

Zheng He was from a Hui (Chinese Muslim) family. In 1381, when he was about 10 years old, Yunnan, the last Mongol hold in China, was reconquered by Chinese forces led by generals of the Ming dynasty, which had overthrown the Yuan (Mongol) dynasty in 1368. His family claimed descent from an early Mongol governor of Yunnan province in southwestern China as well as from King Muhammad of Bukhara (now in Uzbekistan). An extensive seaborne commerce had developed to meet the taste of the Chinese for spices and aromatics and the need for raw industrial materials. The Ming court then sought to display its naval power to bring the maritime states of South and Southeast Asia in line. Chinese travelers abroad, as well as Indian and Muslim visitors, widened the geographic horizon of the Chinese. Technological developments in shipbuilding and in the arts of seafaring reached new heights by the beginning of the Ming. In 1400 the prince of Yan revolted against his nephew, the Jianwen emperor, taking the throne in 1402 as the Yongle emperor.