

**UC Berkeley**

**Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review**

**Title**

"Oceanus Resartus"; or, Is Chinese Maritime History Coming of Age?

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5mp0v9rq>

**Journal**

Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review, 1(25)

**Author**

Blussé, Leonard

**Publication Date**

2017-12-01

# CROSS-CURRENTS



## EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

### ***Oceanus Resartus; or, Is Chinese Maritime History Coming of Age?***

Leonard Blussé, Leiden University

#### **Abstract**

Perhaps the most salient feature of the transformation of China's economic policy is its tack into the oceanic sphere. This is a break with the country's traditional past as an inland-looking, continental power: the landscape is now complemented by the seascape. This article suggests that China's new relationship with the sea asks for a master plan for reclaiming a neglected maritime past—the invention of a national maritime tradition, a newly tailored past to explain China's former relationship with the sea.

Keywords: Chinese maritime history, One Belt One Road policy, maritime anthropology, nautical traditions, mariculture

Some forty-five years have passed since the publication of Joseph Needham's research on Chinese hydraulics and shipping, probably the most acclaimed installment of his magnum opus, *Science and Civilisation in China* (Needham 1954–2004). Volume 4, part 3, of this work—*Civil Engineering and Nautics*, a copious study of some 900 pages—was published in 1971, at the height of the Cultural Revolution, when Chinese academic circles showed little interest in nautical matters. Written with the help of such maritime specialists as Lo Jung-pang, J. V. Mills, G. R. G. Worcester, and other old stalwarts of the former Chinese Maritime Customs Service, it was the first serious attempt in a Western language to give an overall survey of the history of Chinese shipping and navigation.

Volume 4 is representative of “the Needham question.” In the words of Needham's biographer, Simon Winchester: “Why did in the middle of the fifteenth century virtually all scientific advance in China come to a shuddering halt?” (Winchester 2008, 190). For Needham, China's withdrawal from the oceans—whether true or not I will leave aside here—was representative of the stasis that he discerned throughout Chinese society at the time. How should this be explained? Was it, in the case of maritime matters, the outcome of the Chinese bureaucracy's sustained efforts to control the unruly coastal subjects and their shady affairs

overseas? Was it because of the “huge imperial investments in controlling the annual flooding of the Yangzi and Yellow Rivers?” (Winchester 2008, 190). Or were there still other factors involved?

In his survey of nautical affairs, Needham starts by detailing Chinese inventions such as the sternpost rudder, battened sails, leeboards (to keep flat-bottomed sailing vessels on course), watertight compartments, and so on, and he writes with admiration (and some overestimation) about the naval expeditions under the command of the Chinese admiral Zheng He that set sail between 1405 and 1433 to establish and reestablish China’s tribute relations with countries in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean as far away as the African coast. In Needham’s view, these ships represented the apex of Chinese superiority in shipbuilding techniques, logistics, and navigation. He concluded that after this brief period of “shock and awe” voyaging, China’s role as a seaborne nation came to an end, some seventy years before the first Portuguese ships arrived in Asian waters. Although Needham swallowed lock, stock, and barrel what Chinese historians and archaeologists were telling him about the gigantic size of the ancient Chinese ships, we can hardly fault him for concluding that developments in Chinese navigation in the Age of Sail lagged behind the continuously improving skills in Western ship design, shipbuilding, and navigation techniques in the centuries that followed.

Zheng He may have crossed the China Seas and the Indian Ocean, but in navigational terms his coast-hugging, long-distance voyages were not a breakthrough if compared with the subsequent Iberian oceanic voyages of discovery with which they are often mistakenly likened. Yet, even if the massive Ming armadas were flying before the seasonal monsoon winds and basically followed well-known coastal routes that were first explored by Southeast Asian, Indian, Arab, and Persian sailors, the sheer logistical effort of these court-sponsored expeditions indeed remains impressive.

Whether Joseph Needham noticed in his final years that epochal changes were occurring in the Chinese shipping industry *and* in the study of Chinese maritime history is not known. He is said to have been totally dedicated to the publication of the last volumes on other scientific subjects. Now we can look back and reflect on the sea change that is presently occurring in the field of maritime and nautical history and draw some conclusions on the state of the art.

The Chinese economy has been completely transformed since the implementation in December 1978 of Deng Xiaoping’s policies of economic reform, *gaige kaifang* 改革开放

(reform and opening up). Shedding its planned, autarkic mode of production, the People's Republic of China (PRC) government launched a transition to an export-driven, market economy "with Chinese characteristics." It seems incredible but true that now, nearly forty years later, China ranks among the top players in the global marketplace. The Chinese government now pushes its export drive with the "One Belt One Road" initiative, based on the precedent of the transcontinental and transoceanic silk roads of yore.

In the transformation from a predominantly agrarian society into an urbanized, industrialized one, overseas trade and shipping have become the pillars of the booming Chinese market economy. Thus, perhaps the most salient feature of the *gaige kaifang* has been China's tack into the oceanic sphere. This is a break with the country's traditional past as an inland-looking, continental power: the landscape is now complemented by the seascape. It is a break with the policies of the post-1949 Mao period, but even more a break with the imperial past, when the court's policies were primarily involved in territorial pursuits.

The recent surge forward into the maritime sphere has been spectacular in every respect and continues to be so. From the 1980s onward, industrialization made its comeback in the coastal areas, and duty-free zones were opened to attract international investment and trade. Heavy investment in the coastal zones fired the locomotive engine that set the Chinese economy in motion. Along with these changes came the infrastructural and logistical innovations necessary to deal with the huge increase in the nation's imports and exports, such as the complete overhaul of the port system, its inland feeder routes and the shipbuilding industry, as well as the modernization and dramatic expansion of the merchant marine, fishing fleets, navy, and coast guard. Eight of the ten largest seaports in the world today are situated in China, and some of the world's largest container shipping companies now fly the Chinese flag.<sup>1</sup>

All of these developments are mirrored in a strategic 2014 document titled *Several Opinions of the State Council on Promoting Sound Development of the Shipping Industry* (Shanghai International Shipping Institute 2015). This document puts forth the general requirements for meeting the needs for national economic security and foreign trade development. On this basis, the Shanghai International Shipping Institute (SISI) drew up an ambitious laundry list of no less than forty targets for the year 2030. Here are some of the more important goals: In fifteen years' time, China's international shipping volume is expected to account for 17 percent of the global total. The ports along the Chinese coast will be clustered around seven hubs, and four more hub ports along the Yangzi River will confirm

inland China's water transport artery as the main channel of resource distribution in the eastern, central, and western regions. In terms of governmental management and control, the Coast Guard of the Ministry of Public Security, the Ocean Supervision Department of the State Oceanic Administration, the Maritime Affairs Department of the Ministry of Transport, the Fishing Affairs Department of the Ministry of Agriculture, and the offshore Anti-Smuggling Police of the General Administration of Customs will be integrated and reorganized into one—and I quote—“unified law enforcement team like the US Coast Guard.”

Finally, the document mentions the two following targets: “While maintaining its world leadership in the design and R&D of traditional ship and port equipment, China will grasp the design R&D and manufacturing technology of such high-end ships as LNG ships and luxury cruising ships” (Guo Fa 2014). In 2030, China is likely to become the world's largest market for cruise tourism, and China's supply of cruise terminals will be the largest in the world. They will consist of four regional cruise port clusters in the Bohai Rim, the South China Sea, the Yangzi Delta, and the country's east coast (mainly the Zhoushan Archipelago and the East China Sea) (Shanghai International Shipping Institute 2015). It is hard to believe that this is the same country that, for more than twenty-five years after liberation in 1949, turned its back to the sea and for strategic reasons even moved its main industrial plants away from the seaboard provinces. The past is indeed another country.

In any country, such an epochal volte-face from a “landborne” (大陆国家) power into a “seaborne” (海洋国家) power would require some self-reflection and introspection about the nation's ambivalent historical relationship with the blue frontier. In the case of China, which prides itself on a millennia-old past as a political and cultural territorial unit, the inclusion of the maritime sphere asks for something more than merely formulating targets for the future. The future of China's new relationship with the sea asks for a master plan for reclaiming a neglected—or should I say ignored—maritime past, the invention of a national maritime tradition, a newly tailored past to explain China's former relationship with the sea. It may be aptly termed *Oceanus resartus*, or “the ocean [deity] re-tailored.”

I am not the first person to suggest that China needs a new maritime history. In the early 1990s, Xiamen University professor Yang Guozhen already foresaw that such a revision was necessary given the great impact of the *gaige kaifang* on Chinese society in general and on the coastal provinces in particular (Yang 1996). He asserted that China was in need of a new maritime history because this domain had been a totally neglected sphere

within Chinese historiography; he somewhat hyperbolically styled it a *shamo* 沙漠 (desert). When Yang maintained that the sole interest that historians of the agrarian society traditionally showed toward the water world was in terms of *shuili* 水利 (water conservancy), he clearly alluded to the *heshang* 河殇 (river elegy) debate that had sprouted from the initially warmly applauded, then contested, and finally forbidden CCTV documentary with that title. Starting in 1988, this TV series strove to explain in six installments why soil-bound traditional China had lost out to the aggressive “oceanic nations” of the West.

The river elegy metaphor sought to contrast the Yellow River basin, the cradle of an “inward-looking and static” Chinese civilization, with the oceanic world, the freeway of overseas expansion and ambitious designs. It is not my intention here to resuscitate the *heshang* debate, as enough has already been said about it and its author, Su Xiaokang (see de Jong 1989; Su 2002). I should merely like to point out that much of what Su had to say about the drama of the silt-loaded Yellow and Huai Rivers, with their disastrous floods, does not apply equally to the Yangzi and Pearl River basins, which, contrary to the unnavigable Yellow River, have been traditionally open to fluvial, coastal, and maritime shipping. Notwithstanding occasional disastrous floods, the Jiangnan region and the Pearl River Delta have actually been dynamic engines of the Chinese Empire over the past thousand years, and they continue to function in that way. In this context, it is interesting to see that the target-setting agenda of the present PRC government judiciously brackets the Yangzi and maritime navigation into one and the same grand scheme.

Yang Guozhen’s call to arms was visionary, because in the years that followed the Chinese government indeed saw the need to create a heroic national maritime past and took various initiatives to develop such a policy. Let us briefly review the successive steps in this propagandistic media offensive. The nation’s inescapable “equilibrium trap” dilemma as portrayed in the river elegy was not accepted in official circles, but there seemed to exist a *communis opinio* that the “rise of the West” should be explained in terms of continuous rivalry and the oceanic challenges that allowed Europe to expand overseas.

This opinion was expressed in another popular CCTV television series, *The Rise of the Great Powers* (大国崛起), which highlighted the ascendancy of prominent seaborne nations in the past. The success stories of the overseas empires of Portugal, Spain, Holland, and Britain represented the benefits of sea power and overseas trade in the premodern period, and they were obviously major historic examples to be emulated. At the first Beijing Forum

in 2003, a professor at Nanjing University even confided to me that he had been asked to give private courses to China's top leadership about the historical triad of capitalism, maritime trade, and sea power.

At about the same time, heavily sponsored public events commemorated the epochal voyages of the large Chinese fleets to Southeast and South Asia between 1403 and 1433. Some of these fleets under the command of imperial eunuchs, of whom Zheng He is best remembered, are said to have numbered 300 ships, large and small, crewed by 27,000 men. A curious, engine-powered replica of Zheng He's treasure ship was built for use as a propaganda vessel in the context of China's publicity campaign for peaceful development throughout the Indian Ocean.

The Zheng He craze is ebbing, not in the least because of the farfetched claims by British author Gavin Menzies, whose *1421: The Year China Discovered the World* (2002) has succeeded in turning a very interesting episode in Chinese maritime history into a caricature.<sup>2</sup> At present, the leading authorities have turned their attention to the history of the maritime and continental silk roads connecting China with the outer world and initiated the One Belt, One Road (一帶一路) policy. If in the past the history of the *continental* Silk Road appealed to the Chinese, Korean, and Japanese imaginations, the *maritime* Silk Road has become a call to arms in Chinese policy as well as in Chinese historical research.

So confident is the policy-making intended to strengthen China's "sovereign position" in the adjoining seas that, under the cloak of centuries of overseas imperial control and maritime Silk Road connections, the Chinese government is making legal claims to almost all reefs in the South China Sea as if it were a vast inner lake. Here I do not seek to become entangled in the claims of the Chinese and counterclaims of the other nations around the South China Sea, which, like China, exercised neither sovereignty nor control over these reefs—that is, until the era of high imperialism, when colonial governments started to peg out their claims.

It is interesting to note on what shallow legal grounds the present Chinese claims are founded. The groundwork of these recent historical claims was laid out in a map by the eminent geographer Bai Meichu, one of the founders of the China Geographical Society (Hayton 2014, 56). In 1936, Bai Meichu inserted in his *New China Construction Map* a u-shaped line that roughly followed the reefs and islands in front of the littoral regions of the South China Sea and thereby pegged out what he thought should be China's claims of sovereignty throughout that seascape. In the years that followed, this virtual demarcation line

morphed from an armchair geographer's fantasy into the *limes* (outer boundary) of China's claims to reefs and islands and the seas surrounding them. It is the old story of uttering the same claim so often that one not only expects others to believe it but even begins to believe it oneself.

One point should be made about what seems to be an uneven and endless debate between the well-armed Chinese Goliath and a number of stone-slinging littoral Davids around the South China Sea: even if the Chinese historical claims to sovereignty or control are questionable on strictly legal grounds, there can be no doubt that there has been a millennia-old presence of fishermen, traders, and pirates from China's southeastern coastal provinces throughout the South China Sea region. Yet if one scrutinizes the available historical sources in order to formally establish a public historical Chinese presence—that is, one that represents the imperial government—throughout the seascape of the South and East China Seas, one will not find a shred of evidence. But if we search the existing historical sources for the presence of Chinese private entrepreneurs, fishermen, emigrants, and adventurers, we may spot them everywhere engaged in their own pursuits—or, to put it another way, engaged in the expansive trading networks of China's informal coastal economies.

Wang Gungwu, the eminent historian of the Chinese overseas presence in Southeast Asia, has characterized this phenomenon as one of “merchants without empire.” I personally prefer the term “informal empire,” using it in the way English historians John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson applied it to British economic influence in South America during the heyday of imperialism (1953). Private British entrepreneurs operating in overseas countries adapted themselves to, or made use of, the rule of local regimes to gain a determinant role in the economic sphere without having to shoulder administrative expenses. The same phenomenon could be witnessed with the Chinese presence throughout Southeast Asia.

In any case, it should be stressed that in traditional Chinese policy—and in historiography, too—these overseas merchant adventurers simply did not figure in any way as representatives of the empire but as traitors (*hanjian* 汉奸). The only official links at the state level with the surrounding maritime neighbors that one can think of were the so-called tributary relations between the Chinese court and local rulers.<sup>3</sup> But, as has sufficiently been pointed out by various authors, the tribute system in the maritime world of East Asia acted merely as a cloak to engage in trade.<sup>4</sup>



In the past decade, the Chinese government has sponsored all kinds of projects to awaken public interest in the maritime past. Archaeological excavations on land, which have been well funded in broad terms since 1949, are now followed up by intensive archaeological diving for shipwrecks and their often well-preserved cargoes of porcelain. Recently, archaeologists have even started to recover and raise sunken hulls to the surface. Until ten years ago, the shipping museum at Quanzhou was the only maritime museum worth mentioning, but since then public and private shipping museums are sprouting up everywhere in the coastal provinces. Over the past decade, a new national shipping museum has also opened in Shanghai, in addition to a new national port museum in Ningbo. The great challenge for the staff members of the newly created national museums housed in veritable architectural tours de force is that they are basically working in empty shells. They possess little original hardware in the shape of navigation-related objects for the simple reason that, in the past, nobody in the public domain was interested in collecting any objects related to navigation. While in the West, maritime museums are ironically bulging with so many antiquarian objects that they hardly know where to store them, in China such maritime interest has only just started to emerge. Four years ago, when I gave talks about European maritime heritage organizations at the newly created China Maritime Museum in Shanghai—a large building complex crowned by enormous wings that portray sails, then situated in the middle of nowhere at a distance of some 80 kilometers from downtown Shanghai—the young academic staff complained about how frustrating it was to work in a rather isolated location while witnessing how swiftly the traditional maritime culture of China is vanishing.<sup>5</sup> If in the 1980s many shipyards could still be found building and repairing wooden boats, and sailing junks could be seen on the Yangzi, around Zhoushan Archipelago, on the Bay of Amoy, and in the Pearl River Delta, all of this has vanished forever, so that any kind of local fieldwork research must be started *ex tabula rasa*.

There is, however, an interesting countertale to all of this. In recent years, wealthy local benefactors and patrons have started to create their own collections. This is not only a trend among rich art collectors; there has also been something of a groundswell of local enthusiasts resulting in new editions of rare printed material that was thought to have perished during the Cultural Revolution. To give one example: a few years ago, while making a fact-finding trip to Zhanglin 樟林 with Dr. Cai Xiangyu of Guangzhou University, I was surprised to learn that not only several local TV stations, but even CCTV and Phoenix Satellite Television had made documentaries about the history of this formerly well-known

sailing ship port.<sup>6</sup> Students and teachers in the history department of Jinan University have carried out extensive fieldwork interviewing local people and published their findings in a 2002 report titled *The Ancient Port of Zhanglin (Chaozhou): Sources and Research* (Jinan University 2002). The first part of this report consists of seven papers about the port, its “red-prow” vessels and Chaozhou emigration; the second part consists of diverse materials extracted from standard history documents 正史, local gazetteers, inscriptions 碑文, and so on. Unfortunately, the local government has not carried out any maintenance work on the dilapidated new prosperity quarter (新兴街) with its fifty-four maritime storehouses.

For the hedgehogs among the maritime historians, China is presently the place to be. Huge research grants are being handed out to plunder whatever historical written sources are left that could possibly underline China’s past grandeur or presence on the seas. But, as our Chinese colleagues are finding out while sifting through and editing historical sources, information on foreign trade and navigational matters is quite meager, apart from historical material about coastal sailing routes and the *haifang* (coastal defense) describing in detail the types and sizes of patrol vessels, the organization of coastal defense, and the (failing) eradication of piracy (Calanca 2011). Anyhow, historical sources from the imperial bureaucracy offer little to support present claims to widely extending overseas imperial control or exercise of sovereignty.

The question really is: does it matter that the historical sources do not lend themselves to this dialectical maneuvering aimed at repositioning the nation’s outlook on its maritime past? The traditional polities of East Asia all faced the maritime frontier in an uncomfortable and defensive manner. Maritime prohibitions were promulgated and practiced on a level not known elsewhere in the premodern world during the drawn-out process of state formation that characterized China and Japan during the seventeenth century; see John Wills’ classic survey, “Maritime China from Wang Chih to Shih Lang” (1979).<sup>7</sup>

Recurring issues such as coastal control, evasion, and interloping relate directly to the historic state of affairs not only in Qing China but also in Tokugawa Japan and Joseon Korea. From the seventeenth century until the middle of the nineteenth, all native shipping in these three territorial regimes was subject to a host of prohibitions and limitations aimed at keeping some kind of control over those maritime entrepreneurs bold enough to leave the coastal waters for the deep seas. The courts of Korea and Japan were strictest in forbidding their subjects to engage in overseas traffic. The promulgation of maritime prohibitions (*kaikin* 海禁) became the cornerstone in the state formation process of the Tokugawa regime. Even so,

this did not mean that the country was totally sealed. *Sakoku* (closed-country) Japan continued to avail itself of Chinese and Dutch shipping to gather necessities from and information about the outer world (Clulow 2014).

In seventeenth-century China, however, the situation was different, not least because of the laborious process of the Manchu conquest of the coastal sphere. In its declining years, the Ming court allowed sailors from Fujian Province fixed quotas of regulated trade with the “Western and Eastern Oceans” (东西洋, South China Sea) as the best solution to combat piracy and smuggling. The livelihood of these coastal regions was inextricably connected to the sea through fishing and trade. “The sea is their rice field” was the mantra repeated time and again by the governors of Fujian and Zhejiang in their reports to the throne. The innate strength of the maritime world of China’s southeastern coastal provinces was proven by the protracted resistance that the Zheng clan in Taiwan offered against the Manchus. In the 1660s, the successes of these “Ming loyalists” even forced the Manchus to take such drastic measures as forcing the coastal population more than ten miles inland behind a patrolled barrier, in order to cut off their adversaries from mainland resources (Cheng 2013). Not until the incorporation of Taiwan in 1683 did the Manchu government relax its draconian policies and impose a heavily regulated customs system. This allowed foreign trade with the Nanyang (南洋) but forbade migration overseas, as has been pointed out by Huang Guoshen (2000), Ng Chin-keong (1983), and Gang Zhao (2013).

In the years that followed, both the Tokugawa and Qing regimes fostered no maritime ambitions other than to keep the coastal waters secure and free from pirates. The Japanese kept their supply routes open by relying on Chinese and Dutch shipping, which, as the years went by, was curtailed more and more with the aim of achieving almost complete autarky in the economic sphere. The Chinese imperial government followed a mixed policy of allowing native ships to sail overseas and foreign shipping to come to one designated harbor. Junks of China’s southeastern coastal provinces were allowed to trade with the Nanyang on the condition that they would return with the following southern monsoon; during the trading season, foreign ships were allowed to anchor only in the Canton roadstead.

If the research in China and abroad on earlier dynastic periods such as the Song and Yuan has yielded impressive results within the framework of maritime Silk Road studies, comparatively little attention has been paid to the early modern period until recently. In my view, this was the really formative contact period in which maritime China joined up with the truly global trade that was emerging in the Indian Ocean in early modern times. During that

process of interaction starting more than four hundred years ago, the groundwork was laid for the “Chinatowns” and large rural, fishing, and mining communities of people of Chinese descent that mushroomed throughout Southeast Asia, often encouraged and assisted by local rulers or colonial authorities who welcomed enterprising Chinese sojourners in their territories. Because the forests of China’s coastal provinces had already been depleted of suitable timber by this time, many of the larger trading junks were no longer built by Chinese craftsmen in China, but rather in Siam and Vietnam. As a result, Chinese shipbuilding techniques spread across the nations bordering on the South China Sea.

Fortunately, the history of this early modern junk trade to the Nanyang—that is to say, the private overseas trade of the long-distance ocean guilds (*yanghang* 洋行), and, from the late eighteenth century, the less regulated coastal trading guilds (*shanghang* 商行), has in the past few decades more or less been mapped out on the basis of scarcely available Chinese sources. In particular, maritime historians from Xiamen University have distinguished themselves in the wake of Tian Rukang (T’ien Ju-k’ang), who wrote a pioneering contribution in 1955 extolling the impact of Chinese private trade to the Nanyang in the early modern period (Tian 1956–1957; see also T’ien 1987). Lin Renquan wrote about the late Ming trade, and this was followed by a series of PhD theses published by students of the late maritime historian Han Zhenhua of the Nanyang Research Institute at Xiamen University. Yang Guozhen has followed up on his own call to arms by editing a useful series of monographs on maritime subjects since the 1990s (Lin 1991). During the Cultural Revolution, Han Zhenhua and his staff also put together an exhaustive collection of historical materials on the islands and reefs in the South China Sea. This originally restricted publication has recently been released (Han, Lin, and Wu 1988).

Parallel to these developments, scholars in Singapore, Taiwan, and various Western countries have started to compare and combine Chinese sources with Japanese and Western sources stemming from overseas ports of arrival of the Chinese junks, such as Batavia and Nagasaki. Gradually, a more complete view of Chinese navigation in the China Seas is emerging (Gipouloux 2011). To give just one example: much information has been gained on Chinese shipping movements thanks to the Japanese *fusetsu gaki* 风说书 (interrogation reports of Chinese skippers) and the so-called *jonken boekjes* (registers of Chinese junks, in Dutch) of the VOC officials in Nagasaki who studiously noted whatever information they could gain about the shipments of their Chinese competitors (Ishii 1998; Nagazumi 1991). These sources have enhanced our understanding of the information circuit, the freight carried,

and the size of the junks employed, to mention just a few examples. In addition, I must cite here the work of the historian of Sino-Western trade, Paul Van Dyke, who has judiciously balanced Western and Chinese materials and virtually reconstructed how the port of Canton operated (Van Dyke 2005, 2011). The abundant cabotage along the Chinese coast from Hainan in the south to Tianjin in the north organized and carried out by coastal trading guilds remained largely unfettered by government interference. Last but not least, how Ng Chin-keong was able to tease out from Chinese sources so much information on the Amoy junk trade borders on the miraculous (Ng 1983, 2016). Because the early modern activity of Chinese entrepreneurs was very much a part of the early phase of globalization, much information about the Chinese maritime tradition is to be gained from putting together the jigsaw puzzle of shards of information in Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Dutch, and English, to name just a few languages.

Both Tokugawa Japan's and Qing China's maritime policies were remarkably successful in their execution, but as far as illegal emigration was concerned, China's southeast coast turned out to be as leaky as a sieve. Merchants were not allowed to stay over more than one monsoon in the Nanyang, and in the event that they could not leave in time, they were given one extra year of respite. Nonetheless, boatloads of prospective sojourners were stealthily taken aboard fishing vessels to rendezvous with ocean junks after these had been checked out in Xiamen. Over time, communities of Chinese sojourners who chose to stay abroad emerged on Java and in the Philippines, the Malay peninsula, Kalimantan, and Siam. A huge Chinese overseas expansion occurred thanks to the junk networks that connected all ports of the South China Sea. Manila, Ayutthaya, and Batavia became home to tens of thousands of Chinese settlers. This was all private enterprise without any intervention by the Chinese administration at home, which wisely sought to limit its supervision to the coastal waters.

Summing up, the imperial administration was highly successful in taming the inner frontiers, the rivers, and the adjacent coastal waters, but it faced the oceanic expanse with great discomfort because of the centrifugal forces at work in the coastal provinces. As the last phase of traditional state formation occurred both in China and Japan in the seventeenth century, basically one and the same maritime strategy was formulated. The strategies may have differed in execution, but they were remarkably similar in design: overseas emigration was forbidden. When Chinese urban communities were slaughtered in Manila and Batavia,

the Manchu court shrugged its shoulders, concluding that these *hanjian* 汉奸 (scoundrels) who had violated imperial commands had earned their just desserts.

The imperial government's grip on inland and sea traffic was of a totally different nature. On account of the endless logistical effort to provide the north with the produce of the south via the imperial canal, the public sector maintained a firm grip on long-distance canal traffic. Coastwise shipping and long-distance traffic to the Nanyang was basically in the hands of private entrepreneurs and could be controlled only by military posts and customs stations along the coast as spelled out in detail by Huang Guosheng (2000). The first Western scholar to point out this distinction between public inland and private sea navigation was Huang's close collaborator, Jane Kate Leonard, in her *Controlling from Afar* (1996), an eye-opening study of publicly organized Imperial Canal transport and hard-to-manage private, coastal traffic in times of crisis.<sup>8</sup>

What about the long nineteenth century of foreign control of China's coastal affairs in the aftermath of the Opium Wars? The bulk of China's native coastal trade seems to have continued as before, even if the establishment of the Imperial Maritime Customs Service (1854) and the coming of the steamship, including the proverbial gunboats, opened up Chinese coastal provinces to foreign shipping. Starting with John King Fairbank, many Western historians have written admirable studies about Sir Robert Hart and his multinational organization, the most recent being Hans van de Ven's *Breaking with the Past* (2014), which convincingly shows how the Imperial Customs Service played a formative role in integrating China into the modern world of trade and finance. An outstanding example of how the Fujianese entrepreneurs continued to cut out their own course amid the conflicting aims of the British and Chinese empires is Murakami Ei's *Maritime History of Modern China: Local Fujian Actors and the British and Chinese Empires* (2013).

One of the salient features of the Chinese Imperial Customs Service was its co-management of water transportation on the Yangzi and the coast, an interdependent connection that is also stressed in the *Several Opinions of the State Council on Promoting Sound Development of the Shipping Industry* to which I referred at the beginning of this article. So far, historians have mainly consulted the Customs Service archives that are kept in England. As far as I know, nobody has yet been working with the main part of the customs archives preserved in the No. 2 National Archives in Nanjing, a potential treasure trove. Closely connected with the archival deposit of the Maritime Customs are the writings of those foreigners who, in its service, dealt with native shipping. Curiously, Worcester's

excellent studies on Chinese ship types (1966, 1971) have only recently been discovered by Chinese historians and are presently being translated.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Given all the work that has recently been carried out, it is perhaps a bit presumptuous to title this article “Is Chinese Maritime History Coming of Age?” Yet there is still much to be done. I would like to conclude with a few suggestions in that direction.

It makes little sense to continue studying China’s nautical tradition just for the sake of pointing out firsts in navigation (compass), construction (sternpost rudder, leeboard, fully battened sails), size (Zheng He’s treasure ships), and so on, although those aspects of maritime history may be of interest for spinners of heroic lore. What seems more important is to show how the hitherto neglected and ignored Chinese nautical domain occupies a place of its own, not only within Chinese culture but also within the much larger seascape of the China Seas. This implies that this maritime heritage should be studied on its own terms.

For those who would like to emulate an instructive example, the “maritime cultural landscape” approach of Swedish archaeologist Christer Westerdahl (1992) seems an attractive option. In Scandinavia, the need arose for a scientific term for the unity of remnants of maritime culture on land as well as under water. On the one hand, Westerdahl’s concept deals with ancient monuments—docks, quays, sign towers, religious structures, and warehouses—on lands that were produced by shipping or fishing; on the other hand, it deals with the utilization of maritime space by ship—settlement, fishing, hunting, shipping, and its subcultures, such as pilotage, navigational techniques, lighthouses, and seamarks. All of these are part of a “maricultural exploitation area.” Apart from inventorying these physical landmarks and seamarks with their attendant subcultures, including the use of a lingua franca among sailors (a popular topic among North Sea historians as well), Westerdahl and his colleagues also looked at the “nautical similes” in colloquial speech among people who were not sailors. Interestingly, a French-Taiwanese research team has recently initiated a research project on navigational knowledge, port governance, and seafaring languages in order to preserve “endangered naval heritage” that seems to resemble somewhat the Westerdahl approach.

Translated into the context of Chinese mariculture, where certain aspects of traditional navigation are quickly disappearing (if they haven’t already passed away or been destroyed by the construction of new facilities), these research techniques seem quite promising. In

coastal China, there are many nautical similes in everyday language, such as the term *chu-hai* 出海 (literally, “putting out to sea”), which is frequently used in colloquial speech by anybody ready to go abroad. Temples and shrines dedicated to the Chinese sea goddess Mazu (妈祖) dot all the coasts of the China Seas, including some of the now-contested shoals and reefs where Chinese wreckers used to gather waiting for ships to run aground.

Part of China’s lost maritime heritage in portolans and rutters (handbooks of sailing directions) has recently been retrieved by perusing Western sources of the same period. Portuguese and later Dutch and English sailing directions and maps of the South China Sea and the Chinese coast were frequently copied from one another, but all relied on the local, useful knowledge of Chinese fishing folk who were enlisted to steer the European ships past the shoals of the still unfathomed coastal waters. The unique Selden map, rediscovered by Robert K. Batchelor in Oxford, shows that this process worked both ways. This early seventeenth-century map was itself drawn on the basis of Western maps, but the inserted place names are all Chinese (Batchelor 2014; Brooks 2013). Several islands in the China Seas that did not yet figure on contemporary Western maps can be found on the Selden map with the same shapes as depicted in contemporary Chinese rutters (Zhou 2017).

This essay has mused about the reverberations caused by the modification of official Chinese attitudes toward the blue frontier, or should I say a reorientation toward the sea. Nobody, not even a government, can be the historian of his or her own time, Chinese governmental circles included. Or, as Milovan Djilas, the disillusioned Yugoslav Communist politician, is supposed to have once said: “The most dangerous thing for a Communist is to predict the past.” Any dialectical approach toward history suggests, after all, a structure of a reality that develops in a logical way, which is a nonstarter. Therefore, the project to create a top-down national maritime outlook on the basis of a tradition that was never represented in the official mind is bound to shipwreck. Yet local, bottom-up movements aimed at saving local mariculture are emerging to counterbalance this situation.

The great strides that have been made in recent research—and I may have failed to mention some important ongoing research—all point to a remarkably vigorous maritime sector in the past, which, although controlled at custom stations and military outposts, continued to run its own course overseas and kept its own unique “maritime cultural landscape.” Freed from the historically imposed grid of China’s traditional historiography, the outcome of much maritime research may not yield exactly what the political elite is hoping for, but it provides Chinese historians with a formidable challenge to cut out a new



domain of their own. It will also open up our understanding of the long-standing interaction between the local economies of China's maritime provinces and those of the Southeast Asian states along the rims of the South China Sea, and vice versa.

*Leonard Blussé is professor emeritus in the History of European-Asian Relations at the Leiden University Institute of History.*

---

## Notes

- 1 Situated by the Malacca Strait, Singapore holds the third position and Rotterdam at the Europort gate to the Rhine basin the fifth.
- 2 Menzies's account was refuted by Captain P. J. Rivers (2004).
- 3 For this viewpoint, see, for instance, Fairbank (1968) and Hamashita (1997).
- 4 On the Sino-Siamese trade, see Cushman (1975) and Viraphol (1977). The history of the junk trade to Batavia is described in Blussé (1986, 97–155; 2011).
- 5 Now, four years later, this complex is surrounded by an urban agglomeration. But the brand new complex of the local administration in front of the museum has not been put into use due to the bad feng shui of the dagger-like wings on top of the museum building across the street.
- 6 See, for instance, <http://v.ifeng.com/history/wenhuashidian/201211/b18cccb1-e02e-4c8a-ad67-11a7054c1b38.shtml> (accessed 7 May 2013).
- 7 For a broader perspective that includes Japan, see Blussé (2008).
- 8 See also Leonard's monograph (1984) on Wei Yuan, the advocate of sea transport.

## References

- Batchelor, Robert K. 2014. *The Selden Map and the Making of a Global City, 1549–1689*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Blussé, Leonard. 1986. *Strange Company: Chinese Settlers, Mestizo Women and the Dutch in VOC Batavia*. KITLV Verhandelingen Series No. 122. Dordrecht: Foris Publications.
- . 2008. *Visible Cities: Canton, Nagasaki, and Batavia and the Coming of the Americans*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- . 2011. “Junks to Java: Chinese shipping to the Nanyang in the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century.” In *Chinese Circulations: Capital, Commodities and Networks in Southeast Asia*, edited by Eric Tagliacozzo and Chang Wen-chin, 221–258. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Brooks, Timothy. 2013. *Mr. Selden's Map of China: The Spice Trade, a Lost Chart and the South China Sea*. London: Profile Books.
- Calanca, Paola. 2011. *Piraterie et contrebande au Fujian: L'administration Chinoise face aux problèmes d'illégalité maritime, XVIIe–début XIXe siècle* [Piracy and contraband in Fujian: The Chinese administration's problems with maritime illegality, 17th–early 19th century]. Paris: Les Indes Savantes.
- Cheng Wei-chung. 2013. *War, Trade and Piracy in the China Seas, 1622–1683*. TANAP Monographs on the History of Asian-European Interaction, vol. 16. Leiden: Brill.

- Clulow, Adam. 2014. *The Company and the Shogun: The Dutch Encounter with Tokugawa Japan*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Cushman, J. W. 1975. *Fields from the Sea: Chinese Junk Trade with Siam during the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- de Jong, Alice. 1989. "The Demise of the Dragon: Background to the Chinese Film Elogy." *China Information* 4 (28): 28–43.
- Fairbank, John King. 1968. *The Chinese World Order*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gallagher, John, and Ronald Robinson. 1953. "The Imperialism of Free Trade." *Economic History Review*, Second Series, 6 (1): 1–15.
- Gipouloux, Francois. 2011. *The Asian Mediterranean: Port Cities and Trading Networks in China, Japan and Southeast Asia, 13th–21st Century*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Hamashita Takeshi. 1997. *Choko Shisutemu to Kindai Ajia* [The tribute trade system and modern Asia]. Tokyo: Iwanami shoten.
- Han Zhenhua 韩振华, Lin Jinzhi 林金枝, and Wu Fengbin 吴风斌, eds. 1988. *Wo Guo Nanhaizhudao Shiliao Huibian* 我国南海诸岛史料汇编 [A compendium of historical sources on our country's Southern Seas Islands]. Beijing: Dongfan.
- Hayton, Bill. 2014. *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Huang Guosheng 黄国盛. 2000. *Yabian zhanzhengqiande dongnan sisheng haiguan* 鸦片战争前的东南四省海关 [The customs offices in China's four southeastern provinces before the opium war]. Fuzhou: Fujianremin chubanshe.
- Ishii, Yoneo. 1998. *The Junk Trade from Southeast Asia: Translations from the Tosen Fusetsu-Gaki, 1674–1723*. Singapore: ISEAS.
- Jinan University History Department. 2002. *Chaozhou Gugang Zhanglin-ziliao yu yanjiu* 潮州古港樟林-资料与研究 [The ancient port of Zhanglin (Chaozhou): Sources and research]. Guangzhou: Zhonguo Huaqiao chubanshe.
- Leonard, Jane Kate. 1984. *Wei Yuan and China's Rediscovery of the Maritime World*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- . 1996. *Controlling from Afar: The Daoguang Emperor's Management of the Grand Canal Crisis, 1824–1826*. Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan.
- Lin Renchuan. 1991. *Fujian duiwaimaoyi yu Haiguanshi* 福建对外贸易与海关史 [The history of Fujian's overseas trade and customs service]. Xiamen: Lujiang.
- Menzies, Gavin. 2002. *1421: The Year China Discovered the World*. London: Random House.
- Murakami Ei. 2013. *Umi to kindai Chugoku, Fukkenjin no katsudo to Igirisu* [Maritime history of modern China: Local Fujian actors and the British and Chinese Empires]. Nagoya: Nagoya University Press.
- Nagazumi Yoko, ed. 1991. *Tosen yushutsunyuhin suryo ichiran, 1637–1833* [An overview of import and export products, 1637–1833]. Tokyo: Sobunsha.
- Needham, Joseph. 1954–2004. *Science and Civilisation in China*. 24 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ng, Chin-keong. 1983. *Trade and Society: The Amoy Network on the China Coast, 1683–1735*. Singapore: Singapore University Press.
- . 2016. *Boundaries and Beyond: China's Maritime Southeast in Late Imperial Times*. Singapore: National University of Singapore Press.

- Rivers, P. J. 2004. *"1421" Voyages: Facts and Fancy*. Ipoh: Perak Academy.
- Shanghai International Shipping Institute (SISI). 2015. "Shanghai International Shipping Institute (SISI) releases China Shipping Development Outlook." Available at [en.sisi-smu.org/index.php?c=article&id=13534](http://en.sisi-smu.org/index.php?c=article&id=13534), accessed March 7, 2016.
- Su Xiaokang. 2002. *A Memoir of Misfortune*. New York: Vintage.
- Tian Rukang (T'ien Ju-k'ang). 1956–1957. "Shiqi shiji zhi shijiu shiji zhongye Zhongguo fanchuan zai Dongnan Yazhou hangyun he shangye shangdi diwei" [The position of Chinese shipping in the navigation and trade of Southeast Asia from the seventeenth until the nineteenth century]. *Lishi Yanjiu* 8:1–21 and 9:1–12.
- T'ien Ju-k'ang. 1987. "The Chinese Junk Trade: Merchants, Entrepreneurs, and Coolies, 1600–1850." In *Maritime Aspects of Migration*, edited by Klaus Friedland, 381–389. Cologne: Bohlaus Verlag.
- van de Ven, Hans. 2014. *Breaking with the Past: The Maritime Customs Service and Global Origins of Modernity in China*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Van Dyke, Paul A. 2005. *The Canton Trade: Life and Enterprise on the China Coast, 1700–1845*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- . 2011. *Merchants of Canton and Macao: Politics and Strategies in Eighteenth-Century Chinese Trade*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Viraphol, Sarasin. 1977. *Tribute and Profit: Sino-Siamese, 1652–1853*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Westerdahl, Christer. 1992. "The Maritime Cultural Landscape." *International Journal of Nautical Archaeology* 21 (1): 5–14.
- Wills, John E. 1979. "Maritime China from Wang Chih to Shih Lang." In *From Ming to Ch'ing: Conquest, Region, and Continuity in Seventeenth-Century China*, edited by Jonathan D. Spence and John E. Wills, 201–238. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Winchester, Simon. 2008. *The Man Who Loved China: The Fantastic Story of the Eccentric Scientist Who Unlocked the Mysteries of the Middle Kingdom*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Worcester, G. R. G. 1966. *Sail and Sweep in China: The History and Development of the Chinese Junk as Illustrated by the Collection of Junk Models in the Science Museum*. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office.
- . 1971. *The Junks and Sampans of the Yangtze*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press.
- Yang Guozhen. 1996. "Guanyu Zhongguo haiyangshehui jingjishi de sikao" [Reflections on Chinese maritime social and economic history]. *Zhongguo shehui jingjishi yanjiu* [Researches in Chinese social and economic history] 2:1–7.
- Zhao, Gang. 2013. *The Qing Opening to the Ocean: Chinese Maritime Policies, 1684–1757*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Zhou, Yunzhong. 2017. "The South and East China Seas on the Selden Map." In *Beyond the Silk Road: Asian Maritime History and Culture*, edited by Qian Jianguo, 212–230. Shanghai: National Chinese Maritime Museum.