Why did the Chinese withdraw from their world explorations and how did this decision affect their relations with the West by the nineteenth century? With reference given to the relevant phases of globalisation, focussing on relations with Britain

At the beginning of the 19th century, Britain could rightly lay claim to the epithet of "Britannia Rules the Waves" after its conquest of the French and Spanish fleets at the Battle of Trafalgar. Because of its naval supremacy and its growing global empire, it could protect its commercial shipping routes and provide the military muscle to enforce its political and economic interests such as the Opium Wars between itself and China. But this situation could have been reversed if, in the 15th century, the Chinese had maintained and progressed in its position as possessing the greatest armada in the world. But this fleet was dismantled and lost its naval supremacy, only recently regaining a position now comparable to other maritime powers such as the United States of America and Britain. This essay will discuss what we know of China's early armada, why it made the decision to dismantle this asset, who filled the void left behind from their then earlier, and impressive maritime activity, its consequences regarding future globalisation of commercial connections, and its early subjugation to the British empire. Further consideration will be given, that although the Chinese, as considered by many, made a less-than-optimal decision in the 15th century regarding their global reach and naval supremacy, their future success, albeit centuries later, has been achieved by pursuing and demonstrating increased global interconnectedness.

In the early 15th century, China possessed the largest armada of sailing ships in the world and, by appointment by Emperor Yongle, the celebrated eunuch Zheng He was commissioned to explore and create diplomatic connections between relatively proximate regions across the Indian Ocean, such as Cambodia, Thailand and Bengal.[1] The size of this armada in both number and size, are well described by Levathe, that in part, is illustrated below.[2]

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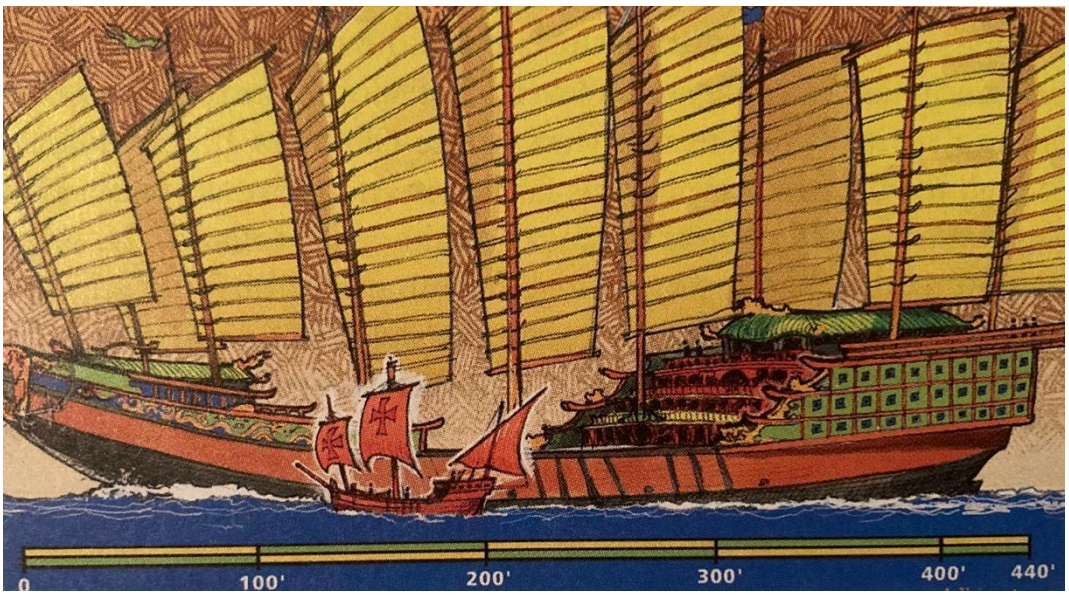
[1] Edward L. Dreyer, *Zheng He: China and the Oceans in the Early Ming Dynasty, 1405–1433*, New York: Pearson Longman, 2007, pp.42–45.
[2] Louise Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1405–1433*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994, pp.53-61.



Size comparison between the Chinese and European vessels. Illustration courtesy of Stearns et al., *World Civilisations: The Global Experience, Volume 2, From 1450 to the Present*, 6th ed., p.615. Dimensions given in feet.

This has also been addressed by Stearns, who states that:

> …the largest Chinese junks were far larger than the caravels, naos and other vessels that the Portuguese, Spanish, and other rival Europeans deployed in their voyages of exploration and discovery from the 15th through the 17th century.[3]

Their ship building technology far surpassed any rival, with significant features in design such as waterproof bulkheads and stern post rudders, unknown to European technology for centuries.[4] But even with such naval superiority and the ability to extend their empire through military conquest and forced colonisation, China chose to use a tributary system to engage with other Nations' interests. However, in addition to diplomacy towards legitimate rulers it did use its military advantage to assist in eliminating any established piracy syndicates affecting their otherwise

[3] Peter N. Stearns, M. Adas, S. B. Schwartz and M. J. Gilbert, *World Civilisations: The Global Experience, Volume 2, From 1450 to the Present*, 6th ed., Upper Saddle River, NJ; Harlow: Pearson Education, 2011, pp.615.

[4] Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas*, pp. 61-66.

harmonious connections.[5],[6] But then those activities faded away during this period of what is recognised as proto globalisation.[7]

There had already been a growing discontent between the emperor and the bureaucrats charged with fiscal responsibility of government resources. Their polite opposition to Zheng He's marine expeditions had opportunity of reinforcement by a spontaneous climatic condition that destroyed the largest hall within the Forbidden City. This was argued by the bureaucrats as a sign from Heaven and assisted in swaying the emperor's mind to halt further marine expeditions, albeit briefly before his death.[8] On the death of Emperor Yongle, the bureaucratic cadre of the Ming Court, then unhampered by any opposing autocratic edict, chose to redirect their resources towards:

> …internal development and on safeguarding the steppe frontier. It withdrew from its southern expansion into Annam (present Vietnam), allowed its fleet to decay, and prohibited private overseas trade.[9]

This was arguably a well-directed move, even at the loss of their great armada, as the threats from the Mongols in the north had been a serious, and yet, until then, an unwinnable issue even during the period of Zheng He's voyages. Re-routing of resources now provided for accomplishing greater defence including the building of The Great Wall.[10],[11]

The prohibition of private overseas trade had the intention of limiting maritime commerce to the now smaller fleet of government sponsored endeavours. This was an effort to compensate in part for the loss of revenue realised from Yongle's

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[5] Edward L. Dreyer, *Zheng He: China and the Oceans in the Early Ming Dynasty, 1405–1433*, pp.28-24.
[6] Mote, Frederick W.(ed.), *Imperial China, 900–1800: A Sourcebook*, Harvard University Press, 1999, pp.615-616.
[7] Hans van de Ven, 'The Onrush of Modern Globalisation in China', in *Globalisation in World History*, ed. by A. G. Hopkins, London: Pimlico, 2002, p.171.
[8] Yiu Siu, 'The Cessation of Zheng He's Voyages and the Beginning of Private Sailings: Fiscal Competition between Emperors and Bureaucrats', *Journal of Chinese History* 中國歷史學刊, vol. 8, no.1, 2024, pp.95–120.
[9] Cynthia Stokes Brown, *Big History: From the Big Bang to the Present*, New York: New Press, 2007, p. 177.
[10] Tonio Andrade, 'How Yongle Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Gun: Perspectives on Early Ming Military History', in *Imperial China, 1350–1900*, ed. by Kenneth M. Swope, Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2020, pp. 71–87.
[11] Hans van de Ven, 'The Onrush of Modern Globalisation in China', p.171.

Treasure Ships. But this 'led to a criminalisation of private commerce that transformed merchants into "pirates" and commodities into "contraband"'.[12] This eventually created a situation where European trade expansion found easier access to Chinese goods. Thus continued a phase of globalisation incorporating China through involvement with European commerce.[13]

On its now restricted maritime activities and amidst the mixture of government sponsored merchants and organised piracy, exposure to European merchants was now added to this blend of traders. This supplemented China's then present-day reliance on closer trading partners such as the Persians, Arabs and Malays.[14] The Portuguese and Dutch were the first to create European connections but because of their behaviour, severe restrictions were applied and remained so for all other European visitors.[15] With a more autarkic government, "… the pace of commercial expansion quickened. Expanding international markets for Chinese silks and porcelains stimulated industrial production…"[16], but it was not long before the White Lotus Rebellion occurred in synchrony with coming "under siege by industrializing Western powers seeking to throw open Chinese markets".[17] Ultimately, seventeen European trade missions were sent to Peking conforming to China's demand for tribute and a subservient kowtow, acknowledging the belief of its supremacy.[18] Except for the British, who did not kowtow and were sent home fortuneless.[19] Although disappointed in leaving with no material goods, the British had more to think about at home with the foreseeable conflict with Napolean. Nevertheless, they did not return without realising as Macartney mused:

> …if the court in Peking could be ignorant that a couple of British frigates would be an overmatch for the whole naval force of the empire, that in half a summer they could totally

[12] Melissa Macauley, *Distant Shores: Colonial Encounters on China's Maritime Frontier*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021, p.25.
[13] James Kai-sing Kung and Chicheng Ma, 'Autarky and the Rise and Fall of Piracy in Ming China', *The Journal of Economic History*, vol.72, no.2, 2012, pp.509-534.
[14] Jiu-Hwa L. Upshur, Janice J. Terry, James P. Holoka, Richard D. Goff and George H. Cassar, *World History Since 1500: The Age of Global Integration*, compact 4th edn, Belmont, CA: Thomson/Wadsworth, 2002, p.427.
[15] Linda Jaivin, *The Shortest History of China*, Melbourne: Black Inc., 2021, pp.120-121.
[16] Richard von Glahn, *The Economic History of China: From Antiquity to the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, pp.345-346.
[17] Richard von Glahn, *The Economic History of China*, p.347.
[18] Dongqing Wang, 'Representing Kowtow: Civility and Civilization in Early Sino-British Encounters', *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation*, vol.60, no.3, 2019, pp.269–292.
[19] Upshur, *World History Since 1500: The Age of Global Integration*, p.435.

> destroy all the navigation of their coasts and reduce the inhabitants of the maritime provinces, who subsist chiefly on fish, to absolute famine? [20]

And before long, this thought became a reality.

China had for centuries long espoused an introspective philosophy towards trade, a good example of which is the earlier imposition of sea bans on any trading by commercial enterprises, but limiting this activity only to government sponsored partners.[21] This limited their exposure to the advanced technological progress being made in Europe. On the other hand, Great Britain, considered the birthplace of the Industrial revolution, had a diametrically opposing philosophy towards progress and global trade, certainly a jolt towards a second and more modern stage of globalisation.[22]

This vast difference in philosophies made similarly vast differences in technological advantage, including military superiority for Great Britain when it decided to enforce its will on China's attempt at stifling trade, particularly in the supply of opium.[23] At this point, Macartney's musing was made a reality and thus commenced the "Opium Wars" in which China now realised that its supremacy in all things necessary was a myth. This resulted in not only continuance of trade but the ceding of Hong Kong to British rule.[24],[25]

However, this now constant exposure to the abilities of the British resulted in a more aggressive stance by the Chinese in the early 19th century to acquire competitive commercial enterprises and, in itself, become more globally connected.[26] Change was fast in coming and 'new business practices and increased participation in world trade led to a "commercial revolution" between the 1820s and the 1880s' leading to

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[20] James L. Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995, p.201-202.
[21] Geoff Wade, 'Engaging the South: Ming China and Southeast Asia in the Fifteenth Century', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, vol.51, 2008, pp.578–638.
[22] Peter N. Stearns, et al. *World Civilisations: The Global Experience*, p. 632.
[23] Julia Lovell, *The Opium War: Drugs, Dreams and the Making of China*, London: Picador, 2011, pp. 26-27.
[24] Jaivin, *The Shortest History of China,* pp. 138-139.
[25] Peter N. Stearns et al., *World Civilisations: The Global Experience*, pp. 156-165.
[26] Yen-p'ing Hao. *The Commercial Revolution in Nineteenth-Century China: The Rise of Sino-Western Mercantile Capitalism.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986, pp. 212-226.

China's most expansive period of globalisation.[27] Britain can lay claim to being the "world's first superpower", leading in "shared institutions of global commerce" and having the English language " as a lingua franca of global business". [28] But China, in the short period of 40 years of reform since 1978, has "eliminated extreme poverty and created a technologically dynamic economy", and where now, "Geopolitical power and technological prowess are no longer the privileged preserve of the North Atlantic".[29],[30] This phase of development certainly exemplifies involvement now in an era of contemporary globalisation hinging on what Sach's suggests as a further era now evolving based on "ubiquitous connectivity".[31]

In conclusion, this essay has considered why the Chinese withdrew from their world explorations and how this decision affected their relations with the West by the nineteenth century. It has also given a reflection on the relevant phases of globalisation focussing on its relations with Britain. In the 15th century it has been recorded that the Chinese had the greatest armada in the world with the objectives of displaying its world supremacy and as a maritime barrier to others. It also opened trade pathways that were of use in a later stage of its development. But within a relatively short time, this apparent advantage of naval capability and more globalised trade possibilities faded away through government edict.

This created a void filled only partially by restricted commercially sponsored activities, also demanded by government edict, but where piracy became rife and there was an increasing incursion of other naval fleets from Europe, including the country that became the hub of what has been recognised as the world's first superpower, Great Britain. Through China's then more local and introspective trading philosophies, it had become isolated and left behind from the advanced technological development of other countries. It was thus through this difference in progress and superiority that Britain in short term, forced China into subjugation. This was a humbling period for China for nearly four centuries, but then global wars

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[27] A.G. Hopkins. 'Introduction: Globalization – An Agenda for Historians', in A.G. Hopkins (ed.), *Globalization in World History*. London: Pimlico, 2002, p. 176.
[28] Niall Ferguson. *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World*. London: Allen Lane, 2003, p. 221.
[29] Jeffrey D. Sachs. *The Ages of Globalization: Geography, Technology, and Institutions.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2020, pp. 167-168.
[30] Ling Chen and Barry Naughton, 'An Institutionalized Policy-Making Mechanism: China's Return to Techno-Industrial Policy', *Research Policy*, vol. 51, no. 2, 2022, pp.2138-2152.
[31] Jeffrey D. Sachs, *The Ages of Globalization*, p.169.

erupted and weakened the apparent long-held superiority of European countries. China, now, has adopted a new stance in its governmental policies on global connectedness and technology, becoming what it is presently considered, as not only a superpower, but a major leader in the globalisation of technological progress.

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