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1421: THE YEAR CHINA DISCOVERED THE WORLD

Did Chinese sailors reach Australia 350 years before Captain Cook? In October 2003, Chinese President Hu Jintao surprised his Australian Parliament House audience by recalling that Chinese explorers had got to Australia in the 1420s.

Chinese history books claim that Chinese sailors travelled to other parts of the world in the 1420s. Now there is a best-selling book in English that sets out an even more ambitious claim for Chinese expeditions. The Chinese between 1421 and 1423 visited pretty much the entire world.

Gavin Menzies is a retired Royal Navy submarine commander who was born in China in 1937. He is currently one of the world's most famous – if not most controversial – amateur historians. He lives in north London and travels widely to promote his book.

The book has generated more disputation than almost any other recent history book. But everyone agrees on one point: Menzies knows how to publicise his book. In most of the world it is called “1421: The Year China Discovered the World” but in the US the book is called “1421: The Year China Discovered America”.

In 1421 China was a great imperial power. It was the world's most populous country, with a large landmass and a scientifically advanced population. Beijing's Forbidden City – completed in 1421 - was a thousand times larger than the walled City of London.

Menzies claims that in March 1421 Emperor Zhu Di sent 107 ships, made out of mahogany, to sail around the world. They constituted the world's biggest fleet. Each ship was larger than any ship built before then – possibly five times larger than the ships Columbus used for his trip to the Americas in 1492. Not until the 20th Century did Europeans and Americans build ships of this size.

So far, Menzies' main argument is supported professional historians. The dry docks where the ships were built (at the former Ming capital city of Nanjing) are still there. Chinese ships did reach India and east Africa. Some exotic animals were taken by China.

According to those historians the Chinese decided at some point to go back to China, where the expedition faded from view. The Emperor had died, there was a palace revolution and the country was falling into chaos. The new rulers were more concerned with immediate issues of

law and order and did not want contact with the outside world. The Chinese officials destroyed all the records of the trips.

But did the ships go much further before returning home in October 1423? Menzies argues that the ships, in four main fleets, sailed almost all over the globe. The Chinese were therefore the first people to sail around the globe. The ships carried sailors, soldiers, diplomats and farmers. They steered by the stars and created maps that were of use to the later European explorers.

One expedition went to east Africa via India. Another went around the Cape of Good Hope, up the west coast of Africa, across to South America and back to China via the west coast of Australia, near Bunbury, south of Perth. The third went north from China, around the North Pole, Greenland, along the east coast of North America and back via the North Pole. The fourth went around Antarctica and returned via the east coast of Australia and New Zealand.

Of the 107 ships that set out, only about a quarter managed to get back in 1423. Menzies claims that one of them was wrecked just off the Victorian coast at Warrnambool. This is the mysterious “Mahogany Ship” first noticed by European explorers in 1836 but which is now covered by sea and sand and lost from view.

This is a great book. It reads like a detective story, trying to piece together various bits of evidence. The reader is swept along by the story.

But does Menzies prove his case? Most professional historians are not convinced. They do agree that the Chinese expedition should get more attention in western countries that it currently receives. Reaching India and east Africa was in itself a major achievement. Some historians have argued that the voyages were spread out over a longer period: 1402-1433. But they all agreed that the Chinese for sometime were fine sailors and they have not received enough recognition in the west.

Additionally, we do know that far smaller ships of other people managed to sail across the Indian Ocean and also sailed across the Pacific (such as to New Zealand and Easter Island). The Europeans were not the only great sailors of past eras.

Also, the medieval world was more interconnected than we tend to think. Some people did travel extensively and there were international maritime trade routes. After all, the Indigenous People in Australia’s north were trading with Macassars (in present day Indonesia) centuries before Cook reached Australia. The Macassar traders ensured that Islam – not Christianity – was the first foreign religion to reach Australia.

But one problem with the book is that the Chinese did not reach the one area where people could have recorded the trips in great detail: Europe. It seems hard to imagine that such an extensive set of expeditions should miss Europe. After all, unlike most of the rest of the world, the

Chinese did know something about Europe because their goods had, before Islam severed the link through the Middle East, gone to the west via the Silk Road. The Chinese, if Menzies is to be believed, went pretty well everywhere else but missed Europe. This is a large piece of real estate to overlook.

Second, there is little physical evidence to support Menzies' argument of Chinese colonization. If the Chinese did venture so far, where are the signs? Most of the Chinese did not get back home. Some (according to Menzies) were left to colonize the new territories (both men and women were on the ships). But there are few (if any) signs of Chinese life from that era. If some Chinese had settled in Australia in the 15th Century, what happened to them? Why didn't the Europeans notice them when they arrived three centuries later?

Additionally, if the Chinese were so ambitious at colonization, why didn't they spend more time expanding out in their own immediate region? Why go to Australia and the Americas when they had problems closer to hand? Why not walk west into present day Russia or sail east to conquer Japan?

Third, there is a controversy over the Chinese maps. Menzies as a former naval officer spends a great deal of the book on maps, sea currents and navigation. He claims that the Europeans who later sailed around the world were guided by Chinese maps.

But why were all the European sailors so consistently reluctant to admit they copied them from the Chinese? Why don't the journals of the European sailors make mention of Chinese assistance? This "conspiracy of silence" is too uniform to be coincidental

Finally, if the Chinese were so good at making maps, why were the maps of their own country so poor? If they were so skilled in mapping the rest of the world then we could expect the surviving maps of China of that era to be far more accurate than they are.

In short, the book is not convincing. It makes a great read – but it may not be good history.

Keith Suter

NOTES

Gavin Menzies "1421: The Year China Discovered the World", London: Bantam, 2002
<http://www.1421.tv>

The US New England Antiquities Research Association also has a "1421"
website: <http://www.neara.org/MiscReports/1421.htm>