China in the 1350s was awful. There was disease. There was suffering. And as rebel armies moved through the countryside, there are cases which have been recorded of them eating villages-- of eating all the people in a village after they had finished the grain stores and the livestock. The only protein that was left was the human beings.

Zhu Yuanzhang was a man of unusual character. He was disciplined. He was not self-indulgent. He was strong, principled.

But he was also suspicious of those around him, deeply suspicious to the point of paranoia. He was-- in fact, if we look at his portrait, he seems like a kind, grandfatherly gentleman. But there are also scurrilous portraits of him, which suggest a man with a jutting chin, a pock-marked face-- a man who is unusually ugly.

Let's look at the relationship with his officials. Zhu Yuanzhang abolished the post of Chief Counselor, Prime Minister, in 1380. How come?

Well, the reason was that he suspected the then Chief Counselor, Hu Weiyong, of plotting against him. And there's some evidence that in fact, Hu Weiyong was plotting against him, and that many other civil officials, and some military officials perhaps, had joined in the plot.

Hu Weiyong is executed, and 30,000 others are executed as well. And with the end of that purge, Zhu Yuanzhang decides he will no longer allow anyone to be Chief Minister. That would give somebody else too much power. And he wants power in his own hands.

Why does he abolish the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the military commissioners? Because in 1393, he suspects the Chief General Lan Yu, who had been with him from early on, he suspects him of threatening him, of trying to usurp the throne. And Lan Yu is executed, and 15,000 others are executed.

Zhu Yuanzhang was somebody, it is said, who took it personally if somebody broke one of his laws. He was known to make use of what are called extralegal punishments-- punishments that are not in the criminal code at all, although these are not unique to him.

They existed before in Chinese history-- the lingering death, the death by 1,000 strokes, where somebody is gradually put to the knife and cut repeatedly, until they expire, suffering as long as possible. The boil and scrub, where somebody is dropped into boiling water, and their skin is rubbed off, and then they're dropped in again until they expire.

He was, in this sense, a very cruel and vindictive man. We have other examples of that. And I'll give you an example later.

But let us go on with the ways in which he wants to totally-- it's not just a matter of centralization in this view. It's a matter of a despotic character who will not allow any opposition, or anyone to object to how he acts, who wants all power in himself.

And this extends even to religion. He goes out, and he sets up new orders, new religious foundations, a new religious system, in which local cults will be centralized, sort of along the model of the administrative hierarchy. And he, the Emperor, will be at the top.

In fact, there's a story that one summer there is a terrible drought, and Zhu Yuanzhang decides that he will go to the Temple of Heaven and demand that heaven bring rain. The way he does this-- he goes to the Temple of Heaven, and he takes off his shirt, and says to heaven-- I'm the emperor. Are you going to burn me? Make it rain. And it is said that it rained.

He has a series of pronouncements, somewhat ad hoc pronouncements that when things go wrong, he makes a pronouncement about what's right, what's wrong, why he punished this person, why he punished that person, why people should not behave like that. And the grand pronouncements are issued in a series. There are three big books of grand pronouncements.

And it is said that if you had a copy of the grand pronouncements in your household, and you were found guilty of a crime, the punishment would be diminished by one degree. And he even had a contest in which tens of thousands of people came to the capital for a memorization contest of the grand pronouncements.

He saw himself then as a teacher to the world, as the father to the world, as the sage in the world, and as the only power in the world.

## **Section 5: Social Policy**

### **1. Practices**

So you've heard three different views of Zhu Yuanzhang. All of which seem to have more than a modicum of truth to them. But let me give you an anecdote and show you how three different points of view can see the same thing and explain it differently.

Let me give you an anecdote. Something that happened before 1368-- in other words, before the founding of the Ming-- that can be interpreted from these three different angles. And you'll see how the same facts, so to speak, can mean different things, depending on the perspective the historian brings to it.

The son of one of his generals was accused, and found guilty of, breaking the law-- one of Zhu Yuanzhang's laws. And the law was that you could not use grain to brew wine. And he was executed.

Well, rather extreme action. Zhu Yuanzhang, the autocrat, or the despot, is saying, any law of mine must be obeyed. And off with your head, if you disobey me.

Zhu Yuanzhang, the person who is continuing military rule from the Yuan dynasty, says, we have rules and orders, and all people in the military hierarchy must follow the rules, as they are given.

And Zhu Yuanzhang, who's trying to centralize authority, who's trying to restore civil society or a civilian government, has a concern of resources. And the reason he had a law against the use of grain for alcohol, making an alcohol, was, in fact, that grain was in short supply. And alcohol was, from his point of view, frivolous. And that's necessary. People needed to be fed.

So you can choose which you think is right. And all of these must be right, to some extent. But I don't think any one of these stories-- the restore civil government story, continue the Yuan story, or Zhu Yuanzhang, the autocratic and despot story-- really is quite adequate.

Because I think, in fact, in the Ming founding we see something far more interesting and important going on, something that will have consequences for many centuries to come. And that is the establishment of a new kind of social policy that contrasted strongly with what had existed before. And that is what, I think, made Zhu Yuanzhang's dynastic founding, the founding of the Ming, different.

Let's look at what the social policies were that Zhu Yuanzhang legislated. And then we can ask how they responded to the situation at the time.

At the heart of it is a village system, begins by organizing all households into groups, groups of 100 households plus 10. Let me explain. The 10 wealthiest families in the village are appointed leaders of the system. And groups of 10 are assigned to them. And the ten wealthiest families, which are leaders of these groups of 10, rotate overall responsibility for the whole village system. This system is called the Lijia, in Chinese. Li means village and jia means group of 10.

So now we have a system in place in which everybody is organized into block groups, so to speak. And if there are more than 110 households in the village, then there's an extra list for the other households. But most villages, 110 households. That's around 500 people. That's probably, for most of rural China at that point in history, was around right.

And this is the way the government will make sure they pay their taxes on time. It will be a way of keeping order. It will be a way of making sure that people follow the law. And there's mutual liability, which means that if my neighbor in my group breaks a law or doesn't pay their taxes, I share responsibility for paying those taxes. Or, in fact, may be punished for the law that he breaks.

This is a way of organizing the entire population. He also calls for institution of a village school system, where all young males, at least, will be taught. Now this won't last too long. It turns out to be too expensive. It's easily corrupted. But let's look at the school system, this village school system, and see what it taught.

Well, it taught things like the rules of mourning. I don't mean morning, in the morning, AM. But I mean mourning and grieving for your parents. A very important part of Chinese death ritual, for elites, certainly, was that you had an obligation to mourn your kin. Depending, with the mourning obligation changing, according to the degree of closeness to that kin. So you mourned more for your father and mother than you would for your grandfather or great grandfather, for example. But this would be a way of, in fact, understanding your obligations to your kinship group.

These schools teach about inheritance and the idea of the partible inheritance. That is, the sons have equal claims on the estate of the father, when they divide the household, if they divide the household. Rather than following a rule of primogeniture, where the oldest son gets everything.

It teaches taking care of widows. Taking care of mothers who are left without husbands. And it teaches, of course, Zhu Yuanzhang's own sacred edict to the people, telling them how to behave.

He also institutes a village elder system. He goes back and forth on this for a number of years. But in the end, settles on an elder system in which the village elders-- two or three people, senior people in the village-- will have certain kinds of legal powers, powers to decide low level cases and punishments for transgressors.

But even a more important power: they can report on the behavior of local officials. And they-- remember, local officials are the higher level. There are many villages, but there's only one county seat and, above that, one prefectural seat. The village elders have the right to go around officials and appeal their decisions at the capital, or to condemn and impeach and criticize the local officials, as well. This was not something that local officials liked.

Their village shrines, as part of the religious reformation Zhu Yuanzhang has in mind, every village will have a communal shrine, where they will worship, as a village. And this shrine will be part of a hierarchy of shrines leading up to the capital.

He orders the installation of the village wine drinking ceremony where once a year, the villagers and the senior villagers gather around to drink wine together-- kind of a ritual. And talk about who has been good and who has been bad. And there will be announcements made and posted of who has done well and who has done wrong.

He encourages the development of family, extended family groups and lineage groups of larger descent groups. And he creates a place for the very richest people in the locality, as tax captains, who will be responsible for moving grain, tax grain, from one place to another.

## **2. Ideology**

Another part of the social policy is ideology. He offers text to be learned. I've already mentioned the three grand pronouncements. And a very important one, which you'll be reading part of shortly, is from 1398, the

year of his death, where he puts forward a placard of instructions for the populace, the Jiaomin bangwen. And this placard of instructions for the populace lays out, in fact, what the responsibilities of elders are, the wine-drinking ceremony, and so on, and so forth.

What is his goal? It seems fairly clear that the goal is social stability, family cohesion, mutual aid, moral improvement, and self-supervision. It's very much for an agricultural society. And the people who were excluded from this-- or not so much excluded-- the people who are most constrained by this system are, in fact, merchants, travelling merchants, people who take up, buy goods, go somewhere else, sell them, come back with money. They now cannot travel unless they have a government-issued passport. Their freedoms are constrained. Although it still continues paper money for a while, the government is not, in fact, trying to help merchants succeed.

Where does this model come from? Well it cannot come from the new policies of Wang Anshi, which was not interested in creating self-supervising moral communities, but wanted active government involvement in transforming society, government institutions that would buy and sell, that would engage people in new undertakings. It's certainly not the faith in civil government that was so much part of the founding of the Song dynasty, for example, where there was a belief that if we could just have civil officials, the problems of civil war and military rule would come to an end. And examinations were installed to recruit civil officials to honor those who were part of the civil side of life rather than the military side. It's not a Yuan military system where great Yuan Mongol aristocrats could have apanage's great estates, where the farmers are basically serfs working for them.

Where does it come from? Well, I think we get a hint when I mentioned that the first six items in Zhu Yuanzhang's Sacred Edict were lifted directly from something that Zhu Xi wrote, the Neo-Confucian philosopher. When Zhu Xi wrote, in fact, an edict of instructions for the people, they were, in fact, all about telling people to honor the family as the basis for society and to supervise themselves. In fact, when we look further, we see that the connection between many of the institutions Zhu Yuanzhang is legislating and is demanding of people have their origins in voluntary institutions created by Neo-Confucian literati for the improvement of local society.

An example? The idea of a community compact, where people from different families will get together and make an agreement to follow certain rules of behavior, will look at each other and report on each other, will have annual meetings or quarterly meetings in which they evaluate each other's behavior. Another somewhat Neo-Confucian idea going back to the Song is that the labor service obligations that people would have can sometimes be very onerous, sometimes quite unpredictable, and that, in fact, a community of the elite would get together to try to lessen the risk by pooling resources so that labor service obligations could be met.

Community schools can remind us, perhaps, of the private academies that were becoming so popular in Song and later, which the government is supporting in Yuan, academies which aimed to educate, at least in the Song times, certainly literati rather than all the population, but which became so numerous, so much more common, than government schools that they had some real impact on local society. Charitable estates. The idea that one could endow fields that would produce income that could be used for local purposes, for local welfare, families that would try to stay together over generations.

At the core then, of the Neo-Confucian vision was of local literati, elites, Neo-Confucians who would voluntarily take on group measures to bring welfare to improve the welfare of local society. What's happening now is Zhu Yuanzhang is legislating this. He's making this a demand.

And what happens to the literati? Some people think that since Zhu Yuanzhang was not from a literati family, did not like literati. In fact, that the literati sort of disappear in early Ming. I don't actually think this is right. I think if we look at Zhu Yuanzhang's brain trusts, people who provide him advice, although he sometimes turns against them as well, they are clearly literati figures. If we look at the families that are the tax captains, these are well-to-do literati families. And it seems that one of the reasons he moved a large

number of wealthy families, literati families, out of Suzhou was not only because Suzhou had been the base for one of his rivals, but also because he wanted to populate rural poor areas with wealthy families so that they could lead the village tithing system, the Lija system.

Well, it seems that this end to the expansion of government initiatives in the sense of the new policies, this new ideal of self-supervising moral community was in some sense a low-risk investment, an investment in stability in an agricultural society. But we know from southern Song and Yuan that these were commercializing societies. And the model of the self-sufficient agricultural community, the self-supervising moral community is not one that fits commercializing society.

In fact, Zhu Yuanzhang's policies were bad for business. They were bad for merchants. They constrained them, returned people to a tax system of taxes in kind. But less wealth went together with greater social stability. The question we have to ask is once the system was in place, once Ming entered a prolonged period of peace and as prosperity grew, could it remain the same or would it have to change. And that's the question we're going to ask and answer in the next module.

## Week 21: Admirer Zheng He Sails the Seas

I wanted to tell you how it came about that a Ming Chinese fleet sailed to Africa sometime between 1431-1433. During the reign of the Xuande Emperor. It was, in fact, the seventh and the final of a series of great fleets that had been sent out from Ming, from the southern capital Nanjing, on journeys between 1405 and 1433. It began under the Yongle Emperor. The Yongle Emperor who had usurped the throne in 1403 from his nephew, the grandson of the founding emperor of the Ming. The Yongle Emperor was the son, one of the sons, of the founder.

Let's begin with just the physical facts about this fleet. The first fleet that was sent out in 1405 had 317 ships, and some say only 250, with 27,000 men on board, an officer corps of 93 commanders, 104 battalion commanders, over 100 company commanders, almost 200 druggists and physicians, one for every 100 men or so, an uncertain number of translators into the various languages that would be spoken along the way, and craftsmen.

There were four Treasure Ships, as the largest ships were called. These are the largest wooden ships that have ever been built in human history, at least to this point today. The length was around 400 feet. They displaced, when they were empty, about 4,000 tons. They were long tons, nautical tons. When they were full they displaced around 13,000 tons. The best speed they sailed at was around six knots. They had watertight, bulwark compartments. They were double, or perhaps even triple, planked. Nine separate masts. The tallest being 200 feet tall. The sail would have covered around 12,000 square feet. Would've weighed 20 tons. Tremendously stable ship, seaworthy ships, that would sail south with a monsoon winds and return north with a monsoon winds.

Compare this with the greatest wooden ship that the English Navy ever built, the HMS Victory. Lord Nelson's ship launched in 1795. 104 guns on it. His flagship. It took around 2,500-6,000 trees to build Lord Nelson's ship, the HMS Victory. It took 7,500 to 12,000 trees to build a treasure ship. The dry dock to build one of these ships was as big as the football stadium at Harvard. And there were other ships, horse ships, 340 feet by 140 feet. The supply ships, 250 or 60 feet by 115 feet.

Compare this to the ship that Columbus sailed across the ocean with to discover the new world in 1492. The Santa Maria. The Zheng He Treasure Ship was 400 times the size of Columbus's ship. And the man in charge, he was a Muslim from China. He was a Eunuch named Zheng He. He became rich and famous from his voyages.

In fact, to honor his father he planned to cut an extraordinarily large stone out of a quarry and have the story of his father inscribed on it. The stone is still in the quarry. It was too large to move -135 feet long, 45

feet wide, 12 feet thick. In any case, Zheng He sailed his fleets to Southeast Asia, to south Asia, to India, Sri Lanka, Arabia, and finally, on the last voyage, part of the fleet went to Africa.

Around the time-- a little bit later-- but around the time that Zheng He was sailing his fleets through the seas, Prince Henry the Navigator of Portugal was launching sets of fleets to explore mainly the west coast of Africa. Now this has been celebrated in western history. When I was a student, I remember reading about Prince Henry the Navigator, the advances in maritime technology, a navigation that came with him, the dawn of an age of discovery, a century of discovery. Well, that's hardly true.

Both the young Yongle Emperor and Prince Henry were drawing on knowledge from the Yuan period. But now the land bridge between Europe and east Asia had been cut. The remnants of the Mongols still occupied central Asia making it very difficult to travel back and forth. But were the purposes of Henry the Navigator and the Yongle Emperor the same? Hardly.

Europeans were going to places they might have heard of, but did not know about. They were, in fact, trying to discover. The Ming was going to places it knew about. It wasn't sailing to discover. It was sailing to show the flag along well-established routes, to announce the power of the Ming Dynasty and of the current Emperor.

They were inviting others to pay tribute they were not seeking new knowledge about others. They were demonstrating their power. They were settling their disputes. They were, in fact, an armed force. They had canon but they didn't use it really to fight at sea. If necessary they would launch soldiers, marines onto shore to fight their battles.

We have a stele, that's one of these stone monuments that they erected in 1409 in Sri Lanka. An interesting stele, it comes in three different languages. The Chinese text praises the Buddha, the Tamil text praises the local version of the Hindu god Shiva, and the Persian text praises Allah.

The Zheng He voyages stopped in 1433 under a new emperor. But why? They were successful. They established Chinese supremacy in the seas. They brought countries into Ming to pay tribute. They were stopped-- it seems the best explanation is not because China was turning inward or didn't want to have anything to do with the outside world. Hardly. They were stopped because they cost too much money. Because people in the government called for austerity. They felt the administration of the emperor, Yongle Emperor, was spending too much money on these fleets, too much money on the northern border in his campaigns against the Mongols. They called for austerity.

It's in the aftermath of this that the Great Wall is refurbished along the northern border to keep the foreigners out. A great fence one might say. It didn't work by the way, but it was built. Shutting down overseas relations for private trade, breaking relations with Japan, these were all the results. Not lasting results but more short term results of stopping the expeditions abroad.

But why do they go to Africa? I said I would tell you why. Well the story goes like this. When the sixth fleet got to India they found an ambassador there from an African state on the east coast of Africa. And that ambassador had with him two very, very strange animals.

When Zheng He's fleet got there they saw these animals and they said, these animals must be unicorns. Now, they hadn't seen unicorns but they knew about unicorns because long ago Confucius had seen a unicorn. It says unicorns only appear when there's a sage in the world.

And it turned out that the Ming Emperor had, back home in his capital, a zoo, a park, where they collected the rare plants and the rare animals from around the world or from around the world that the fleet, has sailed to. And they said, this is a unicorn. It's a sign that our emperor's a sage.

We know something about this because the emperor then proceeded to invite people to the palace to come and view the unicorn. To write poems and to paint pictures of it. We actually have a picture of the unicorn you'll see it in a moment. But first let me tell you why they knew this must be a unicorn.

A unicorn is a benevolent beast. It's not a carnivore. It's a peaceful beast. In this case, this animal ate leaves off of trees. And when they looked at the animal they said, it's a little bit unusual. We didn't expect the unicorn to have a neck quite that long. Rather a long neck on these unicorn. But we'll take them anyway.

And so they persuaded the African ambassador to keep one of these unicorns for their emperor and to come with them back to the capital to give it the emperor. And the ambassador agreed. I don't know if he had a choice in the matter. He got there and after of couple years he said, I'd really like to go home.

Oh. By the way, what do you think the unicorn was in fact?

What do you think the unicorn was, in fact? Well, here's the picture. A giraffe, yes. But that's why the fleet went to Africa-- they were simply doing a favor for an ambassador, returning him home after having delivered the unicorn to the Ming emperor.