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Title Can Early Chinese Maritime Expeditions Shed Light on Lehi's Voyage to the New World?

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Abstract Review of *1421, the Year China Discovered America* (2003), by Gavin Menzies.

CAN EARLY CHINESE MARITIME EXPEDITIONS SHED LIGHT ON LEHI'S VOYAGE TO THE NEW WORLD?

John A. Tvedtnes

Various ancient Chinese texts suggest that small groups of explorers may have reached the New World. The most well-known such voyage is that of the Buddhist monk Hwui Shan, in the mid-fifth century AD. But it is a series of fifteenth-century voyages that has more recently become an object of investigation.

From 1405 to 1433, a Chinese admiral named Zheng He led seven expeditions of maritime explorers to various parts of the world. Based on maps and contemporary documents, it seems that Zheng's fleet of eight hundred vessels may have circumnavigated the globe and even discovered America seven decades before Christopher Columbus. In his controversial book, *1421, the Year China Discovered America*, Gavin Menzies describes not only the Chinese records of Zheng's voyage of discovery but notes that maps created before and just after the 1492 voyage of Columbus show extensive mapping of distant coastlines using data not yet gathered by Europeans. Menzies supports his contentions with an examination of medieval shipwrecks (including a Chinese junk and other artifacts of Chinese origin found in the New World). A television documentary

Review of Gavin Menzies. *1421, the Year China Discovered America*. New York: Morrow, 2003. xxiii + 552 pp., with appendixes, select bibliography, and index. \$27.95.

based on the book's theory was recently aired on PBS. Some elements of the book have been criticized by Louise Levathes, author of *When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne 1405–1433*.¹

Zhu Di, emperor of China (Ming dynasty) ordered the construction of a huge fleet of large wooden vessels (up to three hundred feet in length) and ordered Admiral Zheng to sail to other lands in order to establish diplomatic and trade relations. Four people who accompanied Admiral Zheng's expeditions wrote books about their experiences. The most detailed account is *Ying-yai Sheng-lan*, written by Ma Huan, an interpreter who sailed on three of the voyages.² In 1405, the Chinese fleet departed with twenty-eight thousand men from Nanjing, China. The sixteen-foot-long Mao K'un map, which is still extant, indicates sailing directions for the different parts of the voyage.

Retracing the 1405 voyage are the crew of a Chinese junk named *Precious Dragon*, led by explorer Rex Warner, accompanied by three other men and a woman. Sailing from China in November 1999, the group followed the route described by Ma Huan, putting ashore at various places in Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. On 8 March 2001, the junk docked at the southern Omani port of Salalah, in the region where Lehi and his family were thought to have lived while building a boat to sail to the New World. Members of the expedition filmed the voyage and Warner is preparing a book entitled *Voyage of the Dragon Kings*.

Zheng's expeditions, it seems, would have taken him over seas earlier crossed by Lehi on his voyage to a promised land. Even if Zheng did not arrive in the New World, his exploration of parts of the Indian and Pacific Oceans may provide useful information for future Book of Mormon research.

1. Louise Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne 1405–1433* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994).

2. Ma Huan, *Ying-yai Sheng-lan: The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores (1433)*, ed. J. V. G. Mills (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).