

Zheng He in Singapore?

by Jacqueline Fisher

The year 2005 marks the 600th anniversary of the legendary Ming dynasty Admiral Zheng He's first of seven voyages to South East Asia, and Singapore is getting into a party-mode, throwing a lavish birthday bash which includes a Village, a musical and even commemorative coins and stamps.



NLB is also setting sail on the tide of the Admiral's anniversary with the *Zheng He* and *Maritime Asia* exhibition and a series of programmes presented at the National Library throughout September and October 2005.

The exhibition will feature ancient publications, maps, photographs and artefacts but the real highlight is a replica of the ship (or baochuan) that he used. This is like the Millennium Falcon of its era and is definitely worth checking out!

With the exhibition lasting from 13 August 2005 to 10 February next year, you will have no excuse to miss it.

So Exactly Who is this Birthday Boy?

Admiral Zheng had a life story ripe for a big budget biopic. Born to a poor Chinese Muslim family 1371, he was taken captive at just age 10 by the Mongols to Nanjing.



Somewhere along the way, he lost more than his childhood, being made a eunuch.

Despite this unfortunate loss, Zheng He grew up to become a close confidant of the Emperor Yong Le. To demonstrate China's might abroad, the trusty Zheng He was given the title "Admiral of the Seven Seas" and he embraced this appointment by embarking on his now famous series of voyages.

Of course, befitting such a sweeping saga, there's also a poignant ending.

After a lifetime of seven-sea gallivanting, big-time China promoting and the collection of all kinds of loot, Zheng He died, supposedly in India whilst on his last voyage.

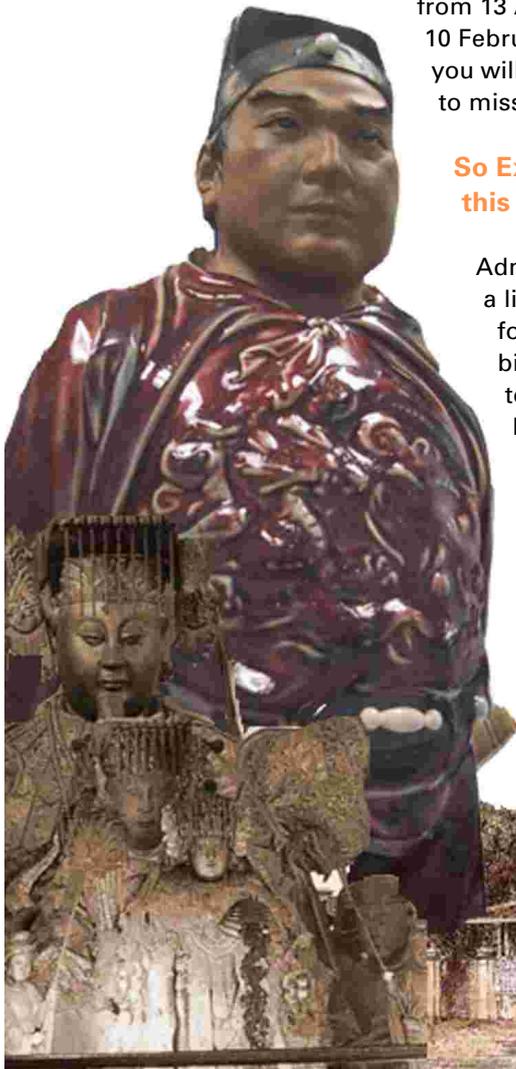
With him went China's maritime ambitions. The political climate had changed as succeeding emperors forbade overseas travel and stopped all building of oceangoing junks. Within a hundred years the greatest navy the world had ever known willed itself into extinction. The period of China's greatest outward expansion was followed by the period of its greatest isolation.

Roll credits. The only thing that seemed lacking was a love interest.

Link to Singapore?

Did you know that the Admiral himself has never set foot on this island?

Zheng He is purported to have used the legendary Dragon Tooth Gate rock structure as a navigational marker as he sailed by. This rock formation used to be located in the sea off Labrador park but was rather thoughtlessly blown up by the British in the 1880s.



Zheng He's legacy is often discussed but his voyages did not lead to a huge boost in trade, nor did he colonise any lands for China. It seems he was no more than the helmsman of the Emperor's travelling advertising campaign. The irony is that for 30 years, half the world was in China's grasp but it all came to nothing. The Zheng He phenomenon can thus be seen as a paradox.

Closer inspection suggests that there are plenty more of these contradictions to be found in the related subjects and topics. This forms the main theme for this series of programmes, which also aims to differentiate itself from the gamut of planned celebrations by using the Zheng He phenomenon as a jump-off point to explore related fields.

Talking Zheng - What is the Zheng He Phenomenon?

Join a panel of speakers including Dr Geoff Wade, Singapore Heritage Society's Dr Kevin Tan and Zheng He enthusiast Chung Chee Kit as they examine Zheng He as a socio-cultural-political phenomenon and take a closer look at the 600th anniversary celebrations from "outside the box".



The panel will discuss the reasons behind this phenomenon and will consider the sudden surge of interest in this man, and debate if the phenomenon has a broad-based following, or is purely driven by sectorial interests like tourism, historical interests or just media hype.

Date : Saturday 10 September 2005
Time : 3.00pm - 5.00pm
Venue : Level 5, Imagination & Possibility Rooms

Cartography Workshop

Have you ever wondered why in spite of advanced technologies and modern methods of map making, border disputes still exist and gross errors of judgment still occur in wartime? And how some of these accidents actually led to the discovery of great lands and adventures?

Join Associate Professor David Higgit of the NUS Geography Department as he explores the history of cartography, its innovations and how it is linked to the subject of exploration. He will introduce participants to simple map interpretation and demonstrate the use of Geographical Information Systems (GIS) & Global Positioning Systems (GPS). He will also consider the different types of maps and their uses. Registration is required.

Date : Wednesday 14 September 2005
Time : 7.00pm - 9.00pm
Venue : Level 5, Imagination & Possibility Rooms

Zheng He and the Formation of Southeast Asian Architecture and the City

Dr Johannes Widodo will delve into the legacy of Zheng He as manifested in material culture throughout the Southeast Asian coastal cities, especially in the fusion of Chinese and Islamic elements in urban patterns (such as the "Datuk-kong" phenomena), hybrid mosques and temples, fusion architecture, and racially mixed settlements.

This presentation is aimed at promoting the spirit of peaceful co-existence among different racial and religious groups, and the celebration of cultural diversity, cherished by the multi-cultural communities in Southeast Asia since its early formation until now - things that we seriously need at the present.

Date : Saturday 24 September 2005
Time : 3.00pm - 5.00pm
Venue : Level 5, Imagination & Possibility Rooms



Zheng He's Voyages and the Malay Community

Very few Malays would know of the close ties that Admiral Zheng He had with the Malay Community. Zheng He himself was a Muslim who made a great contribution to the spread of Islam 600 years ago. Fewer would have known that there were actually experts and Islamic scholars amongst his crew. Join Mr Jaffar Kassim as he talks about the many contributions and impact that Zheng He had on the Malay community at this talk.

Date : Wednesday 28 September 2005
Time : 7.45pm - 8.45pm
Venue : Level 5, Imagination & Possibility Rooms

Pelayaran Zheng He dan Masyarakat Melayu

Laksamana Zheng He dilahirkan pada zaman Dinasti Ming yang mempunyai talian amat rapat dengan kaum Melayu. Zheng He sendiri adalah seorang Muslim yang telah membuat banyak sumbangan terhadap perkembangan Islam 600 tahun dahulu. Tidak ramai orang Melayu yang mengetahui perkara ini. Lebih kurang yang tahu bahawa terdapat pakar dan cendekiawan Islam di kalangan anak kapalnya. Bersama Encik Jaffar Kassim di ceramah ini dan dapatkan maklumat tentang sumbangan-sumbangan yang banyak diberi oleh Zheng He, serta kesan atau efek yang ditinggalkan olehnya ke atas masyarakat Melayu.

Bila : Rabu 28 September 2005
 Tarikh : 7.45pm - 8.45pm
 Tempat : Tingkat 5, Imaginasi & Kemungkinan

Who are the Peranakans?

According to local Malaccan folklore, the Peranakans were descendants of a Chinese princess Hang Li Poh and her entourage. As an unforeseen outcome of Zheng He's imperialist venturing, a group with a very strong and distinct identity - and one that is neither completely Chinese nor Malay - was born.

Peter Wee, a local Peranakan will adopt an investigative enquiry approach to explore how various aspects of the culture have evolved and consider: Where did the Peranakans come from? Who is or is not a Peranakan? What are the differences between the descendants of later settlers from the Southern coast of China and the Peranakans? And with the increase in inter-marriage, are there any real Peranakans left?

Date : Wednesday 12 October 2005
 Time : 7.00pm - 9.00pm
 Venue : Level 5, Imagination & Possibility Rooms

What Does it Mean to be an Explorer in Singapore?

The process of exploration itself is full of paradoxes. An expeditionary failure may even mark the beginning of one's success, as illustrated in the case of David Lim, who became a successful motivational speaker. Why do national expeditions include foreigners (e.g. Sir Edmund Hillary who was a Kiwi in a British expedition when he was the first man to scale Mount Everest)? What happens when there is nothing left to explore or climb?

In this panel discussion, local explorers including Stefen Chow from the NUS Mountaineers who recently returned from Everest, Wilfred Tok who has climbed the highest peak in the Americas, Anaconda, and Dr Chan Yew Wing, who has led and coordinated numerous expeditions to remote areas, will discuss these paradoxes and also consider the economics and sponsorship of exploring - what happens if a sponsored expedition fails?

This session will be chaired by Paul Sng, former broadcast journalist with 93.8Live!

Date : Saturday 22 October 2005
 Time : 3.00pm - 5.00pm
 Venue : Level 5, Imagination & Possibility Rooms