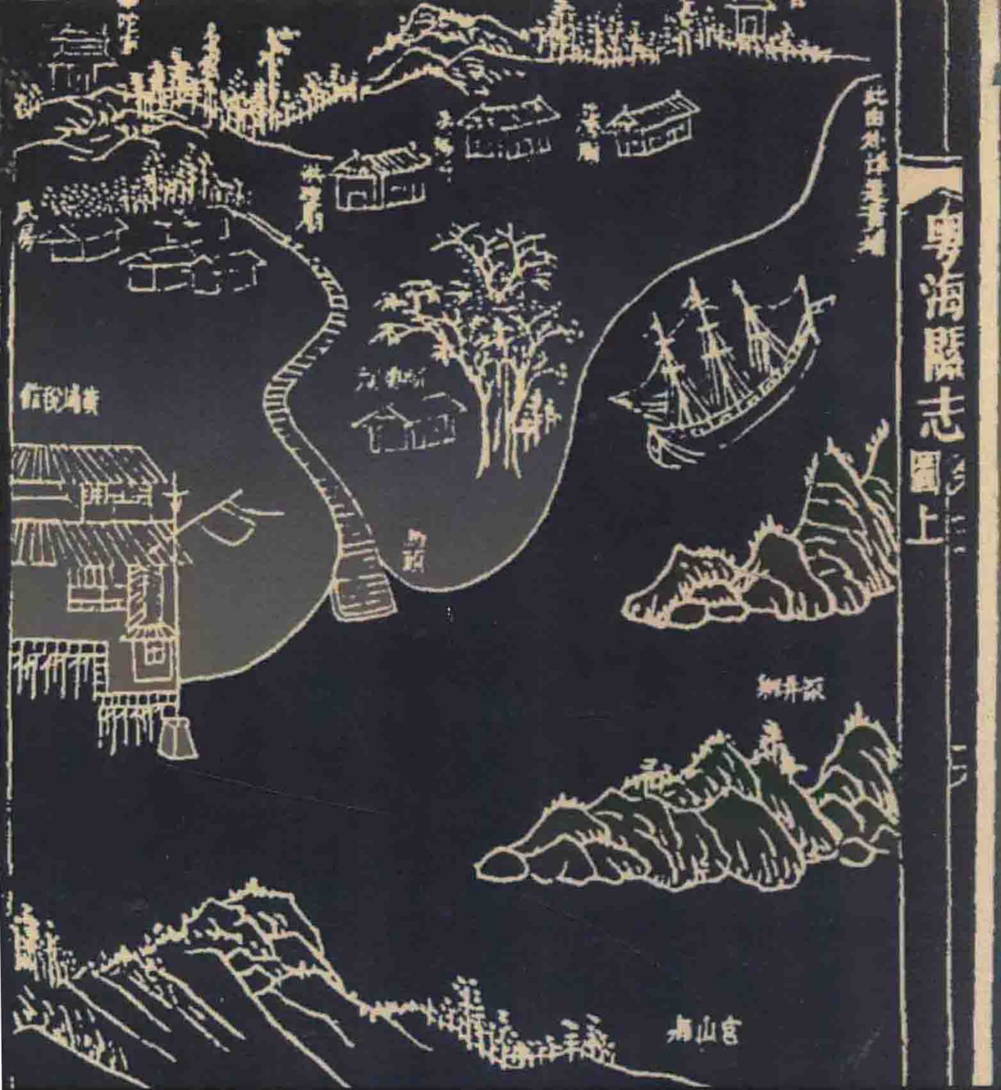

The Qing Opening to the Ocean

Chinese Maritime Policies, 1684–1757

GANG ZHAO

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University of Hawai'i Press
Honolulu

Printed in the United States of America

18 17 16 15 14 13 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Zhao, Gang, author.
The Qing opening to the ocean : Chinese maritime policies, 1684–1757 / Gang Zhao.
pages cm — (Perspectives on the global past)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-8248-3643-6 (cloth : alk. paper)
1. China—Commerce—History—17th century. 2. China—Commerce—History—18th century. 3. China—History—Qing dynasty, 1644–1912. I. Title. II. Series: Perspectives on the global past.
HF3835.Z443 2013
382'.3095109033—dc23

2012029393

Publication of this book has been assisted by a grant from the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange.

University of Hawai'i Press books are printed on acid-free paper and meet the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Council on Library Resources.

Composited by Mardee Melton of the University of Hawai'i Press

Printed by Sheridan Books, Inc.

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Jerry H. Bentley and Anand A. Yang
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Acknowledgments

This book is the result of a long intellectual journey begun in 2000. I have accumulated vast debts to many friends and colleagues while receiving financial aid from a number of institutions. Thanks to their support, this book is now ready to go forth into the world.

The first person to whom I would like to express my deep gratitude is William Rowe of Johns Hopkins University, my doctoral adviser and friend. He has been this project's most enthusiastic supporter, generously dedicating time, attention, and energy at each stage. Thanks to his inspiration and keen advice, I have overcome many obstacles that seemed insurmountable. Even now, years after our *shi-sheng* relationship ended, his views continue to shape my academic work. My deep gratitude also goes to my coadviser, Tobie Meyer-Fong, for her valuable comments, suggestions, and advice on my manuscript.

Similarly, I wish to express my deep thanks to Benjamin A. Elman, who was my adviser during my time at UCLA, in 1997–1999. To him I owe the most for leading me into Western historiography during my early time in the United States. Ben made it possible for me to transfer to Johns Hopkins. I am indebted to my Chinese adviser, Wang Junyi of Renmin University of China, with whom, between 1986 and 1989, I studied the intellectual history of the Qing dynasty. This experience enabled me to bring a new perspective to the study of maritime history. I would like to thank Anand Yang, Cong Xiaoping, Jerry H. Bentley, Dong Jianzhong, Du Jidong, Gao Xiang, Guang Kai, Marta Hanson, David Kang, Kishimoto Mio, Norman Kutcher, Li Tuo, Lydia Liu, Liu Lu, Liu Xufeng, Matsuura Akira, Meng Yue, Qi Yongxiang, Sarah Schneewind, Kelee Tsai, Wang Di, Wu Boya, Yan Yunxiang, Yang Nianqun, Yang Zhen, Zhu Honglin, Zhu Yuqi, and John Ziemer for their insights and help. I benefited from many gatherings and academic discussions with my fellow students at Johns Hopkins, and I would like to single out Saeyoung Park, Mao Liang, Ma Zhao, Peng Juanjuan, Emy Feng, Alger Grant, and Julie Zeng. I am grateful to my friend Sam Gilbert for his comments and suggestions as well as improvements on my manuscript. My thanks also go to John E. Wills, who reviewed my manuscript twice, and to two anonymous reviewers, one for Harvard University Press and the other for the University of Hawai'i Press, whose positive, detailed, and constructive reviews have made this a better book. It has been a great pleasure to work with my editor at the University of Hawai'i Press, Pamela Kelley, who selected the manuscript, believed in its value, and provided gracious and professional assistance.

Special thanks to my colleagues in the Department of History at the University of Akron. Our many discussions and exchanges served as another source of inspiration. Particular thanks are due to the following institutions for their academic and financial support: the Sheridan Libraries at Johns Hopkins University, the Harvard-Yenching Library at Harvard University, the Library of Congress, the National Library of China, the Center for Chinese Studies at UCLA, the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation, the China Times Cultural Foundation, the Buchtel College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Akron, the Association for Asian Studies, and, at Johns Hopkins, the Department of History and the Institute for Global Studies in Power, Culture, and History.

I would like to offer my deepest gratitude to my wife, Yan Liu, who has always been by my side, offering emotional and material support. Because of her encouragement, I have been able to work out the ideas that follow over long stretches of uninterrupted time. Finally, my heartfelt thanks go to my parents, my wife's parents, my younger brothers, and my more distant relatives for the support they have provided during an education that began many years ago and has not yet ended.

Contents

Introduction

In 1684, forty years after a Manchu army had seized power in Beijing, an extraordinary rumor shot along the Chinese coast, then across the ocean to Nagasaki, Batavia (Jakarta), and Manila: the three-hundred-year-old embargo on Chinese private maritime trade was being lifted. Soon the rumor caught the attention of English merchants serving the East India Company.[1] Then it was confirmed: the Kangxi emperor had promulgated a new policy opening the gates of his empire in November 1684.[2]

That year, 1684, a series of decisions were made that proved momentous in the history of Chinese foreign trade. First, the maritime trade ban would be lifted and Manchu and Chinese private traders would be allowed to trade abroad. Second, all merchants from both tribute and nontribute countries would be permitted to enter coastal ports. Third, a clear distinction between trade and tribute would enable those countries having no tributary relationship with China to participate in private trade. Fourth, a maritime customs system would manage seaborne trade and collect tariffs. Later that year, an imperial communication was sent to surrounding countries to request their assistance in rescuing Chinese maritime merchants in distress.[3] These policies, the most important elements of High Qing trade policy, remained in force for the subsequent century and a half.

But that is not the whole story. During the eighty years after 1684, China's Manchu rulers faced a series of new political, ethnic, and diplomatic challenges from within and without. From the Rites Controversy to the hairstyles of Chinese merchants living in Batavia, a wide range of issues arose in connection with the 1684 open-door policy. The Qing emperors reaffirmed, fretted over, and adjusted the policy, deciding to permit the private trade with Japan to continue, then to ban private trade in Southeast Asia, and then to restrict European merchants to a single Chinese port.

Most important, and surprisingly, as they worked out these policies the Qing emperors maintained a view of China and the outside world as closely intertwined: their economic and political interactions were the starting point for the new maritime policies. For example, the Kangxi emperor said of the open-door policy, "The development of maritime trade will benefit the people of Fujian and Guangdong. As the people of these two provinces get rich and commercial commodities smoothly circulate, this prosperity will benefit other provinces."[4] In 1717 he explained the necessity for prohibiting the trade with Southeast Asia by analyzing the threat that the Qing faced from abroad:

> The Russians, Dutch, and Portuguese, like the other Europeans, are able to accomplish whatever they undertake, no matter how difficult. They are intrepid, clever, and know how to profit themselves. As long as I reign there is nothing to worry about from them for China. . . . But if our government were to become weak, if we were to weaken our vigilance over the Chinese in the southern provinces and over the large number of boats that leave every year from Luzon, Batavia, Japan, and other countries, or if divisions were to erupt among us Manchus and the various princes of my family, if our enemies the Eleuths were to succeed in allying with the Tartars of Kokonor, as well as our Kalmusk and Mongol tributaries, what would become of our empire? With the Russians to the north, the Portuguese from Luzon to the east, the Dutch to the south, [they] would do with China whatever they liked.[5]

In 1724 Li Wei, the governor of Zhejiang, cautioned the Yongzheng emperor that China was facing a new international situation: European countries and Japan now communicated with one another by sea and might well form an alliance against China.[6]

These developments raise many new questions: What host of causes led Kangxi and his successors to implement open trade policies? While Western states organized government-sponsored explorations and chartered state monopolies, why did Qing rulers depend on private entrepreneurs to develop foreign commerce? How did the Qing ruling class, which conventional wisdom has characterized as fundamentally anticommercial, manage the empire's overseas trade? Why was the Qing maritime customs system better at developing overseas trade than comparable institutions under the Song, Yuan, and Ming? How did links to the global economy complicate the political, diplomatic, and ethnic situations in Qing China? As we advance into this inquiry, we may feel a need to reconsider our presuppositions about early globalization.

Early Globalization and Qing Maritime Trade Policy

No study of the early modern global economy that fails to address Qing maritime policy can be considered complete. Too long ignored, the decisions of the Manchu emperors relating to overseas trade played a key role in the genesis of what I term early globalization (ca. 1500–1800), a transitional period that laid the foundation for modern globalization.[7]

From the 1970s to the present, scholars of global history have gone from stressing the central role of European expansion to concentrating on the roles of China, India, and Southeast Asia in global integration, from focusing on the state as the major unit of analysis to emphasizing transnational networks, from conventional political and economic history to a novel history of flows of goods, capital, information, and culture. A fresh theoretical and methodological framework is a first step to reappraising early globalization.

It may be useful to reconsider some of the questions the new global history has yet to answer. One of the earliest historians to take an interest in the functioning of networks was Immanuel Wallerstein. The factors of the world system that his theory highlights include the rise of strong centralized European governments that oversaw extensive bureaucracies and powerful militaries and, second, overseas expansion. In other words, for Wallerstein the West created the modern world system. This Eurocentric approach presents the non-Western world as peripheral, acting only in reaction to the changing reality of the core region. Whereas his emphasis on the role of the state, as I discuss, deserves further treatment, Wallerstein's Eurocentric pattern has had to face more and more questions and rebuttals since the 1980s.

One of the most important challenges to the Eurocentric pattern is Janet Abu-Lughod's *Before European Hegemony.* Abu-Lughod denies that the world system was created exclusively by the West. She shows that a global network had appeared long before 1500, when the Europeans started their overseas expansion, and that the influence of the network peaked in the first decade of the fourteenth century. Nonetheless, the book's significance is limited. Abu-Lughod does not inspect the continuity of the pre-1500 world system before and after Western hegemony, let alone the question of how the former laid a foundation for the latter. Quite the contrary, she speaks of the non-Western system as having declined in the fourteenth century and collapsed 150 years before the discovery of the New World.[8]

The more radical challenge to the Eurocentric model has come from Andre Gunder Frank. His *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age,* published in 1998, describes the growth of the world system as a long and continuous process that started early in human history and has continued to the present.[9] More important, he argues that it was China and other non-Western countries that occupied the central position in the world system until 1800. A number of Asian scholars have described for the same period transnational trade networks centered on Asia. One such historian is Hamashita Takeshi, who views the Asian trade network as the product of the Chinese tribute system.[10] Although adding a much-needed corrective, Frank and Hamashita go too far, occasionally exaggerating the role of the non-Western world while focusing on the flow of capital and losing sight of the role of the state.

Whereas Wallerstein's theory minimizes the part that the non-Western world played in global integration, revisionist theories have underestimated the historically unprecedented changes brought by the discovery of both the New World and new sea routes around familiar landmasses—both achievements of European navigators. To overlook those is to fail to grasp why crucial changes in China and other Asian states took place only after 1500. One example is the tax reforms initiated in the 1570s. Silver had become an important medium of exchange long before the 1550s, but it replaced copper coins as the required medium for tax payments nationwide only after silver bullion entered China from the New World. China's tax policies cannot be fully understood without taking into account Western trade.

Many scholars today underestimate the role of the state in global history. In the past thirty years, whereas more and more scholars, especially outside Europe and North America, have emphasized marginalized groups and nonstate or transnational entities, the significance of the state has received little attention. This has distorted our perception of globalization.

The two problems can be solved by highlighting the distinctive characteristics of early globalization, the period between 1500 and 1800. Too many, including Wallerstein and Frank, have treated the period as part of a monolithic thing called globalization without noticing its distinctive features. Let us turn now to some of those important characteristics.

First, it was during this period that the West gradually laid the foundation for global hegemony, achieved after 1800. However, it is an exaggeration to place the West at the center of global history during the early modern period. The reason is simple: except in the New World, Europeans were one among many groups that explored, traded, developed networks, and so on. Merchants from Portugal, Spain, and the Netherlands may have been frequent visitors to East Asia, but their impact was superficial and contact with locals would have been impossible without adapting to local conditions.

Moreover, the role played by European visitors to Asia was shaped by the places they visited. For example, Manila rose to regional prominence between the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries—roughly the same time that Yuegang, a port on the southern coast of China, was open to private maritime traders. In the late seventeenth century, Qing law permitted private merchants to sail from coastal ports to Southeast Asia. The number of Chinese ships that sailed to Batavia increased so quickly that Dutch colonists cancelled plans to expand the China trade. Into the 1830s, government support ensured the rapid prospering of trade between Shanghai, Ningbo, and Singapore. Since those cities were among the most important pillars of Western global expansion, there can be no doubt of the influence imperial Qing trade policy had on the rise of European overseas empires and modern globalization.

A great constraint on Europe's overseas expansion was the emergence of a multipolar world. Certainly military and navigational technologies facilitated Western trade. Except in the New World, however, dominion over foreign lands was often superficial and temporary. In the Indian Ocean, Turkey, and Persia, for instance, mighty empires inhibited political and economic expansion. Imperialists who hoped to maintain a lasting grip on foreign trade had to adapt to local practices. For example, Portuguese and Dutch traders offered generous tribute payments to the rulers of late imperial China and Tokugawa Japan to maintain their commercial interests in Macao and Nagasaki, respectively.[11] In maritime Asia no single group achieved absolute dominance over the rest, so Chinese, Japanese, Southeast Asian, and Western powers formed a multipolar network.

Another feature of early globalization was the central role of the state in political, social, and economic life. After 1500 the emerging global economy created new transnational powers based on the flow of silver, vast networks, and the rise of private traders. Most of the states successfully adapted to such changes by implementing more flexible commercial policies. Global integration meant greater profits for states such as Portugal, Spain, Qing China, and Tokugawa Japan—all emerged strengthened rather than weakened.

To be sure, the maritime policies of those countries varied according to their different commercial circumstances. In the West, official sponsorship and intervention defined oceangoing trade: private traders were not able to bear the financial burden of overseas exploration without royal patronage. In the Middle East, the Indian Ocean, and maritime Asia, it was foreign merchants, such as Armenians, Chinese, and then the Spanish, Portuguese, and Dutch, who played important roles in transregional trade. Their lack of other than commercial ties to most of the places where they did business made them seem, to local potentates, reliably disinterested. Thus they could function as a useful channel for communicating with the outside world.

The rulers of the Ottoman Empire, Mogul India, Safavid Persia, Southeast Asia, and Tokugawa Japan centered their maritime policies partly or wholly on foreign businessmen.[12] To weaken native merchants, the Tokugawa *bakufu* (shogunal government) handed the rights to all overseas trade to two groups of outsiders: the Chinese and the Dutch. The case of China was completely different. In maritime Asia, as I indicate in this work, Chinese private traders held sway until the 1820s. This ensured the flow of New World silver that filled the imperial treasuries of the late Ming and Qing. The enormous economic contribution made by Chinese entrepreneurs rendered the concurrent security problems quite tolerable, and the imperial government consequently adopted an open maritime policy. In other words, the peculiar commercial environment faced by Qing China led it to a maritime policy quite different from the xenophile policies of many other states.

A review of previous scholarship on the Qing court's trade policies may prove useful here.

From Open to Closed: Changing Discourses on Qing Maritime Policy

Almost all English-language works on the history of Chinese foreign relations during the Ming and Qing, ranging from H. B. Morse's chronicle of the East India Company trade with China to John King Fairbank's classic *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast,* at least mention Kangxi's open trade policy of 1684. Surprisingly, however, so far there have been no books or articles, either in China or in the West, systematically examining the causes and effects of the 1684 maritime policy, not to mention the above issues.[13] Most of this policy has remained unclear. For example, no studies accurately revealed how many and which coastal cities were opened under the new policy until Huang Guosheng's pioneering work came out in 2000. As a result, most pre-2000 works merely follow the incorrect view of the nineteenth-century Chinese historian Xia Xie that Kangxi opened four coastal ports—Zhangzhou in Fujian, Guangzhou in Guangdong, Ningbo in Zhejiang, and Yuntaishan in Jiangsu—in 1684. Actually, according to Huang, there were at least fifty large and small ports in these four provinces opened for developing overseas trade.[14] The effacement of the 1684 Chinese open trade policy from the historiography is not accidental. To a great degree, it is the product of the dominance of a Eurocentric discourse on the history of Chinese foreign trade that emerged in the late eighteenth century.

Before the second half of the eighteenth century, even in the eyes of the Europeans, including the English, China appeared as a country aware of the significance of overseas trade for both the well-being of its people and the wealth of the state and one active in developing commercial exchanges with surrounding countries.[15] Du Halde, a French scholar who was famous for his works on China in the early eighteenth century, viewed China as more open during the Qing than during the Ming.[16] Another French scholar, the politician Silhouette, stressed in his work on China that because the new Qing dynasty was more eager for bullion than the Ming had been, all countries were welcome to enter its ports.[17] In a dictionary published in Paris and then in London in the 1751, Qing China was characterized as a mercantilist country that grounded its wealth and power upon developing trade with surrounding countries:[18]

> At present . . . by opening commerce with other countries, the Chinese have increased the means of enriching their own. They now not only suffer, but encourage both near and distant nations . . . to come and trade with them; and bring them the most valuable commodities; and, at the same time, allow their own people unto a great number of foreign parts, whether they carry their silks, porcelain, and other curious manufactures and knick-knacks, as well as their tea, medicinal roots, drugs, sugar, and other produce. They trade into most parts of East India; they go to Batavia, Mallacca, Ache, Siam, etc. No wonder then that it is so opulent and powerful, when all the four parts of the globe contribute to make it so.[19]

Contemporary Englishmen recorded the same impressions after visits to Beijing. In 1719, a British doctor by the name of John Bell accompanying a Russian mission to China was impressed by the prosperity and order he witnessed in the capital of the empire. Contrary to George Macartney, whose portrait of China as a closed, backward, and stagnant civilization molded the West's views of the country, Bell painted a different picture: for traders, Beijing was as safe and convenient as Amsterdam or London, and China's industries and foreign trade set an example for the Europeans.[20] It is clear from such accounts that, in the eyes of early eighteenth-century Europeans, Chinese foreign trade was flourishing. The Chinese attitude toward foreign trade was positive, entrepreneurial, and adaptive, and the Qing government's policies were far from anticommercial but, on the contrary, open, lenient, and mercantilist. More important, for those observers, the openness of Chinese foreign trade policies was best demonstrated by China's measures relating to trade with surrounding countries, rather than with the Europeans. Nonetheless, these China-centered views, to use Paul Cohen's term in a broad sense, gave way to a new Eurocentric discourse that emerged around the second half of the eighteenth century, when the West, especially the British, "construct[ed] a superior English national identity" and demonstrated that they "had now transcended all the past global orders."[21] It was at this time that British traders and scholars began to depict China as closed, isolationist, anticommercial, and lacking the spirit of free trade.

Dutch traders criticized China for violating the principle of free trade for the first time in the early seventeenth century.[22] But the "free trade" they sought from Beijing was an equivalent of their monopoly on maritime Asian trade and excluded the native Chinese private traders there for the purpose of maximizing Dutch commercial interests. The Ming government's rejection of such demands led the Dutch to condemn the Ming court as disregarding the spirit of free trade and failing to respect Dutch commercial privileges in Chinese seas.[23]

But this Dutch view received little attention even in Europe until about the mid-eighteenth century, when the British capitalist class came to have more interest in the Chinese market and, as a result, sought new commercial privileges from China. Like the Dutch, the British traders saw their own commercial interests and privileges as symbolizing the spirit of "free trade." Beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, the emerging English capitalist class claimed its standard of "civilization" as one with which every nation on earth ought to comply.[24] Thus, China's disregard, denial, and rejection of British commercial privileges became a challenge to "civilization" and, more important, clearly reflected the isolationist nature of China's trade policy as well as the backwardness and closed quality of the Chinese empire.[25] As an immediate and ultimate result of this logic, a new Eurocentric view of the history of Chinese foreign trade began to take shape. Obvious examples are Adam Smith's and then Max Weber's views.

Witnessing the rapid industrial and commercial growth in eighteenth-century England, Smith argued in his famous *Wealth of Nations* (1776) both that British trade occupied the central position in world trade and that the Western, especially the English, approach to wealth and prosperity constituted a model applicable to the rest of the world. In contrast to Bell's as well as Jacques Savary's positive pictures, Smith's depicted China as ignorant of the significance of maritime trade, a portrait based on the Chinese attitude toward European traders as told by British merchants returning from China. Since they had not undertaken Western-style maritime expeditions and imposed restrictions on Western trade, he concluded that "the Chinese have little respect for foreign trade" and have "never excelled in foreign commerce."[26] In other words, China would remain stagnant until it appreciated the importance of the Western model of foreign trade and the value of commercial exchange with Europe. Compared with pre-1750 accounts, Western trade replaced Chinese trade with maritime Asia as the focus of the history of Chinese foreign trade, and the centrality of Chinese private trade was completely overlooked. Smith thus claimed that "the great part of the surplus produce of [China] seems to have been always exported by foreigners."[27] Despite the simplism and shallowness of Smith's view, it became the basis of later historiography of Chinese foreign trade. No matter how much later scholars might refine, modify, and extend his view, their studies never went beyond his basic framework.

Following the same logic as Adam Smith, Max Weber, in his well-known *The Religion of China* (1951), identified the eighteenth-century commercial link between China and Europe with the whole of Chinese foreign trade. From this perspective, China's restrictions on European trade, as represented by the Canton system, naturally testified to the fact that China lacked, to use Weber's words, "progressivism" "in the European sense." In speaking of Chinese private traders, he saw no hope of their changing the system, because they had no power to do so:

> The once considerable export trade of China did not revive and there was only passive trade in a single port (Canton) which was open to Europeans but strictly controlled. Popular endeavor, such as might have been nourished by internal capitalist interests, did not arise to shatter this barrier. All evidence points to the contrary, for in the European sense, "progressivism," generally speaking, emerged neither in the field of technology, nor economy, nor administration.[28]

The Eurocentrism of Weber's account is clear, and, as Wang Hui has pointed out, it found its way into his analysis of many aspects of Chinese history.[29] He attempted to fit the Chinese case into the Western pattern, characterized by the expansion of sea power, concluding that China lacked the necessary basis for developing foreign trade because "for centuries China had renounced sea-power, the indispensable basis of export trade."[30]

In fact, however, because Chinese private traders enjoyed a close and stable commercial relationship with maritime Asia from the eleventh century on, the lack of "sea power," crucial to the Western presence in East Asia from 1500 onward, did not prevent them from expanding their commercial presence there. Western traders, especially the Dutch, tried to exclude Chinese private traders from maritime Asia, but their efforts proved fruitless.[31] Although not backed by any Western-style naval fleet, Chinese maritime traders nonetheless won the competition in maritime Asia against Western merchants armed with powerful navies. Not only did their commercial network survive numerous challenges posed by the Western intrusion during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, but also it continued into the twentieth century. To a certain degree the establishment and development of Manila, Batavia, and Singapore as Western colonies was inseparable from the contributions of these Chinese maritime traders.[32] If sea power were "the indispensable basis of [China's] export trade," as Weber claimed, none of this would be comprehensible.

Yet these contradictions failed to capture the attention of either Western or Chinese scholars, let alone prompt them to question the received wisdom.