The “China Seas” in world history: A general outline of the role of Chinese and East Asian maritime space from its origins to c. 1800

Angela Schottenhammer

Ghent University, Blandijnberg 2, 9000 Ghent, Belgium

Received 19 September 2012; accepted 7 November 2012
Available online 16 January 2013

KEYWORDS
China seas;
Maritime history;
East Asian Mediterranean;
Maritime space;
Maritime trade;
Exchange relations

Abstract
Through the East Asian waters its neighbouring countries have since early times on maintained networks of trade and exchange relations. Historically, these waters constituted not only a kind of border or natural barrier but from very early times on also a medium facilitating all kinds of exchanges and human activities, a medium through which in particular private merchants but also governments and official institutions established contacts with the world beyond their borders. The seas were sometimes considered a barrier but above all a contact zone, a medium that despite its dangers and difficulties enabled people to establish and maintain manifold exchange relations.

This article intends to provide a general outline of the historical role and significance of East Asian maritime space from its origins to approximately 1800, including the East China Sea, the Bohai Sea, the Yellow Sea (Huanghai), the southern section of the Japanese Sea, and parts of the South China Sea (now usually called Nanhai). It focuses especially, although not exclusively, on China’s traditional treatment of and reference to this maritime realm. Also in order to maintain the spatial concept operable, we have decided to call this maritime space the “China Seas”.

© 2012 Institution for Marine and Island Cultures, Mokpo National University. Production and hosting by Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.
Introduction

East Asia is a region that has recently gained increasing geopolitical importance and in the course of globalization may well become the new world-centre in the future. Through the East Asian waters its neighbouring countries maintain today a global network of trade and exchange relations. But integration into local and supra-regional networks is not only a modern phenomenon. Historically, these waters constituted not only a kind of border or natural barrier but from very early times on also a medium facilitating all kinds of exchanges and human activities, a medium through which in particular private merchants but also governments and official institutions established contacts with the world beyond their borders. Generally speaking, East Asian maritime space was used by fishermen, private and official traders, governments (nations) and government institutions, pirates, and travellers for both commercial, military, diplomatic and private purposes, such as migration or voyages. The seas were sometimes considered a barrier but above all a contact zone, a medium that despite its dangers and difficulties enabled people to establish and maintain manifold exchange relations. This article intends to provide a general outline of the historical role and significance of East Asian maritime space that includes the East China Sea, the Bohai Sea, the Yellow Sea, the South China Sea (now usually called Nanhai), the East China Sea, and parts of the South China Sea (now usually called Nanhai), focussing especially, although not exclusively, on China’s traditional treatment of and reference to this maritime realm. Also in order to maintain the spatial concept operable, we have decided to call this maritime space the “China Seas”, a term that may not be misunderstood in the sense that this East Asian body of water as a whole or all of the sections that we address in this paper at any time belonged to China or were part of Chinese sovereignty. Notwithstanding the fact that the focus of this article lies in the importance and role of maritime space for and in China’s history, we will now and again also discuss developments that took place in Japanese or Korean coastal waters.

At the same time, it may at least not be neglected that during probably most of the time periods from antiquity through the middle to the early modern period it was in fact China that was the, if not always political, but at least economic and cultural centre of the macro-region, which – although it was undoubtedly primarily a continental power – was also quite active in maritime space.

---

1 This is also reflected by discussions about an East Asian integration, beginning with a uniform market and gradually developing into a closer political and military cooperation, similar to the European Union. Even ideas like an East Asian currency (similar to the Euro) have been raised.


3 We are well aware of the fact that the spatial concept of East Asia itself is a highly complex and not unproblematic one.

4 When we speak of an East Asian “Mediterranean”, a term borrowed from the French historian Fernand Braudel that connected the neighbouring countries in the macro-region, the term is used only as a methodological tool to emphasize the broad variety of multi-layered exchange relations. Fernand Braudel (1902–1985), La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l’époque de Philippe II. (Paris: 1949; Paris, Armand Colin. Le Livre de poche, 1990, rééd.), vol. 3.

- From Dengzhou 登州 and Penglai 蓬莱 in Shandong along the Bohai and Dalian Bay 大連灣 to the mouth of the Yalu River
- From Jiangsu or Zhejiang via Huksan 黑山島 to the west coast of Korea
1b The "eastern route" (donghang lu 東航路) from Fujian or Zhejiang via the Ryūkyū to southern Japan
2 Eastern routes (also donghang lu)
2a From Fujian via the northern tip of Taiwan to Naha 那霸 on the Ryūkyū
2b From Fujian and Zhejiang directly to southern Japan
3 Southern routes (nanhang lu 南航路)
3a The "eastern route" (again donghang lu) from Fujian to Luzon and the Sulu region
3b The so-called "western route" (xihang lu 西行路) from Jiangsu via Zhejiang, Fujian, Guangdong and then further to the South China Sea – via Hainan, Vietnam and the area of modern Singapore – and to the Indian Ocean (this route had many branches within Southeast Asia)6

Many guides and descriptions of sea routes existed in China. An anonymous Ming map, for example, the Gu hanghai tu 古航海圖考释, shows the trade arteries from the Bohai area down to the mouth of the Pearl River near Guangzhou. In some cases, the routes are depicted as lines (chuanlu 船路), in others they are described in words.7 Sea routes of course also sometimes changed over time and with them the in- or decreasing importance of coastal and port cities. Information on sea routes and coastlines was compiled into route maps, star charts, and “compass-needle manuals” (zhengjing 針經) or so-called “rutters”.8 During the famous expeditions led by Zheng He 鄭和 (1371–1433), for example, an enormous quantity of information on sea routes and coastlines was collected and composed as rutters and maps. Unfortunately, much of this geographical material was later burnt by the Minister of War, Liu Daxia 劉大夏 (1437–1516). Nevertheless, the geographical knowledge related to them was not entirely lost.

The condition sine qua non for the practical use of maritime space were boats and ships. When exactly the Chinese first

---

6 Angela Schottenhammer, “The Sea as a Barrier and Contact Zone: Maritime Space and Sea Routes in Traditional Chinese Sources and Books”, 9, in Angela Schottenhammer, Roderich Ptak (eds.), Maritime Space in Traditional Chinese Sources; see also the many publications of Roderich Ptak that discuss sea routes, for example, China, the Portuguese, and the Nanyang, Oceans and Routes, Regions and Trade (c. 1000-1600). (Aldershot, etc.: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2004), Variorum Collected Studies Series CS 777; Roderich Ptak, “Jottings on Chinese Sailing Routes to Southeast Asia, Especially on the Eastern Route in Ming Times”, in Jorge M. dos Santos Alves (coord.), Portugal e a China: Conferências nos encontros de história luso-chinesa. (Lisbon: Fundação Oriente, 2001), 107-131; “The Northern Trade Route to the Spice Islands: South China Sea – Sulu Zone – North Moluccas. (14th to early 16th Century)”, Archipel 43 (1992), 27-56.

7 Timothy Brook, Geographical Sources of Ming-Qing History. (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, The University of Michigan, 1988), 43.

began to build boats is hardly reconstructable. Early sources, generally speaking, contain little evidence on ships or seafaring. The Shijing (chapt. Xici 系 航 舟) traces ships for transportation purposes back to the time of the Yellow Emperor (Huangdi 黃帝). The Shi ji 說 續 contains various references to boats and ships. But these very short entries cannot provide any further information about shipbuilding; in addition, they mostly refer to river shipping. Various archaeological relics including boats, oars, and rudders dating to periods between 6000 and 2000 BC, encouraged Chinese scholars to conclude that already during the earliest times of Chinese civilization, during the Xiantouling 大頭嶺 culture (6500–5000 BC), in Guangzhou dug-out canoes were used to venture into the open waters. But even when we assume that these dates are correct, any definite proof for this is lacking. It would seem to be safe to say only that by Shang times at the latest (16th–11th centuries BC) the coastal population used simple devices to float along the coastal waters. Written sources only rarely speak about construction forms of ships (for example Shi ji, chapt. 30 and 118). The “first seaworthy vessel” according to some Chinese historians, is recorded in the Bamboo Annals (Zhushu jinian 竹書紀年), composed at the time of the Warring States. When Huangdi 黃帝 ascended the throne, a big fish that had been caught in the coastal waters, was reportedly sacrificed. King Mang 芒 is recorded as having caught a big fish in the sea. But such entries of course provide no valuable information concerning shipbuilding.

A spectacular find was excavated in 1974 in Guangzhou, when archaeologists discovered the remains of an old shipyard that was dated to the turn of the second to third century BC. According to estimations ships of a length of up to 30 m and a width of 8.4 m could have been constructed there. In situ various Qin and Han coins, carpenters’ tools, arrowheads and daggers were excavated. Through comparative analysis scholars concluded that this was most probably a state-supervised shipyard used for military purposes.

Eventually, during Han times, shipbuilding technology was on a great upswing. Progress was made not only in terms of hull construction, masts, rudders, oars or sails. But, as written sources confirm, there existed different types of ships that could be used for different functional purposes – naval, commercial, for commodity or human transportation across small and large rivers or coastal waters.

---

11 Xi Longfei, Zhongguo zaochuan shi, 38.
12 Xi Longfei, Zhongguo zaochuan shi, 21, 27–29.
15 Gang Deng, Chinese Maritime Activities and Socioeconomic Development, 23; Zhushu jinian tongjian 竹書紀年校證 by Xu Wenjing 徐文靖, (Taipei: Ywen yinshuguan 1966), j. 1, 5a (87).
16 Zhushu jinian tongjian, j. 3, 18a (181).
18 Gang Deng, Chinese Maritime Activities and Socioeconomic Development, 77.
19 Guangzhou wenwu guanlichu, “Guangzhou QinHan zaochuan gongchang yizhi shijue”.
Essential for sailing the seas were the periodic monsoon winds, which determined seafaring all over the Indian Ocean over centuries. These winds comprise a system of regularly alternating winds and currents unique to the Indian Ocean and South and East China Sea. From April to September, as the Asian land mass heats up, hot air rises producing a vacuum, which sucks in the air from the ocean, creating the southwest monsoon. During the other six ‘winter’ months of the year, the opposite reaction occurs, creating the northeast monsoon. They were later called xinfeng 信風 (reliable winds), jifeng 季風 (seasonal winds) or maoyifeng 貿易風 (trade winds) in Chinese. Early evidence that the Chinese knew about these winds can be found in the Shi ji. It mentions the northwest winds 不周風, the northerly winds 度莫風, the northeast winds 梁風, the east winds 明庶風, the southeast winds 清明風, the east winds 景風, the southwest winds 涼風 and the west winds 閉閉風.

But the invention of the sail constitutes a problem. We can only speculate that probably as early as Shang times simple forms of sails were in use. Functional sails were probably not used before the fifth century BC, certainly later than in Egypt. Scholars basically agree that sails were most probably invented by non Han-Chinese peoples such as the Yue 越. This contradicts the legend that the sail (fan 帆) had already been invented by the Great Yu 大禹 during the Xia 夏 Dynasty (trad. 2205–1766).

**Early mythology and ideology**

Already in the first millennium BC the sea had a definite place in Chinese ideology. A bronze inscription from the 10th century BC mentions the term “hai 海” already in its meaning as “sea”, while the term “yang 洋” is still restricted in meaning to signify a “vast, expansive space”. The earliest Chinese literary source attesting to the fact that the sea was originally regarded as a kind of frontier, margin, or delimitation – and at the same time as a mythological place – is the Daoist work Liezi 列子 (3rd–4th century BC; fl. 398 BC), which refers to five mountains in the middle of an abyss beyond the Bohai Sea 渤海 in the East – the first one Daiyu 大飈, the second Yuanjiao 負嬌, the third Fanghu 方觚, the fourth Yinzhou 漯州 and the fifth Penglai 蓬萊. The Eastern Sea was considered the frontier or margin towards immortality and a space in which the islands of the immortals are located – Penglai 蓬萊, Fangzhang 方丈 and Yinzhou 漯洲. Tomb No. 1 from the Mawangdui 馬王堆 complex contained a mural with a representation of the Penglai Islands. In Chinese mythology these were considered the empire of immortality where the elixir of immortality could be found. Qin Shihuang 秦始皇 (r. 221–210 BC) is said to have searched for these islands to obtain the immortality drug. Similar stories are reported about Emperor Han Wudi 漢武帝 (r. 140–87 BC). In 130 BC, a certain Li Shaojun 李少君 told the emperor about the process of obtaining immortality as supposedly also carried out by China’s first and mythical emperor Huangdi 黃帝. These stories at least reveal that the sea seems to have possessed quite a strong magical-mythological attraction for Chinese emperors and other members of the social elite. They also attest to their interest in a world beyond – be it a mythical one or a vast unknown world beyond China’s borders. Interestingly, these mythical ideologies all refer to the Eastern Sea (donghai 東海), the direction in which the sun rises. According to Chinese views China was surrounded by the Four Seas (sihai 四海), located close to three oceans (yang 洋). The Eastern Seas included the Bohai 海或 Sea, the Huanghai 黃海 or Yellow Sea, the Donghai 東海 or the East China Sea and the Nanhai 南海 or South China Sea.

**Early imperial China (Qin-Han)**

The first contacts on sea routes were of course established with close neighbours in the region. From approximately the fourth century BC relatively lively shipping developed in the North-east Asian waters, in particular between China and Korea. Originally, the increase in shipping activities in the Eastern Seas certainly also has to be traced back to Emperor Qin Shihuangdi’s 秦始皇 (r. 221–210 BC) search for the islands of the immortals. The sea route led from Shandong either via Korea. In addition, the sea was from early times onwards used for commercial and military purposes. But it must be mentioned that in terms of maritime commerce the Chinese

---

21 The monsoon winds were known to most of the seafarers. Greeks and Romans knew the winds according to its “discoverer” Hippalos, who probably lived in the first century BC. He dared to sail over the open sea and could, thus, shorten tremendously the sea voyage to the distant world of the immortals. Greeks and Romans knew about the monsoon winds and highly valued them as both a necessity as well as a means of transport. They were used for commercial and military purposes. But it must be mentioned that in terms of maritime commerce the Chinese

---

22 Shi ji, j. 25, 1243–1248. According to Gang Deng 1997, 43, the monsoon winds were called bozhuo feng 舶趨風 in sayings of the peasant population during Han times. This would imply knowledge and distribution of the character 船.

23 Xi Longfei, Zhongguo zaochuan shi, 48–50.


25 On the invention of the sail during Shang times, see Xi Longfei, Zhongguo zaochuan shi, 49-50.

remained relatively passive until approximately the 11th century. They seem to have traded early on (in the Qin-Han period) with locations in Korea and a bit later also Japan, but did not venture to trade with Southeast Asia, not to speak of the Indian Ocean, until the latter half of the 11th century. In this context, one should make a distinction between Chinese activities in Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia.

In search of the wealth of the south

Early contacts with Southeast Asia basically went via the South China Sea and Canton or Panyu 魚釣 as the major port. On Panyu the famous historian Sima Qian 司馬遷 (145–86 BC) reports that it constituted an important commercial centre where pearls (zhují 珠璣), rhinoceros horn (xi 麋), tortoise shells (dàinào 抵鶴), fruits and fabrics (guo bu 果布) were exchanged.31 But commercial relations became really important between South China (Guangdong), Indo-China and the Malay Archipelago only at the beginning of our time. In 111 BC Emperor Han Wudi subjigated the NanYue 南粵 Empire in the south to get access to the wealth from the Nanhai region. We know that in 29 AD Jiaozhou 楚州 (modern Vietnam) under the supervision of its local governor still voluntarily sent an embassy to the Han court “paying tribute” (交阯校尉讓率七郡太守遣使奉貢).32 At that time many Chinese had already migrated to the region from the north. But soon problems arose and Wudi sent a punitive mission to the south (see below). Later descriptions provide evidence that the Chinese were, for example, especially interested in the copper wealth of the region.33

Many Chinese historians claim that the merchant junk (guchuán 貨船) that were also used by Han envoy ships around 100 BC were built in China and operated by Chinese sailors. The Official History of the Han Dynasty, the Hanshu 漢書, however, clearly states that these envoy ships had to rely on foreign “barbarian junks” (manyi guchuán 蠻夷貨船) to travel along the coasts. Still the Tang period Tang yulin 唐律林 by Wang Dang 王鑒 refers to “foreign ships called haibo 海舶”, which year for year come to Guangzhou for trade, the largest ones coming from the “Lion’s Country” (Shizi guo 宋子國), that is Sri Lanka. Whenever these or other foreign junks reached Guangzhou, the local population was full of excitement.34 This is Sri Lanka. Whenever these or other foreign junks reached the coasts of Southeast Asia, year for year come to Guangzhou for trade, the largest ones coming from the “Lion’s Country” (Shizi guo 宋子國), that is Sri Lanka.

Hepu 合浦 in South China was very famous for its richness in pearls.35 Even though it was economically speaking rather underdeveloped region – favoured as a place of exile for officials who had fallen into disgrace – the pearl fishing was very lucrative. On Hainan Island, that was called Zhuyai 珠崖 at that time, two commanders, Zhuyai and Dan’er 儲育 were established. But due to revolts both commanders were suspended again in the first century BC and all the evidence we possess suggests that the island did not play an important role in China’s early sea routes that rather used to follow the coastal line to the south.

Probably the most important source concerning China’s maritime contacts and routes in the Nanhai region during the Han Dynasty is provided by a much quoted and discussed entry in the Hanshu. Scepticism about the authenticity of the passage as well as the assumption that it was not actually written by Ban Gu 郎固 (32–92) himself has been raised. But there can be little doubt that the entry provides a relatively authentic picture of China’s maritime relations at that time. Contacts with places in Indo-China, North Sumatra, Myanmar and South India are mentioned.36

Following this entry in the Hanshu and comparing it with archaeological evidence along the coasts of Southeast Asia and India, ships in these times sailed from Hepu 合浦 or Xuwen 徐聞 first to Funan 楊南 (Phnام; Southern Annam), the first important kingdom in Southeast Asia,37 and then reached Oc Eo, the port of Funan.38 From there they travelled via the Gulf of Thailand to the East coast of the Isthmus of Kra on the Malay Peninsula. Goods were unloaded and then transported on land probably crossing the narrowest passage of the isthmus at Kra Buri in order to reach the West coast. From there ships sailed in the direction of the Gulf of Bengal

---

and then further to the east coast of Sri Lanka or they reached another South Indian port, Arikamedu, or another port along the coast of Coromandel.\textsuperscript{39} The return voyage happened accordingly or via the Malacca Strait. Funan was an important stopover in the Indo-Iranian and Parthian sea trade of that time. Among the archaeological relics of its former capital dated to the second to fourth century archaeologists excavated a Roman coin of 152 AD with the image of the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius (reg. 161–180). Undoubtedly, this find does not tell us anything about how and when the coin got there. But there is also no convincing reason to deny the existence of a relatively robust sea trade in Funan. Both Parthia and India are recorded in the \textit{Hou Hanshu} as trading with the Romans by sea and conducting a very lucrative commerce. The seafaring trade of the Roman Empire, thus, finally connected Southeastern Europe and the Orient with the west coast of India, it connected the Red Sea to the Arabian Sea and ports in India,\textsuperscript{40} and from there links existed that led into the China Seas, even though they were not yet routine.

**Human movement and migration**

The sea – certainly also understood figuratively in the sense of escaping to a remote place – including islands located close to the littoral but also countries like Korea and Japan were relatively early on considered or used as a place of refuge or exile. Kongzi 孔子 (551–479 BC) is claimed to have already said he would go into exile on the seas with a raft, should his political ideas not be accepted (\textit{Lunyu 論語}, Book 5, chpt. 7).\textsuperscript{41} The first concrete case of an exile by sea is reported from the year 473 BC. After the state of Yue had annexed Wu, Fan Li 范蠡, originally advisor to the victorious King Gou Jian 句踐, went overseas fearful of the revengeful personality of the king (\textit{Shiji 史記}).\textsuperscript{42} When in 277 BC the state of Qin conquered the state of Yue in Southeast China (modern Zhejiang and Fujian), local inhabitants are said to have fled in great numbers overseas. One renowned modern historian, Zhang Xun 張雲, even claimed in this context that the original settlers of the Penghu 澎湖 Islands as well as of Taiwan were originally descendents of these Yue refugees who were known as fishermen with short hair and tattoos. A first official state-supported emigration to lands overseas is transmitted from the third century BC. Emperor Qin Shihuang is said to have sent a fleet with 3000 young emigrants, men and women, as well as with grain, seeds and a great quantity of tools in the direction of Japan.\textsuperscript{43} When Dong Zhuo 董卓 (murdered 193) took over power through a coup d'état towards the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty, many scholars and literati are said to have emigrated to Liaodong 遼東 by crossing the Bohai Sea.

**Military purposes**

Following the \textit{Zuozhuan 左傳}, naval battles had become quite popular by late Eastern Zhou times. In 549 BC King Gong 共 of Chu 楚 sent out his fleet to attack the kingdom of Wu 吳. In 525 BC, Wu 吳 subsequently dispatched its fleet twice to attack Chu. It has been calculated that between 549 and 476 BC a further 20 sea battles took place between Wu and Chu alone.\textsuperscript{44} But we can say with relative certainty that the war ships navigated only in the close coastal waters and in river estuaries. A real sea battle did not take place before 485 BC when Fuchai 夫差, King of Wu 吳, sent a fleet from the south and defeated the navy of the Kingdom of Qi 齊 in the north (Aigong 役公, year 10). In 482 BC the Kingdom of Yue 越 in the south attacked Wu from the sea and eventually defeated and annexed the country nine years later. All these references attest to the use of the seas around China for political military purposes, but first only along the coastal line of what is now China. But soon rulers ventured a bit further.

In 109 BC the Emperor Han Wudi dispatched a fleet with 5000 soldiers from Shandong via the Bohai 海洋 Sea to Korea in order to attack the country and establish Chinese prefectorates or commanderies there.\textsuperscript{45} The Chinese soldiers were supposedly transported to Korea on multi-storied ships called “\textit{touchuhan 極船}”. Subsequently, the Han Empire established three commanderies on Korean territory, Lelang 連壤, Zhenfan 真番 and Lintun 臨屯.\textsuperscript{46} Also a first Chinese occupation of the island of Hainan, at that time designated as Dan'er 丹耳 and Zhouyi, is recorded from Han times. The campaign took place in the winter of the year 6 of the reign period Yuanding 元鼎 (112 BC) of Han Wudi. The \textit{Hanshu} 公元 交代 of 100,000 soldiers that are said to have participated in the campaign.\textsuperscript{47} Edward E. Schafer in this context also mentions the famous Han general Ma Yuan 馬援 (14 BC–49 AD) who was involved in many campaigns in the south: “These garrisoned territories seem to have been little disturbed by the immigrants with their strange ways during the earlier Han period. But in the first century of the Christian era, after the definitive conquest of those lands by the septuagenarian hero Ma Yuan, the soldiers were followed by colonists and their magistrates, bringing all the paraphernalia of official culture with them. Parts of Nam-Viet took on the superficial but pleasing aspect of a respectable Chinese province”.\textsuperscript{48} These examples clearly attest to the fact that by Han times at the latest the Chinese Empire was expanding its influence via the sea to close-by


\textsuperscript{42} \textit{Shiji}. j. 41, 1740.

\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Shiji}. j. 118, 3086.

\textsuperscript{44} Zhang Xun, \textit{Zhongguo hanghai kejishi 中國航海科技史}. (Beijing: Haiyang chubanshe 1991), 23.

\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Shiji}. j. 115, 2987–2989.


\textsuperscript{47} \textit{Hanshu}. j. 6, 188; also Wang Xiangzhi 王象之 (\textit{Jinshi 1196} — after1221), \textit{Yudi jisheng 儒家聖經}. (Taipei: Wenhai chubanshe, 1962), j. 89, 2a. 1.

neighbouring territories. The use of the China Seas for naval, military purposes has, thus, a long tradition.

Diplomatic purposes

Sources tell us much less about early private trade relations. Little has been recorded – often we possess only indirect evidence – and also archaeology can so far provide us with only more general tendencies. Officially at least, maritime trade in Northeast Asia was more or less closely linked up with diplomacy.

First written evidence of a visit of a Japanese envoy to China stems from the year 57. In the Hou Hanshu it is mentioned that the Wo ( conducenced the Chinese designation of Japan – had brought tribute to the Chinese court that year. The Han Emperor Guangwu 光武 (reg. 25–57) is even said to have conferred, via the Japanese envoy, a golden seal to the "King of Wo". An inscription confirmed the Japanese ruler as the king of his country. This written record seemed to have been verified when in 1784 a golden seal was unearthed on the Island of Shika-no-shima 賀卑島 in Japan – supposedly exactly the same seal that had been conferred upon the Japanese king by the Han emperor. Indeed this seal has meanwhile been considered as authentic among Japan’s archaeological experts; a solid proof that this really is the seal that is mentioned in the Hou Hanshu is this, however, admittedly not.

As tribute the Japanese are said to have sent goods such as textiles, sapan wood, bows and arrows, slaves, and white pearls. Chinese gifts on the other hand included silk fabrics, gold objects, bronze mirrors, pearls, lead and cinnabar.

Bronze mirrors as well as numerous other bronze and iron objects stemming from the Han period have been excavated in various places in both Korea and Japan. Undoubtedly, bronze mirrors constituted one of the early trade commodities and diplomatic gifts of the time. Even bronze coins cast under the rulership of Wang Mang 王莽 (r. 9–23) have been unearthed from some places in Kyūshū 九州.

The China Sea was of course also used by fishermen since earliest times. Coastal residents of Shandong, Jiangsu and Zhejiang obviously were highly qualified shipbuilders and already during Zhou times were using the coastal waters for fishing and trading.

Boats for two can probably be dated back to the Eastern Zhou Dynasty 東周 (770–221 v. Chr.). Relics of rudders are much older and have been estimated to date back to 7000 BC or earlier.

Migration, military, political-diplomatic and commercial purposes were, thus, the dominating factors of activities in the China Seas in this early period. The sources provide us with the impression that, officially at least, military and diplomatic purposes prevailed while trade was only of minor importance. This certainly does not reflect the whole range of the picture. And it is clear that official relations went along with cultural exchange, a factor that became ever more important parallel to the sharp increase in commercial interchange and interaction. The routes still closely followed coastlines and islands in the more shallow waters.

The period of division (Sanguo 三國, 220–265, 280; Nanbei chao 南北朝)

This period is characterized by growing official and non-official relations with Korea and Japan, which rose as independent states at that time, a process that was also facilitated by increasingly frequent travels of Buddhist monks. As Korea and Japan converted to Buddhism, China became a major pilgrimage destination for monks seeking education and texts and, thus, also increasingly functioned as a mediator of Chinese culture. The China Seas were used increasingly for private voyages and increasingly functioned as a cultural exchange zone. Goods and technologies introduced to these countries by merchants undoubtedly greatly facilitated the adoption of Chinese culture throughout the China Seas.

At that time, Korea was divided into three kingdoms, Koguryó 高麗 (37 BC–668 AD), Silla 新羅 (57 BC–953 AD) and Paekche 百濟 (18 BC–660 AD). Mutual relations with China and Japan were, generally speaking, characterized by military considerations. The Chinese state of Wei 魏 (220–265) attacked Korea, in particular Koguryó that had a joint land border with China, and vice versa. All three Korean kingdoms, on the other hand, tried to take advantage of China’s separation and use nomadic peoples as well as Japan for its own military purposes. Paekche, for example, asked for Japanese troops to assist in attacking Silla. Paekche also developed as the spring-board from which aspects of Chinese culture as well as Buddhism were further transmitted to Japan. But despite these not really pacific politics that continued throughout the Nanbeichao period, it was a time when the ruling and social elites in Korea adopted many elements of Chinese culture as well as Buddhism.

Wei also maintained official relations with Japan. Twice the Wei ruler sent embassies to Japan, between 238 and 247 and vice versa four Japanese embassies came to China. The chapter “Description of the Eastern Barbarians” (Dongyi zhan 東夷傳) in the Wei annals of the History of the Three Kingdoms (Sanguo zhhi 三國志) described the Wo people in relative detail. The various peoples of the Wo country, it is said, can be reached, as a rule, by each time crossing another small sea. The geography and the most important local products are described, as well as the number of households, if known, the name of the responsible official, as well as distances. The Wo country is mentioned as the country of the Queen Himiko 賀卑
Japanese contacts with China for a long time were maintained basically via Korea. This has of course also to do with the managing of the sea routes. It was easier to sail along the coasts and passing islands than to take the direct sea route via the open sea, a route that was first officially taken in Tang times. Japan’s interest in Korea in this respect basically only existed in her role as intermediary to Chinese culture. One was interested in scholars, books, calendars and art objects. It was also via Korea that Buddhism reached Japan, mainly via Paekche. A last Japanese embassy to China had reached the court of the Western Jin 西晉 (265–316) in 266, a following embassy is not mentioned before 413, when it reached the court of the Eastern Jin 東晉 (317–420).56

With the unification of North China under the Toba-Wei 北魏 (386–534) the Northern Bei Wei state became Koguryo’s most important partner. After 425 for more than a century regular tribute and trade relations existed between both countries. At the same time, Koguryó tried to maintain diplomatic relations with China’s Southern dynasties, what turned out to be not as easy as hoped. In 480 and 520, for example, two embassies of Koguryó to the Southern Qi and the Liang Dynasty were caught by the Bei Wei.

The influence of Chinese civilization, as well as immigrants from both China and Korea that were troubled by wars between 365–645, left far-reaching signs in the hitherto still relatively primitive and traditionally organized Japanese society that was based upon a clan system (氏族). A Japanese work dating from 815, the Shinsen shoji roku 新撰姓氏錄, contains genealogies of 1182 aristocratic people from Kyōto and five inner provinces. More than 30% of these aristocratic families were of foreign origin (bambetsu 落別), 176 from China, 120 from Paekche, 88 from Koma (Koguryó) and 18 from Silla. Also numerous Korean peasants and craftsmen emigrated to Japan during this time.57

During this time period, the East China Seas also started to become the spring-board for locations beyond in Southeast Asia. In this context, it is intriguing to see that the Chinese character for ocean-going junk “bo 船” seems to appear for the first time in the third century. In 260, Kang Tai 康泰, received the order of the ruler of Wu, Sun Quan 孫權 (reg. 222–252), to travel to Southeast Asia. He left a report about his travels, the Washi waiguo zhuàn 吳時外國傳 (Description of foreign countries during the time of Wu), parts of which have survived in later encyclopaedias. An entry in the Taiping yulan 太平御覽 by Li Fang 李昉 (925–996) provides us with a brief passage of the Washi waiguo zhuàn. Accordingly, at that time overseas junks existed that were equipped with seven sails (船張七帆).58 Another entry quotes the Nanzhou yiwu zhi 南州異物志 by Wan Zhen 萬震 and speaks of people beyond China’s borders, whose ships were equipped with up to four sails according to their size (外夷人隨舟大小或待四帆).59 Sun Quan reportedly already possessed ships of a size to be able to transport up to 3000 soldiers and officials and could sail along the big rivers and streams (大船名之曰長安載坐直之士三千人與群臣泛舟江津).60

Interestingly, the character for “bo 船” is written in two different ways in the Washi waiguo zhuàn (乘大伯張七帆; see also Nan Qishu, j. 11, 195: 船, 白也), which may suggest that it originally emerged from a certain phoneme (in Cantonese pronounced “buhk”), perhaps by adopting a foreign language term related to the Arab “bahr” or the Greek “baris”. According to Pierre-Yves Manguin, the expression “kolando phonta” in a passage in the Periplos of the Erythrean Sea has been interpreted as a corrupt Greek form “kantun bo 船高船”, referring to ships that sailed from India to Southeast Asia.61 They are described as ships up to 50 m in length, carrying about 300 tons of goods and hundreds of passengers, equipped with multiple sails and masts and planks fastened with vegetal fibres.62 Nautical archaeologists call these vessels “stitched-plank and lashed-lug technique”.63 Foreign shipbuilding traditions consequently greatly influenced South China’s shipbuilding industry. As late as the Tang Dynasty coastal people of Guangdong learned how to build junks without using nails, namely by tying together planks and beams with the fibres of

---

55 Matsuhashi Kenrin 松下見林, who introduced this text into Japanese scholarship, supposed that the last character, “yi 一”, was a typo and replaced it by the character “tai 太”. From this the name Yamatai for the land of the Queen of the Wo resulted, a name that has remained in use until today despite critical textual analysis. Later in the fifth century Yamato in Central Japan was the seat of the central Japanese government. In this context it has been suggested that the Yamatai of the Wei Annals is actually identical with Yamato. More recent research, however, claims that the Yamatai of the Wei Annals rather referred to the northern part of Kyushu. But even taking into consideration archaeological evidence, the residence of Himikos, Yama’ichi, cannot be identified with absolute accuracy.


58 Taiping yulan 太平御覽 by Li Fang 李昉 (925–996), j. 771, 5b, Sibu congkan, fasc. 35–55.

59 Taiping yulan, j. 771, 5b.

60 Sangwochi buzu 三國志補注 by Hang Shijun 杭世駿. (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1937), j. 6, 6b (1023).


the “guangluang 桂柳 tree”, a kind of palm (Arenga pinnata). The greatest period of advancement in Chinese shipbuilding technology occurred during the Song and Yuan dynasties.

The most famous Chinese overseas vessels are the so-called “sand ships” (shachuan 沙船) for shallow waters, the “bird ships” (wu or niaochezuan 鳥船) with a sharp bottom, proficient in sailing in the open waters, as were the “Fuchuan 船川” (Fujian ships) that were equipped with a keel and the “Guangchu 桂川” (Guangdong ships) – but these have basically to be dated into the Song dynasty (960–1279). Song ships, as the famous Quanzhou shipwreck that was excavated in 1747 off the coast of Quanzhou (Quanzhou Houzhuo Song chuan 泉州后渚宋船) may show, were already divided by bulkheads into ship compartments.66

Some time later, we meet the expression also in Official Histories of the Nanbei chao period, such as in the Songshu 宋書, the Nan Qishu 南齊書, the Jinshu 晉書 or the Liangshu 梁書.67 Analysing the quotations from these histories we learn that both private merchants and officials crossed the sea on such bo 船. The Liangshu, for example, explicitly speaks of foreign merchants (外國商人) who arrived on bo and also mentions the multiple profits that could be made from mar-


66 See for example the excavation report in Fujiansheng Quanzhou hawai jiaotongshu bo wuguan 福建省泉州海外交通史博物馆 (ed.), Quanzhouwulan Songdai huchuan fajie yu yanjiu 泉州灣宋代海船發掘與研究. (Beijing: Haiyang chubanshe, 1987).
67 Songshu, j. 97, 2377: 南齊，西南夷。大抵在之交州之南及西南，居大湖中洲，相去三百五十里，達喜二三万里，船乘帆操。造運不可詳言。Songshu, j. 97, 2380–81: 今遣二人，是臣同心，有所宣勞，誠實可信。願增華州時遣運。不令所在有蔭通客；Nan Qishu, j. 64: 119; 吳孫權征百越孫諧，浮海乘船，白也，今言和模所書《白符》焉；Nan Qishu, j. 31, 573: 又督胡與越山南營，倭使禮命通各海内南州；Nan Qishu, j. 41, 724: 處波將於邇州，汎舟樓於長道，浮海遷難，迎船交際；Nan Qishu, j. 59, 1015: 又曰：「臣前遣使羅物行廣州貿易，天竺人譯伽耶僧伽訥子在廣州因與臣華僧擬欲來遊南州；又言，則海內亦起於是，南州乃可乘也。」Wendi, Sally Church and others also started a website, seehttp://www.shipwreckasia.org/wp/download.php?id=3 (31.08.2012), where a few complete wrecks are introduced. Historians and underwater archaeologists including Jun Kimura, Xi Longfei, Cai Wei, Sally Church and others also started a website, see http://www.shipwreckasia.org/projects/.

68 Wang Gungwu provides a very good overview on early Chinese trade in the Nanhai and the gradual rise in importance of Buddhist religion, culture and commodities.
70 See for example the excavation report in Fujiansheng Quanzhou hawai jiaotongshu bo wuguan 福建省泉州海外交通史博物馆 (ed.), Quanzhouwulan Songdai huchuan fajie yu yanjiu 泉州灣宋代海船發掘與研究. (Beijing: Haiyang chubanshe, 1987).
71 See for example the excavation report in Fujiansheng Quanzhou hawai jiaotongshu bo wuguan 福建省泉州海外交通史博物馆 (ed.), Quanzhouwulan Songdai huchuan fajie yu yanjiu 泉州灣宋代海船發掘與研究. (Beijing: Haiyang chubanshe, 1987).
72 During the Sui Dynasty 隋 (589–617) official and diplomatic relations still seemed to prevail. But private traffic, especially of monks and merchants, increased. The first Sui Emperor, Wendi 文帝 (r. 581–604), still concentrated on the consolidation of the newly unified empire. In 598, he sent troops to Korea on both land and sea routes to subdue the country. Generally, he looked towards northern China and the wealth of the south rather seemed to have been a thorn in his flesh. In 598, he even tried to restrict maritime commerce in the south by prohibiting the construction of large ships. All ships that were built in the south and were longer than 30 Chinese feet were confiscated (其江南諸州，入海有船長丈三已上，悉割入官). However, this is not only a clear sign of the existing

time trade, basically by buying cheaply and then reselling the goods for higher prices (Liangshu, j. 33, 470). Also Chinese pilgrims like Faxian 法顯 (c. 337–422) provided descriptions of these ocean-going vessels. This is a clear indication for that states neighbouring the China Seas started to venture into this body of water on a more regular basis between the 4th and 5th century AD.
73 The China Seas were increasingly used for private commercial activities – reflecting, according to our thesis, a general tendency away from official military, political and diplomatic relations towards more private exchange – although, as mentioned above, the Chinese basically still remained passive receivers along the coast, as far as relations with the Nanhai are concerned. But it is undisputed that major changes took place in the China Seas during this period. The latter increasing importance of Buddhism has to be mentioned. Wang Gungwu provides a very good overview on early Chinese trade in the Nanhai and the gradual rise in importance of Buddhist religion, culture and commodities.

In Ge Hong's Zhang (284–343) Shenxian zhuo 神仙傳 (Records of Deities), the Daoist immortal Ma Gu 麻姑 once told another immortal, Wang Yuan 王遠, that since meeting him, the Eastern Sea had been turned into mulberry fields three times. From this story comes an old Chinese saying, “canghui sangtian 漆海桑田”, which literally means turning the sea into mulberry fields, but which has been widely used to indicate any great transformation. The third to approximately the early seventh centuries were in fact a period of great changes in the China Seas. In this context we can speak of a period of the coming together of the East and the South China seas as well as its gradual linking up with the Indian Ocean, the gradual growing together of what had formerly been a “maritime patchwork” (Flickenteppich). However, this is not only a clear sign of the existing

commercial wealth in the south that accrued from maritime trade; this political measure also attests to the fact that the sea was regarded under political criteria but that at the same time trade relations that had developed more or less independently continued to exist.

Military purposes

The second Sui Emperor, Yangdi 楊帝 (r. 605–617), however, actively promoted maritime trade and “called for men to establish contacts with far-away regions”.72 Several missions were sent to various countries in Southeast Asia. Although he, too, used the sea for military purposes (in 612, 613 and 614 in the three campaigns that were undertaken to Korea) and hundreds of ships are said to have been constructed to sail from Shandong to Korea, Yangdi at the same time paid great attention to the wealth that could be derived from maritime trade.

He eventually also ordered the construction of a fleet and undertook military expeditions to Liuqiu 劉墟.73 It is still unclear to which island this actually refers, the Ryukyu Islands or Taiwan. Until today scholars have not arrived at a definite conclusion. According to Ts'ao Yung-ho 曹永和 the majority of historians considers it to be Taiwan.74 This is at least the first time that Liuqiu is officially mentioned and, thus, another part of the East China Seas was explored for the first time officially. However, the mission was not successful. A lot was apparently destroyed and thousands of captives taken who were later taken to China as slaves. But no trade or diplomatic relations were established. When the Chinese army proceeded further into Chinese territory – if we accept that this entry actually referred to Taiwan – most of the soldiers were infected with malaria or died of other diseases.75 After this campaign, Taiwan at least officially seems to have disappeared again from Chinese consciousness.

Diplomacy

When the ruling elite of Japan came to know about the unification of China, between 581 and 600 a first embassy was sent to the Chinese court. In 607, during the reign of the Japanese Queen Suiko 推古 (592–628; according to Nelson) with Ono no Imoko 小野妹子, the first official Japanese envoy was sent to the Chinese court. The Japanese letter that was handed over to the Chinese emperor designated Japan as the “Country of the Rising Sun”, while China was addressed as “Country of the Setting Sun”. Imoko referred to the Chinese emperor as “the Bodhisattva Son of Heaven who dedicates his full power to the support of Buddhist teachings”. Nevertheless, the letter was seen as a bone of contention, as, in the eyes of the Chinese, the Japanese ruler had placed himself on the same level with the Chinese Son of Heaven. But in spite of diplomatic irritations and the alleged insult, Emperor Yangdi sent his own envoy, Pei Shiqing 皮世清, back to Japan with Ono in 608. They sailed via Shandong, Paekche 百濟, Tsushima 對馬 and Iki 岳崎 further east. This means that they still took the route along the coastline and islands avoiding deep waters. Pei Shiqing later brought some Japanese students with him who then spent some time in China and learnt the basics of Chinese culture.

In this context, we see that the sea route from Japan to China also was starting to become a route for scholars and people who were in search of knowledge and Buddhist teachings. Official students from Korea and Japan came to China to learn about Buddhism and Chinese culture. Japan adopted not only art and culture from China but more or less its complete administrative system. Certainly the most famous Japanese monk who came to China at that time was Ennin 圓仁 (c. 793–864), who left us an interesting diary about his travels in the Tang empire. Among Chinese monks who went to Japan Jianzhen 鉴真 (688–763) has to be mentioned. All this attests to the importance of culture and religion in mutual exchange relations. Trade relations of that time were also greatly influenced by Buddhism, Buddhist texts and artefacts ranging highly among them. At the same time, the sea routes expanded on a permanent basis to places such as India and the Persian Gulf.

Between 623 and 684 alone numerous missions not only from Indo-China but also from countries further away reached China, such as Java Heling 訾陵, Panpan 盤盤, Juloumi 捨婆密, Dundan 蒲丹 on the Malay Peninsula, Srivijaya (Sanfoqi 三佛齊) and Jambi (Moluoyou 倫(末羅)州) on Sumatra. Important also are the embassies from India between 656 and 658, a mission from Sri Lanka in 670 (the first one since 527), as well as missions from the Persian rulers. Already in 638, for example, the Persian king Yazgard III (r. 632–651) sent a mission to the Chinese Emperor Taizong 太宗 (r. 627–649) asking for help to repel the Arabs. Starting with the Abbasid Caliphate in 750, merchants gradually became more important than diplomats. Since the overland routes were temporarily rather obstructed by political and military clashes, the merchants went by sea. Thus since Tang times, the major communication road between the Persian Gulf and China came to be the sea route. This has of course also to be traced back to the upswing of navigation in the Islamic World.

We have clear evidence that Yangzhou, located on the Grand Canal about 15 km north of its junction with the Yangzi, was not only known to Muslim Arab and Persian traders, but that it was one of their major trading centres at that time. The Xin Tang shu 新唐書 refers to several thousand Arab and Persian merchants being killed in a local disturbance at Yangzhou during the 750s (Dashi Bosi gu hu sizhe shuqian ren 大食波斯賣胡死者數千人; sha shang hu Bosi shuqian ren 將商胡波斯數千人).76 In 785, Arabs and Persians are said to have plundered Guangzhou (Dashi, Bosi kou Guangzhou 大食, 波斯囗廣州).77 Also Arab maritime accounts, such as the Akhbar al-Sin wa-l-Hind of 851,78 give detailed descriptions of Arab

72 Suishu, j. 82, 1817.
73 Suishu, j. 81, 1822–1823 (Dongyi 東夷) states: 流求國, 居海島之中, 當班文野, 水行五百里至。74 Ts'ao Yung-ho 曹永和 (Cao Yonghe), Zhongguo haiyangshi lunji 中國海洋史論集, (Taipei: Lianjiang chubanshe, 2000), 40.
75 Suishu, j. 24, 367.
76 Xin Tangshu 新唐書 by Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007–1072) and Song Qi 宋祁 (998–1061). (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), j. 141, 4655 and j. 144, 4702.
77 Xin Tangshu, j. 6, 161.
78 This date was given by Abu Zaid, the author of the Silsilit al-tawârikh written in the tenth century, when he edited the former work.
settlements in China. According to Abu Zaid, by 878 about 120,000 foreign merchants had settled in China.79 Elsewhere I have already argued that it was in fact Persian and Arab merchants who actually carried long-distance maritime trade to China and initiated the age of active maritime trade there.80

Trade contacts between China and the Persian Gulf are also attested to by archaeological evidence, primarily ceramics. Tang artisans copied artistic influences with which they came into contact, adopting and adapting many exotic styles. Native styles were combined with shapes and decorative motifs from Persia, India, Greece and Syria. A great quantity of Tang period bronze coins has been excavated at the port of old Hormuz.81 These coins most probably reached Hormuz by sea.

In the course of the Tang Dynasty the East China Seas eventually witnessed a fresh phenomenon. The Yangzi area with the city of Yangzhou developed as a leading commercial centre with a significant presence not only of Chinese and East Asian or Southeast merchants, but a remarkable community of Persian (Bosi波斯 traders. The Yangzi area with the city of Yangzhou揚州 developed as a leading commercial centre with a significant presence not only of Chinese and East or Southeast Asian merchants, but a remarkable community of Persian and Arab traders – so-called Muslim or Hui回 merchants, as they are called since Yuan times in Chinese sources.82 Trade contacts between China and the Persian Gulf are attested to by both written and archaeological evidence, primarily ceramics.

The China Seas were consequently further linked up via the Indian Ocean to the Persian Gulf. And also the quality of traded products changed – more and more luxury goods from far-away countries reached China. In this context, a city like Yangzhou (and of course Guangzhou in South China) also emerged as great cultural centres that attracted both domestic and foreign intellectuals, scholars, monks, etc. The coastal province of Zhejiang and the region around the Yangzi area increasingly came to the fore of the outer world, also Japan and Korea. And in this way Northeast Asia, in particular Japan, was also linked up with the South China Sea. And commercial and cultural centres like Yangzhou at the same time functioned as the gateway to inland China.

Use of the sea for military purposes, however, remained prevalent also during Tang times. Sources repeatedly speak of large fleets and up to 500 ships. In one case, Japan is said to have supported Paekche with a real armada and supposedly 400 of these battle ships burnt down in flames during an unsuccessful attack. Even if we take these figures as exaggerations, they do at least attest to the obviously enormous capacity to mobilize the required wood and other resources for the construction of ships for military purposes within relatively short time periods, both in China, Korea and Japan.

To summarize, commercial exchange and cultural transfer in the early period reached a peak of hitherto unseen density and intensity and had already started to overshadow the military campaigns of navies. In the following period China even rose as a maritime power.

Late middle period China (Wudai-Song-Yuan)

Since the An Lushan安禄山 (693–757) Rebellion in 755 stability and order within China had already decreased. At the beginning of the tenth century the formerly glorious Tang Empire eventually collapsed formally and China fell apart into the so-called Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms. Against the background of political instability in Central, North and East Asia, and, last but not least, in China itself, we can now observe an ever present shift of trade routes from the traditional overland routes to maritime routes. In addition, we have to take into consideration in this historical context the active promotion of maritime trade, first by rulers of local dynasties or kingdoms during this period and subsequently by the Song government during the tenth century. Maritime trade not only supplied the social and ruling elites with fine and rare luxury articles that were otherwise unavailable in China, but it was also used as a source of income to fill state coffers. During a time when China was split among competing dynasties and kingdoms, some rulers of states located in coastal areas, such as the state of Min閩 (910–946), and later, the independent rulers of the Quanzhou region in Fukien, the Kingdom of WuYue吴越 (907–978), the Southern Tang Dynasty (937–975), or the rulers of the Southern Han dynasty南漢 (917–971) in Guangdong, all discovered maritime trade to be a way to guarantee the economic underpinning of their regimes, including the satisfaction of their own personal consumer demands.

We know, for example, that the Min Kingdom in Southeast China had trade contacts with Zhancheng占成 (Annam安南), Sanfoo三佛齊 (Srivijaya), Korea and probably also Japan.83 Local ruling clans, such as the family of Liu Congxiao留從效 in Min, are said to have given generous sponsorship to the construction of kilns for ceramics production84 – ceramics being one of the most important exports goods – as well as the mining of metals. And the local Wang clan is supposed to have possessed numerous kilns already, located especially close to the capital, Fuzhou.85 We can here clearly depict a new tendency that local rulers and governments were discovering foreign maritime trade as a source to underpin their national resources and state coffers, making available to the social

82 Literally this refers to “persons and things related to Islamic faith” and is generally translated as “Muslim”. It must be emphasized, however, that the term was much more widely used and also included ethnic people like Uighurs or West Asian people in general.
83 See Li Donghua, Quanzhou yu woguo zhongguo de haishang jiaotong泉州與中國的海上交通. (Taipei: Taiwan xuesheng shuju, 1986), 43, 58–59.
84 This is mentioned in the clan’s genealogy. See also D. H. Smith, “Zaitun’s Five Centuries of Sino-foreign Trade.” Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society 4/5 (1958), 165-177, 172.
and ruling elites the fine and rare luxury articles hitherto unavailable as well as a means of income to fill state coffers. By political decision, maritime space became more and more important primarily for commercial purposes. In this context, a significant commercialization of the China Seas took place, a process that greatly accelerated during the following Song dynasty.

But the sea was also used for military purposes, although naval battles basically still took place in river estuaries. Qian Liu 猛銳 (892–932) placed his son Qian Yuanguan 猛元瓘 (887–941) in command of a Wu Yue fleet of five hundred ships, called “dragon ships” because they were designed in the shape of a dragon. It set out in April 919 to invade Wu 吳. An interesting Wu Yue account speaks of beans being thrown on enemy’s ships and the shooting of “burning oil” (ménghuò you 猛火油)86 to set fire to the ships. Then, the liquid was shot from a metal tube. The oil, it is recorded, was obtained from Arab merchants from Hai-nan (or simply from “south of the seas”).87

Or, further south, the state of Nan-Han also became prosperous by its encouragement of maritime commerce and rose to power through the possession of a navy. In 928, the ruler of Nan-Han, Liu Yan 劉巖 sent a fleet of a hundred warships to Fengzhou 封州 (in northwest Guangdong), which had been attacked by a navy (shuǐjun 水軍) from Chu 楚 (a state located in present-day Hunan) and succeeded in repelling the invasion of Chu; in 930, his fleet raided Champa and returned with a rich loot of gold and treasure.88

In her 1991 book, Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350, Janet Abu-Lughod argued that the thirteenth century Eurasian world encompassed a vast trade system. It was a segmented system, it must be admitted, with a few regional sub-systems such as maritime East Asia, South-east Asia, Southwest Asia and the like, but with a sufficient volume of long-distance trade to justify speaking of a world system. Moreover, she argued that the primary economic motor driving this system was China, both as a producer of porcelain and other popular exports, and as a mass consumer of incense, aromatics and other goods from South-eastern and Southern Asia.89 Also segmented was the North-east China Sea, to be sure. With the establishment of the Liao (907/916-1125) and later the Jin (1115-1234) dynasties, the North-eastern coastal zone was separated from the rest of China and experienced a different development. Frankly speaking, we still know only very little about maritime trade activities of the Khitan Liao and the Jurchen Jin, but it can be stated with certainty that they were more engaged on their continental borders, in particular with their southern neighbour, China. Southeast China, on the other hand, experienced the greatest upsizing in maritime trade ever seen during this time period. At the same time, thriving centres in Champa, Srivijaya, Calicut, Baghdad and Cairo, to name just a few, did much to provide the system with its vitality.

That the sea route was preferred also for official diplomatic contacts may be concluded from the following entry. A tribute mission from “Dashi 大食” arrived in China in early 1024. After their arrival, a complaint was made that the embassy had followed the land route through the territory of the Tangut Xiaxia 西夏 (1038–1227). As a consequence, it was decreed that future Dashi missions must come by sea and use Guangzhou as the port of entry.90 The Songs Shi subsequently speaks repeatedly of “bozhu 船主” (ship captains) from Arabia.91 This may be taken as evidence that at least from the early eleventh century onwards most tribute missions reached China by sea. Missions between the Persian Gulf and Guangzhou have already been described by Jia Dan 賈耽 (710–785). The passage is translated by Friedrich Hirth and Rockhill and therefore will not be repeated here.92

The idea of considering maritime trade as a financial source had already emerged, as we have seen, in the course of the 10th century. But it eventually became the main impetus for the promotion of seaborne trade with the introduction of Emperor Shenzong’s 神宗 (r. 1068–1085) new legal statutes. In 971, a year after the conquest of the Southern Han, a Maritime Trade Office (shibō shi 賓舶司) was already established in Guangzhou to handle all ships from the Nanhai and to secure the government a larger share of the profits attainable through the rapidly increasing maritime trade. Two years later a ban on Chinese merchants venturing overseas to engage in trade signalled the government’s intention to control the trade.93 Only a few years later, between 976 and 983, the trade was declared a state monopoly and private trading with foreigners more or less forbidden. At about the same time (Tai zoung shi 太宗時, i.e. 960–975), a general Monopoly Office (jué shuǐ 樞宻) was established in the capital. Orders were issued that all foreign aromatics and goods of value imported into China through the ports of either Guangzhou, Quanzhou, Zhejiang province or Jiaozhi 交趾 (Tongking) had to be deposited in government storehouses.94 Then in 987, the Emperor Taizong 太宗 (r. 996–1023) constituted the important precurso
976–997) sent eight eunuch attendants in four missions out into the Nanhai 南海 to invite traders to come to China. Two years later a second maritime trade office was opened in Hangzhou 杭州, followed by a third in Mingzhou 明州 in 992. In the course of the Northern Song dynasty a series of maritime trade offices was established along the South-eastern coast to supervise maritime trade, the major ones being located in Guangzhou, Quanzhou and Mingzhou (Ningbo). Emperor Shenzong eventually officially stated that trade (including maritime trade) should be used to help fill the state coffers. Thus for the first time, the commercial aspect became as important as politics, but it was an official state-monopolized commerce. Much of that commerce occurred under the aegis of the tribute system, which was extremely active through the first 60 years of the dynasty, and even in the case of trade carried out through the maritime trade offices. Only gradually did the centralized control give way to a more decentralized system involving a host of maritime trade offices or, after 1080, of maritime trade superintendencies (shibō tijū si 市舶提舉司). Eventually, a liberalization of Chinese shipping dating to the year 1090 paved the way for Chinese merchants to “shop abroad” so that they were no longer so dependent on foreign shipping to meet their demands—a milestone in the development of China’s maritime trade relations that supported what we may perhaps call a “privatization” of the China Seas.

Shipbuilding, it must be mentioned in this context, was a major industry during the Song, benefiting from such technological advances as both floating and graving docks (below ground level) in the shipyards, and the use of models and blueprints to standardize the production of government ships. Much of the shipbuilding was aimed at supplying the needs of the Song navy and domestic commerce, but the demand for seagoing ships was also great, especially since, beginning in the 11th century, Chinese-style junks came to supplant the Arab shows that had long dominated transoceanic trade in the Indian Ocean and south-east Asia.

Until the Xining reign period (1068–1077), there were two central shipyards on the coast of China, namely in Hangzhou 杭州 and Canton, as well as provincial yards located in land. Although shipbuilding establishments were to be found throughout the empire, including Shandong, the south-eastern coast specialized in ocean-going ships. Particular attention was furthermore paid to the defence of coastal cities and the protection of merchants’ ships from pirate attacks. As Jung-pang Lo has shown, during the Northern Song dynasty, when Canton was still the principal port of China bringing in about 80–90% of the total volume of maritime commerce, numerous naval stations (zhai寨) and observation posts were established along the coast from Canton to an island called Ruzhou 濡州 (Dan’gan Island 擬漳州, located south-east of modern Hong Kong, or Hailing Island 海陵島, located south-east of Yangjiang 阳江, Guangdong?), that is over a distance of 700 li (c. 200 miles). In other words, the Song government actively encouraged merchants to conduct maritime trade and facilitated their doing so.

John Chaffee has already convincingly argued that the economic transformation that occurred in the course of the Song dynasty made Song China the economic centre and motor of contemporary maritime trade – despite the fact that it was politically speaking no longer the undisputed “Middle Kingdom” in the region. As evidenced by archaeological finds from all parts of maritime Asia, the demand was especially high for Song ceramics. But Song exports also included silks, foodstuffs (often in large ceramic containers), manufactured goods (including books), and – in the 13th century especially – large quantities of copper and tin. Indeed, such was the demand for copper coins that the government repeatedly though ineffectually tried to ban their export. In the Southern Song a massive outflow of bronze coins (and un-minted copper) from China to places as far away as the East coast of Africa had emerged as a major irritant for the Song government. As for imports, Song urban consumers developed a great appetite for xianggao 香藥 (usually translated as aromatics but it included incense, scented woods, perfumes and medicines), but also for pearls, ivory, rhinoceros horn, cotton fabrics, ebon and sappan woods, among other commodities.

A result of the upswing in maritime trade during this period was the rapid growth of the port cities of the south-eastern coast, origins of which we have already encountered during Tang times. Examples include Guangzhou, Fuzhou 福州, Wenzhou 温州, Mingzhou, or above all Hangzhou (Lin’an 临安), certainly the largest city in the Empire during the Southern Song, when it served as the capital. Its wealth and cosmopolitan atmosphere is later also described by the Italian traveller and merchant Marco Polo. A city like Quanzhou 泉州, the Zaitun of Marco Polo, developed as a centre of the Nanhai trade, the trade with the South China and Southeast Asian Seas with a thriving merchant culture, in which Chinese traders mixed with Arabs, Srivijayans, Tamils, Cholas,

95 Songshí, j. 186, 4558–9.
96 Song huiyao jīgāo, Zhīguān 44/27a–b.
97 Derek Heng, Malay Trade and Diplomacy, 50.
100 Pingzhou ketan 萍州可談 (1119) by Zhu Yu 朱遜 (1075? – after 1119), j. 2, i (288), in Siku quanshu, fasc. 1038.
Koreans, Ryūkyūans, and Japanese. This development affected both the East and the South China Seas. Momoki Shiro and Hasuda Takashi emphasize that “North-east Asia was deeply incorporated into international trade networks for the first time” during the eleventh through to the fourteenth centuries. Yamauchi Shinji calls this “the age of Japan-Song trade” in which “there were active exchanges of people, commodities and information through frequent maritime trade with the Asian continent,” and Charlotte von Verschuer has similarly described it as the age of free trade for Japan’s relations with China and Korea. Despite flourishing trade relations only few Japanese embassies, however, seemed to have reached China. Roderich Ptak suggests that generally speaking official circles in Japan seem to have maintained a relatively negative attitude towards the foreign. But this did not derogate mutual exchange relations. Chinese settlements in Japan (Tōbō 彤坊), like Hakata 博多, and Korea, like Mokpo, both coastal cities, also attest to the fact that it was no longer mainly foreigners that came to China, but that to a greater extent than seen before Chinese also went abroad. Thousands of Chinese, it has been speculated, travelled to Korea during the Southern Song.

In 1020, Korea officially became a tributary of the Liao. But despite the lack of official diplomatic relations Song-Korean trade flourished during both the Northern and Southern Song. We have records of Korean merchants settling in China (for example in Ningbo), while Korean records document visits by dozens of Chinese ships, especially during the eleventh century. This period also marked the highpoint of an active trade between Korea and Japan, which also exchanged frequent embassies. Moreover, visits by Arab envoys and merchants to Korea are well documented in Koguryō sources, including a visit by an Arab (Dashi 大食) envoy and one hundred others from Arabia in 1024, a telling indication of Korea’s participation in the maritime trade world.

In 1123, a first Chinese mission was sent again to Korea. The chief envoy, Xu Jing 徐兢 (1093–1157), left us an interesting report about his travels, the Xuanhe fengshi Gaoli tujing 襄和奉使高麗圖經 on this mission. And his report tells us that, although he considered the seas as a frightening, dangerous place, at the same time he saw it as something “intelligible, manageable, predictable, quantifiable, and survivable.”

Also relations with South-east Asia reached a hitherto unseen peak. Geoff Wade has argued that the period of 900–1300 C.E. constituted an “age of commerce” for South-East Asia, while Kenneth Hall identifies the period 1000–1400 as a time of fundamental transitions in the trade and state developments of that region. The appearance of new ports in South-east Asia, the movement of administrative centres nearer to the coast, population growth and the development of both cash cropping and South-east Asian ceramics and textiles industries, new modes of consumption, and new mercantile organizations greatly attributed to the upswing of maritime commerce between the China Seas and South-east Asia. Arab or Hui 回 played a major role in contemporary maritime trade, but Chinese became increasingly important. The Islamic domination of the China Seas had already set in, as we have seen above, during Tang times and it was during the Song when it received a real upswing. During the Mongol period still more Hui merchants and Huìhuì 回回 in general settled in Chinese coastal cities such as Quanzhou. It was also from Quanzhou that the China Seas were further extended to the south-east, namely to the Spice Islands and Moluccas. Although Chinese merchants had for the first time become really active seafarers across the China Seas, we have to see that during the period between the 11th and 14th centuries (approx. 1000–1400), also foreign merchants (especially South-east Asian, South Asian and West Asian or Huìhuì merchants) were most active during this time.

Both commerce and migration consequently saw an unprecedented peak during this time. Simultaneously, military purposes, although they did not disappear completely, retreated into the background. The active and direct participation of the Song court in maritime trade and the liberalization of Chinese shipping in 1090 greatly contributed to this development across the China Seas. At the same time we observe a privatization of exchange, although everything remained under state control, in particular imports and domestic redistribution of imports. That the administrative system was repeatedly changed in the course of the Song dynasty attests to the fact that there still existed an uncertainty about how to ideally control

---

108 Roderich Ptak, Die maritime Seidenstraße, 155.
111 Lee Hee-Soo, The Advent of Islam in Korea, 56.
and supervise maritime trade in order to use it for state purposes without damaging trade. But only during the Yuan dynasty did the substantial participation of the Song court in the domestic redistribution of foreign imports finally give way to a kind of monopoly on trade by means of officially sponsored trading voyages and intermittent bans on private shipping.

Between 1285 and 1320/25 the Yuan government sought to strictly control maritime trade and even forced private merchants to enter government service. Only after 1325 were regulations again liberalized. It can doubtlessly be claimed that the Mongols and the Yuan government actively promoted maritime trade and had a strong interest in strengthening its role. The search for good trade relations was accompanied by diplomatic missions. Numerous missions were sent abroad inviting tribute and trade as far away as India.

At the same time, the military use of the China Seas again predominated – perhaps for the first time since early Tang times. From 1266, Mongol rulers undertook various efforts to subdue Japan, first using Korea as a diplomatic middleman but after these efforts failed, naval attacks were prepared. In 1273, the Mongols transported soldiers to Cheju Island off the South Korean coast. In 1274, a first attack on Japan, supposedly with more than 900 ships and a great number of land troops, was launched. The battle ships sailed from Korea, attacked Tsushima 塙島 and Iki 萬次 Island and having reached Kyushū 九州 destroyed parts of modern Nagasaki Prefecture. Battles were fought in the vicinities of Hakata but then the Mongol troops suddenly retreated – probably because of logistic shortages, as has been speculated. As is well known, the final collapse of the Southern Song was also brought about in a naval battle. In 1279, the Song surrendered to the Mongols after a historic battle at Yaishan 崖山 off the coast of Guangzhou. By then the Yuan already controlled the entire Chinese coast and had incorporated the former Song navy into its own naval structures. And they started another attempt to conquer Japan. One fleet again sailed from Korea, the other one crossed the East China Sea directly from Zhejiang. Several thousand soldiers are said to have taken part in this undertaking


119 See Roderich Ptak, *Die maritime Seidenstraße*, 158.


lam and Islamic Hui merchants seem to have become more
important than Buddhism, at least on the sea routes from
South and South-east China further west. In this context, we
can perhaps even speak of an Islamic-dominated overseas
trade.

Along with flourishing trade relations certainly not a new
but increasingly important and severe phenomenon also arose
that of piracy.

Early modern China (Ming-Qing)

With the downfall of the Mongol Yuan state and the establish-
ment of the Ming Dynasty, the quality of exchange relations
across the China Seas changed drastically. The collapse of
the Yuan had already resulted in a certain fragmentation of
the China Seas again. Private maritime trade suffered great
losses. We should recall that never before the Yuan had great
amounts of food provisions been shipped along coastal routes
to supply the Yuan capital. In its final years the Yuan court
had become increasingly dependent on rice and grain ship-
ments up the Grand Canal to the capital Dadu (Beijing), mak-
ing them vulnerable to extortion from Zhang Shicheng 张士诚,
who had proclaimed himself “King Cheng of the Great Zhou
Dynasty” in 1354. The arrival of Fang Guozhen’s 方国珍
(1319–1374) naval forces in the Yangzi estuary to fight Zhang
certainly contributed to the latter’s decision to eventually sur-
render to the Yuan court in 1357. Fang’s fleet is said to have
numbered over one thousand vessels of all kinds, and he con-
trolled much of the Ningbo 宁波 and Shaoxing 韶興 region in
the Hangzhou Bay. Fang had been among the earliest leaders
to acknowledge the rise of Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 (1328–
1398) – later the first Ming Emperor Hongwu 洪武 (r. 1368–
1398) – but, the power and influence of both Zhang and Fang
constituted a clear warning to Zhu not to become dependent
on such persons or to give them the opportunity to rise in
his newly established dynasty. A great part of the remaining
private maritime trade between China, Korea and Japan came
to be controlled by private persons, who on occasions disposed
of greater fleets and can be designated as a kind of “merchant
empires”. To some extent, Zhang Shicheng and Fang Guozhen
may be considered a kind of prototype of such merchant mag-
nates. At the same time, such experience without doubt nouri-
sished the suspicion of a ruler like Hongwu and convinced him
to not to provide private merchants with too much power as a
consequence of which they could obtain the means to under-
mine state authority. This conviction had far-reaching
consequences.

Maritime trade prohibition and the rise of Chinese mercantile
power

With the initiation of the “maritime trade proscription policy”
(haijin zhengce 海禁政策) in 1371,122 the “privatization” of
maritime exchanges that we have described above was sud-
denly interrupted from the Chinese side. Foreign trade was
subsequently only possible as part of the official tribute sys-
tem. Foreign tribute missions presented part of their cargoes
as tribute and received rewards of Chinese goods in return.
The remaining part of their goods they were permitted to sell
to Chinese, mostly during a fixed time period at a market or
place especially designated for this purpose and only under
strict government supervision. As a rule, private merchants
accompanied the tribute missions and then used this opportu-
nity to sell their goods for Chinese ones.123

It is important to emphasize that despite the official ideol-
ogy that placed China in the middle of an East Asian world or-
der with “barbarian” vassals around that paid tribute and
despite the official interruption of private foreign trade, ex-
change relations still never came to a standstill and this never
led to China’s or even East Asia’s complete isolation from the
outer world. Nevertheless, this had various consequences and
the quality of exchange relations changed significantly. This
policy affected not only the China coast and Chinese mer-
chants but the entire China Seas region.

Migration and China’s overseas expansion

Many fewer foreigners came to China than before and they all
had to rely on Chinese merchants for selling their goods. Pri-
ivate traders from South, South-east and West Asia no longer
came to China and also the foreign communities in Chinese
coastal cities soon declined. The Ming maritime policy, thus,
actually enabled the Chinese for the first time in history to
really monopolize Sino-foreign exchange, as Chang Pin-tsun
has argued.124 This policy consequently unintentionally
formed the basis for the gradual rise of Chinese private mer-
cantile power in the coming centuries, although its original
goal had in fact been to curb private commerce. And it gave
rise to all the Chinese overseas communities from which the
Chinese cherished their manifold maritime commercial
networks.

But Ming China’s new maritime policy not only prevented
many foreign merchants from coming to China to trade it also
deprived great parts of the coastal population of their former
livelihoods. Many Chinese who had depended on maritime
trade for their living were now driven into smuggling, either
becoming “pirates”, emigrating or both. The political decision
to curb all private maritime trade in the long perspective con-
sequently caused a large mass emigration of Chinese to coun-
tries overseas where they built up the well-known overseas
Chinese communities – above all in South-east Asia, but also
in other countries like Japan. Families from Fujian moved to
the island country of the Ryūkyūs (according to some sources
they were officially sent there by Emperor Hongwu) and
helped to maintain trade relations throughout East and in par-
specific South-east Asia and even beyond. This large-scale emi-


gation of Chinese since the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries is so-to-say the Chinese variant of the overseas expansion, China’s early modern overseas trade expansion.125

We have seen above that the China Seas have been used for migration ever since. But never before had they experienced such a form of what we might term “mass migration” and such an “expansion” of Chinese traders overseas. This overseas expansion resulted both from the new policy implemented by the early Ming government and from a commercialization of local economies that since Tang times at the latest had been directly linked to maritime trade.126 Many trading networks were subsequently only maintained with the help of Chinese residing overseas (Huaqiao 华侨, lit. “Chinese living outside of China”). Also the emigration of numerous Islamic merchant families to South-east Asia is significant. Originally considered partners of the Mongols, many were simply not desired in the new social environment of Ming China. In general the Arab-Persian preponderance that we have observed during the Tang-Song-Yuan period decreased in favour of Indian shipping.127

As a consequence of the new Ming policy, trading centres also shifted away from the Chinese littoral to other regions. In this context, the Ryūkyū 流球 Islands (modern Okinawa) and Ryūkyūan merchants entered the scene. They little by little took over the role of an intermediary in the East Asian waters, frequently in cooperation with Chinese merchants.128 They provided Japanese merchants, for example, with tropical goods from South-east Asia, and the latter re-exported a part of these to Korea. This intermediary role enabled the islands to enjoy considerable independence. To some extent, the Ryūkyū occupied a special position during this time, especially in terms of relations with China. They became China’s most loyal “tribute country”, providing products such as horses and sulphur, whereas the Chinese on the other hand gave all sorts of development aid – from technical equipment and expertise, such as ships and shipbuilding, to human resources including (Confucian) education. Ryūkyūan students were, for example, officially dispatched to China to study there. Also different products appeared to a larger extent than before on the Chinese Seas, such as South-east Asian ceramics, as the direct access to Chinese ceramics was blocked. Although tribute missions were officially exchanged between Korea and the Ming, these were rather overshadowed by restrictions imposed by the trade proscription. Also official relations between China and Japan were at a low point. In 1523, the Maritime Trade Offices (shibo si) of Fuzhou and Ningbo were even closed down as a consequence of the so-called “incident caused by striving for tribute” (zhenggong zhi yi 争贡之役), also called the “Ningbo-incident”.129 And although later during the early seventeenth century the new Tokugawa rulers, starting with the time of Ieyasu 徳川家康 (1542–1616; r. 1603–1616), sought in vain to re-establish direct relations with China – of course under their political-economic premises – it should be emphasized that until 1871 officially no diplomatic relations existed between China and Japan.

The Zheng-He expeditions

For some thirty years, however, during the early Ming, China returned to the centre of the maritime world. Between 1405 and 1433 the third Ming Emperor, Yongle 永乐 Emperor (r. 1403–1424), initiated in all seven overseas expeditions that were carried out under the supervision of the Muslim eunuch Zheng He 郑和 (1371–c. 1433). Debates about the actual purposes of these expeditions continue unabated to this day.130 But it has been widely accepted that they did not primarily serve trading purposes but were rather diplomatic missions serving political ends.131 It has also startled modern scholars that these most influential naval undertakings took place during a time period preceded and followed by a more or less strict maritime prohibition policy. However, the expeditions become understandable when seen in the context that China considered herself as the leading power, with undisputed supremacy in the contemporary Asian world and beyond. The main purpose behind the expeditions, I would argue, was a demonstration by China of this view, and may even have implied a claim for “world domination”, at least in Asia, by the Yongle Emperor.


127 Roderich Ptak, Die maritime Seidenstraße, 269.


130 The more generally accepted explanations include efforts to impress its neighbours with China’s prosperity and power, the Ming court’s wish to stimulate trade and tribute missions from abroad, and the aim of securing foreign luxury products. The official accounts (Mingshi) note that the Yongle Emperor intended to find the former emperor, Zhu Yunwen 朱允炆 (r. 1399–1402), whom he had just ousted from the throne. For a discussion and refutation of the hypothesis that the expeditions were dispatched for the purpose of concluding military alliances with countries in the Red Sea, Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean region to fight against Timur (d. 1405), cf. Morris Rossabi, “Cheng Ho and Timur: Any Relation?”, Orients Extremus 20 (1973), 129–136.

131 Timothy Brook, “Communications and commerce”, in Frederick W. Mote, Denis Twitchett (eds.), The Cambridge History of China, vol. 8, part 2 (1988), 579–707, 615: “Their rationale was diplomatic, enabling the Yung-lo emperor to declare his enthronement and demonstrate his suzerainty over other Asian states, as well as providing passage for foreign envoys bearing tribute to the Chinese throne; but it was also economic . . .”; John E. Wills sees the voyages as “an anomalous state-directed revival within the framework of the tribute system of Sung-Yuan positive attitudes towards maritime trade . . .”, cf. John E. Wills, “Relations with maritime Europeans”, in Frederick W. Mote, Denis Twitchett (eds.), The Cambridge History of China, vol. 8, part 2 (1988), 333–375, 334.
The historical facts and circumstances do at least suggest that Yongle intended to realize in a practical fashion the concept of the middle Kingdom versus surrounding vassal or tribute states.

Independently of the exact historical assessment of the expeditions, it is certain that they officially carried China throughout the Indian Ocean as far as the East coast of Africa and the Red Sea for the first time and remained unrivalled until our days. It also becomes evident from the routes of the expeditions that official Ming naval policy mainly concentrated on the western part of South-east Asia and the Indian Ocean region. Hormuz located in the Persian Gulf obviously played a key role in the expeditions. It is repeatedly mentioned as destination and even appears on an old Chinese sea-route map, the so-called Zheng He hanghai tu 鄭和航海圖.132 Debates have also taken place about the alleged size of the ships or the question of what kind of weapons they carried on board (the term “fire arms” is vague; were these perhaps already some form of small cannons?). Supposedly between 20,000 and 30,000 men including mariners, soldiers, officials, physicians and technicians as well as others accompanied the expeditions. Although much of the information that we encounter in the sources may be exaggerated (definite archaeological evidence is lacking until today), it is clear that never before had a maritime power in the world. And its eventual retreat from the “world seas” eventually happened on its own initiatives, caused by internal political considerations and a re-emphasis of the continental border with the Mongols in north China – again there is much speculation about the concrete reasons of her retreat – and was not forced on it by external powers.

**Piracy and naval enterprises**

When Ming tribute trade began to decline after the mid-15th century, while the trade proscription was still in force private trade in the form of smuggling began to fill its vacuum.

Illegal private merchants, smugglers or “pirates” as they are called in official Chinese historiography (most of these texts simply reflect the official Chinese position that stigmatized everybody who was violating the trade proscription as “pirate”), became increasingly active. Private trade was still prohibited and with the advent of the Europeans the demand for Chinese products even increased while there were increasingly fewer official possibilities to trade. A modern source collection like the Mingdai Wokou shiliao 明代倭寇史料 in seven volumes133 attests to the great quantity of source material that exists on the topic of smuggling and piracy during the Ming. Although also foreigners like the Japanese, reflected in the term “Wokou” 倭寇 (lit. Japanese bandit; Jap. Wako), or Portuguese were active in this network of clandestine trade, using offshore islands to exchange their goods, it was Chinese people who formed the backbone of the smugglers.134 Activities of more famous pirate-merchants of the 16th century, such as Wang Zhi 汪直, Xu Dong 許東, Li Guangtou 李光頭, Xu Hai 徐海 and others have already been investigated in more detail.135

Piracy was not only omnipresent along the Chinese littoral but also in the Korean Straits. It strongly influenced international relations and trade policies in the East China Sea during this early modern period.136 Already during the thirteenth century, Korean coastal cities had repeatedly been attacked by Japanese pirates, but in the 14th century such attacks increased again. Eventually, in 1380, the Koguryo (918–1392) court successfully countered an attack by pirates. Great efforts were made to destroy the scattered bases of the Wako on the islands lying near the south coast of Korea. In 1419, 227 ships with more than 17,000 Chosón (1392–1910) soldiers invaded the Aso Bay 沖之漁 and raided the heart of Tsushima 對馬島, curbing Wako power in the Korean Straits at least for a time. The interest of the early Chosón government in foreign trade relations thus lay not in financial profits but in the pacification of the Wako at all costs.137 To help reduce the threat of pirate assaults, ports were opened to Japanese seafarers on the south-east Korean coast, and living and trading quarters known as the Waegwan 倭館 (Wakan) [Japan Houses] were set up in the first half of the fifteenth century in order to strictly control foreign traders.138

On the Japanese side the feudal lords of Tsushima were entrusted with the responsibility of consolidating the relationship between the two countries. By the Kyehae Treaty 糧御海約 of 1443, the number of trading ships coming to Korea via Tsushima was limited to fifty annually, and the Haedong chegukki 濟東諸國紀 (1471) by Shin Suk-choo 申叔舟 details the number of ships the members of the Sō 宗 and Sōda 須田 families of Tsushima were allowed to send each year. Such restrictions once again provided the reason for various forms of piracy. Jurgis Elisonas regards it as possible that the Wako were not only interested in the commodities traded across East Asian waters, but also engaged in slavery, one story reporting, for example, 200–300 Chinese slaves being kept by Japanese families on Satsuma 森摩ら.139

---

132 Zhong He hanghai tu 鄭和航海圖 by Mao Yuanyi 茅元儀; edited and annotated by Xiang Da 向達. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1961).

133 Zhongwai jiaotong shiji congkan 進貿易史紀叢刊, 19.

134 These developments have recently been investigated by Barbara Seyock, "Pirates and traders on Tsushima Island during the late 14th to early 16th centuries: as seen from historical and archaeological perspectives", in Angela Schottenhammer (ed.), *Trade and Transfer across the East Asian “Mediterranean”* (2005), 91–124.


137 These developments have recently been investigated by Barbara Seyock, “Pirates and traders on Tsushima Island during the late 14th to early 16th centuries: as seen from historical and archaeological perspectives”, in Angela Schottenhammer (ed.), *Trade and Transfer across the East Asian “Mediterranean”* (2005), 91–124.

The “Maritime Great Wall”, as Chang Pin-tsun has called it, provided an effective policy along the coast to seal off China from overseas countries, but in the long perspective it was not successful. For the Chinese coastal waters the sixteenth century undoubtedly constituted a peak in terms of piracy and discussions about expenses needed for coastal defence contributed to the general debate about the abolition of the trade proscription policy.

Military operations

A first larger naval expedition, after the Mongol attempt to conquer Japan, occurred with the invasion of Korea in 1592 under the Japanese ruler Toyotomi Hideyoshi. One of the most effective examples of Korean resistance came from a naval campaign led by Admiral Yi Sun-sin 李舜臣 (1545–1598) in the summer of 1592. He is said to have developed a type of attack vessel equipped with cannons called the “turtle ship”, which obviously caused particular problems for the Japanese navy. Especially famous is the battle near Hansan Island 関山島, one of three great victories against the Japanese as a result of which Korea regained control of the sea lanes. The Ming government also assisted Korea at this time, sending a relief army to Korea led by Li Rusong 李如松. The death of Hideyoshi in 1598, however, resulted in the eventual retreat of the Japanese from the Korean peninsula.

Also in the 17th century, in particular during the Ming-Qing conquest, the China Seas continued to be a space for military operations. Mention should be made of Emperor Kangxi’s 康熙 (r. 1662–1722) fight against the “merchant empire” of the Zheng 鄭-clan who had retreated to Taiwan after the fall of the Ming and the eventual conquest of Taiwan, carried out under the Commander-in-chief of the Manchu fleet, Shi Lang 施琅 (1621–1696).

For North-east Asia we should mention the example of Mao Wenlong 毛文龍 (1576–1629), a Chinese general who had escaped to Korea with a small army and set up a base on Pidao 皮島 (Kado Island), south of the Yalu estuary, in 1621 when the Manchus took Liaodong and consequently blocked the overland route between Korea and China. Pidao needed large quantities of food to provide for the tens of thousands of soldiers under his command and the refugees from Liaodong. But regardless of its strategic advantages for diplomacy, trade and military defence, the island was unable to provide for the necessary provisions by itself. Food supplies from Dengzhou 鄧州 or Tianjin 天津 were irregular due to the Ming government’s financial problems as well as the insecure nature of maritime transport. Besides grain, Mao also demanded that the Korean government provide ships, horses, guns and ginseng. Pidao, as Jung Byung-chul has shown, developed not only as the official diplomatic contact space between Ming China and Korea, but also as an important frontier market for Ming-Korea-Manchu triangular trade at the northern edge of the Yellow Sea. Under Mao’s patronage, “merchants from south and east crowded into the island, [and] the Pidao market grew as prosperous as a city on the mainland”.

The Zhoushan 芝山 Islands, offshore Zejiang, to the east of the Hangzhou Bay, comprising 1390 islands and 3306 reefs, thereby forming one of the largest archipelagos of China, constituted a flourishing smuggling centre, especially for Sino-Portuguese and Sino-Japanese smuggling. They continued to fulfill this role until the archipelagos were completely destroyed by Ming troops in 1549 and 1558, respectively – as a consequence of which Taiwan emerged as the commercial centre in the East Asian waters. When the Qing established their capital in Beijing, Ming loyalists fled south. In 1646, Ming loyalists around Prince Lu 魯王, Zhu Yihai 朱以海 (1618–1662), re-treated to the Zhoushan Islands and settled there between 1649 and 1651, when Qing troops conquered Zhoushan and defeated the Ming loyalists. Consequently, having already lost their commercial importance during Ming times, the island archipelago continued to play a political-military role. After the conquest of Taiwan, however, the Chinese concentrated themselves on her continental border and officially no more naval undertakings were carried out during the time period under investigation here.

A few words are due on the particular role Taiwan played in the China Seas. As we have seen above, it apparently first entered official Chinese consciousness during the Sui period, although many things remain unclear about its early history. In older texts it is, as a rule, called “Liuqiu 琉球” of which there exist various character variants and which in early texts appears with the adjectives “big” (da 大) or “small” (xiao 小) referring to Taiwan and the Liuqiu or Ryūkyū Islands or...

---

140 Chang Pin-tsun, op. cit.
141 See for example the Wubei zhi 武備志 (1624 ed.) by Mao Yuanyi 萬元僖; Charles Hacker, “Hu Tsung-hsien’s Campaign against Hsu Hai, 1556”.
144 Mingjī běilù 明季北略 by Ji Liuju 計六奇 (1622–?). (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984), j. 2, 40.
either only Taiwan or only the Ryukyu Islands. The name of “Taiwan 台灣” seems not to have been used before the 1630s.149 Although the island was certainly visited by Fujianese fishermen—evidence for which is also suggested by the latter Portuguese designation of the island group, namely “Pescadores”, literally meaning “fishermen” – Taiwan emerged only relatively late as a trading “rendezvous” in the East Asian waters. Not before the opening of the port of Haicheng off the Fujian coast (formerly called Yuegang 渝港) and the subsequent gradual liberation of Chinese private maritime trade in 1567 did its history as an international trading “rendezvous” begin.150 And it must be emphasized that until Qing times, the island was considered as a frontier location, not really being part of the Qing Empire, although it was officially incorporated as a part of Fujian Province in 1684. Qing sources describe the island as “lonely hanging beyond the seas” (yu xuan haiwai 孤懸海外),151 as a “faraway place beyond the deep ocean” (yuan zai zhongyang zhi wai 這在重洋之外).152 The local inhabitants are repeatedly referred to as cruel, ruthless and stubborn. They are described as “foreign people that came from several places outside [the Chinese realms]” (fanmin zachu er wailai zhi min 坐民雜處而外來之民).153

Thus although Taiwan officially became an integral part of activities in the China Seas in the seventeenth century, it continued to play a particular role.

The advent of the Europeans

The period we have been talking about is of course also the time when the first Europeans, the Portuguese, came to the China Seas, driven by the quest to avoid the trade routes in Asia Minor controlled by the Mameluks of Egypt and thus to monopolize the “spice routes” into Europe combined with missionary goals. They were followed by the Spaniards, the Dutch and only later also the British, French and various other European nations. With the advent of the Europeans, the China Seas once again experienced a qualitative change. Step by step and with interruptions or even setbacks, the Asian waters had increasingly “grown together” and this initiative originated in East Asia. With the beginning of the European overseas expansion gradually more and more Europeans filled roles that had formerly been carried out by Asian traders. Early networks of missionaries and merchants brought East Asia and its people gradually into closer contact with Europeans at places such as Macao, Manila, Taiwan and Nagasaki.154 With Vasco Da Gama (1468/69-1524) and Ferdinand Magellan (1480-1521) and his successors the China Seas were eventually “opened up” on a permanent basis also beyond the Indian Ocean towards the Atlantic in the West and the Pacific up to Mexico and the American continent in the East. Starting with the Portuguese and Spanish expansion the China Seas consequently became part of and were connected with the entire world, a process that was completed with English colonialism in the nineteenth century.

The prohibition policy of the Ming on the one hand resulted in a certain decline in the importance of Chinese merchants on the seas, namely the importance of China-based merchants. Indian and South-east Asian based Muslim traders expanded their traditional networks and traded with China in connection with tribute envoys.155 Also Ryukyuan merchants, as we have seen above, took over the role of the Chinese merchants to a certain extent. But on the other hand, especially when Ming tribute trade declined after the mid-fifteenth century, more and more Chinese migrated to overseas countries from where they managed a powerful private trade network. Chinese merchants came to monopolize these networks in the China Seas and foreign, basically Southeast, South and West Asian merchants were displaced, from then on being active only beyond the China Seas. In this respect, it is probably not exaggerated to state that the maritime trade proscription at the same time constituted the basis for the rise of China’s private mercantile power.

The eventual abolishment of the trade proscription was not only the result of a long political debate within China but also of both contradictions within China’s political-economic system156 and of the ever increasing demand for Chinese products, in particular by the Europeans, and the consequent high profits that could be earned from engaging in maritime trade. This caused not only private people to maintain or build up clandestine networks but also official persons and institutions to engage in maritime trade – despite official prohibitions. The abolition of the maritime trade proscription was soon only a question of time. Trade relations bloomed in the late 16th and early 17th century and only the Manchu conquest of China brought with it a certain setback.

Although the main markets for the Europeans lay in Europe, European merchants and merchant organizations soon constituted competition for Chinese traders in East Asian waters. Between 1600 and 1700 the Chinese were gradually displaced by the Dutch and other European merchants in the trade with South-east and South Asia. But, as Chang Pin-tsun has argued, only the Dutch VOC (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie) was able to successfully enforce a monopoly of

---

150 Ibid.
151 Shizong Xianhuangdi zhupi yuzhi 正宗顯皇帝批議旨 by Yongzheng 咸正 (1677–1735) and Qianlong 乾隆 (1711–1799), j. 176, section 5, 5, 27b, in Siku quanshu, fasc. 418–423.
152 Shizong Xianhuangdi zhupi yuzhi, j. 13, section xia, 22b; also j. 72, 1b (yu xuan haiwai 孤懸海外).
153 Shizong Xianhuangdi zhupi yuzhi, j. 72, 3b.
156 See Li Kangying, The Ming Maritime Trade Policy in Transition, 1368-1567 (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 2010), East Asian Maritime History, 8, for an excellent discussion about the gradual shift in Ming China’s maritime policy.
trade between South-east Asia and India in the seventeenth century.157 Generally speaking, at least as far as the China trade is concerned, the period between 1720 and 1760 has been designated the “period of construction of the European China trade”.158 After the Qing government lifted its ban on maritime trade and opened Customs Houses (haiguan) between 1683 and 1685, foreign trade quickly revived and numerous Chinese commodities reappeared in the Asian waters. A new world-market had come into existence. It was a time when “Chinese silks were being worn in the streets of Kyoto and Lima, Chinese cottons were being sold in Filipino and Mexican markets, and Chinese porcelain was being used in fashionable homes from Sakai to London”.159

In maritime relations with Japan, Chinese merchants remained very active. In the 17th and 18th centuries China pursued a relatively positive trading policy with Japan, seeking to obtain first as much silver and, later, copper as possible from her neighbour – although, as we have seen above, no official diplomatic relations were re-established until 1871. The hub for mutual exchange relations was Nagasaki, where Chinese merchants were competing with Portuguese and later Dutch traders. Japan on the other hand tried to obtain knowledge, specialists and goods from China not only via China’s official Nagasaki trade but also via the Ryūkyūs. The island country was even subdued by the Japanese lien of Satsuma 薩摩 in 1609. It has been argued that after the subjugation by Satsuma in 1609 actually most of the profit went to Satsuma, as a consequence of which from time to time the Chinese cargoes were unloaded on smaller islands to hide them from the Japanese officials – contraband practices that of course only encouraged stricter control on the Satsuma side.160 In general Satsuma did play an important role within the smuggling networks in Chinese and Japanese waters at that time. This is attested to by many examples in the Tsukō ichiran 通航一覽 (1853).161 Smuggling (nakem 抜荷) was nothing extraordinary.162 Also Dutch sources attest to this phenomenon. A local interpreter, after the Dutch had repeatedly complained about the rampant smuggling of the Chinese, noted: “(T)he Chinese have to smuggle in order to render their business profitable”.163

The China Seas of that time were a closely connected and complex network of sea routes on which primarily private individuals and institutions from many countries world-wide were active, above all for commercial purposes. Migration continued and also numerous Europeans settled in East Asia. With the missionaries during the late 16th to early eighteenth centuries Christianity – that had only played a minor role in the centuries before – and European culture also entered the China Seas.

Politically speaking, the seventeenth and eighteenth century Qing emperors concentrated primarily on China’s continental borders. But they were still interested in what was going on overseas. Emperor Kangxi openly raised his concerns in face of the European expansions that he considered a threat, both from continental (Russia)164 and maritime (the Netherlands, the Spaniards, the British) borders.165 Both Kangxi and Yongzheng were concerned about developments in Japan and even sent spies there.166 During the rule of Kangxi and Yongzheng fears have even been accentuated about Japan’s activities in the East Asian waters (such as cooperation with the Zheng 鄭 clan) and her general anti-Manchu resistance, along with her restrictive foreign trade policy that attempted to make the country stronger, and that Japan may even use her copper cast cannons to attack China.167 But with the rise of the Qian-

---


161 Cf. for example Tsukō ichiran 通航一覽 (1853) edited by Hayashi Fukusai 林福齋 (1800–1859) et al. (Osaka: Seibundo shuppan, 1967), vol. 5, j. 198, 228.

162 For numerous examples cf. Tsukō ichiran, vol. 4, passim.


164 Jonathan D. Spence, The Search for Modern China. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1990), 65–66; Jürgen Osterhammel, China und die Weltgesellschaft, 100 and 465, Footnote 75.

165 Admiral Shi Lang 邵瑯 had suggested that Taiwan became a fortified base to protect China against the “strong, huge, and invincible” warships of the Dutch. Kangxi, later, ordered a Qing garrison of 8,000 soldiers to be left permanently on the island. Jonathan Spence, The Search for Modern China, 57. In 1703, Emperor Kangxi, on a tour of the southern provinces, was alarmed to discover how many Westerners were present all over China. Foreseeing trouble, he imposed restrictions on Europeans entering the empire.

166 Kangxi in 1701 sent a Manchu bondservant, the chief clerk (ulina 島達) of the Imperial Silk Manufactory (zhizao ju 織造局) in Hangzhou, Morsen 莫爾森, as a secret agent to Japan. Disguised as a merchant, Morsen sailed from Shanghai in the summer of 1701 and returned to Ningbo in the autumn of the same year. Under the Yongzheng Emperor, the Chinese doctor and merchant Zhu Laizhang 朱來掌, who had lived in Nagasaki for quite a while, was sent at least twice to Nagasaki to inquire about the political-economic situation there. For a detailed analysis of the background behind the dispatch of these spies see Angela Schottenhammer, “Japan – the Tiny Dwarf? Sino-Japanese Relations from the Kangxi to the Early Qianlong Reigns”, in Angela Schottenhammer (ed.), The East Asian Mediterranean – Maritime Crossroads of Culture, Commerce, and Human Migration, (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 2008), 331-388. East Asian Maritime History, 6.

167 “Although Japan is a tiny dwarf barbarian island, it relies on its big copper cast cannons which can attack from a far-away distance and its extraordinarily sharp Wodao swords; already in the former Ming Dynasty [Japan] belonged to the evils of the seas (haihuaxia 海外ixa), in the Eastern Seas (Dongyang 東洋) it was considered a violent invader (qiangkou 強寇). Our dynasty has a majestic spirit, and they [i.e. the Japanese] have prostrated themselves from fear and hidden, so that for many years they have had no way to offend against China (zhonghua 中華),” This stems from a memorial of the governor-general of Zhejiang, Li Wei 李柟 (1687–1738). See Shizong Xianhuangdi zhupi yu zhi j. 174, section 8, 25a-b (201). See also Guo Yunjing, “Views of Japan and Policies Toward Japan in the Early Qing”, in Joshua Fogel (ed.), Sagacious Monks and Bloodthirsty Warriors: Chinese Views of Japan in the Ming-Qing Period. (Norwalk: EastBridge, 2002), 88–108.
long Emperor interest in what happened in Japan – not to speak of the European countries – disappeared almost completely.168 With Korea and the Ryūkyūs tribute relations were officially maintained.

Officially, China, as had Korea and Japan, almost completely retreated from the China Seas in the second half of the 18th century. In this context, we may speak of a European-dominated China Seas region. And it was the Europeans who eventually connected the China Seas from outside with the entire world. The network across the China Seas was characterized by a variety of commercial competition along with smaller campaigns and “punitive actions” but it was not before the 19th century that military purposes again dominated the Chinese waters.

Conclusion

Can the history of the China Seas reasonably be explained from a global historical standpoint? We have seen that basic characteristics of interaction were present already from relatively early times on – increasing economic and cultural interrelations and exchange, human movements and migration, or diplomatic intercourse. Interaction networks require a certain permanence and stability. We observed a process of increasing economic, political and cultural interaction in certain phases, or, in our case in particular during the period from the collapse of the Yuan dynasty until the mid-16th century, of deconstruction or de-globalization of grown networks. In this respect, the question can certainly be answered affirmatively. But the history of the China Seas of course followed its own characteristics.

In earlier times military and diplomatic relations seem to have prevailed, although the coastal waters were being used for short-distance commercial exchange as well – that it has always been used as a source of living by fishermen and their families should go without saying. From the post-Han to the Tang dynasties we could subsequently observe a continuous upswing of private commercial interaction in which Buddhism (as religious and cultural element) played a predominant role. During the Tang-Wudai-Song-Yuan period we see an Islamic dominated maritime trade in the south, linking up China on a permanent basis with the Indian Ocean region and the Persian Gulf, while North-east Asia was rather dominated by Confucian and Buddhist culture. Commercial exchanges on southern and Western routes were dominated by merchants from the Islamic world. Song and Yuan China eventually developed as the economic motor in the macro-region with Chinese merchants becoming ever more active in the China Seas and beyond from the late eleventh century. This process is also paralleled by an ever-increasing privatization of interactions.

With the collapse of the Yuan Empire and the establishment of the Ming dynasty we subsequently encounter a phase of deconstruction and re-segmentation of the seas. Except for the three decades between 1405 and 1433, when China for the first time in history officially expanded as far as the Indian Ocean up to the coast of Africa and the Red Sea, the country subsequently officially retreated from the China Seas. Consequently, this was only a temporary and not a more permanent expansion of interaction.

But the structures and networks that had grown over centuries could not be destroyed simply by government decree. Rather were they maintained by private, “illegal” actors. Gradual privatization from the post-Han to the Tang period was, thus, followed by an “officialization” during the Song-Yuan and finally illegalization (smuggling) and mass emigration during the Ming. The persisting profits that could be earned via maritime trade, especially against the background of a sudden new and ever increasing demand for Asian, above all Chinese, products by the Europeans, eventually led to a revivification of commercial interactions, even if this happened under more or less strict government control. And it may be considered an irony of history that the maritime trade proscription policy of the Ming rulers that was intended to curb private maritime trade eventually led to its opposite, the rise of Chinese mercantile power.

With the advent of the Europeans, Chinese and Asian traders in general lost their share of the market and the increasingly complex commercial network again came to be dominated in large parts by foreigners, this time the Europeans. In addition, Christian culture and religion entered the China Seas.

François Gipouloux has recently provided a comparison of three different Mediterranean Seas – the European Méditerranées of the repubbliche marinare and the Hanseatic League in the Baltic Seas and the Asian Mediterranean comprising the Sea of Japan, the Yellow Sea, the South China Sea, the Sulu Sea and the Sea of the Célèbes.169 The large absence of independent institutions and a private commercial law in Asia is one of his main arguments explaining the different historical developments of Europe and Asia. In Europe we encounter city-states that were maintaining the networks across the Mediterraneans and that developed independently of a central governmental sovereign. Both the repubbliche marinare and the Hanseatic League could only prosper because a tradition of independent cities in Europe existed. According to Gipouloux, inter-regional commercial exchange in Asia, in contrast to the European Mediterraneans, adopted basically two peculiar forms of progress: (1) tribute trade, that means trade that was forced into a bureaucratic corset and implemented behind an official diplomatic umbrella, and (2) non-official or contraband trade (p. 89).

Summarizing the history of interaction in the China Seas, we have to conclude that for a holistic assessment of the region’s history this statement would be too generalizing. Although we do not encounter city-states like in Europe, since Tang times there existed large commercial cities along the coastlines, such as Yangzhou, Guangzhou or Quanzhou, with great numbers of merchants that could pursue their private commercial interests at least relatively liberally, and with partly significant foreign settlements that often even possessed their own jurisdiction. And such merchant communities, of course to different degrees, disposed of certain institutional

168 For a more detailed discussion of these arguments see Angela Schottenhammer, “Empire and Periphery? The Qing Empire’s Relations with Japan and the Ryūkyūs (1644–c. 1800), a Comparison”, The Medieval History Journal 16: 2 (2012), in press.

structures to carry out long-distance trade.\(^{170}\) It is also important to note that contraband trade was not the most important commercial activity throughout China’s and East Asia’s history. In particular during the Song-Yuan period maritime trade was not only officially sponsored (even though it was more or less strictly controlled), but private commerce and merchants enjoyed at least a certain degree of independence and liberty. That developments across the China Seas nevertheless looked so differently from those in Europe has probably rather to be traced back to the very different politico-economic purposes of the governments of China, Korea and Japan, to their different understandings of sovereignty and foreign trade and, consequently, to their qualitatively different reference to the seas as a medium of exchange and interaction.

Since antiquity, the China Seas have grown more and more together and have been connected via sea routes to regions as far away as India, the Persian Gulf and the Islamic and Oriental worlds. And this development originated in Asia. However, that they were globally (in the literal sense) integrated, was achieved by the Portuguese and the Spaniards. But in Asia the Europeans entered into trading networks that already existed and they overtook roles that had previously been played by others for centuries. With their advent, however, these networks gradually came to change their quality. The more or less direct connection between military and commercial seafaring that was typical for Europe but has never been a typical characteristic of seafaring in the China Seas before can from then on also be observed in the China Seas.

\(^{170}\) These institutional structures were of course far more developed by Ming/Qing (e.g. *Huiguan* -like merchant associations) than by Song/Yuan times but they did exist in earlier times, too, e.g. in the form of the “commendas” during the Song or the “ortu” merchants’ partnerships during the Yuan.