Preface

This collection includes 14 selected essays on maritime China in Late Imperial times. The three earliest pieces originate from a Master's thesis that was written in 1970 and the most recent pieces are the English versions of two conference papers presented in 2010 and 2013 respectively at the National Cheng-kung University of Taiwan. The rest were published in the 1990s and 2000s. The main title of the volume “Boundaries and Beyond” provides some sort of frame of unity for the different topics.

My choice of the word “boundaries” as a concept has been inspired by John Hay’s ideas in his introduction to the edited volume Boundaries in China. Hay mentions all sorts of boundaries that have been "drawn for specific purposes, demarcating particular regimes of powers... The demarcations are erected as barriers..." Ritual is a good example. While its principal purpose is for “the maintenance of stability in a system”, it can also be seen "as a dynamic system, rather than simply as a frozen body of pre/proscription". The former situation “inherently sets it against the forces of change”. However, “its inception ... is a reaction to those forces, which are therefore always implicit in it. Ritual is not 'non-change', but rises to demarcate a fundamental boundary between stability and instability.”

The main heading of the book title, “Boundaries and Beyond”, highlights the two contesting forces of continuities and discontinuities that characterized China’s maritime southeast in late imperial times. Boundaries were in the process of shifting. They were there for the purpose of maintaining stability, status quo, or law and order. The state prescribed which occupations were perceived to be fundamental and which secondary. Besides this function, boundaries also worked to protect the powerful, the wealthy or the interest groups who often had the privilege of setting the boundaries to prevent others from inflicting harm and destruction upon them. There were also boundaries of activity set to demarcate the land and the sea and between "us" and "them". In actuality, boundaries were not strict demarcations separating the space within them from that outside them. Boundaries were in a state of flux, driven by the emerging socioeconomic forces and hence embodied dualistic characters of “tradition” and “change”.

In accordance with the content of each topic, the 14 chapters are grouped into four parts. Part One provides a long view of the development of maritime East Asia. It places China’s southeastern coast in late imperial times in the broad perspective of maritime East Asia and the Asian Seas over a long period of some two thousand years. One salient feature of this maritime world was its flexibility and inclusiveness, allowing people from within or without to assume different roles as commodity producers, traders, shippers, cargo carriers or consumers in the long-distance shipping trade. Part Two depicts the orthodox perceptions of viewing and responding to the changes or challenges. Part Three reviews the undercurrent of social and economic forces that had the effect of modifying the existing boundaries. Part Four examines the transnational movements crossing the borders, altering the status quo and creating new types of boundaries.

Parts Two to Four are arranged under three sub-themes that seem to indicate a chronological sequence of movement in three stages from tradition toward change. In fact, they illustrate a continuous process of interactions throughout late imperial times between the status quo and challenges as shown in all the chapters. In other words, status quo and change did not preclude each other, rather, both were responding to the current social and economic forces. Although tradition remained strong, change was also occurring all the time, either in the form of a deep undercurrent or as an increasingly visible phenomenon.

As regards the conventions, the volume uses Pinyin romanization and simplified Chinese characters in general for the Chinese terms or publication titles. However, the Wade-Giles or dialect-pronounced names are kept in accordance to the scholars’ own preference. An older form of romanization is applied to a few Chinese place names, such as Amoy, Soochow and Canton that were commonly used in the older western writings. There is also no conversion to Pinyin for such place names as Taipei that follow the local usage. For the Chinese characters in the article or book titles, the complex form of characters is kept for the pre-1949 publications, the historical texts of Imperial times or the printed materials from outside mainland China. Place names in Southeast Asia are as complicated. In general, names that have long been used in the past in English literature have been chosen. Among them are the Moluccus, Celebes, Bantam and Malacca. When discussing shipping trade in the Malay world, however, either the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago or the Indonesian Archipelago are the terms used depending on the geographical extent of the activity. When it comes to the modern period, the more familiar term in western writings, the Indian Archipelago, is also used.

No attempt has been made to update the contents of the essays to accommodate later works by other scholars. Other than the editorial refinement, the essays are kept in their original form and style.