

CHINESE SEAFARING BEFORE 1421 AD

by

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This article I dedicate to professor Dr.

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on the occasion of his 100th birthday, March 26, 2004

Summary

My researches on Chinese seafaring before 1421 led to the following conclusion:

- 1) Already since emperor Yü, who founded the Xia dynasty (2205 – 1766 BC), there were repeatedly overseas expeditions from East Asia to North America (Mexico included), and back, mostly on the route along the Aleutian Islands.
- 2) Arguments are adduced to the effect that the cultivation of maize has probably not had its origin in the Americas, but in Inner Asia.
- 3) The thesis is presented that the so far rather enigmatic Chinese seals, which have been found in different regions of Ireland, may have probably been left there by visiting Chinese overseas merchants.
- 4) A new proposal is made with respect to the real causes, which may have led to the sudden total ban on overseas activities by the Ming government in 1424.

Introduction: The researches of Gavin Menzies

Even as late as the 21st century the amazing achievements of Chinese seafaring were scarcely known. This explains why Gavin Menzies was able to successfully publish a book in 2002, in London, with the title "1421 – The Year China Discovered the World". The German edition has been published in 2003 by Droemer in Munich (1).

FOR EUROPEANS, the discovery of the world begins with Christopher Columbus finding America 1492, and Vasco da Gama discovering the sea route to India 1498. With this double event begins the modern colonialism by the European maritime and trade powers, which becomes a decisive factor in world affairs after the circumnavigations of the globe by the Magellan expedition (1519-1522) and, later on, by James Cook (d.1779).

It seems almost as if non-Western maritime powers, which were active in intercontinental trade on the oceans of South and East Asia, and the other continents – like e.g. ancient Peru, which about 1500 AD had about 100.000 balsas, partly of impressive size, on the ocean (2) – should be denied their right of existence.

This may have been one more reason for Gavin Menzies, as an ex-submarine captain, to persevere in his unusual hobby, to wit in his self-commissioned task of looking for vestiges of a Chinese presence around 1421 AD, around the globe. Perhaps he has been inspired by certain Portuguese stone pillars, called Padrões. They are topped by the escutcheon of Portugal, adorned with a cross. Such stone pillars have been erected by Portugal everywhere on distant coasts where her captains had landed and taken possession of the land. The famous world map of Waldseemüller from 1505 shows such Padrões on the coasts of southwest and southeast Africa.

Menzies' unceasing urge to discover the true facts about those overseas expeditions by Ming China, together with his navigational experience, has made it possible for him to write a book which, because of his vivid and realistic accounts of innumerable episodes and incidents, make most interesting and stimulating reading for anybody who chooses to peruse it. This makes his book a meritorious endeavor, in spite of critical commentaries which seem necessary here and there.

My main point of critique: by dealing almost exclusively only with the maritime expeditions of the Ming era, i.e. of very late pre-Columbian times, Menzies tends to produce in the minds of his not so well-read readers a kind of phantasm, an illusory perception of the past, by not taking into account the far earlier maritime and overseas activities of the Chinese. More on this later.

1) Circumnavigations of the globe by Chinese admirals 1421-1423

In his book Menzies describes, in his first chapter, imperial China of 1421, and the great, far-reaching scheme of Ming emperor Zhu Di, who had become enthroned as emperor Ch'eng-tsu. His motto as ruler was Yung-lo, meaning eternal peace. He reigned from 1403 to 1424. On his orders, on March 5, 1421, a never-before-seen great armada, later on parting into separate overseas expeditions to distant regions of the world, left China.

TWO MONTH later, on May 9, 1421, a thunderbolt struck the imperial palace in Peking, which resulted in a conflagration destroying all which the emperor had achieved so far. Also all papers relating to the great naval expeditions perished in this destructive fire.

Menzies describes these great overseas expeditions (pp.25-94), and the routes of the Chinese fleets are shown in an accompanying

world map, and in detailed regional maps. These routes of course have to be taken as tentative approximations. We are in possession of diary records made by Ma Huan, who accompanied admiral Zheng He on three of his great overseas voyages. It is the book: "The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores", of 1433 (3): Ma Huan's records show that Zheng He, on one of his expeditions to the West, had visited the east coast of Africa.

WITH HIS SIXTH expedition, admiral Zheng He leaves China on November 10, 1421, and returns to Peking on September 3, 1422. At Semudera, north-eastern Sumatra, he had divided his armada in four separate fleets. The smallest of these remains under his direct command. Ma Huan parts from the expedition fleet at Calicut. From there the admirals set sail with their respective fleets for their circumnavigations of the globe as described by Menzies.

In the second chapter ("Die Leitsterne" – "The Lodestars" pp.95-154), Menzies describes how the Chinese rounded the Cape of Good Hope, in the third chapter the voyage of Hong Bao to Antarctica and Australia (pp.155-182) is discussed, and in the fourth chapter (pp.183-272) admiral Zhou Man visits, after Australia, the Pacific coasts of the Americas.

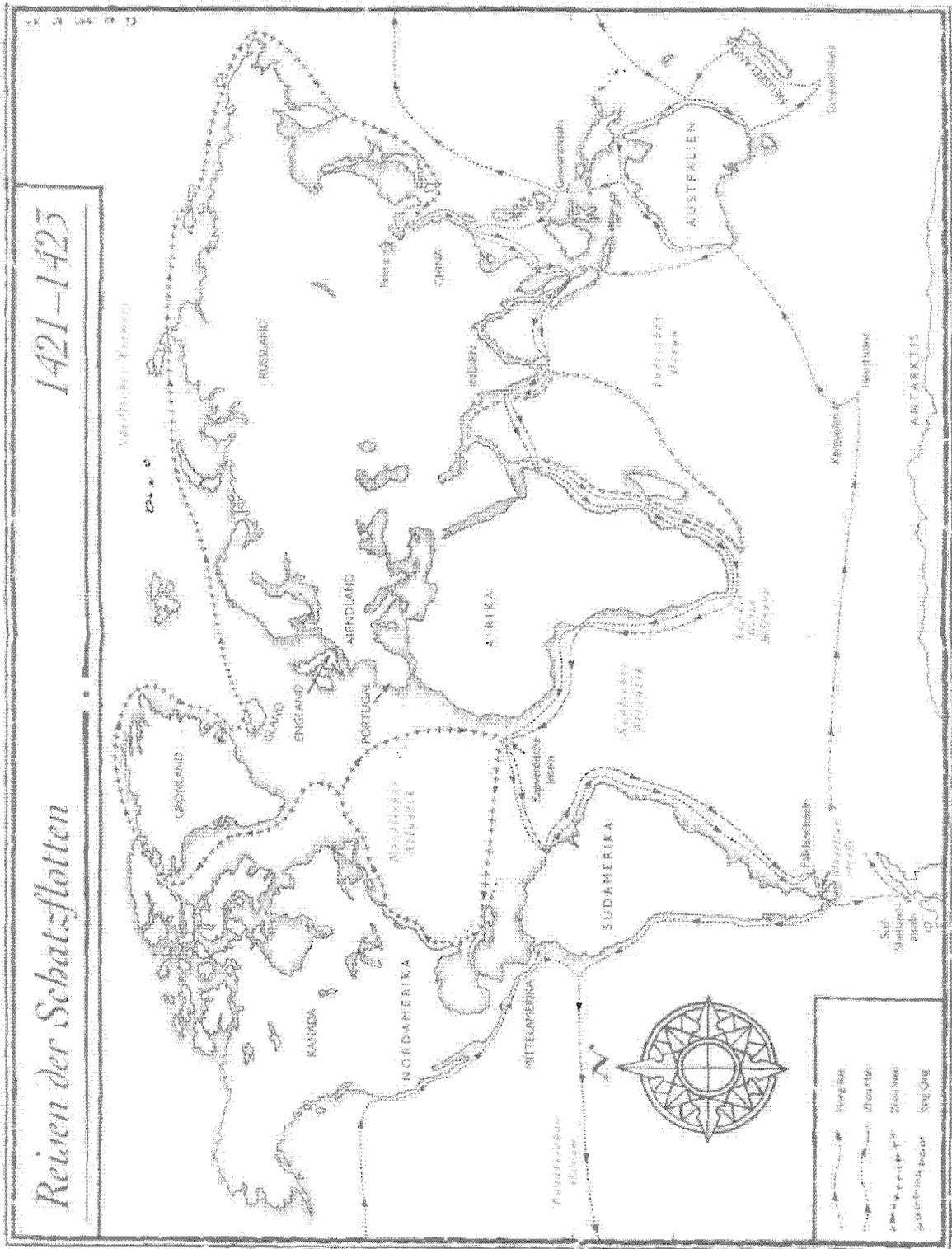
In the fifth chapter (pp.273-358), admiral Zhou Wen, after crossing the Atlantic from the Cape Verde Islands, explores the Caribbean, the east coast of what today is the United States, and in the end also the Arctic waters towards the North Pole. On the North American east coast incidentally Menzies thinks Zhou Wen discovered, or better re-discovered, ethnologically relevant traces of a still earlier Chinese presence there, from former Atlantic expeditions. In his opinion e.g. the thesis might very well be defended that the famous Newport Tower (Rhode Island) has originally been a Chinese lighthouse.

The sixth chapter describes the voyage of Yang Qing (pp.359-379), and the real secret of Ming China's overseas achievements, namely the unsurpassed accuracy of the Chinese in measuring time, centuries before the Europeans were able to find a comparable technique. It is of great importance to keep this in mind.

Later European Mariners of diverse nationality were normally not conscious of the fact that the world maps they used had become possible only by incorporating Chinese cartographic material which had somehow found its way to the West. In the eighth chapter (pp.381-442) it is described, why and how Portugal became the immediate inheritor of this Chinese cartographic knowledge, and took advantage of it.

In an epilogue (pp.443-461) the legacy is described which the Chinese, as a result of their overseas expeditions, left for posterity. According to Menzies this legacy comprises countless achievements by the millennia-old Chinese civilization in many fields of human activities, which have been handed down, by means of said overseas expeditions, to posterity, and have been received by the world with gratitude.

CHINA'S GREATEST contribution to civilization would have to be seen in the cultivation and spread of plants. The cultivation of maize, however, is said to have had its origin in the Americas. It is supposed that the cultivation of maize began in the highlands of Peru, where maize is said to have had its origin in some wild ancestor variety. It is, however, not inconceivable that maize had been cultivated from certain wild varieties, when Chinese colonists living there found that their maize supplies, which they had brought with them, were shrinking rapidly. We had a similar phenomenon in Germany when, because of the Continental System of 1806 (Napoleon's plan to blockade Britain by excluding her ships from ports on



he mainland of Europe), cane sugar respectively sugar cane was no longer available, and beet sugar was produced instead.

I believe indeed that the cultivation of maize had its origin in China. In Inner Asia it is widespread and, beside millet, the staple food of the population. Taiyuan in Shanxi province is a center of agriculture and cultivation of maize since more than two millennia, also the endless maize fields of Shanxi province have to be remembered. As far as I know the Chinese had no maize god, but a maize god is worshipped in America, where people pray to him every year, so that he may continue to provide their necessary food. For me, worship of the maize god in America seems to indicate that the improvement of the original wild ancestor variety and the "creation" of true maize did not take place on this continent. I think maize will have arrived in the Americas already during Shang times at the latest, with Chinese colonists. It is to be hoped that future researches will soon help to clear up the matter.

Be it remarked in passing that the rather voluminous Appendix (pp.463-603) makes also most interesting reading, and contains additional evidence and other thought-provoking material, and a very fine bibliography of 38 pages.

2) Seafaring, the earliest means to convey cargo and greater numbers of people over great distances

IN THE COURSE of his researches on the discovery of the world around 1421 by the Chinese, Gavin Menzies has possibly overlooked the fact of mankind – and therefore the peoples of East Asia, too – have begun much earlier to conquer the seas and master seafaring. Thor Heyerdahl speaks from experience when he states that seafaring has been the earliest means of mankind to

transport cargo or great numbers of people over great distances. I would like to cite here his classical statement: "Man hoisted sail before he saddled a horse. He ... navigated the open seas before he travelled on wheels along a road" (p.3 of his fine book "Early Man and the Ocean", 1979).

IN MY LITTLE work "Das Weltbild des 21. Jahrhunderts – Entdeckt schon im Paläolithikum?" (4), in my world map I have indicated the oceanic routes which the early cultures will probably have used. This map may be amended at any time in view of additional discoveries. Not so long ago e.g. I read about the earliest settlements in southern India, which were said to have been founded by people who had come from East Africa over the sea. In the Madras region on the southeastern coast many implements, especially axes, of this people have been found.

I am reminded of Prof. Hermann Baumann's amazement in Munich about the unusual (for "black" Africans) yellowish complexion especially of the Bushmen women, and also about the fact that the Bushmen of the extremely arid Kalahari desert had depicted boats in their rock art. It may be that the Bushmen had come over the sea from somewhere in southeastern Asia to Africa, during some prehistoric period. As yet their original motherland is unknown. Beside their yellowish complexion, their graceful hands and feet may stimulate reflections along this line.

Even in cold and desolate regions like that around Hammerfest, the northernmost harbour of Europe near the North Cape (above 70° North), there were skilled mariners in prehistoric times. Far to the north of the Arctic Circle they have left, about 4500 BC, on an almost vertical rock face the representation of a seaworthy boat. This was the same time when the peoples of Inner Asia

used, instead of ships, their enormous wealth of uncounted herds of horses.

A) The Shang era

Many centuries later during the reign of the Shang dynasty (traditionally dated circa 1766-1111 BC), China became especially important in diffusionist respect. The Shang were rich, they owned enormous wealth of horses and mineral resources in Inner Asia as well as eastern China, e.g. in Shandong, and were able to extend their trade connections over the Pacific as far as the coasts of America. More about this may be found in my brochure "Innerasien und Rapa Nui, Die Osterinsel" (5), with the subtitle (translated): "An Underestimated Phenomenon with Respect to Eurasian-Pacific Cultural Connexions".

THE SEA CAPTAINS of the Shang obviously steered courses along routes, which most probably were already known to the early cultures 12.000 years ago. Evidence for this can be seen e.g. in the result of examinations by Spanish scientists of 33 skulls found on the Baja California peninsula of Mexico. They found great similarities with skulls of early man in Australia and Southeast Asia (6).

When the immensely rich Shang rulers were overthrown by the king of a vassal state, the belligerent Wu-wang, because of their trade connexions they knew the sailing routes over the Pacific. Obviously some groups of the Shang nobility will have preferred an opportune flight by sea to distant coasts, to forced resettlement by the Zhou under humiliating circumstances. With their ocean-going ships they landed at several places of Central and South America. For a long time it was thought that these people, who came from the ocean, were of unknown origin. Recently, however, in the course of excavations at La Venta, objects have come to light which have to be taken as evidence for an ancient Chinese presence in Mexico.

The Shang are the ancestors of the archaeological Olmecs. Paul Shao in his article "China and Pacific Basin Art and Architectural Styles". P.39f describes the first working of jade in Central America. He says: "Only two cultures in the world at the time, the Chinese and the Olmec, were capable of producing jade artwork of such esthetic and technical sophistication" (7). In the same journal Pre-Columbiana H. Mike Xu gives a summary on "La Venta Offering No.4: A Revelation of Olmec Writing?". The accompanying illustrations show the archaeological situation and the engraved characters (8).

Two additional "mosaic stones" may be of help to reassemble our transpacific "puzzle". During the nineteen-twenties a well-known physicist, Prof. Dr. Damian Kreichgauer, got important results from his researches. His astronomical deciphering or decoding work makes it rather probable that the Chinese had a calendar script comparable with the Mexican pictographic writing system of the same time, circa 1000 BC, when the Shang made their influence felt in Mexico. In South America it is a golden crown (height 8 cm, diameter 20,07 cm), found in the ruins of Chavín de Huantar in Peru. On this crown I discovered a Chinese-style Taotie with its paws. This is sensational, because this Taotie in its compact form is only known from Shang times. Taoties from later times do no longer show this form. The temple complex of Chavín de Huantar is supposed to have been built circa 1000 BC. This is the time when the Shang fugitives, fleeing before the Zhou over the Pacific to the east, arrived in the Americas.

B) The Zhou (Chou) era

THE ZHOU or (until recently) Chou rulers – the dynasty is conventionally dated to circa 1111- 481BC – have at first to occupy themselves with stabilizing the empire. A certain general prosperity has as a consequence a considerable increase of the

population. New land has to be created. The reclamation of the great marsh lands in the plain of the Huang-He delta begins. Dykes have to protect the newly reclaimed land from monsoon rains and prevent flooding. For this agricultural technique Dr. Josef Thiel (9) has coined the term "Deichfelder" ("dyke-fields"). These dyke-fields are a great achievement of the Chinese farmers.

IT MAY BE that the internal activities in China itself had priority for the Zhou, and that therefore overseas expeditions played no role. However, Baldeo Sahai in his book "Indian Shipping – A Historical Survey" (New Delhi, 1996) says on p.72 that "The Chinese junks had been passing through the south seas on way to India and further west to the eastern coast of Africa since the seventh century BC", and repeats this statement on p.89 in nearly identical form that "the Chinese were seen around the east coast of Africa as early as the seventh century BC".

China has always had, from very early times, larger or smaller merchants fleets at her disposal, on her coasts. We know that the Yüeh, then living on the coast of Fujian province, already before 1000 BC sailed over the South China Sea to the Philippines. Their captains knew from experience the sea there, and the coastal waters and natural conditions. We can be sure that they will have had sailing directions, which have been lost in the course of time.

C) The Qin (Ch'in) era

It seems that under the Qin overseas voyages were quite normal. Shi Huang Di (221-206 BC) ordered expeditions to certain islands in the eastern sea, to look there for some herb of immortality (cf. John Blofeld: "Der Taoismus", 1986, pp.59-61). These ships must have been of considerable proportions. They were able to carry 600 passengers, beside the crew. The ability to build such ships has as a prerequisite a long tradition. It seems remarkable that those rulers, who

hailed from continental Asia, did not only regard continental mainland China as their dominion, but also the sea. The vastness of their country is transferred to the adjoining sea in the east. Menzies should have taken this into consideration. It was part of the reform-oriented policy of Shi Huang Di, to create an economic community in East Asia, and to utilize the resources of China in Inner Asia as well as East Asia generally, but also those accessible via the sea in the east. At the same time he gives orders to explore the Far West and reconnoitre the commercial possibilities there.

D) Han to Song era

From the time of the Han dynasty (200 BC – 220 AD) we hear again of trade voyages to America and back. Besides the seas in the south and west of China were integrated into China's overseas trade network. We hear of the important harbour Siraf on the coast of Iran respectively the Persian Gulf that it has been – since the Sassanid era about the 4th century AD, which means during the time of the Six Kingdoms, and especially during the 9th/10th century AD under the Abbasid califate – a transshipment harbour for goods from China, India and Africa. In the year 977 AD it is, however, destroyed by an earthquake, and many merchants emigrate to the Oman and other harbour towns of the Persian Gulf (10). But the trade with East Asia was not interrupted. If Chinese ships are not explicitly mentioned in the literature, we must not forget that commonplace and obvious things are seldom mentioned at all.

APART FROM his descriptions of the 1421 AD overseas expeditions, Menzies does state on pp.365-367 that during the Tang era (618-907 AD) maritime expeditions to East Africa did occur on a regular basis. Indeed during the 8th century AD, after a chequered history, the Tang with their capital Ch'ang-an were able to lead China to an unbelievable bloom. It became more powerful and estimable than ever before.

About 200 years ago, great quantities of Chinese ceramic objects from Song times (960-1279 AD) were discovered in the ruins of the former Arabic trading town Shanga, on the island of Pate, near the Kenyan coast. Later the Portuguese in what today is Mozambique met kings and queens from Zanzibar and Pemba clothed in the finest Chinese silk fabrics. They lived in stone houses and used exquisite Chinese porcelain. A flourishing silk manufacture produced magnificent silkware, which were traded via profitable commercial connections to Moorish towns. The Portuguese, too, participated in this trade later on.

In Yang-chou (Yangzhou), where the Great Canal joins the Yang-tse, during the time of the Sui (589-618 AD) a great shipbuilding industry was established. It is no great miracle that during the Sung era overseas navigation plays an even greater role. The compass has become indispensable meanwhile. According to Menzies, Chinese ships during this time, and perhaps even earlier, have reached Australia. These ships carried 500-600 people and were able to carry, in addition, several dozen tons cargo (11).

IN 1974, in the gulf of Quanzhou opposite Taiwan, a seaworthy junk from the Song era was raised from the bottom of the sea. Today it is on exhibition in the shipping museum of Quanzhou as a monument to the famous past of this overseas harbour and its merchants. It is shown with its historical cargo of sacks of spices, and precious wood.

From 600 to 1300 AD, i.e. from Tang to Yuan times, on a great rock near Quanzhou harbour, prayers have been carved into the surface for those leaving for an overseas destination.

3) Genghis Khan (1162-1227 AD)

Genghis Khan, born 1162 AD as Temujin, is the greatest conqueror of known world

history. In 1202 AD he defeated Ong Khan, ruler of the Kerait, also the Ojuraz, Kungraz, and the Naiman. After the subjection of Mongolia, in 1206 AD at the Khuriltai, the great Mongolian assembly, he is proclaimed Genghis Khan, 44 years of age. He subjugates Idikut, ruler of the Uighurs, in 1209, and in 1211 Arslan Khan, ruler of the Karluks. About 1211 he invades northern China, and in 1215 wins Peking.

ALL HIS CAMPAIGNS were excellently planned and ruthlessly executed. Genghis Khan left nothing to chance. The empire which he created with the help of his horsemen warriors within 15 years, under his son Ögödei (ruler 1229-1241 AD) and later under Khubilai Khan (reign 1260-1294) becomes the greatest empire in the history of mankind, made up not only of geographically contiguous regions. Karakorum, capital of the empire since 1220, about 1250 reaches the zenith with respect to sumptuousness, but is destroyed by the Chinese in 1388.

A) Streams of fugitives

Genghis Khan's campaigns in Inner Asia are triggering unheard-of streams of fugitives. Separate groups during these decades try to flee from the Tarim oases towards the east, and the Amur river. On ancient nomad and trader routes they reach a well-known place on the coast of the Pacific, from where already since centuries, or perhaps millennia, Chinese ships had set sail along the Aleutian Islands to Alaska.

Professor Dr. Cyclone Covey in his paper "Ancient Chinese Sojourns in the 'Beautiful Land'" (12) informs us about a Chinese expedition, which already emperor Yü the Great (2205-2198 BC) had despatched to reconnoitre the North American continent. His ships took the Aleutian route in both directions, and the expedition brought back to China much new knowledge about conditions in the distant land. Maurice Chatelain in his

impressive article "Nos Ancêtres Chinois" (13) has published tentative maps from British Columbia and Lake Winnipeg to the Rio Grande and the Sierra Madre Oriental with routes of four Chinese exploratory expeditions during the time of emperor Yü, successor of the Shun dynasty. The Chinese in North America discovered several locations with valuable mineral wealth. Henriette Mertz (1896-1985) in her book published 1953: "Pale Ink: Two Ancient Records of Chinese Explorations in America" (14), speaks of this most interesting historical facts. The Great Land in the east, on the other side of the Pacific, has obviously been known to the Chinese and other nations of Asia.

IN THE COURSE of history this Great Land, the American continent, has, it seems, repeatedly become a haven for fugitives from Asia, a land, where it was possible to begin a new life. Also those population groups, which had to flee their homelands in Inner Asia and China before the mass-muderous, often outright genocidal horsemen warriors of Genghis Khan, found a refuge in America. They used, for their passage in the first half of the 13th century, ships that were superior by centuries to the ships Europe had at that time.

The Dene ancestors came to the interior of Canada, where their descendants still alive. Others migrated far to the south as far as Mexico. They had left Inner Asia already 1218 and 1233 and became the Kutshin, Navaho, and Apaches. Seventeen small Dene groups settled along the Pacific coast of southern British Columbia, Oregon, and northern California.

Certain leaders of these refugees were Altai-Naiman and came from the Xi-Xia (Hsi-Hsia) kingdom, which comprised the Ordos region of the Huang-He or Yellow River and the oases of Kansu. Genghis Khan combated against this Xi-Xia kingdom all his life. Only his successor was able to incorporate Xi-Xia

into the Mogul realm, when its last king had died in 1227.

The Na-Dene have come from the Altai and the northern Gobi. They touched the American shore on the southern coast of Alaska, where they found a new home.

All these refugees came from a region which was, with respect to general culture and agriculture, by far superior to contemporary Europe. Block-printing is known there circa 770 AD, and printing with movable characters since 1045 AD, to take only these examples. As late as shortly before 1949, camel caravans brought delicious fruit from Turfan and the Tarim oases to Peking.

Genghis Kahn's campaigns against Jin (Chin), beginning 1211, at first did not look very successful. But when the Chin emperor transferred his capital to K'ai-feng in 1214, the Mongols conquer Peking. Again, fugitives reach the Pacific and are able to get ships for the passage to the "Great Land". Their descendants have become part of the "native American Indian" population on the Pacific coasts of North America, as far to the south as California.

A CATHOLIC missionary, Father Emil Petitot at the mission of Fort Good Hope on the lower McKenzie river, during the period 1860-1875 had been able to collect informations on the ancestors of the Dene. He came to the conclusions described above. His research results have become the basis of Dr. Ethel G. Stewart's remarkable book: "The Dene and Na-Dene Indian Migration 1233 AD – Escape from Genghis Khan to America" (15). In 2001 she published an article in the "Midwestern Epigraphic Journal" (Vol.15, pp.123f.), which described the moving history of the ancestors of the Sittichinli, the Sit-Y-chin Li, who had to flee in 1218 AD from Qara-Khodja in the Tarim region, via the Pacific, and in the end reached the Peel River in northwestern Canada.

Linguistic investigations, which have also been mentioned by Prof. Dr. Wolfram Eberhard in his "History of China" (16), can be helpful to be able to discern the ethnic interconnections from today's Turkey via Inner Asia to North America, which have been formed in the course of history. These interconnections over space and time may, indeed, be regarded as truly marvellous.

IN THE SAME manner in which Genghis Khan's horsemen warriors left behind them a trail of death and devastation in Inner and East Asia, the Mongol armies ravaged western Asia as far as eastern Europe. One example is the first campaign of Genghis Khan against Russia in 1224 AD. Even after his death the same, infamous story of rapacious pillage and barbarous atrocities continues. In 1237/1238 the Mongols destroy Moscow (founded about a century earlier as a fortified settlement) and devastate all far and wide. In 1242 the troops of Batu Khan (d.1255) take Kiev, then Russia's capital, by storm. Only in 1380 Grand Duke Demetri dares, from his now capital Moscow, to stop payments of tribute to the Mongols. On September 8th, 1380, in a furious battle he defeats the Emir Mamai and succeeds in terminating the Mongol yoke. In 1480 Ahmet Khan tries once more to reduce Russia to submission and payment of tributes, but without success. With this event Ivan III. terminates once for all 240 years of Mongol hegemony over Russia.

We should, however, not allow our minds to forget – because of understandable dejectedness over Mongol barbarous campaigns and atrocities – that the Mongols also had worldwide trade connections by land, especially over the Silk Road, and oversea by ocean-going ships.

B) Ancient Chinese seals in Ireland

Menzies (p.460) seems convinced that admiral Zheng He's fleets did not reach Europe. However, there have been

discovered objects in Ireland, which can be interpreted as evidence for contacts with East Asia, possibly already earlier than the 13th century. Mongolian envoys have visited Bordeaux, today the main commercial port of southwestern France, and Northampton on the Nene in England (Cf. Fischer Weltgeschichte, Vol.16/p.123). The merchant ships landed at Bordeaux harbour. This was, we have to remember, English territory from 1154 to 1451. Bordeaux wines were well-known already then. From Bordeaux, the Mongolian merchants went to Northampton in England itself. Perhaps they visited there the excellent shoemaker and saddler workshops. Most probably they bought necessary provisions for the continuation of their voyage, and possibly their ships were in need of repair work and maintenance. Lighter barges were available for loading and unloading a ship which had to anchor on the open sea.

It is interesting to know that Ireland has been well-known among the seafaring nations already in early BC times. According to Irish tradition, there were many immigrations waves, often from distant countries.

THE IRISH language has obvious "Oriental" – or better: Semitic – affinities. Perhaps there has been a Phoenician or proto-Pheonician influence. Prof. Theo Vennemann of Munich, in his work "Europa Vasconia – Europa Semitica" (Berlin/New York 2003) states: "Insular Celtic, e.g. today's Irish, has ... more similarity structurally with the ancient Semitic languages and also with classical Arabic, than any other Indo-Germanic language".

Doubtless there have been trade interconnections between East Asia and the Near East, via ancient trade routes of Inner Asia, the Silk Road, and the southern ocean and seas. It seems rather probable that there, in the East, some information was available about trade possibilities with the distant British Isles, including Ireland. We must not



Some inscriptions on Chinese seals found in Ireland.

forget the Vikings: Irish towns like Dublin, Waterford, Cork, and Limerick were founded by them. Anglo-Normans colonized Ireland during the 12th century. We know that both nations had lively trade connections with Oriental, Near Eastern countries.

The presence of Chinese traders in ancient Ireland can be inferred from finds of seals. Every trader had such a seal with him, with which he was able to put his signature on a contract or agreement. It is a sensible assumption that those seals belonged to men which had died in Ireland. The first seals in Ireland were discovered about the middle of the 19th century. About 1852 already more than 60 seals had been found. The localities where they were discovered tell a bit about the things in which the Chinese or Mongolian traders were interested in Ireland. Six seals were found in Cork county. Cork is the important transshipment port on the south coast. To this day export goods are cattle, horses, poultry, eggs, and butter. Menzies states that the Chinese ships used for the Ming overseas expeditions had horses on board, and of course they needed provisions.

FOUR SEALS were found near Waterford, on the southeastern coast, also one of the more important Irish commercial ports. Three seals were found in Borrisokane in Tipperary county. The traders must have come from Limerick on the river Shannon, a harbour on the West coast of Ireland, or from Cork. The fertile "Golden Valley" of Limerick is easily accessible via the somewhat mountainous countryside. Even today it is the center of Irish cattle-breeding and dairy farming. Three seals have been found in the county Down, south of Belfast, in northeastern Ireland. Northern Ireland is today well-known because of its famous Irish whiskeys.

One seal was discovered near Dublin. The above and more of these Chinese seals can be inspected at the National Museum of Ireland in Dublin. I became aware of these Chinese seals of Ireland when Dr. Horst Friedrich

kindly sent copy of a little article he had published on them in the journal "Synesis" (No.18, 1996, pp.25-26). Mrs. Audry Whitty of the National Museum of Ireland has done me the favour to send, besides other material, partial copy of a long since out of print publication by Edmund Getty: "Notices of Chinese Seals Found in Ireland" (17).

FOR ME THESE finds of Chinese seals in divers regions of Ireland are evidence of commercial contacts with East Asia, to wit by Chinese and/or Mongolian traders visiting Ireland.

In May 2004 China's prime minister Wen Jiabao, on his first visit to Europe with a great delegation, visited, besides Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Great Britain, also Ireland. This seems remarkable in view of the ancient trade connections between Chinese/Mongolians and Ireland.

4) Khubilai Khan (1260-1294 AD)

In the Yüan era (1271-1368 AD) under Khubilai Khan, not only the transcontinental caravan trade, but also overseas shipping increase once more. An attack by sea on Japan, by a Chinese-Korean fleet in 1274 and 1281, becomes, however, a failure. In 1281 an invasion army of about 150.000 men is landed on northern Kyushu, but the fleet of the invaders is destroyed by a typhoon. An attack by sea on Java becomes likewise a failure.

Here we have to mention Marco Polo (1254-1324), the famous Venetian merchant. In July 1275 the Polos have probably reached Shang-tu, the "upper capital" and summer residence of the Grand Khan Khubilai (1215-1294). This summer residence was situated in the Dolon-Noor region of today's Inner Mongolia. Ta-tu, the great capital, today's Peking, was the winter residence.

Marco Polo was soon held in high esteem by the Grand Khan and had a position of trust

with him. In 1277 he visits, as special envoy of the emperor, the provinces (Szechuan) Sichuan and Yunnan. In 1284 he sails, in Chinese ships, to Ceylon and in 1285 to Indochina, where he has to inspect Cambodia and Vietnam, which had been conquered by the Mongols. These are only some of his many travels which he had to realize on orders of Khubilai Khan (18). He and his retinue preferred Chinese ships because of their well-known security standards.

The great Chinese merchant ships of that time have four masts with twelve sails. They have wooden bulkheads made from thick planks. Special caulking made them absolutely waterproof. Real danger for a ship to sink, in the case of some local leak, was therefore virtually nonexistent. On the merchant ships, sixty cabins for the merchant passengers alone were available. A certain number of smaller escort boats had to function as tugboats in the case of a calm, or as landing barges. With these smaller ships victualling from places on the coast was also effected. This was usual practice not only with Chinese and Mongolian ships. Transfer opportunities did exist in regulated shipping. The enormous fleet of Khubilai Khan, in this time, will doubtless have dominated the seas of China, and to a lesser degree, because India was also a great seafaring factor, also the Indian Ocean. With respect to Indian seafaring, Sahai (op.cit., p.212) states that "The earliest proof of shipping and shipbuilding in India can be traced to the third millennium BC".

IN 1292 THE Polos get fourteen ships from the overseas fleet of Khubilai Khan for their return voyage home. Four or five of these ships had a crew of 250-260 men each. The Polos travel, as ordered by Khubilai Khan, with a military escort of 2000 men, and provisions for two years. From Zaytun, today Quanzhou, on the southeastern coast of China, they set sail through the Taiwan Strait to the South China Sea. Zaytun-Quanzhou at this time was immensely rich, and twice as

large as Bologna was then. On the further sea voyage the small fleet touched at Chabin in Champa (Vietnam), Singapore, Malaya, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), the Malabar coast of India, and Hormuz on the Persian Gulf.

The admirals of the Ming emperors will most probably have taken the same route with their fleets.

THE POLOS GET the occasion to return to their homeland, distant Italy and famous Venice, when they are asked by Khubilai Khan to accompany princess Kökötshin with her retinue by ship to Bagdad. There her marriage to Hulagu, a brother of Khubilai, is to take place. In addition, Marco Polo is authorized on this voyage to negotiate with the Pope and with the kings of France and Spain, as special ambassador of Khubilai Khan. A campaign is planned against the Muslims in Egypt, and Jerusalem was thought to become, towards the end of the Crusades, yet the sacred city of Christendom. Indeed a project which shows, with which kind of East Asian superpower the West had come into contact toward the end of the 13th century (19).

I think my brief overview in regard to millennia of Chinese seafaring will let my readers gain a more realistic understanding of China's pre-Ming achievements in this respect, of the pertinent heritage which the Ming emperors had at their disposal. The oceans between East Asia, southern Asia, Africa and Europe, and between East Asia and the Americas, have been known to the Chinese long before 1421. Surely 1421 was not the first time "China discovered the world".

5) Chinese World Maps

Already before the Ming era (1368-1644) the Chinese have designed world maps. The so far most important known world map of 1402 is hand-painted. It shows how the Mongol emperors in Peking saw the world, to wit some time before the map was painted.

This map is the Chinese-Korean Hun-i
chiang-li li-tai kuo-tu chih t'u

混一疆理曆代國都之圖

Today it is kept by the Ryukoku University in Kyoto. To produce it, 14th and probably also 13th century source material was used. Moreover Arabic-Ptolemaic knowledge about the western Old World, together with Chinese-Korean knowledge about Asia, has been taken into account, as Walter Fuchs thinks.

In 1945 he discovered such a Chinese world map in the Palace Museum in Peking. It is the Ta Ming hun-i-t'u

大明混一圖

the "World Map of the Great Ming Dynasty". It is painted with colours on silk. Its height is about 380 cm, with about 480 cm breadth. With respect to its date respectively age, Fuchs was unable to arrive at a definite conclusion. On this Chinese map, Europe was squeezed into the farthest western edge or border region, and together with Africa and western Asia it is represented only on a much reduced scale. Walter Fuchs sees here at work "the typical Confucian disregard for those parts of the world not under Chinese cultural influence" (20).

ON MY OWN equal area projection World Map of 1973 (Huppertz projection), which has China, not Europe plus Africa as usual, in the center, Europe – although correctly computed – is also squeezed into the westernmost corner, so to speak. This is a simple fact which, however, Europeans of the 20th and 21st century do not like to take into consideration. To this day, Europeans prefer

world maps with Europe in the central position: to the West, behind the Atlantic and the Americas, the eastern part of a so to speak twofold Pacific, and to the East, behind the great continent of Asia (with most populous China almost on the edge) the western Pacific. This kind of Eurocentric projection is of no help in understanding that, strictly speaking, Europe is only a western appendage of Asia, which in my projection is quite obvious on first sight.

THE DISCOVERY of two additional Chinese world maps of Korean origin facilitates the study and more exact dating of all other extant earlier world maps. It seems remarkable that Eurasia, on the Tenri map Ta Ming-kuo t'u of the library of Tenri University at Nara, is shown as a continent surrounded by oceans, in conformity with the Chinese world view. The map (height 135,5 cm, breadth 174 cm) is a revised and amended map of 1402. It seems that it was produced sometime about the middle of the 16th century.

The importance of these world maps, which originally have been produced circa 1300 AD, cannot be overestimated. By showing the continents of Eurasia and Africa, and because of the many geographical designations, they are far superior to the contemporaneous, inadequate European world maps. The geographical "horizon" of the Mongol rulers of China at that time was much wider, and showed more realistic details, than that of the Western world.

An older map Yü-ti t'u from 1100 or 1137, chiselled in stone, depicts amazingly exact the coasts and large rivers of China (21).

The original is now in the Pei-lin museum in Xian (Sian). The map astoundingly has more or less the appearance of a modern map, and when seeing it one suspects that the practice of cartography has been rather advanced in China, not only since Song times (960-1279 AD). The Chinese must have had at their



Weltkarte, Happersz-Projektion.
Copyright © 1973 by Dr. J. Happersz, Sohn, Augustin

disposal maps as well as charts, i.e. maps designed to aid navigation by sea, much earlier than that.

It seems that normally those maps painted on silk do no longer exist today. There do exist, however, descriptions of them. From such descriptions Albert Herrmann was able to reconstruct maps from Shang times.

ONE SUCH MAP shows the region between 110° and 120° eastern longitude and between 30° and 40° northern latitude, drawn to a scale of 1:10,000,000. According to the inscription the map shows the land to the east as far as the Eastern Sea, and to the west as far as to the west of Hei-shui. Many rivers are shown with their names and give evidence of the competence Chinese cartographers had already during the Shang era. The Hsia, Shang, and Zhou had cartographic bureaux, where officials were busy with updating existing maps in accordance with the latest information. Chavannes calls Phei Hsiu (225-271 AD) the father of Chinese cartography of the post-Han era. His "Atlas of the Realm and the Frontier Regions" comprised 18 sheets. All maps had a grid of parallels of latitude and meridians, and were orientated towards the North. Of this atlas today only a copy of 1701, of a map showing the geographic scope of the atlas, exists. This copy, however, is said to be of rather doubtful quality.

The greatest cartographer of the Tang era was Chia T'au (730-805 AD). For more information the interested reader is referred to Joseph Needham's great work: "Science and Civilization in China" (22).

From all of the above it will have become clear that, centuries later, the cartographers of the Yüan (1271-1368 AD) and Ming (1368-1644 AD) era had a sound working basis.

6) The beginnings of the era of the Ming rulers

Civil wars during the thirteen-fifties rang in the decline of Mongol rule in China. Peasant uprisings, influenced by secret societies like the messianic Buddhist White Lotus, played a decisive role in these. In 1356 one of their leaders, Chu Yüan-chang (1328-1398), of humble tenant origins from central China, with his army was able to conquer Nanking. In 1368 he conquered Peking. The Mongol emperor Toghan Temur was able to flee. In that same year Chu Yüan-chang becomes emperor of China, in Nanking, his capital. The dynasty is given the name Ming (bright, clear). The Ming era lasts from 1368-1644 AD. Chu Yüan-chang's reign title, by which he is often referred to, was Hung-wu (comprehensive warrior-nature).

Almost psychopathically the first Ming emperor persecuted the Mongolians, irrespective of rank, position, or social standing. When he marries a Mongol princess, he does not know that she is already pregnant with Zhu Di. Chu Yüan-chang suspects that this son is also Mongolian and therefore does not acknowledge him as a potential successor.

AT FIRST Zhu Di lives in the gorgeous palaces of the Mongols in Peking, but persecuted by the second Ming emperor he has to go underground and live under an assumed identity, under disguise. But in the end he is able to organize his own military force and, having defeated his adversaries, becomes the third Ming emperor. With farsightedness and his so to speak claim to global sway he has become the respectable, dignified personification of the Mongolian heritage. As Ch'eng-tzu, Yung-lo, Zhu Di he reigns 1402-1424 AD. He inherits the maritime trade of the Yüan, and under his reign it expands in an amazing manner. Menzies emphasizes, however, that already

200 years earlier the fleets of Khubilai Khan had vastly surpassed the enormous fleet of admiral Zheng He (p.446). In 1405 AD begins the first of seven overseas expeditions by Zheng He, about which we have been informed by Ma Huan (23).

7) The ban on overseas expeditions

AS YET THE true cause for the sudden interdiction on overseas expeditions, after emperor Zhu Di's death, is unknown. It is said that the Confucianists have demanded a reorientation on China, the Middle Kingdom. Financial difficulties, because of enormous expenditures for these expeditions, have also been alleged. However, the trade in spices alone, the profits of which were mentioned by Marco Polo with amazement, brought with it already a sound financial basis for the empire.

I believe therefore that the real reason for the ban on overseas trade has to be looked at in quite another direction: in a quasi-antithetical, racial or mental antagonism between Mongolians and Chinese.

Domination of the settled populace, influenced by Confucianist ethnics, in the eastern parts of the empire, i.e. China proper, by the horsemen warrior nations of Inner Asia, was so powerful that the officials in Peking had to wait for an opportune occasion, to be able again to manage things as they had been used to, before the Mongol invasions.

This became possible after Zhu Di's death, in spite of the intention of his great experiment to unite the whole world by means of trade and foreign affairs policy in Confucian harmony.

Since Genghis Khan, however, who created a military aristocracy, and who had also been the commander in chief of the allies and

vassals, in this respect nothing had changed even under the excellent ruler Khubilai Khan (1260-1294 AD), in spite of his efforts to bring about a positive and future-oriented interrelationship with the Chinese. The Mongol heritage of emperor Zhu Di, who is regarded as the posthumous son of a Mongolian prince, has made it impossible for him to neutralize the ethnic antagonisms in his realm, in spite of his goodwill vis-à-vis the Chinese people and its culture. The still existing military aristocracy was the exact opposite of the hierarchy of Confucianist Chinese officials.

Because of these circumstances the Chinese government officials were only able after Zhu Di's death, to justify and realize a policy of reanimation of the heritage of pre-Mongol China. An immediate consequence of this new policy was the ban on overseas expeditions of Mongolian admiral Zheng He. We are reminded here of what the "Fischer Weltgeschichte" (Vol.16, p.120) has to say about the contrarities between the Mongolian and Chinese peoples: "Mongol 'feudalism' was absolutely incompatible with the bureaucratic tradition of China. This incompatibility was reinforced by the dissimilarities with respect to population numbers and culture". This was still a problem under the Ming.

WITH THEIR radical ban on overseas activities by Chinese subjects, China unintentionally created the prerequisite circumstances which made possible the European domination of the world, and Western colonialism. Had China still been in possession of a powerful navy and her former overseas fleets, the Western powers would not have had any chance in the Pacific and Indian Oceans.

When the imperial government of the Ming lifted the ban on overseas activities in 1567, it had become too late for China to intervene

in world politics. The next chance for China to successfully influence world affairs came only after World War II, after a rather confused period of the establishment of the republic in 1911/1912, the Chinese-Japanese war plus civil wars, and reunification of the country with Communist rule under Mao Tse-Tung.

Concluding remarks

I THINK I will have shown with this article, how excellent the geographical knowledge of the Chinese, on the Asian mainland as well as on the oceans, has been already in pre-Ming times. China, with a multiethnic population and under favourable geographic and climatic conditions, has again and again shown that it can achieve great things. One source of China's energy has doubtless to be seen in the metal attitude of the peoples originating from Inner Asia. Used to the wideness of their land, they do not see limitations or restrictions on the adjoining seas and oceans to the east and south of their homeland.

What the Chinese can achieve is demonstrated, as a recent example, by the nine-million city Shenzhen near the delta of

the Pearl River (Chu Chiang) and the South China Sea. This "Deng-city", as it is also called, was born within 25 years from an unimportant fishermen's village. About 1950 departing Europeans still had to leave the train at the terminus Shenzhen and walk on foot to pass the Chinese frontier and get the train to Hong Kong. Now a force of millions of hard-working young Chinese – many of them under 30 – constitute a threatening rival for Hong-Kong. At this moment Shenzhen even has the fourth largest harbour of the world.

The rise of Shenzhen, thanks to the activity and efficiency of young Chinese, and to the vitality of the populace, can help us to understand the vitality of China and its people, in times past as well as today, and probably also in the future. We should therefore try to harmonize the self-assuredness of the Europeans with the aspirations of the peoples of East Asia, for the welfare and prosperity of the world. Industriousness, perseverance, and persistence of its people may probably lead to China becoming, within a few decades, the most potent economic power of the world.

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Prof. Dr. Herbert Franke has been kind enough to alert me to this important work by Walter Fuchs.

Zusammenfassung

Meine Untersuchungen über die Seefahrt der Chinesen v o r 1421 brachten folgende Ergebnisse:

- 1) **Schon seit Kaiser Yü, dem Begründer der Xia (Hsia) Dynastie (2205-1766 BC), fanden wiederholt Überseeexpeditionen von Ostasien nach Nordamerika (Mexico inbegriffen) und zurück, meist entlang der Aleutenroute, statt.**
- 2) **Es wird begründet, warum die Maisnutzung nicht der Bevölkerung Amerikas zu verdanken ist. Sie hat ihre Heimat sehr wahrscheinlich in Zentralasien.**
- 3) **Es wird argumentiert, daß die in verschiedenen Gegenden Irlands aufgefundenen chinesischen Siegel sehr wahrscheinlich von chinesischen Überseekauffleuten dorthin gebracht wurden.**
- 4) **Die eigentlichen Ursachen des plötzlichen Verbotes von Überseeexpeditionen 1424 konnte erklärt werden.**