

## DID CHENG HO DISCOVER AMERICA PRIOR TO COLUMBUS?

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It is well-established historically that Cheng Ho, the first maritime hero in Chinese history, went down to South Pacific and left his foot print in countries as far as the Persian Gulf and distant Africa. However, according to Dr. Wu Jing, historian and former minister of Ministry of Education, Cheng Ho had arrived at Northern American before Columbus did.

Dr. Wu came to TKU on March 29 to share his daring discovery at the Chueh Sheng International Conference Hall. Founder Clement Chang, President Chang Horng-jinh, and both vice presidents together with 200 strong faculty and students from the College of Liberal Arts joined him for his tales of adventures on the high seas entitled “Cheng Ho sailed into the South Pacific and into the Atlantic Ocean: facts, implications and actions”. Dr. Wu is convinced by his thorough historical research that Cheng Ho was the first maritime expert of his time.

As he recalls that the inspiration of his research came from a casual conversation some years ago with a friend of his who was an American Navy Admiral at that time. This friend, despite being an American, was able to cite lucidly many historical events concerning Cheng Ho as all these events are recorded in great detail in US Navy documents. His friend made it clear that it was not because Cheng Ho was a Chinese, but because he was considered an outstanding, and in fact, the first seafarer of his time. After this conversation, Dr. Wu devoted his time and energy in researching all possible documents to support his hypothesis however, he would like to have more input from experts in seafaring technology as he often encounters a lack of information in this regard. He also wishes for more cooperation from other disciplines so that there will be a joint effort to further explore the great spirit of Chinese seafaring culture.

Dr. Wu believes that Cheng Ho surpasses Columbus in many ways such as crew strength, supplies and size of fleet. For example, in each of Cheng Ho's seven voyages, he commanded over a crew of 27,000, and more than 300 vessels with the largest ships exceeding 1,500 tonnes each. On the other hand Columbus sailed to America in one ship, St. Maria, which was eighty-five feet long. Even in Columbus first expedition, he had only three ships an 87-crew and the largest ship weighed 100 tonnes. It takes far more navigation skills and management, Dr. Wu asserts, to command a big fleet as Cheng Ho had on ever-changing seas therefore, his successful seven sea voyages are the proof of his genius over those of Columbus.

The success of Cheng Ho adventures did not purely rely on good management. It was substantially enhanced by the superior shipbuilding technology developed throughout Chinese history. Dr. Wu points out that a major difference in the structure of a ship between China and the West in early maritime history is that in China, people used the analogy of the web of a duck foot whereas the West used the fish as an analogy for building a ship. Consequently, Chinese ships had an edge over Western-built ships in those days. Unfortunately, due to the anti-maritime policy in China that ensued Cheng Ho, China became isolated and hence lost her dominance on the seas.

Dr. Wu also took full advantage of being at TKU by visiting its Maritime Museum before his speech. He was impressed by what he saw and praised TKU students for their luck in having such an unusual establishment. He also visited the exhibition: Cheng Ho's Flagship. He carefully examined her structure and double-checked the figurehead at the front of the ship. Once he saw the correct figurehead, he was pleased by the details the Museum had put in. Upon his departure, he reminded everyone present to restore the 'glory of Chinese Marine Culture' .