

Review of *1434: The Year a Magnificent Chinese Fleet Sailed to Italy and Ignited the Renaissance*. By Gavin Menzies. William Morrow. 368 pp. \$26.95

Between 1421 and 1423, according to Gavin Menzies, a former submarine commander in Great Britain's Royal Navy, four Chinese fleets, organized by Zheng He, the great eunuch-admiral, circumnavigated the globe. Seventy years later, Menzies maintains, Christopher Columbus used the maps the Chinese voyagers prepared to "discover" America.

Despite the skepticism and scorn of professional historians, Menzies' *1421* became a bestseller in 2002. "There's not one chance in a hundred million that I am wrong," he told *People Magazine*. Six years later, he's back, with an equally audacious reappraisal of the history of Europe. In *1434*, he claims, another Chinese fleet, with official ambassadors of the emperor on board, landed in Tuscany. Received in Florence by Pope Eugenius IV, the delegation left behind a treasure trove of books, treatises, and tables on astronomy, art, architecture, anatomy, engineering, mechanics, music, philosophy, politics and warfare. The "transfer of Chinese intellectual capital to Europe," and not a rebirth of the classical civilizations of Greece and Rome (or the genius of Da Vinci, Copernicus, and Kepler), Menzies declares, is at the root of the Renaissance.

Menzies pursues his subject with missionary zeal—and a will to believe. He is unperturbed by the absence of contemporaneous accounts of the arrival in Italy of a flotilla of hundreds of ships from China. And, unfortunately, he does not employ standards acceptable to professional historians, linguists, or life scientists to evaluate the mountain of evidence he has amassed. Because Menzies gives credence to anyone who shares his views, every link in the chain of causation in *1434* is made of paper maché.

Consider, for example, the e-mail Menzies received in 2007 from Dr. A.C. Lovric, a geneticist. As evidence that Chinese sailors visited the Dalmatian coast in 1434, Lovric cited legends indicating that "oblique-eyed yellow easterners" landed along the Adriatic sometime before 1522, and studies asserting that on Hvar and other islands, inhabitants have East Asian genotypes, non-Slavic and non-European surnames, and use a non-European nomenclature for America.

The DNA test Dr. Lovric referred to identified several explanations for these phenomena. The research paper on Dalmatian names he relied on has not yet been translated from Croatian into English. Nonetheless, Menzies concludes, with breathtaking specificity, that the "results are part of a logical sequence of events": One of Zheng He's ships berthed on the coast; sailors and slave girls jumped ship and melted into the countryside; the fleet proceeded to Venice and Florence; returned to Dalmatia in late 1434; and on the way home, the Chinese were joined by a Dalmatian fleet, under Admiral Harvatye Mariakyr, which discovered thirty Pacific islands and gave them Dalmatian names.

In trying to establish that the Chinese visit was the "spark that ignited the Renaissance," Menzies relies on a fundamental fallacy of logic: after-this-therefore-because-of-this reasoning. *The Nung Shu*, the world's first mass produced book (published in 1313) and *Yongle Dadian*, a massive encyclopedia consisting of 11,095 books (completed in 1421), he claims, contained information related to latitude and longitude, surveying, printing, perspective in art, gunpowder, helicopter design, the theory that the earth revolved around the sun, and much, much more. Since the Chinese emperor wanted the Europeans to "render tribute" to him, Menzies argues, he *must have*

ordered that the tomes be brought to Italy to educate the "barbarians." And the Renaissance masters, in turn, *must have* borrowed, built on, or plagiarized from their Chinese mentors.

It's very difficult to prove a negative. So, maybe an expedition from China, toting tons of texts, did disembark in Italy in 1434 and jump start the Renaissance. But, at the moment, Gavin Menzies hasn't got much more than novel propositions—best suited to a novel.

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