

## EVENT

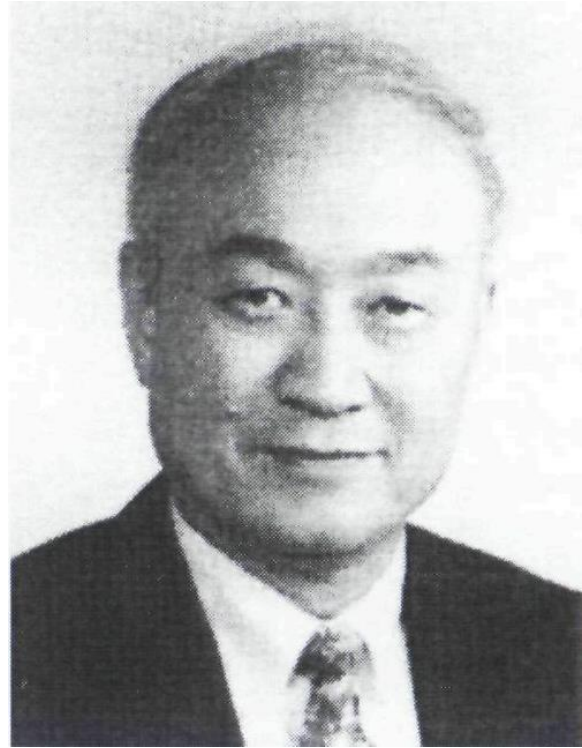
# The Spirit of Zheng He (1371-1435)

By Shiang-yu Lee and C.C Tien

On Saturday March 4<sup>th</sup> Dr. Jin Wu, former Education Minister and President of National Cheng Kung University (NCKU) spoke to the NCKU Alumni Association and the greater Seattle Chinese community. On a sunny afternoon, an audience of almost a hundred people from various communities around Seattle came to learn about the accomplishments of the great Chinese explorer, Zheng He. The talk was inspiring and the audience response was extremely enthusiastic.

Citing the imminent 600th anniversary of Zheng He's expedition to the South Seas (called West Ocean during his time) and the Indian Ocean, Dr Wu called for establishing a world wide Chinese movement to commemorate the event and for emphasizing the Chinese contributions in marine technology, trade and culture.

Dr, Wu explained that the Zheng He mission took place almost a century before Columbus' discovery of America and was on a significantly grander scale than the Western explorations. As a result of Zheng He's efforts, China established a number of trade and foreign connections that were unprecedented at the time. Unfortunately, China abruptly abandoned those efforts to start a "Closed Door" policy that lasted 5 centuries until 1985! To this date, Western Marine and Naval researchers have been amazed by those achievements, but we Chinese are ignorant of our own history and achievements. With the 600th Anniversary Grand Celebration, Dr Wu hopes to revive the pride by highlighting the contributions to maritime science and technology made by China before the change in foreign policy.



*Dr. Jin Wu*

In terms of technical marvels of the Zheng He Expeditions, Dr. Wu shared these facts:

- China possessed sophisticated ship building and navigation technology for centuries before the expeditions. The Long Jiang Ship Yard was established back in the Song Dynasty (960 -1279 AD) near Nanjing which had dry docks measuring 50 yards wide and 500 yards long. (Unfortunately, the Song channels were filled recently for housing constructions and the Ming docks are facing the same fate.)
- Chinese sailors were already able to navigate the oceans using celestial guidance techniques, Zheng's fleet knew where they

were heading and when they could catch seasonal winds to sail and return.

- The largest Zheng armada had more than 300 ships and 27,000 men in the fleet. They were well-organized in formation for command and control. The largest ships were more than 500 feet in length and over ten thousand tons in weight. Water tight chamber technology was standard in Chinese ship construction.
- The expeditions were staffed with tens of thousands of warriors and sailors with well organized logistical support. Water tankers were in use for the fleet's water supply.

The Zheng mission did promote trade by granting favored nation status to trade partners rather than exploiting them. Many agricultural and manufacturing techniques were brought to the local people to improve their livelihood.

Dr Wu calls for Chinese in China as well as overseas to come together to jointly organize and promote this celebration. The purpose would be twofold: to highlight past accomplishments, and to identify Chinese contributions to world trade and technology. The celebration calls for the construction of a grand ship replica of the fleet, retracing the same sea routes as taken by Zheng He. In addition, Dr. Wu called for technology communities to join forces in researching China's ship building, maritime navigational and logistics technology to heighten the understanding and awareness of the great achievements of our ancestors.

After the meeting, discussions explored the broad meanings of the exploits of Zheng He and the subsequent "Closed Door to the Sea" policy which lasted for 500 years. The "Closed

Door to the Sea" policy of the Ming and Qing Dynasties restricted its people to limited land resources and an age-old ideology. It also strangled the development of commerce and technology in China at a time when Europe was flourishing due to successful expeditions undertaken by several explorers. China closed the door to shut itself in and was doomed to collapse in the competitive world of the last 300 years.

The voyages of Zheng He, commissioned by the Emperor of the Ming Dynasty to explore the sea, highlight the accomplishments of a remarkable adventurer who successfully earned out the forward-looking, international policy of that time. In 7 journeys spanning 28 years, he visited over 30 countries. The spirit of Zheng He (or Zheng He-ism) is not just what he did but more so about what he represents, especially in the re-birth of China.

The spirit of Zheng He is a symbol for us to reclaim our heritage of optimism and perseverance.

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