

South China and Maritime Asia 12

Maritime China in Transition 1750–1850

Edited by Wang Gungwu
and Ng Chin-keong



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Preface

This volume is the product of a conference, *Maritime China in Transition*, organized by the Department of History, National University of Singapore, in late November 1999. With the exception of a few, most of the papers were revised and submitted in mid-2000.

The papers in this volume are arranged thematically, and primarily in the order in which they are mentioned by Professor Wang Gungwu in his introductory essay.

Pinyin romanization is generally adopted. However, in consideration of the historical context and author's preference, we have in some cases retained the conventional versions; for instance, Amoy is occasionally used in place of Xiamen, and Nanking is retained in the Treaty of Nanking. Words not of English origins and key words are listed in a Glossary-Index at the end of the volume. However, neither the Glossary nor the Index is meant to be comprehensive or exhaustive. For example, those terms for which the authors have not been able to trace their Chinese origins are not included. More common or familiar terms have also been left out.

The editors wish to thank the many supporters of this volume, without whom its completion would not have been possible. The idea of holding a conference of this nature was the brainchild of Associate Professor Edwin Lee, the former Head of the Department, while his successor Associate Professor Tan Tai Yong continued to provide support in bringing out this volume.

We are also appreciative of the assistance and patience of Professor Roderich Ptak, who liaised with the publishers on our behalf. Our heartfelt thanks go to Vani S., who copy-edited the bulk of the papers, while Associate Professor Paul Kratoska, Dr Kwan Siu Hing and Miss Chang Yueh Siang worked on the rest; Siu Hing and Siang also read the final proofs. Their efforts helped improve the quality of this volume and minimize errors. We also wish to express our thanks to Rohani binte Sungib for assisting in the formatting and presentation of the book.

Not to be forgotten of course, are the authors who have contributed to this volume. Our deepest gratitude goes to them for accommodating the many requests of the editors, for obliging us with appendices and addenda and most importantly for their patience and interest in the progress of the production of the book. The editors would like to apologize for the inconveniences which the delay in publication may have caused them.

Last but not least, to all the well-wishers and supporters, including those who had made the conference possible in the first place, we wish to extend our gratitude for any form of assistance that they have rendered us.

NCK

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Introduction

Maritime China in Transition

Wang Gungwu

Since the 1920s, most historians have tended to regard the years 1840-1842 as the turning point of modern Chinese history and speak of all Chinese history before that time as being either traditional or premodern. There have been a few challenges to that widely accepted view by advocates of an early modern period for Chinese history, following a similar periodization in European history, and this drew attention to the Ming-Qing transition in the seventeenth century as a useful marker. Others have simply questioned the assumption that “Western impact” in the mid-nineteenth century is the best starting point for the study of modern China.

Another approach is to ask if there had been an abrupt change in China because of its defeat by the British and the signing of the Treaty of Nanking. Was there a period that could be described as transitional? If there was, would the period have been after the Treaty, say, from the 1840s to the 1880s, or during the decades before the 1840s? In either case, one would have to ask, what did China experience that could be described as a transition, what kinds of criteria may be used to determine that there had been a transition, and what were the consequences of the transition.

The subject of this volume is Maritime China. If there was something we could call a transition, was it one from a not so maritime China to a more maritime China, or vice versa? These would be primarily quantitative questions, something less, or something more. Or, should the question be a qualitative comparison, a transition from one kind of China to another? For example, (a) from tradition-bound to openness on its way to progress and modernity; or (b) from continental to maritime; or (c) from a China confident in its “all-under-Heaven” civilization to one that is defensive and seeking to construct a national culture in its place? Such questions tend to sound teleological, or are the products of hindsight. They were not the kind of questions that the Chinese at the time would have asked of themselves.

Also, the world was changing rapidly during the eighteenth century and the pace of change was accelerating during the first half of the nineteenth. Were the Chinese really not aware that this was happening? Perhaps the fact that no single

power emerged in the Asian world before 1800 induced complacency in the Manchu Qing court and the mandarin elites. Modern research has highlighted changes elsewhere during the eighteenth century that are not fully reflected in the surviving documents of the Asian polities. This is certainly true of the contemporary materials we have of China, but this does not mean that some Chinese people were not already sensitive to the transitional environments that affected their daily lives. Depending on where they were located at the time, they were observing the transformations that would ultimately lead to the crises of the nineteenth century all over Asia.

In the context of the themes addressed in this volume, this essay will focus on whether there was a transition period for maritime China that led up to the First Anglo-Chinese War of 1839-1842. If there was one, can we find evidence of it by looking back at the century before 1850 or so? We do not have to look at all of the hundred years. Any part thereof would do if we can identify developments that show that the people of maritime China had begun to prepare for radical changes before they occurred.

But first, the idea of maritime China needs to be further clarified. It certainly does not mean that China was ever a maritime empire or civilization. There is no basis here for questioning the picture of China as fundamentally an agrarian and continental empire. Given that, there can still be many ways to approach the subject. For example, there is more than one way of envisaging maritime China. In terms of change and transition from the 1750s to the 1850s, there are at least the following that could usefully be examined:

1. Maritime China as Segment. That is, as a segment of a larger tributary system created by a continental empire to deal with foreign peoples and countries that had been extended during the Han dynasty to cover those who came by sea. Chinese official sources are primarily concerned with this.

2. Maritime China as Periphery. That is, the coastal provinces pushing out seaward away from an inward centripetal polity. Some local Chinese sources point to this, supported by some external writings as well.

3. Maritime China as Terminus. That is, as one end of an extensive maritime Asia that has an active economic and cultural life of its own. This comes mainly from Arabic and European documents.

4. The Whole Maritime China. That is, All of the Above, a holistic approach reflecting the sum total of Segment, Periphery and Terminus. Modern scholars with access to all sources will tend to see this.

5. An Ideal Maritime China. That is, as one half of a balanced ideal of both a continental and maritime power and civilization. This can be found in traditional rhetoric, but also in some of the futuristic and wishful writings by contemporary writers.

Maritime China as Segment

Let me examine these five maritime Chinas more closely and begin with maritime China as segment. This China was linked to the tributary system of a continental empire. Some of the papers here examine the weakening structure.¹ The system has been presented as a series of concentric circles, with the center made up of the lands of the Son of Heaven. Next in order of proximity were Chinese feudal lords and princes, followed by minority chieftains on the Chinese borders. Then there were various degrees of near and distant rulers of kingdoms who wanted a relationship with China and were prepared to send tribute to the emperor. The refinements that evolved in this system need not detain us here. What is relevant is that when the Chinese reached the whole length of the coasts from the Liaodong peninsula to the Gulf of Tongking, they did not hesitate to extend the tributary system across the oceans. They expanded it for those rulers who were prepared to send ships to open relations and trade with China. Thus the structure of the system did not distinguish between land and sea relationships. The one formula was thought adequate to serve both, although for centuries the seaward segment was considered the lesser of the two.

In practice, there were differences, the most important of which was that it became accepted wisdom that those who came by sea could occasionally create trouble but were no real threats to the empire. The sea borders were easier to defend than the overland routes into China, the foreign ships were small, the trading fleets carried more goods and merchants than armed soldiers or sailors, and these were not capable of endangering the throne. Occasionally, the foreign and local merchants would do something illegal and the law was applied with vigor. In this system, maritime China was that segment of the imperial condition dedicated to naval defense, diplomatic relations and merchant control. The people concerned were mainly mandarins, military officials and select merchants as well as their foreign counterparts.

Official China determined the limits of its maritime policies. It remained relatively passive for the first millennium of the empire. During the end of the Tang dynasty (618-907), this began to change. At least four major maritime kingdoms controlled China's coasts and overseas relationships during the tenth century: the Southern Han in modern Guangdong, the Min in Fujian, the Wu Yue in Zhejiang and the Southern Tang in Jiangsu. A more open policy toward maritime affairs and overseas trade emerged. This evolved steadily for the next two centuries. When the Southern Song dynasty moved to its new capital to

1 Masuda Erika, "The Last Siamese Tributary Missions to China, 1851-1854 and the "Rejected" Value of *Chim Kong*". The subject is also touched on in Dian Murray, "Piracy and China's Maritime Transition, 1750-1850" and Roderich Ptak, "Macau: Trade and Society, circa 1740-1760".

Hangzhou in 1127 and became the largest Chinese polity to have a capital with direct access to the Pacific Ocean, its overseas concerns grew much more significant. Following its fall in 1279, the Mongol Yuan, with its world-conquering forays across Asian waters, notably to Japan, Champa and Java, encouraged many more coastal Chinese to be drawn into ever larger maritime enterprises.

But what might have been a natural progression to even more maritime commitments did not happen. The Ming empire reversed the 300-year trend to open up seaward. Instead, it restructured the tributary system to become an institution that was more tightly controlled than ever before. Thus, maritime China was restricted to becoming merely a segment of a formal system. Albeit important, the segment was subject to overall imperial considerations which consistently gave lower priority to coastal affairs.

It is in this context that we ask whether the century before 1850 was one of transition. The coming of the Portuguese and Spanish in the sixteenth century and the activities of the Wako along the whole China coast had drawn fresh imperial attention to coastal defense. There was some relaxation of merchant control after 1567 and much extra stimuli were provided by adventurous seamen and enterprising partners of foreign traders along the southern coasts for the next two centuries. What is significant, however, is that Ming China maintained its tribute-centered maritime policy and that the successor Qing rulers adopted the essentials of a similar policy.

Qing officials seemed more flexible toward foreign traders throughout the eighteenth century, but there was no obvious shift away from the forms of the tributary system. They saw maritime China as still but one segment of that system. Even after it became clear by the end of the century that the English East India Company had become the dominant trading power in the region, the Qing mandarins recommended no change to the structure of this maritime China. Its segmentary position continued until past the Treaty of Nanking of 1842, and this was confirmed in the various editions of Wei Yuan's *Haiguo tuzhi*. Wei Yuan was much better informed than all his predecessors in this genre of compilation, and recommended a more proactive policy. But, the rhetoric employed in this influential work differed little from the tone of Chen Lunjiong's *Haiguo wenjian lu* a hundred years earlier and that of Qing official documents down to the second half of the nineteenth century. They make it clear that maritime China remained a small segment of a larger system and that there was no transition during the 1750-1850 period.

Maritime China as Periphery

What about maritime China as periphery, with the coastal provinces pushing out seaward away from an inward-looking centripetal polity? As the periphery of a continental empire, this maritime China involved all the people of the districts, counties and prefectures who were eager to trade with foreign merchants coming by sea and included the fisher folk whose livelihood depended directly on the sea. With the numbers of such people growing rapidly after the Tang dynasty and becoming increasingly active between the tenth and thirteenth centuries, this represented the venturous and human dimensions of maritime China.

It did not follow that increase in numbers alone made China any more maritime. The Ming founder in the fourteenth century put this maritime China in its place by placing severe restrictions on its freedom to cultivate its overseas relations independently. This did not mean that he and his successors did not care for the people of the maritime periphery, only that good governance dictated that these coastal regions be carefully regulated to conform to higher and more vital concerns of the dynasty. Were it not for the initiatives of the merchant networks linking Chinese to various Muslim groups, Japanese, Indians and some Southeast Asians, economic activity along the China coasts would have been even further curbed during the fifteenth century. The coming of the Portuguese and Spanish to these coasts via Southeast Asia in the sixteenth century alarmed Ming officials and they made it clear that they would not allow the increasingly lively periphery to influence their well-tried policies. On the other hand, they did demonstrate some flexibility in letting the Portuguese use Macau as their base and allowing some access to Chinese ports by the Spanish based in Manila.

When the Dutch and the English arrived in the seventeenth century, there were even more opportunities for the coastal peoples of southern China to advance their maritime cause. This had coincided with a considerable weakening of Ming central authority by the 1620s. The court in Beijing was distracted by vicious political infighting and widespread internal rebellions. These were then followed by full-scale Manchu invasions of the 1640s. Under the circumstances, Ming officials could not retain control of an increasingly disorderly and boisterous maritime China. Hence the rise of Zheng Zhilong and his partners and rivals, and the intensification of Iberian-Dutch competition at Macau and then in Taiwan. Although Ming officials were alerted to such dangers to their traditional policy, there was little they could do to curb the fresh burst of activities along the whole length of their coastal domains.

Here was an example of the case that when the center is weak, the periphery thrives. Indeed, for more than half a century, from the 1620s to 1683, maritime China could be described as a region in flames. The Zheng family fleets were raiding freely along the coasts and stimulating Chinese-led trade throughout East and Southeast Asia on a scale never seen before. Also, the local people in the

coastal provinces also took up arms to join the “Three Feudatories” led by Wu Sangui in a challenge to the new Manchu authority that started at the center and spread to the maritime periphery.

Was this a chance for maritime China to experience a transition and become a major player in Asian history? From foreign records, like those of the Japanese, the Dutch and the Spanish, it might well have looked like the beginnings of a new era for the maritime peoples of China. But it was not to be. The Qing armies quelled the “Three Feudatories” rebellion and concentrated on taming the maritime provinces in order to defeat the Zheng naval threats to their new empire. The scorched earth policies along the coasts were drastic but they confirmed that the center’s power had been restored and the periphery would have to submit again. Men like Shi Lang (1621-1696), himself a man of maritime China, played a key role in ending the Zheng regime in Taiwan and in bringing the region firmly under central control. The accounts of the maritime countries in the *Haiguo wenjian lu*, compiled by Chen Lunjiong’s father and prepared by Chen Lunjiong for publication in 1730, clearly showed the complete restoration of normalcy. This maritime China seems to have had its best chance to take off during the seventeenth century. After 1683, its economic and strategic value to the Qing empire was recognized, but the ambitions of peoples of a periphery, however great, could not overwhelm the centripetal forces of Chinese history.

What of the century from 1750-1850, when, in center-periphery terms, the second half of the eighteenth century saw the empire at the peak of its power while the first half of the nineteenth saw it weaken rapidly. Conventionally, the notable changes at the turn of the century, say about the 1800s, could be interpreted as the normal manifestations of downturn in the dynastic cycle. Should the changes be better described as quantitative, say, from less activity or volume of trade to more or, in some cases, from more to less? Some of the papers presented here point to, or reaffirm, some striking quantitative developments during the century. For example, the rise of the bulk trade in rice,² the fluctuations in the price of silver,³ the growth in transactions with the Canton Cohong system at the expense of Macau,⁴ and the peopling of Taiwan and other

- 2 Li Tana, “Rice from Saigon: Singapore Chinese and the Saigon Trade of the 19th century”. This builds on the work by Jennifer Cushman, *Fields from the Sea: Chinese Junk Trade with Siam during the Late 18th and Early 19th Centuries* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1993, Studies on Southeast Asia No. 12) and Wong Lin Ken, “The trade of Singapore, 1819-1869”, *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 33, 4 (1960), pp. 1-315.
- 3 Lin Man-houng, “The Shift from East Asia to the World: The Role of Maritime Silver in China’s Economy in the Seventeenth to Late Eighteenth Centuries”. This examines a vital triangular silver linkage that traces back to the work of Chuan Han-sheng and the many debates that followed. The fresh light it throws on the complex interrelationships involved raises doubts about issues of transition, but it alerts us not to underestimate the financial problems we need to understand about this century in China’s foreign trade.
- 4 Roderich Ptak, “Macau: Trade and Society, circa 1740-1760”.

new migratory patterns.⁵ Underlying other papers is also the fact that the East India Company, and the country traders which it spawned, had become dominant groups on the China coast.⁶ But clear evidence of qualitative change in the way these maritime Chinese worked and lived, that is, clear signs of transition from one condition to another, is lacking. On the contrary, there are papers stressing that southern China seemed to have become poorer and more disorderly, the *hong* merchants were continually in debt, and the Chinese customs (*haiguan*) was more threatened by corruption than ever.⁷ The possibility of any major group, or any leader, seizing the opportunity to offer new directions for the maritime clientele of South China was negligible.

The situation in Jiangnan emerges indirectly through the trade with Japan and the merchant shippers that helped the Qing court's experiment with sea transport during the hundred years under study.⁸ The late eighteenth century was a good period for the economy of Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces, although they too encountered deteriorating conditions by the early nineteenth century. A direct comparison between the two regions of eastern and southern China, whether it brings out similarities or significant difference in development patterns would help us determine the shape of maritime China as a whole.⁹ The differences would underline the fact that the conditions for maritime China to share in any common experience of transition were simply not present. Even when the center was weakening, a powerful centripetal pull was still present.

Was there any kind of transition then during the period 1750-1850? Perhaps nothing clear-cut on the China coasts, but what about with the outreach of maritime China, among the Chinese actually abroad? The community in Batavia

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- 5 Pin-tsun Chang, "Chinese Migration to Taiwan in the Eighteenth Century: a Paradox"; John R. Shepherd, "Some Demographic Characteristics of Chinese Immigrant Populations: Lessons for the Study of Taiwan's Population History"; and Kuo-tung Ch'en, "Chinese Frontiersmen and Taiwanese *Tushengnan* in the Local Economy of Taiwan before 1900".
 - 6 For example, Paul A. Van Dyke, "A Reassessment of the China Trade: the Canton Junk Trade as Revealed in Dutch and Swedish Records of the 1750s to the 1770s".
 - 7 Dian Murray, "Piracy and China's Maritime Transition, 1750-1850" brings this out most clearly, but this is also indicated among the Chinese outside the country, in Eric Tagliacozzo, "Border-line Legal': Chinese Communities and "Illicit" Activity in Insular Southeast Asia, Mid- to Late Nineteenth Century". And Huang Guosheng, "The Chinese Maritime Customs in Transition, 1750-1830", highlights the problems faced by the customs officials operating under the deteriorating conditions.
 - 8 Ng Wai-ming, "Overseas Chinese in the Japan-Southeast Asia Maritime Trade during the Tokugawa Period (1603-1868)". The specific assistance that these merchants could give to the Qing court is described in Jane Kate Leonard, "Coastal Merchant Allies in the 1826 Sea Transport Experiment".
 - 9 Strong hints about the possibility of common experiences with contracts may be found in Robert Gardella, "Enterprises, Contracts and Partnerships: a Case for Chinese Customary Legal Traditions Bridging the Nanyang".