

First letter  
February 25, 1432

G R E A T   S O N   O F   H E A V E N

*I begin by again voicing my reservations of such an unnecessary voyage. China has everything that you or your people could possibly ever need. It undermines China's position to go traveling to foreign countries. Foreigners should come on their own to pay homage to you and your great kingdom. I urge that The Middle Kingdom should be where the attention of the Emperor be focused, not on the far off lands of other peoples. I shall of course faithfully perform the duties that my venerable lord has assigned me.*

*Life on the waters is rough. The constantly rolling sea beneath is an unsettling experience. On a daily basis all the men pray in earnest to the celestial consort in hopes that we will arrive safely at our destinations. On January 12, 1432, we left the South China Seas behind and headed out for Qui Nhon. Our time there was quite uneventful. The men went ashore and spent several days trading. They came back with many bundles of sweet smelling aloe wood and other curious things. I was glad to be on land once more, and was therefore sorry to leave. We went on to the North coast of Java and docked at Surabaja. The journey continues to be uneventful and pointless. I am homesick. I miss civilization and long to be away from the strange customs of these savage people. I dream of being back in China once more with my family.*

*Respectfully yours--*

*Xhi Liu*

*Second letter  
June 30, 1432*

G R E A T   S O N   O F   H E A V E N

*What unspeakable horrors and nightmares roam through the cities and streets of these foreign lands. How could you wish to be in contact with such barbarous places?*

*We traveled to the gateway of the Indian Ocean: Malacca. Zheng He was well received at the Malaccan court. He talked and feasted with the King for the duration of our stay. Our men traded with the merchants for beautiful ebony, dammar and aloes to make medicine. The market place had an incredible myriad of people and things. Not only were there cloves nutmeg, seed pearls and a colorful assortment of bird plumes, but also batiks, which were traded for things from India.*

*Everything seemed fine, except that the people there seemed to be restless. I noticed our own men left the ships only to trade and returned as soon as possible. Their strange behavior prompted me to question Ma-Huan. In response Ma-Huan told me a ghastly tale of a corpse-head barbarian. The wandering soul of a woman who died in child birth, whose disembodied head and dangling entrails prays upon newborns. It eats their faeces, killing them. There were also stories of men that change into black tigers with dark stripes at will. These hideous beasts walk amongst the rest of humankind searching for their next meal. After hearing such things I too was not eager to leave the safety of the ship without undue cause, for fear of being devoured by some strange demon.*

*After our stay in malacca we arrived at Semudera, the sulfur ball. The foul stench greeted us even before we reached its harbors. All of us wished to lock ourselves away in our cabins and fill them with the sweet scents of incense. Zheng He had to force the men ashore*

*to cut wood so he could replace the rudders that had been damaged in the storm along the way. The medicine men left the ships in order to gather plenty of the odoriferous sulfur, despite its foul smell. Camphor, ginger and pepper were brought aboard in large quantities and Semudera has sent an ambassador to accompany us back to China to pay tribute to your eminence.*

*I dream of a quick and safe return back to The Middle Kingdom. I shall rest more peacefully at home without the worries of how many more barbaric peoples we have yet to encounter on this voyage. Will these people learn anything from us about being civilized, or will we be tainted and corrupted by their lack of civilization.*

*Respectfully yours --*

*Xhi Liu*

*Third letter  
January 16, 1433*

G R E A T   S O N   O F   H E A V E N

*Great exulted one of the Dragon Throne, I had no idea of the riches that lay so far beyond China. The beauty of such things should be sung about and praised at great lengths. Some of the most wondrous splendors abound in Ceylon. Scores of bright gems and pearls catch the eye. The surrounding scenery stirs the core of one's being with its serenity and loveliness. There is an overwhelming feeling of sacredness to the place. Perhaps it is brought about by the peaceful co-existence of such devout believers of the Buddhist, Muslim, and Hindu religions. The followers of these religions share the belief that Ceylon is a holy place. There is an impression in the rocks of a giant footprint, which is held sacred by all three religions. I regret having to leave such a spectacular place and wonder if I shall ever return to see it again. I am sure that the ambassador sent from this place must have some misgivings at having to leave such charm behind as he joins us in our voyage to unfamiliar lands.*

*From Ceylon's ports we sailed on to Calicut and reached its ports on December 12, 1432. I was surprised to encounter such a highly structured society and distinguished people. These people were treated as our equals by the men. They truly deserve such an honor. One might ponder if these people are also followers of Confucian beliefs. They certainly seem to be virtuous and upstanding people. The merchants I traded with were honest and intellectual. Traits I have observed to be almost non-existent in the ports that we have visited thus far.*

*I must however report some unfortunate news. The commander of the Treasure Fleet, Zheng He, has fallen ill. Poor health forced him to remain behind at Calicut with part of the fleet. He put eunuch Hong Bao in charge of the portion of the fleet that is to go down the east*

*African coast. I feel that He's illness may be affecting his decision making. Hong Bao is nothing more than a corrupt and power hungry eunuch, who couldn't wait to take command. Bao has no integrity. I fear for the good name of China if Hong Bao must be its diplomatic representative.*

*We stopped at Cochin on our way to Hormuz and picked up an ambassador. He is very enthusiastic about visiting your illustrious kingdom and spent his time questioning anyone who would tell him about it. Once we were ashore at Hormuz I was again astounded. The center of trade for precious stones certainly is a jewel itself. Walking through the market was a dazzling sight of colors and light being reflected from the surface of thousands of polished jewels. Magnificent bazaars where merchants from all over the world gathered. There, in abundance were gold, silver, copper, iron, salt and some of the most splendid strings of pearls. Everyone in Hormuz is rich. The people help each other in times of need and their sense of well being for the community is inspirational. The ambassador from Cochin was also impressed. An ambassador from Hormuz joined us this evening. For this our men are thankful. The man from Cochin gives their ears a rest while he interrogates the newest addition to the ships compliment.*

*Respectfully yours --*

*Xhi Liu*

*Fourth letter  
March 03, 1433*

G R E A T   S O N   O F   H E A V E N

*A few of our ships attempted to put into port at Aden, but were unable to do so due to political instability. Instead we docked at Jidda and Dhufar where we were shown great honor by the locals. The men traded for frankincense and aloe, myrrh and storax. The men of medicine had their hands full reaping as much information as they could about Arab drugs and therapies. With so much for them to learn, several of the men considered staying behind. Surprisingly Bao showed much concern over the problem and proved to be competent by handling it in such a way that nobody was offended. To help keep these men from abandoning their duties to China, Hong Bao requested that we be provided with a man knowledgeable in the field of medicine. Bao presented himself very well in front of a court and the local rulers were happy to comply. I later talked to Bao and found that he was a man of intellect who had some background in Confucian teachings. Bao was extremely distraught over the prospect that these men had wished to leave the emperor's charge for their own personal gain. While it was the best possible solution I cannot help but feel sympathy for the poor Arab who did not want to leave his home. I can understand his reluctance, but it will keep our men happy and well occupied.*

*We traveled to many places down Africa's coast, but our last stop turned out to be a special place. Malindi had many a qilin freely wandering. The sight of these creatures summoned feelings of hope and good will in all of the men. It was a sign of favor. One of these magnificent creatures shall even return to China with us as a special tribute gift for your excellency.*

*Respectfully yours--*

*Xhi Liu*

*Fifth letter  
May 27, 1433*

G R E A T   S O N   O F   H E A V E N

*I regret to inform you of the death of Zheng He. He was a magnificent man who faithfully served you and your dynasty since the time of the first Ming Emperor. His presence with the fleet will be sorely missed. After our return to Calicut the entire Treasure Fleet left for home. Zheng He's failing health suggested that he would not be able to survive the journey home. He requested that his shoes and a braid of his hair be brought back to Nanjing if he was unable to return on his own. Zheng He's body was taken care of by the Muslim followers on board. It was washed and wrapped in white cloth, then given a proper burial at sea. Everyone grieved for Zheng He as the chanting to Allah by the Muslims continued well into the night.*

*The ending of Zheng He's life is the closing to our voyage in distant lands. We shall return home to China soon with the blessing of good weather. It has been a long journey and I pray that the tributes we are bringing back will find favor in your eyes.*

*Humbly yours --*

*Xhi Liu*