

Editor's Preface

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China's contemporary Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—also called One Belt One Road (OBOR)—treats land and sea trade as co-equals by also creating a Maritime Silk Road (MSR) to promote greater maritime trade. But as early as the 2nd century CE, the Romans had come to understand that sea trade with China cost only a fraction, one-seventh in fact, of the price of the overland silk route. Following the unification and then the collapse of much of Eurasia under Mongol rule, during the early Ming Dynasty in the 14th century this East-West sea route was formalized into the main trade conduit between China and the Mediterranean world.

In his ground-breaking but until now unpublished book, the late Dr. Lo Jung-pang discusses the geographic, political, and commercial factors that led to the creation of this unprecedented Ming maritime road. While most scholars with an interest in China have heard of Admiral Zheng He (1371–1433) and his seven Treasure Fleets, few have understood how the maritime path Zheng He's ships traveled—established years if not decades previously—came into existence. The creation of this maritime pathway is the focus of Dr. Lo's still-timely and highly significant book.

In addition to detailing the Ming Dynasty's extraordinary maritime accomplishment, however, Dr. Lo also examines some of the factors that led to the end of China's first great maritime era. Why did China suddenly seem to turn away from the sea? How did the loss of Annam (modern-day Vietnam) in 1427 contribute to this shift? What significance did the 1449 attack on China by the northern Oirat Mongols have? Or the gradual collapse of Chinese financing, as shown by plummeting exchange rates for

Ming paper money? More broadly speaking, we may ask: Why therefore was it Europe that discovered China, and not the other way around? How did the West come to dominate the East? These questions are particularly relevant as modern-day China once again sets out onto the high seas.

To aid the reader, a Foreword by Dr. Richard J. Smith, one of Dr. Lo Jung-pang's former students and a professor of Chinese history, discusses how Lo viewed the early Ming Navy—not simply in terms of its military strength, but also in terms of the peaceful commerce and shipping that it promoted. He calls special attention to the way Lo documented the centuries-long shift of China's demographic center of gravity from the northwest to the southeast, so that by the Song period (960–1279), over half of China's population resided in the six coastal provinces, which also furnished two-thirds to three-quarters of the total state revenue. This shift created an ever-greater reliance on maritime trade that ultimately resulted in the extraordinary naval voyages of the Muslim eunuch-admiral Zheng He in the period from 1405 to 1433. Smith also provides a brief summary of Zheng He's expeditions and a broad overview of the subsequent history of the Chinese navy.

In the Afterword, Ming scholar Dr. Geoff Wade shows how the Ming rulers, eager to widely display their legitimacy, sent military forces abroad, collected treasure for the imperial court, and urged rulers of all known states to demonstrate submission to the court. In 1405, just after Zheng He departed on his first expedition, shipyards in Zhejiang and other parts of the empire were ordered to build more than 1,000 ocean-going ships, including 48 “treasure-ships,” truly astonishing numbers.

Although these fleets are portrayed by modern Chinese as peaceful, a large proportion of the Treasure Fleet crews were military personnel, intended to encourage recalcitrant foreign rulers to send official envoys to the Ming court. The Afterword underlines the fact that the history of the Zheng He voyages is replete with violence because the eunuch commanders implemented the Ming emperor's demands through the demonstration of force. Military actions by the fleets' forces occurred in Sumatra, Java, Burma, Sri Lanka, and Siam.

In a final analysis, Dr. Lo's book represents the most comprehensive and insightful English-language treatment of the early Ming Navy to date. Moreover, it encourages further inquiry into such important questions: Are China's regional or even global aspirations today premised on a powerful

navy? Is it an offensive force, or has it been created to defend against pirates and protect maritime trade? Will the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) become a permanent fixture of modern-day life, or will its destiny—like the Ming Navy before it—come and go like a shooting star?

Either way, the massive blue water expansion of the PLA, seen particularly since 2012, is certainly a prescient reminder of the Ming armadas of the early 15th century. For this reason alone, Professor Lo Jung-pang's history of the early Ming Navy provides a modern audience with pertinent comparisons to better understand the present and future of the Chinese navy.

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Author's Preface

Lo Jung-pang

Sea power helped to catapult China to supremacy over East Asia five hundred years ago. According to John H. Parry, Europe during the 15th century was undergoing contraction while the “Chinese empire was by far the most powerful and most civilized state in the world at that time.”¹ Song, and later Yuan, China commanded a superb navy, dominated commercial shipping, and controlled the mightiest assemblage of military craft in all of Asia, if not of the world at that time. These elements would be instrumental in allowing China's Ming Dynasty to establish far-flung dominion over the lands and seas of the Eastern World for the first three decades of the 15th century.

China was a riverine power long before it became a sea power. The location of China's major political and economic centers in the eastern part of the country, adjacent to the Yellow and the Yangzi Rivers, led to the construction of a huge network of canals linking all of the major river systems. Wars were fought mainly on lakes, rivers, and canals, especially during the Song Dynasty when these interconnecting waterways, created both for irrigation and transportation, were fortified to create an effective defensive barrier against the cavalry of the northern invaders. The Mongols, horse-borne conquerors of Siberia, Inner Asia, Russia, and Eastern Europe, were stopped by this barrier for almost a century, until they acquired a navy

1 John H. Parry, *Europe and a Wider World, 1415–1715* (London: Hutchinson's University Library, 1949), 7.

of their own, mainly from Song defectors.² A century later, the nascent Ming Dynasty, founded by an indigent ex-monk, fought and defeated its rivals by the effective use of the Yangzi River waterways, whether it be fighting upstream or downstream, expanding to the East or to the West. In the final battle, the Ming ousted China's unwanted Mongol overlords by sailing northward to victory up the Grand Canal.

With experience gained fighting in China's lakes, rivers, and canals, the Ming navy advanced out to sea. In the last half of the 14th century—the focus of this book—the Ming fleets swept the seas of Chinese and Japanese pirates when it safeguarded the maritime transportation of troops and supplies to Manchuria, which is where the last remnants of the Mongols were expelled from China. Beginning in the 15th century, while Ming land and sea forces engaged in an amphibious campaign to reconquer Annam, the Ming court also sent heavily armed flotillas, known as the “treasure fleets,” to overawe Southeast Asia and to cruise in the Indian Ocean. Most of these fleets were led by a larger-than-life Muslim eunuch commander named Ma He, later known as Zheng He. Zheng's Chinese warships saw action in Java, Sumatra, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), and even sailed as far as the Persian Gulf and to the eastern coast of Africa. According to Joseph Needham: “In its heyday about 1420, the Ming navy probably outclassed that of any Asian nation and would have been more than a match for that of any contemporary European state or even combination of them.”³

The military strength of these magnificent fleets convinced almost forty states—considered tributaries by the Chinese—to enter into the political orbit of China. Native kings came to the imperial capital of China with their entire courts to prostrate themselves to the Ming monarch, or sent ambassadors to present tributes of rare and valuable local products. These naval expeditions enabled early Ming China to establish an economic empire at sea extending from Japan southward to Java and from Kamchatka westward to Kenya, an economic and cultural empire greater in extent than the land conquests of

2 See Lo Jung-pang, *China as a Sea Power, 1127–1368: A Preliminary Survey of the Maritime Expansion and Naval Exploits of the Chinese People During the Southern Song and Yuan Periods*, edited, and with commentary, by Bruce A. Elleman (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press; Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012).

3 Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), IV-3, 484.

Chinggis Khagan (aka Genghis Khan, 1162–1227). Never before nor after in Chinese history had any dynasty ruled so vast a dominion over the land and sea.

The book title “Empire in the Western Ocean” and the subtitle “Sea Power and the Early Ming Navy, 1355–1449” give a broad outline of the book but not the nuances. The word “empire” does not signify the physical seizure of foreign lands, although the Ming did do this on occasion; nor does it mean the forcible impressment of foreign peoples, although again many hostages were taken by force and brought back to the Chinese capital. In the case of Ming China, the term “empire” signifies pressure to induce foreign peoples to come into the maternal embrace of the tributary system, and to follow the paternal guidance of China’s emperor, by agreeing to follow his directions and accept Chinese protection, culture, and ways of thinking—in other words, to adopt Han Chinese civilization in full or in part.

The focus of this book, therefore, is on China’s political and cultural sway over much of the Eastern World. The term “Western Ocean” (*Xi Yang*) was what the Chinese of the Ming period called the South China Sea plus the Indian Ocean. Technically an imaginary line could be drawn roughly along the longitude 117 degrees East from the port of Amoy (Xiamen) in Fujian Province southward to Brunei on the island of Borneo. This line divided the Eastern Ocean from the Western Ocean. To the East of this line were the East China Sea, the Yellow Sea, and a large part of the Pacific Ocean; the term “Eastern Ocean” (*Dong Yang*) usually referred to the Japanese sea as well. West of this line, in the corresponding “Western Ocean,” were the Chinese province of Guangdong, Hainan Island, the Paracel Islands, Spratly Islands, Indochina, the Malay Archipelago, Burma, India, Ceylon, the Muslim Near East, plus the eastern coast of Africa.

For centuries, the Chinese people had sailed on the Yellow Sea and the East China Sea, but during the Song Dynasty from the 10th through the 13th centuries, when they made significant advances in naval power, it can be argued that they actually controlled these waters. Under the Yuan Dynasty, the Mongols used the substantial remnants of the Song navy to dominate the South China Sea as well. It was the Ming emperors, however, who extended their control, for a brief period in the early-to-mid-15th century, as far as the Indian Ocean. During the Song, Yuan, and early Ming, the Chinese ventured out onto the high seas, exercising largely unchallenged naval power to the East, South, and West as far as the eastern coast of Africa.

China was a sea power in the full sense of the word. Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan defined sea power as not only the military strength of their navy, but equally the influence of a healthy commerce and shipping industry from which a military fleet naturally springs and on which its commerce's security rests. He stressed that an aptitude for maritime commercial pursuits must be a distinguishing feature for any nation that had at one time or another been great on the sea.⁴

Marco Polo (1254–1324) and other medieval travelers from the West who came to China during the Yuan period of Mongol rule, about a century prior to the founding of the Ming Dynasty, were astounded by the enormous amount of shipping they saw in Chinese ports. Marco Polo spoke of seeing more than 15,000 ships in the inland port of Zhenjiang. Friar Odoric of Pordenone (1286–1331) wrote that at Censcalan (modern-day Guangzhou) “the city has shipping so great and vast that to some [it] would seem well incredible. Indeed all Italy has not the amount of craft that this one city hath.”⁵ His contemporary, the Arab traveler Ibn Battuta (1304–1369?) said: “The harbor of Zaiton (modern-day Quanzhou) is one of the greatest in the world—I am wrong—it is the greatest. I have seen here about one hundred first class junks together, as for the smaller ones they are past counting.”⁶

What the medieval travelers from the West saw with wide-eyed wonderment were only the commercial fleets, privately owned and operated. During the early Ming, powerful naval fleets stiffened the merchant marine and thus advanced China to being a full-fledged sea power. The period of heightened naval activities encompassed almost a century, from 1355 to 1449. The date 1355, which is thirteen years before the formal founding of the Ming Dynasty in 1368, is not an anachronism. It was in 1355 that the rebel organization, called the Wu, was created. This group eventually evolved

4 Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Seapower upon History, 1660–1785* (London, 1890; 1918 ed.), 25–28, 60.

5 Henry Yule, *Cathay and the Way Thither: Being a Collection of Medieval Notices on China* (London: 1914–1915, rev. ed.), II: 180. On the fundamental reliability of Marco Polo's account of China, see Igor de Rachewiltz, “Marco Polo Went to China,” in *Zentralasiatische Studien*, 27 (1997): 34–92. An online version of this essay can be found at <https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/bitstream/1885/41883/1/Marcopolo.html>.

6 Yule, *Cathay and the Way Thither*, VI: 117.

into the Ming state by occupying the city that would become known as Nanjing (literally the Southern Capital) and beginning waterborne operations on the Yangzi River. From lakes and inland waterways the Ming navy soon moved out to sea. Between 1405 and 1435, Ming China dominated maritime Asia; its navy patrolled all of the seas of the Eastern World. In 1449, however, a disastrous defeat of the Ming land forces by their erstwhile enemy, the Mongols, resulted in the reallocation of military resources away from the sea to the land. This transition signaled a decline of Ming sea power as China withdrew into herself.

China's inward turn after the mid-15th century has caused many modern historians to downplay the significance of the Ming Dynasty's naval accomplishments up to that point. This relative neglect has created a misleading image of a militarily weak China, and a false perception that the Chinese have always been a peace-loving, land-bound people. At the same time, a few modern writers have sensationalized the achievements of Admiral Zheng and his treasure fleets, making exaggerated claims that cannot be sustained by the evidence.⁷ What we need is a balanced account of maritime China that considers the evolution of China's maritime power as well as its complex legacy. To reveal the "true face" (in Chinese *benlai mianmu* 本來面目) of Ming sea power will require describing what happened during the first three decades of the Ming Dynasty.

This book attempts to provide just such an account. Complementing an earlier work, *China as a Sea Power, 1127–1368*, this examination has sifted through obscure primary source material in classical Chinese in an effort to acquire all pertinent maritime information. It then sorted and assayed this information and assembled it in mosaic-fashion to create a magnificent multi-colored panorama of epic exploits and medieval pageantry when Ming China

7 Gavin Menzies, *1421: The Year China Discovered America* (New York: William Morrow, 2008); Gavin Menzies, *1434: The Year a Magnificent Chinese Fleet Sailed to Italy and Ignited the Renaissance* (New York: William Morrow, 2009). A work in the same vein by a recent Chinese author is Sheng-Wei Wang's *The Last Journey of the San Bao Eunuch Admiral Zheng He* (Hong Kong: Proverse, 2019). For more measured accounts of Zheng's voyages, see Edward L. Dreyer, *Zheng He: China and the Oceans in the Early Ming Dynasty, 1405–1433* (New York: Pearson, 2006); and Louise Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1405–1433* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

ruled an extensive maritime empire. Until very recently, the spectacular naval expeditions under Admiral Zheng He remained a deep and intriguing mystery.

But this book attempts to be more than a mere recitation of China's naval exploits. At its heart it tries to explain how naval power contributed to the political hegemony of Ming China over East Asia. The Confucianist spirit of dynamic action manifested itself in the decision to dispatch the naval expeditions, allow overseas migration, and spur Han Chinese colonization of Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, the countervailing Daoist (Taoist) inhibition against dynamic action, and the introspective worldview it engendered, eventually brought this period to an end. The core of the book provides a description of the naval ways and means: the ships and armaments, seamanship and geographical lore, economic and political policy, and early contacts with foreign peoples. The sinews binding these facts together is a detailed narration of the maritime development of the early Ming.

The story of China's great seaward advance during the early Ming period cannot be told fully without reference to the political, social, economic, cultural, and environmental conditions of the time, the scientific and technological means that made it possible, and the specific impulses behind it. This book thus ranges broadly, covering not only ships and arms, strategies and tactics, but also such diverse topics as piracy and the mechanics of the pepper trade. Furthermore, it explores and evaluates the cultural traditions, teachings, values, and standards that influenced the minds and motives of the historical actors, from Confucian and Daoist beliefs to certain pertinent magical practices. Chapters on inland warfare, early Ming politics, maritime transportation, coastal defense organizations, ships and ship-building, manufacture of weapons, foreign intercourse, cosmopolitan ideals, geographic lore, and schools of thought are not digressions, therefore, but should be considered as integral components of the complex civilization that produced Ming maritime development.

A brief word about transliteration is in order. In the interest of consistency and clarity, all Chinese names, terms, and titles in the text have been rendered in the modern Pinyin system, including quotations from Western sources that originally employed the Wade-Giles and/or Post Office systems. In the case of words derived from non-Chinese languages, such as Japanese or Arabic, the original expression will be presented first in italics followed by the appropriate translation in parentheses.