THE CONTROVERSY ON
THE DIMENSION OF ZHENG HE’S BAOCHUAN

The following exchange best summarises my personal view on the size of the Zheng He Baochuan. (See the highlighted portion)

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List Editor: "Lynch, Tim" <TLynch@CSUM.EDU>
Editor's Subject: Chinese Ships-Lengths and Menzies' 1421
Author's Subject: Chinese Ships-Lengths and Menzies' 1421
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Dear List,

The discussions on other lists re Menzies' 1421 have been entirely negative in terms of assessment of the veracity of the work. Menzies has been shown to create his "evidence" from nothing, dismiss any facts which diverge from his thesis and be completely unconcerned about the social effects of his deceptive writing. It is fiction. For further details, see:

http://www.maritimeasia.ws/topic/1421bunkum.html
http://hnn.us/articles/18698.html

Or better still, buy this book:


Perhaps those on the list can urge librarians to reclassify the book as fiction (and particularly not as "Voyages Around the World") and desist from recommending it as a source for world history.

I suggest that one looks elsewhere for information on the size of Chinese ships. One source is Mr Chung Chee Kit of Singapore, who is one of the world's experts on Chinese ships of the period. He has recently been involved in the reconstruction of a model of such a ship for the 600th anniversary of the Zheng he voyages. Mr Chung can be contacted at:

chungcheekit@imcpaa.com

He has written the following about the "baochuan" or "treasure ships" of Zheng He during the early 15th century.
Chung Chee Kit wrote:

"The issue of the size of the Baochuan is complex and really cannot be addressed fully in just a few paragraphs.

Essentially there are two main sources of records:

The first source are written documents including the official history of the Ming Dynasty and the famous novel (fictional) written many years later. This suggests that the vessel was 44.4 zhang (1 zhang = 10 chinese feet) long and 18 zhang wide. The Chinese foot was shorter than the US foot, therefore the vessel was estimated to be in the region of about 350 feet (not the 450 feet which you mentioned). These written records also mentioned that the vessel carried 9 masts and 12 sails.

The second source came from a fragment of a steele found at the Jinghai Temple in Nanjing, commemorating the first two voyages. The text on the steele recorded that Emperor Yongle dispatched vessels of 2000 liao and 150 liao during the first 2 voyages. The liao is a volumetric measure of the size of the ship. From subsequent shipbuilding records in the late Ming and early Qing period, scholars established that the 2000 liao vessel would be about 62 metres long. From another source, the "Tian Fei Jing" or Sutra to the Goddess of the Sea, a frontispiece illustration of the Baochuan fleet was recorded, showing the vessel had 6 masts, displacing a rather high bow and stern. This "Tian Fei Jing" was written during the period of the 6th voyage, and as far as can be established, is the only contemporary drawing of the Baochuan, albeit in a stylistic fashion.

For a long time, there had been debates regarding the true size of the Baochuan. In summary, scholars are divided into two camps, the 'Romantics', who insists that the larger 44 zhang vessel of the historical records to be correct, and the 'Realists' who feel that the smaller 2000 liao vessel is nearer to the truth. Debates between the two groups had been quite heated. The Romantics' strongest argument is that we have to rely on the historical records (which came from 7 sources) unless they can be proven wrong. Sentimentally, they also feel that the 600th anniversary is not a good time to revise history. The Realists point to the fact that both the Jinghai Temple steele fragment and the Tian Fei Jing illustrations are contemporaneous, and therefore should be more accurate.

The 'Romantics' tend to be more vocal, and many overseas Chinese tend to want to believe them because the larger vessel strokes their cultural pride (hence the popularity of Gavin Menzies). The Realists are more quiet, but many academic papers have been written to support their view. Their ranks are also growing, because China has in recent years been developing as a major shipbuilding and maritime nation, and there are many marine engineers and naval architects there who know the physical constraints imposed by material, method of ship construction, economic considerations, ship operation etc. These constraints cannot be ignore through denial.

The greatest flaw of the 44 zhang design is not in its size. The pyramids are real, but that does not mean that we can build them again even with today's technology. The Romantics have always argued that just because there are no vessels of this size built in recent times, we cannot assume that it could not be built previously. The greatest flaw is the length/beam ratio of the 44 zhang, which is an obese 2.58. With this L/B ratio, any sailor who has handled a sailboat will know that it is impossible to tack or sail close to the wind. There are other
serious technical and operational constraints, but I shall not mention them here. The 2000 liao ship is smaller, but is definitely possible. Sizewise, it would be of the order of Lord Nelson's HMS Victory - still a grand achievement by any standard. Accepting the 2000 liao reality in no way diminishes the Chinese' cultural pride.

Other Romantics used other arguments to justify their stand. One argument is that the large Baochuan did not actually put to sea. It was a large floating palace/reviewing stand for the Celestial Emperor to review his fleet prior to their departure.

I am heading a project sponsored by the Singapore Tourism Board to create a well-researched Baochuan model for one of Singapore's museums. To this end, we had been collecting research material, and had organized two major forums, one in Nanjing and another in Beijing in 2004, to look at all aspects of the Baochuan design, including size, sails, rigging, deck equipment, flags, weapons etc. Currently this model is under construction in Zhoushan, China.

Rgds

Chung Chee Kit*

Best,

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