

# The Ming Voyages

"China, the West, and World History in Joseph Needham's *Science and Civilisation in China*"

by Robert Finlay, in *Journal of World History* (Fall 2000), Univ. of Hawaii Press,  
2840 Kolowalu St., Honolulu, Hawaii 96822.

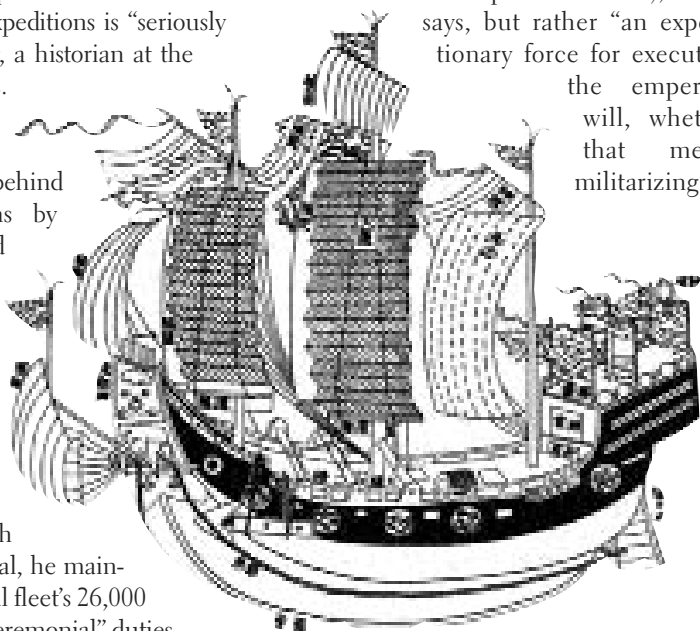
Thanks to British scholar Joseph Needham's monumental *Science and Civilisation in China* (1954–98), westerners have a whole new appreciation of China's richly inventive past. Especially compelling was his account of 15th-century Chinese expeditions to Southeast Asia and, through the Indian Ocean, to India, Arabia, and Africa. Renowned now as voyages of discovery, they show up in many notable treatments of world history. Needham drew a sharp contrast between those peaceful Ming dynasty expeditions (1405–33) of Zheng He, whom he portrays as China's answer to Vasco da Gama, and the early-16th-century Portuguese voyages of conquest. But Needham's portrait of the Ming expeditions is "seriously skewed," argues Finlay, a historian at the University of Arkansas.

Though Needham (1900–95) acknowledged that the motives behind the seven expeditions by Zheng He's 300-odd junks were mixed, he claimed that the chief purpose, growing stronger with each expedition, was "proto-scientific"—the scholarly gathering of rare materials and knowledge. Trade, though extensive, was incidental, he maintained, and the peaceful fleet's 26,000 troops had "primarily ceremonial" duties since they were part of "a navy paying friendly visits to foreign ports." Far more important than merchants and military men, according to Needham, were the fleet's astronomers, geomancers, physicians, and naturalists.

The reality was quite different, Finlay argues. The eunuch admiral Zheng He "did not, as Needham asserts, inspire the Ming voyages, and there is no significant sense in which he can be regarded as an explorer. He commanded the maritime expeditions as a military agent of the

Yongle emperor, a ruler who had no interest in voyages of discovery. . . . Aggressive and ruthless, Yongle was one of the most militaristic rulers in Chinese history." He had come to power in a bloody civil war, personally commanded campaigns against the Mongols, and, starting in 1406—the year after Zheng He's fleet first sailed to Southeast Asia—sent an army of more than 200,000 men to invade Vietnam. "Yet the emperor does not figure in Needham's analysis," Finlay observes.

The 26,000 troops on the Chinese junks were not "a ceremonial cortege for diplomatic occasions" (being much too numerous and expensive for that), Finlay says, but rather "an expeditionary force for executing the emperor's will, whether that meant militarizing the



*The ocean-going fuchuan provided a model for the large junks in Zheng He's fleet.*

tribute system, suppressing piracy in Southeast Asia, bringing overseas Chinese ports under control, or even making Siam and Java vassal states of the empire." And the many "experienced, heavily armed" troops, not the "'calm and pacific'" nature of the Chinese, were the reason that the voyages were generally tranquil. Nor was trade mere-

ly incidental, “for Yongle evidently intended to harness the force (and profits) of seaborne commerce to serve the purposes of imperial hegemony in Southeast Asia.”

Needham, a former biochemist who subscribed to an idiosyncratic blend of Marxism and Christianity, was determined, says Finlay, “to present the Ming expeditions as embodying the virtues of China in contrast to the vices of the West.” *Science and Civilisation in China* is an

encyclopedic survey of Chinese accomplishments in science and technology. But, “as with the voyages of Zheng He,” Finlay says, Needham’s account of those accomplishments “ignores social, political, and economic contexts.” Needham’s claims about the impact of Chinese inventions on Europe are also suspect, Finlay thinks. Yet, despite its flaws, he says, the late scholar’s masterwork “remains an extraordinary achievement.”

## *Mexico’s ‘Compassionate Conservatism’*

“Vicente Fox and the Rise of the PAN” by David A. Shirk, in *Journal of Democracy* (Oct. 2000), 1101 15th St., N.W., Ste. 802, Washington, D.C. 20005.

Mexico’s new president, Vicente Fox, ended decades of rule by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) when he took office last December. The country is entering a new era—and many fear that Fox’s National Action Party (PAN) is, at bottom, a reactionary party. It isn’t, contends political scientist Shirk, a former visiting fellow at the Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, at the University of California, San Diego.

Though the PAN includes traditionalist conservative and Catholic elements, he says, “the party is better understood as a liberal-democratic alternative to PRI authoritarianism than as a Catholic reaction” to the Mexican Revolution of 1910–17.

Founded in Mexico City in 1939, the PAN initially attracted business groups and religious activists opposed to the PRI regime’s leftist and anticlerical tendencies. But the regime soon made a sharp right turn, drawing most businessmen back into the PRI fold. The remaining PAN supporters were committed to the party’s agenda of liberal-democratic reform and religious freedom, says Shirk. During the 1960s and early ’70s, the party’s religious wing grew stronger, but it was heavily influenced by international Christian Democratic organizations and left-leaning liberation theology.

Then, in the early 1980s, many entrepreneurs in small- and medium-sized businesses, frustrated by the PRI regime’s mismanagement of the economy, entered the PAN, and “the balance of power within the leadership shifted in favor of more secular and pragmat-

ic leaders,” Shirk says. Fox, a former Coca-Cola executive who was then running a small business, was one of the PAN’s new breed.

“The PAN’s path to the presidency was paved by a ‘creeping federalist’ strategy focused on winning control of local and state governments,” Shirk observes. PAN governments had jurisdiction over less than one percent of the populace in 1987, but by the time of last year’s election, PAN-controlled municipal governments alone governed nearly a quarter of the nation’s population.

Along with “the practical, largely secular approach of [its] liberal-democratic vision,” says Shirk, the PAN has a philosophy of “political humanism.” Drawing largely from Jesuit teachings, it advocates programs that meet both spiritual and material needs and that help citizens to help themselves—“a Mexican analogue to ‘compassionate conservatism,’” Shirk writes. This outlook is very different from the “illiberal brand of ‘right-wing’ conservatism historically adopted” in Chile, Argentina, and various other Latin American countries, he notes.

While the PAN and Fox have frequently been made out to be Catholic crusaders, “these characterizations have little basis in reality,” the author says. Fox, a divorced bachelor, is a moderate Catholic who “has taken middle-of-the-road positions on key religious issues,” such as abortion. At least for the time being, says Shirk, the Mexican “religious right” has far less voice in the PAN than its U.S. counterpart has in the Republican Party.