CHAPTER 9

Managing Maritime Affairs in Late-Ming Times

Introduction

It is generally accepted that throughout the whole of its long history China remained land-centric and anti-commercial. Agriculture was considered the proper and fundamental economic activity that provided a solid foundation for society. For this reason, the state would not support commercial entrepreneurship in general and maritime enterprises in particular on a sustainable basis. In contrast to her European counterparts, that ventured out to discover and explore new lands from the late fifteenth century, the Chinese developed their culture independently, forming a self-centered Chinese “culturalism”. It was always a top priority of the state to strive for self-sufficiency in agriculture and provide enough food for its large population. The only form of foreign trade recognized by the Confucian state was the transactions conducted within the tributary framework.¹

Despite the traditional state ideology and economic policy orientation, seafaring activities actually had a long history in China, especially on its southeast coast. Even the government indulged in maritime commerce under certain circumstances. For example, maritime commerce became an essential part of the national economy during the South Song period.² The grand scope of overseas commercial contacts during this time persisted until the Chinese state closed itself off again after the founding of the Ming dynasty. Following a brief period of 28 years commencing in 1405, the state initiated seven sea expeditions under the command of Zheng He. Then the door open to the maritime world was shut off again with the re-imposition of the strict Seafaring Prohibition (haijin).

It was exactly at the time when the Seafaring Prohibition policy was in force that the South Fujianese (Minnan ren, or Minnam nang in the South Fujianese dialect) on China’s southeast coast were embarking on seafaring activities in increasingly large numbers. Many of them even sailed to or migrated overseas; others involved themselves in piracy.

The second half of the Ming Dynasty between the years 1522, the beginning of the long-reign of the Jiajing Emperor (r. 1522‒66), and 1644, when the Ming collapsed, was a time of striking contrasts to the earlier part of the dynasty. Although despotism was at its height, dynastic rule was in decline, eventually leading to the downfall of the dynasty. Nevertheless, in response to fresh challenges diverse changes were taking place, especially in the traditional economy. Among these new endeavors were efforts to improve agricultural techniques by the introduction of new implements, a better understanding of the use of manure and the introduction of new plants. Much technical progress was also achieved in the fields of weaving and irrigation. Such utilitarian or statecraft scholars as Xu Guangqi (1562‒1633) and Song Yingxing (1587‒1666) occupied themselves with the scrutiny of practices that might contribute to the well-being of the country. Beyond the boundaries of traditional occupations, there was a surge in the commodity economy and in domestic inter-regional trade.

In South Fujian, where the rugged terrain dropped abruptly into the sea to form an irregular coastline, littered with many bays and good harbors, fertile arable land was scarce. After one thousand years of development prior to the mid-Ming period that was accompanied by population growth, land utilization there had reached its limits. Even the agricultural improvements and innovations mentioned earlier could do nothing to reverse the adversity. Natural catastrophes, though not new in Chinese agricultural history, became fatal in this land of low productivity on which the population relied it for their livelihood. In addition to the economic hardship, intolerable social oppression had pushed the South Fujianese people to breaking point. It became commonplace in the countryside that witnessed the malpractices of the shijia (local prominent families) and the shihao (powerful people), hand-in-glove with corrupt local officials in their efforts to exploit the already

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3. Xu Guangqi 徐光啟, a high-ranking Court official and agriculturist, was the author of *Nongzheng quanshu* 農政全書 [A complete record of agriculture]. Song Yingxing 宋應星, a local official, was among many others during the late Ming who endeavored to improve the nation through practical studies. He was the author of *Tian gong kai wu* 天工开物 [The exploitation of the works of nature], an important work on technology in late imperial China.
helpless xiaomin ("little people") who were the most hard pressed by the unfavorable socioeconomic conditions. "For the rich the field dividers stretch one after another; for the poor there is not even the space to put an awl on", ... a popular Chinese saying describes the cases of extreme poverty. Whenever outbreaks of famine and hunger occurred, the desperate people would form smaller or larger bands here and there on the mountain sides and on the river banks to engage in sporadic uprisings.

Not all resorted to lawless responses. A considerable number of South Fujianese people sought positive remedies for their plight by engaging in small trade, ignoring what the state ideology advocated as a proper occupation. They engaged in commercial endeavors not only in other Chinese regions but also overseas. The presence of such foreigners as the Japanese and Portuguese on the coast gave rise to new opportunities in maritime activities. Their willing participation in trading with them had created a favorable environment that in turn attracted more frequent visits by foreign merchants and adventurers wanting to join them in common pursuits. As the sea traffic flourished, it became profitable to build ships to meet the rising demand. Writing during the Ming-Qing transition, Gu Yanwu (1613‒82) said, "[In 1547] every household in Yuegang in Zhangzhou Prefecture built seagoing vessels and traded to Siam, Folangji (Malacca) and some other countries"; for instance, Korea, the Ryukyu Islands, Luzon and Annam. Local fishermen and salt-producers shifted to the new occupation of maritime trade because "its profit is tenfold"; "Only those who were inferior in mind and weak in strength remained in the old jobs."

According to traditional perceptions, their trading and maritime enterprises were a breach of Confucian values, trespassing beyond the bounds of acceptable occupations. Ironically, the imperial ban on maritime activities had never been a convincing policy in the eyes of the common people because the state continued to keep the shibo (Supervisorsates of Maritime Trade and Shipping) open to foreigners, under the pretext of receiving their tribute, and yet prevented its own subjects from engaging in trading with foreigners. Broadly speaking, even

7. Ibid.
the government officials were far from unanimous among themselves on matters regarding maritime activities and the majority of local officials in particular made only half-hearted attempts to enforce the prohibitory laws that jeopardized their extra income. Both the local scholar-gentry and the Fujianese who held high offices at the Court strongly opposed strict restrictions on maritime endeavors.

The following discussion explores the social and political complexities of this situation by studying Ming government policy and the contesting views on maritime affairs.

**Frontier Relations and the Concept of Coastal Defense (Haifang)**

A brief study of the Ming frontier policy from the time at which it was established will help comprehend the late Ming government’s attitude toward maritime affairs in general, and the South Fujianese involvement in seafaring activities in particular.

The best place to begin is to trace many of the policies to the time of Zhu Yuanzhang, the founding Emperor of the dynasty. Soon after his re-unification of China, he decided to follow the preferred traditional approach of refraining from the unnecessary use of force against foreign countries since it would not benefit the state. He decreed:

Those barbarians surrounding China are all located in remote areas with natural barriers formed by mountains and seas. Even if we were to occupy them, their limited resources could never support our administration, and it would be difficult to assimilate their people to our rule. If they disturb our border areas recklessly, they will be punished by natural self-destruction. If they never cause us any trouble and we send precipitate expeditions against them, we shall be confronted with evil omens. My descendants should forever restrain themselves from using the nation’s strength to undertake military operations without a reason, thereby causing unnecessary casualties for only temporary military success. Nevertheless, we should train our army constantly and be on guard against the Hu barbarians [residing in northeast China], the Yong [in the west] and those on the northern frontier [Di], since they are closely connected with China proper and have waged wars with China for generations. We should never invade those foreign countries named on the following list: Chaoxian guo (Korea) …, Riben guo (Japan) …, Da liuqiu guo (the Ryukyus) and Xiao liuqiu guo (Taiwan) …, Annan guo (Northern Vietnam), Zhenla guo (Cambodia), Xianluo guo (Siam), Zhancheng guo (Champa),
Zhu Yuanzhang’s approach was also guided by political considerations. His policy priority was to keep a watchful eye on the latent menace posed by the remnants of the defeated Mongol forces. He had learnt the lesson of the preceding (Yuan) dynasty, weakened by its bitter failure in its overseas expeditions against Japan and Java. In terms of border defense, he concentrated his attention on the north rather than the south, and the inland conditions rather than the coastal frontier. In the face of the threat of the Japanese piracy along the coast, as punishment he simply terminated the arrival of their tributary missions by closing down all the shibo at Ningbo, Quanzhou and Guanghou in 1373. Six years later, Hu Weiyong, his premier, was accused of colluding with the Japanese and of allowing the latter to come to trade. Outraged by such an incident, the Emperor urged his future generations not to maintain contacts with Japan under any circumstances whatsoever. In 1381 he stiffened his stance and decreed a rigid Seafaring Prohibition known as the haijin, to prevent his people from engaging in any maritime trade. This policy was intermittently re-enforced during the Ming period. The main regulations in the Sea Prohibition are as follows:

1. Anyone who ships out horses, cattle, military supplies, iron, copper coins, satin, lustre, silk and cotton, or engages himself in sea-borne trade will be subject to punishment with one hundred blows of heavy bamboo. Anyone who transports or helps carry the above-mentioned articles should be subjected to the same punishment but one grade lighter. The cargo, vessels and carts concerned will be subject to confiscation. Informers are entitled to a reward of 30 per cent of the value [of the goods] confiscated. Anyone who ships out weapons or engages in such seafaring activities will be subject to death by hanging. Anyone who discloses local information to outlaws

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will be punished by beheading. Officials who act as accomplices will be subject to the same punishment.

2. Officials who use their positions to connect themselves with unauthorized trade will be subject to punishment extending to their whole families.

3. Foreign merchants who engage in maritime trade should report their cargo for tax purposes immediately after their arrival in ports of call. Should they fail to do so, they will be punished by one hundred blows of bamboo.

4. Any officer who receives bribes for allowing cargo vessels to enter and connects himself with such transactions that lead to piratical activities will be sentenced to death if he is the principal, and banishment to the frontier if he is the accessory.

5. Any officer or civilian who sells prohibited weapons to tribute-bearers will be subject to punishment by beheading.

6. Vessels can only be put to sea with an official permit. Any civilian or officer who builds three-master or larger vessels (later two-master and above) without authorization, transports any prohibited cargo by sea and trades in foreign countries, has secret commerce with pirates and acts as a guide in plundering law-abiding people will be subject to the death sentence by beheading and the other members of his family are to be banished to the frontier. Anyone who builds a forbidden type of vessel and sells it to foreigners will suffer the same punishment.

7. Any civilian or official who trades with Woguo (Japan) will be subject to the death penalty by beheading.

8. Any civilian who purchases foreign cargo from tribute-bearers before they report to the customs office or collects prohibited cargo for the foreigners, will be banished to the frontier.

9. Influential and wealthy families who provide capital to purchase cargoes and ship them out to sea via the agency of evil people, even though they have not engaged in such activities personally, will also be subject to banishment to the frontier. The cargo will be confiscated.

10. Anyone who harbors wicked merchants or hides their cargo and transports it out to sea will be charged with theft, and sentenced to wearing the cangue for two months. Neighbors or petty officials who are aware of such events but fail to inform the authorities will likewise be guilty and be subject to punishment by wearing the cangue for one month.\footnote{11}

\begin{thebibliography}{11}
\bibitem{11} Ch'en Wen-shih 陳文石, \textit{Ming hongwu jiajing jian de haijin zhengce 明洪武嘉靖間的海禁政策} [The Sea Prohibition policy during the Reigns from Hongwu
As mentioned earlier, the Sea Prohibition policy that prevented their own people from engaging in maritime trade existed alongside a separate tribute-and-trade system. The latter was actually an extension of the Song shibo model that persisted until the Jiajing Emperor’s succession to the throne in 1522. Thereafter, a change was ushered into maritime affairs, in response to the presence on the coast of the Portuguese, the Japanese pirates and Chinese maritime adventurers. Eventually, their illicit activities supplanted the role of tribute trade.

During Ming times, with the exception of the early years of the first Emperor, the shibo si (Supervisors of the Maritime Trade and Shipping) took charge of foreign trade in Guangzhou, Quanzhou (later removed to Fuzhou) and Ningbo. Throughout the dynasty, Guangzhou was the port of call for incoming foreigners from Champa, Siam and other countries in the “Western Ocean”, Quanzhou for the Ryukyus and Ningbo for Japan. Guangzhou was almost always kept open, but the other two were closed intermittently in response to the prevailing situation on the coast.

Under the shibo system, once a foreign country was accepted as a tributary country, a special permit was issued to allow it to engage in limited, supervised trade upon its arrival. The number of vessels and personnel on board and the frequency of the tribute missions were specified according to the size or status of each individual country. Their cargo was allowed to be sold under supervision in the port of call or the national capital for only three to five days. The tribute system was actually an important component in traditional foreign relations. The dynasty intended to use such measures to bind and appease aggressive frontier peoples. In his policies, Zhu Yuanzhang was not unlike his predecessors in previous dynasties, who intentionally suppressed commercial activities, especially among the civilians. He even adopted discriminatory laws against merchants prohibiting them from wearing silk clothing.

Two reasons led to a more rigid control of the tribute-and-trade activities. Since the tribute system was principally regarded as a means to enhance imperial prestige and maintain goodwill between foreign countries, especially those along the borders, profit was reduced to a secondary consideration. In other words, the state had no intention of profiting from trade, even though this enterprise was considered the exclusive prerogative of the state. The Imperial Court accepted tribute...
and in turn bestowed generous gifts on the tribute-bearers, resulting in an exchange which was seldom in the dynasty’s favor. The Court’s dilemma is vividly expressed in the following memorial by a Ming official:

Your humble servant realizes that the Court will suffer real harm for vainglory if it does not limit foreign tributes... Although they do display some sort of sincerity and respect, they make the voyage to China because they are covetous of Chinese products and they have sold such products to other countries for considerable profit. The Court should limit the frequency of the tribute ... to the degree that it still can achieve the purpose of building up goodwill and simultaneously save our people from the wearisome service of taking care of the tribute missions from the ports of call to the national capital.¹⁴

Other problems also arose. Lured by the promise of great profit, the coastal merchants still traded with foreigners, thereby breaking the prohibition laws. To do so, they used to bribe the port officials. Countries paying tribute were also dissatisfied with the restricted trade. Besides the tribute trade that benefited only the local officials and powerful households, there was also illegal trade that had begun to flourish on account of the tacit collaboration of the authorized or un-authorized “tribute-bearers”, well-connected merchants and port officials. The state regulations existed only on paper.

The Court neither encouraged private trade nor did it relax its strict control of maritime affairs, even during the Yongle Reign in which the unprecedented Zheng He expeditions were initiated, when it could have expected this Emperor’s inclination would have been more favorably inclined toward a maritime approach. In fact, it was not the case. One of the first actions taken by the Emperor in 1404 was the reinstatement of the ban on the building of seagoing vessels. Zheng He’s fleet is known to have relentlessly suppressed the Chinese pirates-cum-traders in Southeast Asia in a successful attempt to restore law and order on behalf of the local regimes.¹⁵ The upshot was that royal control of trade was more rigid, but nonetheless more effective, than ever. The fly in the ointment was that it worked only when state power was strong. Once the power of the dynasty waned, the coastal people immediately took advantage of the situation and managed to get around the prohibitive laws. They organized numerous bands to trade overseas. This is precisely what happened in the Jiajing reign (1522–66),¹⁶ during which the rich provided

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¹⁴. Ibid., p. 75.
¹⁵. Ibid., pp. 93–5.
the capital and the poor risked their lives in seagoing ventures. Even the royal envoys to foreign countries brought merchants along with them or personally engaged in private trade. The most notorious transactions were those supported by the eunuchs who seized control of the shibo administration.

Certainly to some extent this situation can be attributed to the state’s awareness of its own limitations to exert full control over the maritime situation, compounded by the fact that there were signs of a readiness on the part of the government to relax the prohibition even before the Jiajing Emperor’s accession to the throne. Unfortunately, two concurrent incidents frustrated the prospective change in policy. The first was the breakdown in Sino-Portuguese relations. Earlier, Wu Tingju, then the Provincial Administration Commissioner of Guangdong, had suggested the relaxation of the prohibition for two reasons: cogently the shortage of spice supplies had become serious as a direct consequence of the prohibition policy; second, port revenue had dropped considerably since the restriction discouraged the visits by foreign vessels. One serious consequence was that the military rations that had been drawn from this source were badly affected. In response, the Court issued approval of Wu’s suggestions, and consequently the Portuguese mission under Fernando d’Andrada’s command was well received by the Guangdong authorities and their embassy was allowed to proceed to the capital to seek an audience with the Emperor. However, while the embassy was still in the capital, news that threw a different light on the newcomers reached the Court. It concerned Simon d’Andrada, the commander’s brother, who had committed acts of piracy near the port of Guangzhou. The increasing violence and aggressive conduct of his men had led to open hostilities in this southern port. Subsequently, the local officials resorted to military measures and drove the Portuguese ships out of the Pearl River by force. Thereafter they were forbidden to enter Chinese ports. When Alphonso

17. Ibid., 7:1b.
19. Ibid., pp. 101‒2.
22. Chang Wei-hua 張維華, “Mingshi Folanji Lusong Helan Yidali zhuan zhushi” 明史佛朗機呂宋荷蘭意大利傳註釋 [A commentary on the four chapters on Portugal, Spain, Holland and Italy in the Standard dynastic history of the Ming], in Yenching Journal of Chinese Studies: monograph series No. 7 (Peiping: Harvard-Yenching Institute, 1934), p. 12. Also under a new title, see Chang Wei-hua, Ming shi Ouzhou siguo zhuan zhushi 明史歐洲四國傳註釋 [A commentary
de Mello appeared off Guangzhou in 1522, he was promptly attacked by a Chinese naval force and defeated. Certain members of the Portuguese crew were captured and executed as pirates.23

In that same period, the resumption of the "Japanese tribute mission" came to a disastrous conclusion in 1523 because its "tribute-bearers" launched a raid in the vicinity of Ningbo. The area was severely devastated, and even the Chinese coastal commander-in-chief was killed.24 This incident greatly shocked the Ming government, as an official commented:

The responsibility for the Wo's notorious behavior should be laid at the door of the local officials. They were at a loss to know how to tackle the outbreak and failed to suppress them as the violence burst loose. Their incompetence allowed the dwarves (the Japanese) to succeed in bringing calamities upon the innocent people, occupying cities, plundering treasuries, burning government offices and killing officials. What a national humiliation it was! My investigation has shown that, in an effort to evade responsibility, the officials involved tried to cover up the facts... Moreover,... the number of Wo who successfully devastated the whole region of the Ning and the Shao sub-prefectures where the population is no fewer than a million was no more than a hundred.25

These two incidents suffocated the short-lived attempt to relax the maritime restriction. The Ming government slammed the door on the Portuguese and on other southeastern countries as well. Subsequently, the Portuguese and the southeastern countries skipped Guangzhou and went north along the coast where they found a way to trade illicitly with the friendly South Fukienese people. Twenty years later (1542), the Portuguese even made an appearance in Ningbo. Here they were initially permitted to trade, perhaps partly because the port officials

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24. Li Chengxun 李承勛, "Kanchu wokou shiqing yi shen guowei shu" 勘處倭寇事情以伸國威疏 [Investigate the Wokou incidents to strengthen the national prestige], in *Ming jingshi wenbian* 皇明經世文編 [Collected essays on statecraft from the Ming Dynasty] (hereafter MJSWB), comp. Chen Zilong, Xu Fuyuan, et al. 陳子龍(1608‒47), 徐孚遠(1599‒1665) 等選輯 (Orig. 1638; reprint, Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 109: 19b‒26a; references to the disturbances are also found in *MSL: SZ*, 227: 2b; 234: 4b; and 349: 4a.
25. Ibid. Consequently, strict regulations against contacts with foreigners were reinforced; see *MSL: SZ*, 38: 4b‒5a.
chose to overlook the previous, unpleasant event in order to profit from their arrival, but the old story repeated itself. Assaults on and murders of people in and around the city became common. The audacity of the Portuguese reached such heights that they began to construct a fort on land. Their boldness alarmed the Chinese officials who had hitherto condoned them for the sake of the personal profits they made from the trade. The Portuguese establishment in Ningbo soon met an abrupt and violent end. The experience in Ningbo was repeated in Quanzhou in 1549. Here too, the Portuguese, having been well received at first, soon proved intolerably aggressive and were expelled by force. It was at this time that the Westerners earned the derogatory nickname of fanguei (foreign devils).

The disturbances that were erupting along the southeast coast in the 1540s stirred up heated discussions both at the Court and in the locality. For the first time, government officials and scholars began to pay serious attention to issues related to coastal defense. On the basis of the attitude they adopted toward maritime affairs, the gentry circles of Ming society can be divided into two opinion groups: the defenders of law and order, stressing the importance of enforcing the Sea Prohibition, and the supporters of trade, especially found among the local vested interests.

The law-and-order defenders upheld the existing maritime prohibition as the best way to restore peace and stability in the coastal regions. They treated the maritime turmoil as part of the larger frontier problem, believing that the best solution was to follow the traditional frontier policy that had been a general practice during the previous dynasties and followed by the Ming state in the past. Prior to the Ming, outside threats had been posed, almost without exception, along the inland borders. The vast ocean to the east and southeast was considered an impassable natural barrier. Therefore national defense was principally conceived as finding a means to repel the nomads along the long inland frontiers. As an agricultural society, China imported furs, skins and hides from the nomads, but the most important item of trade was horses. In their turn, the nomads had to import agricultural and handicraft products, notably grain, silk, cloth and tea from China. As pastoral products were not essential to the maintenance of daily life in the sense that grain and cloth were, the Chinese had the economic upper hand at the expense of

the nomads. Since it was geographically impossible for the nomads to produce these products in their own land, they had no option but to trade with China to obtain them, although, to some extent this demand was met by gifts from Chinese governments through the time-honored tribute system. Chinese governments never hesitated to use economic weapons, either by withholding subsidies or forbidding trade so as to "punish the barbarians for their misdeeds or appalling behavior", that is to say, for their occasional raids and unauthorized incursions into China proper.  

A study of Ming-nomad relations will throw light on the basic idea of traditional Chinese frontier policy. The following mid-fifteenth-century memorial by a Ming official represents the standard observation:

> Once there were officials appointed by the government to take charge of the border transactions. Military and civil officials all observed ... the strict regulations [laid down] and dared not engage in private trade with the barbarians.... Therefore those barbarians ... did not venture to commit evil deeds. In later periods, these ignorant military and civil officials along the frontier ... frequently ... traded with the barbarians.... Consequently, the barbarians made use of the iron pans and cotton damasks they received to manufacture weapons, military jackets and the like and began to assume an aggressive attitude. Sometimes they argued about the prices in transactions, and even killed the Chinese merchants who traded with them. Since these were illicit transactions, the survivors dared not take the chance of reporting these matters to the higher authorities. Being afraid of retaliation, the barbarians no longer ventured to trade. Hence they resorted instead to plundering. This was the situation which gave rise to the troubles. Being covetous of gifts, people who remained near the frontier and had marital relationships or frequent contacts with the barbarians, even sent false tribute instead of the barbarians. Their intimacy with the barbarians prompted them to spy out border intelligence and reported it to the foreigners. As a result, the government's pacification policy became more ineffective toward the frontier barbarians. The disturbances turned out to be more serious and frequent plundering and killing occurred. Without severe restrictions, probably all other frontier troops [in

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28. Dun J. Li makes a good point on this topic; see *The Ageless Chinese*, pp. 198–9. For a typical example of the Court discussion in 1551 in this respect, refer to *MSL: SZ*, 376: 1a–3a, 4b–5a; and 378: 3a.
the immediate future] will act in the same way and engage in trade with barbarians.  

Predictably, the law-and-order defenders among the government officials and gentry scholars proceeded to apply the frontier defense tradition to the maritime situation. They used the same tactics in their handling of the Wokou (Japanese pirates) problem, maintaining that China needed no important products from them, but instead they had to depend on China for the supply of their daily necessities. China was in a superior position and could trifle with its antagonist. In the eyes of the Chinese, trade was a political weapon rather than a matter of economic significance. “Frontier” people were granted permission to trade only when they had satisfied the Chinese of their “proper behavior”. If they did not, China would have no hesitation in imposing an embargo on them. The law-and-order proponents regarded smuggling and piracy along the southeast coast in exactly the same light as they did the nomad menace. In the first place, it was a direct threat to Jinling (Nanjing), the southern and founding capital of the dynasty. Secondly, the Yangzi Valley and the area to the southeast were the richest regions in the nation. The government could not tolerate any activities that would jeopardize the security of the national economy.  

Law and Order versus Local Interests  
Among the law-and-order defenders, Zhu Wan (1492‒1549) stood out as the most outstanding anti-smuggling and anti-foreign trade champion. His appointment as Governor of Zhejiang and concurrently Inspector-General of the Zhejiang-Fujian Maritime Defense in 1547 gave him a
challenging job and placed him in quite a precarious situation. Two powerful groups that had vested interests in maritime trade were anxious to know what his next step would be. One group was the eunuch clique. When the Ming Dynasty was founded, eunuchs were assigned to take charge of the shibo administration, but in most cases they were notoriously corrupt. Throughout the Ming period, they intervened in governmental functions and sought to expand their sphere of influence by grasping such lucrative posts as those that would give them control of the tribute trade. In 1509, for instance, Eunuch-Superintendent Pi Zhen asked for the Court’s permission to take charge of the shibo. Although the Board of Rites had turned down the request, Liu Jin, the most influential eunuch at Court, granted this permission. Despite the nominal, and temporary, termination of their shibo control during the Jiajing Reign, they represented the actual power in the bureaucracy, not to mention the reinforcement of their status in the financial sphere in the late sixteenth century. The local shihao (powerful people) were the other group and they soon found Zhu Wan an intolerable nuisance who barred their way. Since they had a stake in the seafaring business, they naturally opposed any severe restrictions. As Zhu Wan stated in one of his memorials to the Court:

It is easy to exterminate robbers from foreign lands, but it is difficult to get rid of those from our own country. It is comparatively easy to exterminate the robbers on our coast, but it is indeed difficult to eliminate those robbers in disguise who belong to the gentry class in our country.\(^{33}\)

Furthermore, he listed five damaging factors aggravating the maritime problem: the lack of rations for the army, the absence of a well-trained defense force, the neglect of city defense, low morale and the reluctance to eliminate malpractices. Influential and wealthy people always stood in the way of any reforms. Fearing to offend these people, the defense

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33. Zhu Wan accused this gentry group as “bandits who are wearing gentry-style hats and gown” (yiguan zhi dao 衣冠之盗). See Ming shi 明史 [Standard dynastic history of the Ming Dynasty], in Ershiwu shi 二十五史 [Twenty-five standard dynastic histories] (reprinted from Qianlong wuyingdian kanpen edition 乾隆武英殿刊本 (Taipei: Ywen, 1965), 205: 2b. See also Foreword by Wen Zhenmeng 文震孟, to Zhu Wan, Piyu zaji. 朱纨, Piyu zaji 砌餘雜集 [A collection of miscellaneous writings, 1587 ed.], 2: 10a. The collection contains 12 chapters of Zhu Wan’s memorials and other writings. Refer also to MSL: SZ, 104: 14a–b; 324: 7a–b; and 325: 2a.
troops could do nothing to improve the situation. Should they have done so, their commanding officers would have been in a precarious position.\footnote{Zhu Wan, “Yueshi haifang shu” 閱視海防疏 [Inspecting the coastal defense], in \textit{MJSWB}, 205: 5a‒10a.}

In his memorial to the Court, Zhu wrote:

Your humble servant personally ... inspected the maritime defense conditions in Zhangzhou and was greatly shocked by and worried about the distressing situation there... The office-bearers follow the routine mindlessly and do their duties in a perfunctory manner to avoid trouble.... The local public opinion [among the gentry] has become the only decisive and influential power.... For example, the anti-dwarf commanding officer, Li Xiu,... could not even answer my questions about the number of soldiers and vessels [under his command].... The government troops stationed in the capital city of Zhangzhou \\textit{wei} (a military unit) and Zhangzhou \\textit{fu} (prefecture) had not been paid for three months and, in some other places like Tongshan, for twenty months.... Re the number of naval vessels, only one ship was available in the Tongshan camp out of the twenty officially recorded, four out of twenty in Xuenzhong Bay, thirteen out of forty in Wuyu camp, and most of these vessels need immediate repair before we can put them into service.... Along the coastal area of Zhangzhou ..., I could find only three hundred and seventy-six archers out of the original nine hundred and fifty,... and in Quanzhou,... six hundred and seventy-three out of one thousand five hundred and sixty. Maritime defense depends solely on troops, rations and vessels.... We cannot now count on them for anything.\footnote{Ibid.}  

Zhu Wan greatly resented the South Fujianese local scholar-gentry. He denigrated them as \\textit{jianhao} (treacherous bullies)\footnote{Zhu Wan, \textit{Piyu zaji}, 2: 15a‒16b; see also \textit{MSL: SZ}, 347: 5a‒6a and 350: la‒2a.} for having dealings with the intrusive foreigners and supplying (\textit{jieji}) the bandits with daily necessities. For this reason, he firmly believed that, once the authorities had got rid of these people, there would be no more foreign intruders. What troubled him most was the local scholar-gentry’s influence at the Imperial Court and that no one dared to do anything to offend them. The local authorities even ignored the instructions from the higher authorities because, as Zhu Wan put it, “the real authoritative power had already shifted to local public opinion”.\footnote{Zhu Wan’s memorial, in \textit{MJSWB}, 205: 5a‒10a.} With the local scholar-gentry’s support, pirates and foreigners entered the port openly without the slightest fear.
Zhu was especially irritated by two outrageous incidents. In the first case, the pirates held a big party and grand entertainment to celebrate the marriage between one of their members and a local girl against her own will just a few miles away from the government headquarters. In another case, the Portuguese had their two ships repaired in the locality after they had completed their transactions, as if the local authorities did not exist at all. In the same memorial, Zhu Wan ruthlessly attacked the local scholar-gentry by name. Among them was Xu Fuxian who held the highest imperial jinshi degree. He had become rich through the marital relationship between his sister and a pirate.

Zhu also placed the blame for the local lawlessness on Lin Xiyuan, a prominent South Fujianese Confucian scholar. Lin was accused of blackmailing the local authorities. It was said that Lin used to send incoming new officials biographies of their predecessors written by him, implying that such officials’ reputations, even their careers, depended to a large degree on what he thought of them. He was also found guilty of interfering in official duties by lynching the accused sent to him and making public instructions about local affairs without due authority. Above all, Lin built forbidden vessels to transport contraband and booty, to assist him in his shady transactions with foreigners.

What was Lin Xiyuan’s side of the story? During the contest between the two perceptions of law and order and maritime trade, Lin ruthlessly criticized Zhu Wan’s heavy-handed tactics in his dealings with maritime traders. He also expressed his resentment at the anti-Portuguese action. He argued that the Portuguese were well-behaved traders who engaged in legitimate business activities to which their presence in the past five years bore witness. They imported spices and all sorts of Nanhai products and conducted trade fairly and squarely. The coastal people benefited from their presence by supplying them with articles of everyday use including foodstuffs. Was the nature of their activities not similar to those of the frontier people who sold their horses in the northwest or the southern foreigners who dealt in spices in Guangzhou? As these two latter categories of traders had never had any obstacles placed in their way, why were the Portuguese not treated the same way? Moreover, it was an exercise in futility for the authorities to try to stop them because this goal would be beyond their capacity to achieve. Although the Portuguese numbered only five or six hundred, the authorities would suffer great losses of life if they were to attack them. Even if they took this

step, there would be no guarantee of victory for the government troops.
Lin also pointed out that on several occasions the Portuguese had helped
the government suppress the coastal pirates. Finally, he felt totally at a
loss about the accusation of his collaboration with the Portuguese leveled
at him by Zhu Wan, but he did not proceed to explain why he thought so.40
Being a staunch supporter of trade relations with the Portuguese, Lin
was also in favor of government suppression of the rampant piracy on
the Fujian coast. He proposed dispatching troops to eliminate the pirate
bands,41 bearing in mind that members of pirate bands were mostly
desperate xiaomin who looked to the sea as an avenue from which to
seek a livelihood. If one accepts Zhu Wan’s accusation, Lin Xiyuan was an
interested party personally involved in the maritime trade. This probably
explains his reasons for defending what he believed to be legitimate
business contacts with the Portuguese. Were this indeed the case, there
was no contradiction in the hostile position he adopted toward the pirate
bands, given that they were likely one of the many competing groups that
inflicted harm on his own trading interests. Unfortunately, at this distance
in time the information available precludes getting to the bottom of the
matter and verifying their respective accusations.
Meanwhile, a propitious time for Zhu Wan to act presented itself
when a quarrel broke out between the Portuguese and the Chinese near
Ningbo, leading to a killing and growing disorder. The incident was of
such a proportion as to draw the Court’s attention. Zhu Wan grasped the
opportunity and requested the Court for absolute power independent of
the Inspecting Censor (xun’an yushi) in order to avoid conflict between
the two authorities in dealing with the maritime matters.42 The Court’s
approval paved the way for a strict observation of the existing prohibition
regulations and vindicated the validity of the standing order of the Court
to interdict foreign trade as well as to warn those who were engaged in
smuggling. He soon revealed himself to be the bitter and uncompromising
enemy of the gueiguan (high-ranking officials), shijia (prominent families)
and shihao (rich and powerful people of the locality). These people had
personally profited considerably from trade. Among the measures taken

40. Lin defended himself and justified his viewpoint in writing; see Lin Xiyuan 林
希元 (1482–1567), Tong’an Lin Xiyuan xiansheng wenji shiba juan 同安林希元
先生文集十八卷 [Collection of writings in eighteen chapters by Lin Xiyuan of
Tong’an], in Siku quanshu cunmu congshu 四庫全書存目叢書 [A collection of
books listed in the complete library of the four treasures] (Jinan: Qilu shushe,
1997), ji bu 集部 [Fourth section: Collections of literature], 5: 30b–34b (ji 75,
pp. 538–40).
41. Ibid., 5: 31a–b, (p. ji 75: 539), 12: 5a–b (p. ji 75: 665).
42. Ibid., pp. 677–81; also MSL: SZ, 335: 7a.
under his orders was the destruction of all seagoing vessels with two or more masts, the re-establishment of the baojia (household surveillance) system, the re-training of troops and, above all, severe punishment of any breach of the prohibition law. By his actions, Zhu Wan publicly and relentlessly challenged the people in power.

However, those who had a stake in the seagoing business were waiting for the right time to strike back. Lobbying at the Court was rife, leading to Inspecting Censor Zhou Liang and Supervising Censor (jishizhong) Ye Tang, both Fujianese, to commence preparing a counter-attack on Zhu. In a bid to reduce Zhu’s power, the two high-ranking officials convinced the Court that holding the offices of the Governor of Zhejiang and the Commander-in-Chief of the Zhe-Min (Zhejiang and Fujian) Maritime Defense simultaneously was too great a responsibility for Zhu. They took the opportunity to suggest that Zhu’s existing official title be suspended and, in its place, the old title of Itinerant Inspector-General be restored. His power to supervise local granaries, revenue, military affairs, local administration, justice and punishment should likewise be abrogated. This leaves little room to doubt that it was Court politics that explains the Emperor’s consent to the suggestion.

Before long, they delivered the final blow. In 1549, when 96 smugglers led by a pirate leader, Li Guangtou, were executed by order of Zhu Wan, several high-ranking officials at the Court immediately turned against the dutiful Zhu Wan and impeached him for the excessive use of his authority in putting to death the prisoners without having obtained imperial approval. The clash ended in tragedy. Zhu Wan realized, even if the Emperor were to show him mercy, the ministers would still demand his death. Even if the ministers did not venture as far, then the Zhejiang and Fujian people were still those who would like to take away his life. Eventually, in 1550 he committed suicide to avoid humiliating punishment.

Before proceeding further, one question remains to be tackled. As mentioned, Zhu Wan pointed the finger at “powerful and evil individuals” (shihao or jianhao) as well as at the local scholar-gentry who were actually, in Zhu Wan’s words, “robbers” in disguise on account of their involvement in maritime businesses. The question is how best to explain who these powerful local people actually were. Taking a different perspective, they might be viewed as a rising group of local people who...
were in the position to make substantial capital investments in maritime businesses, even though they did not personally go to sea. They were in contrast to another group of small investors who did travel abroad, the ordinary xiaomin who provided manpower and worked as seamen on board the trading junks. This interpretation ties in with the development of the Chinese junk trade in the following two to three centuries.

**Toward a Regulated Maritime Environment**

How should the triumph of Zhou Liang and his collaborators be interpreted? Is it indicative of a total defeat of the traditional approach to maritime affairs on the one hand, and an overwhelming victory of the local interests on the other? The answer might be something in-between. In the first place, the outcome illustrates the precarious position of a high-ranking official who might find himself in the midst of a political conspiracy. This was simply part of Court politics all along in Chinese imperial history. In the present case, corrupt officials and influential eunuchs paved the way for the powerful and wealthy families of South Fujian and those people who indulged in power struggles to bring down a high-profile official whose actions threatened their self-interest in maritime trade. Importantly, the unfolding of events should be looked at from a broader perspective. There were three concurrent developments during the late Ming that ushered in a changing social and economic environment, namely: the development of the commodity economy that was gaining momentum, the surge in the private shipping trade and the appearance of large quantities of writings centering on the big question of how to develop the country and save the people. The last category was also known as the statecraft scholarship (jingshi wen) during Ming-Qing times.

Returning to Zhu’s tragic fate, in the later years of the dynasty, he was generally recognized as a conscientious defender of the status quo and an upright official. He was loyal, firm, incorruptible and, above all, one of the few who dared to fight face-to-face battles against power and wealth. As a responsible and caring official, he had undergone a thorough investigation and possessed an understanding of the circumstances that were responsible for the chaotic situation on the coast. He realized that if the Fujianese people were to feed themselves they had to go to sea and that they were resentful of official restrictions. However, his

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survey revealed that only a handful of powerful and wealthy families were actually in control of all the seagoing activities. He argued that the shipbuilding prohibition did not affect the xiaomin adversely because they obviously could not afford to build seagoing vessels of the size specified (with two or more masts). From the bottom of his heart he showed great pity toward these people whose daily lives were disrupted by the turmoil caused by pirates. He took it as his duty to save his people. While he was aware that the prohibition would mean that these humble people would lose their livelihood, he contended that only after piracy had been eliminated would these people be able to enjoy a peaceful life. However, had he asked why “even small kids (sanchi tongzi) look upon those pirates as if they were parents who feed them”, he would have had second thoughts on the matter.

After Zhu’s death, the prohibition on the seafaring trade was relaxed and the Folangji (Portuguese) subsequently sailed the seas with nothing to fear. Meanwhile, the prohibition issue remained a topic of heated discussion at the Court; the voices of the proponents of prohibition lingered on. Opposing the relaxation of the prohibition in 1551, for instance, Feng Zhang, the Deputy Commanding Officer of the Fujian Sea Patrol (Fujian haidao fushi), made his critical comments claiming that the “reprehensible customs” (e su) of the Zhang-Quan people stemmed from their involvement in seagoing businesses and admiration of the well-to-do families. He said:

They even mortgage small children for foreign cargo,… or … submit themselves to being sons-in-law and live with their wives’ families.

47. Ibid.
48. Ibid.
49. Ming shi, 325: 22a.
50. This is confirmed in a letter written by Lin Xiyuan. Lin defended the Portuguese behavior but he had to admit that they had done wrong to buy children (quoted in Chang Wei-hua’s commentary, fn. 22). Apparently, the Portuguese kept or sold these children as slaves. However, the contemporary Chinese reasoned differently. They thought the newcomers were cannibals who had a special taste for eating small children (see Ming shi, 325: 19a). This might have been mixed up with their belief that there were certain evil people who gained extra stamina by eating the essence of unmarried youths.
51. In Chinese custom, a son-in-law was not supposed to live with his wife’s family. If he did so, others would think his behavior parasitical and be contemptuous of him. See memorial by Feng Zhang, “Tong fanbo yi”通蕃舶議 [On allowing visits by foreign trading ships], in MJSWB, 280: 18b.
Another memorial reviewed the 40 years of devastation caused by Japanese pirates since 1552 when the restrictive maritime laws had been relieved. The piece firmly opposed the prospective resumption of Japanese tribute missions. It says:

The dwarves devastated ... our coastal area of some ten thousand li (Chinese measure of distance).... Half of the nation’s territory was thrown into turmoil... It took twenty years to eradicate the trouble.... The reasons were as follows: Their tribute missions had come so frequently since the Yongle Reign (1403–1424) ... and they went around our country as if it were their native land.... They used to collect all our charts and books and, therefore, were well informed about our military secrets.... We should no longer discuss tribute-and-trade. Once it is resumed, your humble servant is certain that within several decades Ningbo will vanish. ... If we welcome them with open arms, trouble will break out again. If we let them in with precautions, this will damage our reputation for treating guests [from afar].... [Furthermore], they might come with a few hundred well-selected men and launch a sudden attack; if so our tens of thousands of soldiers will be put in an awful situation and be defeated.... In the last forty years we have successfully eliminated the roots of turmoil and cut off the contacts between our people and the dwarves. Once the tribute-and-trade is resumed, the worst things will occur again. ...52

During this period an increasing number of statecraft writings appeared, showing Ming scholars' great concern with the practical application of knowledge to the national affairs. Many of them understood that inept and doltish dogmatism could only endanger the already precarious situation of the nation even more. In such a field, amazing works of a utilitarian nature were written on sea defense, agriculture, technology, medicine as well as socio-political well-being. Discussing the maritime problem, some scholars were convinced that the issue could only be resolved by adopting a more practical and flexible policy, rather than by retaining the strictly orthodox and traditional approach.

In answer to whether the government should accept the surrender of the notorious pirate leader Wang Zhi, a Ming official, Tang Shu, stated that the re-opening of foreign trade was the only way to make inroads on piracy. Ever since the government had enforced the restrictions around 1526–27, merchants had been deprived of their livelihoods and

52. Memorial by Shen Yiguan 沈一贯, "Lun wo gongshi buke xu shu" 論倭貢市不可許疏 [Tribute trade should not open to Japan], in MJSWB, 435: 1a–4a.
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had subsequently teamed up with pirates. When the restrictions were strengthened, the situation only worsened. He went on to state that, since the prohibition benefited only illicit traders, the government made itself master of the profit by opening trade and collecting customs duties. Control of this revenue would mean that the poor people could be relieved of heavy taxes and levies. No matter how hard it tried, the government had never made the restrictions effective. Finally, he concluded that, even if the government decided not to accept Wang’s surrender, it should not extend the trade prohibition.  

In 1567, 17 years after Zhu Wan’s death, Tu Zemin, Governor of Fujian, successfully obtained the approval of the Court to lift the sea prohibition. People were allowed to trade in both the Eastern and the Western Oceans. He stressed the point that China was only on its guard against Japan but not against its vassal states such as Luzon, Sulu, Jiaozhi, Champa and Siam, that had never given China any trouble. Therefore, the imperial ban was relaxed.

The seagoing trade was suspended again in 1572. When Xu Fuyuan was Governor of Fujian (1592‒94), he appealed to the Court on behalf of the Fujianese people for a reconsideration of the decision to reinstate the prohibition. In his memorial he wrote that:

Recently, after the outbreak of the dwarves’ attack on Chaoxian (Korea), the trade prohibition has once again been enforced. The purpose of the ban is to cut off the saltpeter and sulfur supplies to the attackers by our evil people. Haicheng merchants suffer the most as a result. Hundreds of vessels and incalculable amounts of cargo are not allowed to move out of the port. Merchants are bankrupted and their employees are starving…. In my humble opinion, local turmoil will inevitably erupt for four reasons resulting from the resumption of the prohibition. First,... the prohibition will

53. Tang Shu 唐枢, “Fu Hu Meilin lunchu Wang Zhi shu” (Reply to Hu Meilin (Hu Zongxian 胡宗憲) regarding Wang Zhi’s (王直) case), 270: 3a‒9b. Tang, who received his jinshi degree in 1526 and was later promoted to take charge of the Office of the Board of Justice and Punishment (刑部主事), supported, in implicit language, the acceptance of Wang Zhi’s surrender. The government finally did so, and gave its firm guarantee of Wang’s safety in 1557. Wang Zhi also promised to serve the government by safeguarding the coast. Unfortunately, the authorities broke their promise and executed Wang Zhi instead. Consequently, the maritime situation then deteriorated on account of this unwise act. For the whole story, see Tongxi yang kao, 6: 8a‒9a.

54. Tongxi yang kao, 7: 1b–2a.

55. Saltpeter and sulfur were among the main articles strictly banned for export because they were constituents in the making of gunpowder.
encourage unlawful activities... Second, ... Zhangzhou people are used to trading in Luzon... If they are not allowed to return, the foreigners will make use of them for their own ends... Third,... we shall no longer be able to collect information about the foreigners from our merchants who also act as good informers.... Fourth, there are regular troops consisting of several thousand men stationed along the coastal area south of Zhangzhou. Military spending amounts to as much as fifty-eight thousand liang (taels). Twenty thousand of this comes from commercial taxes. Without this revenue, not only will there be a shortage of military supplies, but we shall also have to levy taxes more heavily on the people...

My predecessor, Governor Tu Zemin,... was granted approval to open the shibo... In the past thirty years, fortunately we have not heard of any serious piracy.... During my investigation, I noticed that evil people from Tong’an (in Quanzhou prefecture), Haicheng, Longxi, Zhangpu and Shaoan (in Zhangzhou prefecture) put to sea during April‒May ... to Funing (in North Fujian), under the pretext of carrying fish or trading in Jilong and Danshui (in Taiwan), but frequently they are transporting forbidden cargo ... to Japan.... Some others, on the pretext of going south to Chao, Hui, Guangzhou and Gaozhou to ship back grain, actually set their course for Japan.... Since it is impossible to stop them ... a better option is to reopen the shibo in order to recover the revenue.... Otherwise, we are alienating all the other foreign countries, causing damage to our own merchants and making way for plunderers, only to help Chaoxian guard against Japan.56

Governor Xu Fuyuan's management of maritime affairs is a good example of administrative flexibility. When the restoration of the seafaring prohibition in 1592 caused people a great deal of distress, Governor Xu not only promptly memorialized and appealed to the Court for a re-consideration of its reinstatement of the prohibition law, he also took immediate measures to relieve the hardship of the people affected. He issued a special permit to allow people who were still trading overseas or had been spending the winters in foreign lands to come back without punishment or discrimination. Subsequently, several merchants sailed back with 24 vessels and reported to the authorities. They were duly taxed at the customs. This extraordinary measure helped the seafaring people enormously and in 1594 earned the local authority

56. Xu Fuyuan 許孚遠 (1535‒1604), “Shu tong haijin shu” 疏通海禁疏 [Lifting the Sea Prohibition], in MJSWB, 400: 1a‒6b.
additional revenue amounting to almost one-third of the total income collected the preceding year.\textsuperscript{57}

Xu Guangqi (1562–1633) was another outstanding statecraft scholar. His name is often associated with Father Matthew Ricci, a Jesuit missionary. As a far-sighted statesman and an agriculturist and an economist, he explicitly expressed his views in favor of the tribute-and-trade system. He did not regard the shibo trade as illicit and hence implicitly criticized Zhu Wan for his rigidity in the handling of affairs and his inability to resolve the maritime problem. His formula for the elimination of seafaring outlaws was simply to legalize the trade. He firmly stated that:

\begin{quote}
Only after legalizing the trade, we can pacify the dwarves; only after legalizing the trade, shall we be able to get to know them better; only after legalizing the trade, can we subdue them; only after legalizing the trade, can we plot against them.
\end{quote}

He even said he regretted not approving a request to send an expeditionary fleet from Fujian to reinforce Satsuma, a feudatory state in southern Japan, against the menace posed by Toyotomi Hideyoshi.\textsuperscript{58} This non-traditional expansionistic view is truly unorthodox.

On the other hand, Xu Xueju, the Governor of Fujian in the early seventeenth century, proposed a differentiated policy toward the maritime foreigners. Unquestionably, he was highly resentful of the Dutch presence in the Penghu Islands,\textsuperscript{59} located in the Taiwan Straits, because they maintained close relations with Japan but he was definitely not anti-trade, as seen from his attitude toward Spanish Manila. He evidently had no objection to trading with Manila because this destination was perceived to be less dangerous to the country's maritime defense. The trade with it also contributed to the customs revenue in Haicheng in Zhangzhou prefecture. If the trade were banned, he said, the revenue would be lost to the Dutch who had occupied the contiguous and strategic islands off the Fujian coast.\textsuperscript{60} In other words, he made a distinction between the violent aggressors, namely the Japanese and the Dutch, and the non-threatening trading counterpart, the Spanish in

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{57} Gu Yanwu, \textit{TXJGLBS}, Vol. 26, pp. 100‒1.
\item \textsuperscript{58} For the whole passage, see the writing by Xu Guangqi 徐光启, “Haifang yu shuo – zhi Wo” 海防迂說: 制倭 [Subduing the Wo], in \textit{MJSWB}, 491: 29b‒47a.
\item \textsuperscript{59} The Dutch first arrived in Guangzhou in 1601. Three years later (1604), they landed on and occupied Penghu. See \textit{Tongxi yang kao}, 6: 20b‒22a.
\item \textsuperscript{60} Memorial by Xu Xueju 徐学聚, “Chu bao Hongmaofan shu” 初報紅毛番疏 [On the Dutch as a threat to the country], in \textit{MJSWB}, 433: 1a‒4a. Xu Xueju was Governor of Fujian in 1603‒07.
\end{itemize}
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Manila. More importantly, his lenient view must also be attributed to the fact that the Haicheng-Manila trade was the largest in volume and value in the contemporary maritime world, contributing to one major source of influx of silver into China.

The topic of maritime affairs continued to attract the attention of the memorialists in the final years of the dynasty. For instance, in 1639, shortly before the fall of the Ming, a memorial sent by the Supervising Censor Fu Yuanchu reached the Court. In it, this official argued that:

Your humble servant is himself a Fujianese.... During the Wanli reign, foreign trade was resumed in Yuegang, in Haicheng district in Zhangzhou prefecture. The annual revenue derived from the port was more than twenty thousand liang.... But this practice was abandoned later.... To the Fujianese, the sea is the same as cultivated land. Once the imperial ban came into force, their livelihood was cut off and they have had no other option but to resort to piracy.... They often go out to trade with the red-haired barbarians (the Dutch).... If foreign trade is legalized,... the revenue ... will be recovered, ... poor people in the coastal area will be relieved of starvation and poverty ... and will no longer participate in piracy.... The military and other officials will not indulge themselves by profiting from it illicitly.... These are not your humble servant’s original thoughts, but rather public opinion throughout the whole province of Fujian.61

Commenting on the prohibition laws that were decreed by the founding emperor was tantamount to embarking on treacherous waters and this analogy might explain why when the issue was brought up in statecraft scholarship, it was generally presented along more nuanced lines. One example is a tactful presentation of a view about managing maritime affairs summed up by a statecraft commentator Gu Yanwu (1613‒82). His presentation said that the task would likely be confronted by three scenarios: the best policy would be prohibition, provided it could be implemented successfully; the second in order of importance was national control of the profit through management of trade, if the first goal could not be effectively achieved; and thirdly, prohibition in name but ineffectual in effect was the worst of the three.62 In the third case, the government would not only be unable to benefit from maritime income but, on the contrary, it would allow the seafaring outlaws to swallow all

62. Gu Yanwu’s summary of the views is the most representative in this regard. See ibid., Vol. 26, p. 104.
the profit that should have belonged to the state. This was the root cause of all kinds of maritime troubles. The commentator also pointed out the inappropriate measure of abolishing the shibo system simply because of the "Japanese tribute mission" incident in 1523. The proposal contended that the government should root out only the corrupt shibo eunuchs, not the whole system.

Writing during the Ming-Qing transition, Gu Yanwu put the shibo management into perspective, asserting that even the first Ming Emperor had only instructed his successors not to trade with Japan, but to maintain the shibo system for other countries as usual. He justifies the continuation of a regulated trading environment for several reasons: firstly, the shibo system could provide special agents with a chance to attain a better understanding of the barbarians; secondly, China and foreign countries benefited mutually from the exchange of their products (it was considered an effective method of tempering the frontier people); thirdly, the government would get hold of the profit from the customs revenue; fourthly, the shibo income could cover a large part of local military expenditure; and lastly, a successful shibo system was certainly the best way to root out illegal maritime trade at long last, suppress evil merchants and monopolize the trading profit by the state. The proposition neatly skirted around the sensitive issue of advocating private trade (shangbo).

A Test Case Reflecting the Ming State’s Attitudes Toward Its Maritime Merchants

The first recorded encounter between the Spaniards and the Chinese took place in 1570 when a Spanish fleet on course for Luzon clashed with a Chinese trading fleet off Mindoro. The Chinese were defeated. Four years later, Manila miraculously escaped an attack by Chinese pirates led by Limahong. In 1593, relations between the Spaniards and the Chinese were again strained when Gomez Perez Dasmaries, Governor

63. Ibid., Vol. 26, p. 99.
65. Gu Yanwu, TXJGLBS, Vol. 26, p. 19. The respective terms in Chinese used in the passage to show the benefits of the shibo are: 通夷狄之情，遷有無之貨，收徵稅之利，減戍守之費，禁商賈，抑奸商 and 使利權在上.
67. Ibid., p. 17.
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of Manila, was slain by the Chinese oarsmen of his galley. At the time, the Governor was on an expedition to the Moluccas and he had taken 250 Manila Chinese as laborers. To speed up the voyage, these Chinese had been forced to row without respite and were freely tortured by the infliction of various punishments. Driven to desperation, the Chinese mutinied and the Governor and his men were killed. The following year the Fujian officials received a complaint about the Chinese migrants from the Manila authorities, and consequently, sent several junks to bring the Chinese in Manila home.68

The growth of the Chinese population in Manila continued to be regarded as a great threat to the Spanish population of that city. This suspicion was strengthened in 1602 when two Chinese officials arrived in Manila. Their visit was a consequence of information passed on to the Wanli Emperor by a man called Zhang Yi who claimed that in Mount Jiyi (Keit or Cavite) in Luzon, the ground was made of gold nuggets as big as chick peas. Two officials were sent with Zhang Yi to verify the report. The mission returned and reported that the information given by Zhang Yi was false. The Court was so furious, Zhang Yi was beheaded.69 Meanwhile, mutual hate and suspicion were brewing in Manila; both Spaniards and Chinese feared each other and consequently each prepared themselves for hostilities. There were more than 30,000 Chinese settlers in the city, whereas the Spaniards numbered less than a thousand. A massacre of the Chinese broke out in 1603, when Spaniards, Filipinos and Japanese joined in a concerted action and killed more than 25,000 Chinese.70

When the killing ceased, the Spaniards had to face possible reprisals by the Ming state, faced not merely with an imminent attack by Chinese troops but also the likelihood that Chinese junks would no longer trade with Manila. Governor Acuna considered this last possibility the gravest eventuality that might occur. So when Chinese junks again appeared in Manila the following year, he wrote to King Philip III, saying: “We have been greatly pleased to see that the Chinese have come back to trade with us, a thing of which we were highly doubtful.” To ensure the continuity of trade, Acuna sent an embassy to China.71

In Fujian, the massacre aroused great anger, especially among the seafaring population, either because their relatives and friends had been among the victims or they feared they would have to face a similar fate in

68. Zhang Xie, Tongxi yang kao, 5: 1b–2b.
69. Ibid., 5: 3b–4b.
70. For the event, see ibid., 5: 4b–5a.
the future. Hard-pressed by popular opinion on the one hand, and enrag ed
by the insult to imperial prestige on the other, even the high-ranking
officials in Fujian petitioned the Court for retaliation.\footnote{Fujian tongzhi 福建通志 [A general gazetteer of Fujian] (1871 ed.), 278: 37b, under the heading “the 31st year (1603) of the Wanli Emperor”.} However, two
considerations prevented the Court from taking action against Manila:
first, uncertainty about the fate of the proposed sea-expedition and
memory of the failed expeditions of the Yuan dynasty against Japan and
Java; second, it was considered not worth risking another humiliation for
the maritime merchants, who were described as “worthless, ungrateful
scum”. Governor Xu Xueju later reported to the Court about the contents
of a letter he had sent to Manila and also the safe return of merchants
who had survived the slaughter. The memorial is a good illustration of
the Chinese government’s apathy toward its own seafaring population
in general and the massacre of their countrymen in particular. As a most
interesting diplomatic document, the memorial is worth quoting at
length:

Since Luzon never made trouble with China, trade was permitted....
Suddenly and unexpectedly, tens of thousands of Chinese were
massacred. Laws should never tolerate such happenings. However,
the slaughter was originally caused by the false information
made by Zhang Yi and the killing of their chief committed by
our evil merchants the year before. Their pent up anger made
them commence the incident. It seems there is reason to pardon
them. We are not certain about the outcome of the war if we
send troops across the sea. It is a matter of the nation’s dignity;
we should not do so hastily.... Your humble servant has informed
the chieftain of the Folangji (here refers to the Spaniards) and the
tribes of Luzon about our legitimacy over all ... the places under
Heaven. For instance,... three times we had sent troops to restore
Korea’s sovereignty after Japanese attacks.... Last year, on account
of Zhang Yi’s lies,... we found out that tens of thousands of our
Zhang-Quan people had been killed in Luzon. Our local authorities
were so irritated that they requested the Emperor to avenge their
deaths by sending troops over there ... and they told the Emperor
that Luzon was a poor land of little consequence,... it had acquired
some importance only because the Chinese had come to trade with
the people.... Despite all, they had killed tens of thousands of our
people. ... The local authorities wrote three times to the Emperor
[and urged him to take action] and the Emperor answered that
it was best not to take revenge or to make war on Luzon, for the
people had been our friends for a long time and we were still not
sure who the real trouble-maker was. Furthermore, merchants were the least worthy of the four social strata. How could we make war for such insignificant people? They are scum, ungrateful to China, their land, their parents and ancestors, because they failed to return to China for the New Year. Such people are to be deemed of little worth, therefore the Emperor has not accepted the advice of the local authorities and ordered us to inform you that if you were sensible and regretted it, the Emperor would not punish you ... and the trade with you might continue.... If this is not so, the Emperor would forbid future trade [with you] and send warships with soldiers, with the relatives of the dead and with men from the tributary kingdoms, and they will wage war ... so that Luzon might be given to the vassals of China.... Thanks to Your Majesty’s concern, Luzon has let the merchants who had survived the incident return freely with their goods....

As recorded in a Chinese gazetteer, most of the victims of the slaughter came from the Haicheng district of Zhangzhou prefecture. This was only one of a series of disasters that overcame the South Fujianese during their overseas adventures. Without the slightest concern from their home government, not to mention any government protection during their struggle to survive abroad, those Fujianese had no choice but to resign themselves to the will of Heaven. In 1639, a second ghastly massacre was perpetrated in Manila, in which it was estimated that another 23,000 Chinese were killed.

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73. Xu Xueju 徐學聚, "Bao chuhui Lusong qiushang shu – fuchu Lusong" 報取回呂宋囚商疏 – 撫處呂宋 [Reporting on the return of the merchants from Luzon], in MJSWB, 433: 4a–7a. Morga’s version is quoted in Rafael Bernal’s article, with the exception of a few minor points, the two texts are almost identical. In his article cited above, Rafael Bernal says that he is not certain about the accuracy of the letter translated by Morga. However, he assumes that the degree of accuracy of the translation at that time was rather high by giving several examples. See Rafael Bernal’s article in Felix’s book, pp. 53–5. Should Rafael Bernal have a chance to read Governor Xu’s memorial available in Chinese, his uncertainty would be needless.


Concluding Remarks

In the early sixteenth century, two concurrent developments occurred on China's southeast coast as a whole and coastal southern Fujian in particular. One was the growth of a bustling domestic trade with other provinces. The other was expansion of the maritime trade on the coast and overseas. The surge in trading activities presented the South Fujianese people with extensive opportunities that linked the coastal and inland regions to each other. The linkages were extended farther into the Nanhai (maritime Southeast Asia), a process that greatly boosted the Chinese junk trade in the following three centuries. South Fujian was the first major area to play a prominent role in the new pattern of economic activities and emerged to become the maritime center of China.

While the littoral people endeavored to promote maritime activities, the state remained obsessed with its self-centered tradition and was reluctant to abandon the sea prohibition laws. The authorities were always suspicious of those involved in maritime trade, denigrating them as "scum and ungrateful". Nevertheless, people capable of putting up capital investment were able to find ways of evading restrictions and controlling lucrative seafaring businesses from afar by sending their men to sea or to engage in trade in foreign lands. The "little people" also enthusiastically entered the fold provided by the new opportunities. Being in the forefront of the activity, they understandably encountered greater hardships and harassment than did the wealthy and influential business investors. Whether they joined the pirate bands or sailed to strange lands, they inevitably suffered. At home, in the name of maintaining law and order they were slaughtered as "jianmin" (evil people) by the authorities. In sailing forth, many perished on the high seas or on remote islands without any hope of getting assistance or protection from their government. When such tragic incidents as the Manila massacres occurred, only their families would mourn the loss of their loved ones.

Gradually, the government resistance to change became more untenable and it had to face the reality of the new environment. Since maritime trade could no longer be suppressed, the state retreated from its rigid, orthodox position of banning what it perceived to be illicit trade and smuggling activities. At the time, in the time-honored shibo concept, the government found an effective mechanism to exercise control of the booming private trade. Consequently, the shibo system that managed the tribute or state trade gave the state an idea for reining in the uncontrollable maritime situation.

Private trade was termed shangbo in the writings of late Ming times. The shibo and shangbo represented the two modes of trading operations. Simply put, when foreign vessels, whether they were tribute-bearers or
merchants or both, approached the designated Chinese ports and traded with the Chinese people through the customs system, the trade was called *shibo*. If Chinese people built their own vessels and traded in foreign lands, their activity was regarded as *shangbo*,76 mercantile or private trade that involved both the capital investors and numerous participants among the seagoing population. Such activities were subject to persecution under the prohibition laws. Here was the rub. The prohibition policy only served to put constraints on and cause frustration among the maritime community, deterring a smooth transition to legally accepted private trade. It failed to prevent the maritime population from going to sea in ever greater numbers.

Concerns about the maritime problem lingered on and inspired serious discussions in the statecraft scholarship. When maritime conditions became chaotic in the first half of the sixteenth century, the prohibition defenders indiscriminately opposed not only private trade, but also the *shibo* trade. In contrast, the statecraft approach was in favor of the resumption of trade, including the *shangbo*, by creatively applying the control mechanism of the *shibo* concept, that offered ideas of supervising foreign contacts and managing the limited state trade, in order to allow an orderly and controllable maritime trading environment.

After 1567, the authorities finally worked out a modus operandi that was a compromise between strict prohibition and uncontrolled trade. It allowed the operation of private trade for the purpose of regularizing the movement, especially of the private junks sailing overseas, while benefiting from the handsome receipts of customs duties. The policy adjustment came at an opportune time to welcome the impending opening of Manila for trade after the Spanish occupation. The shipping route between Haicheng and Manila that was part of the trans-Pacific shipping route became the most lucrative of all in the maritime world of the time.

There should be little hesitation in crediting the policy change in 1567 for having ushered in a golden age of Chinese overseas shipping trade that would last until the early decades of the nineteenth century, despite the intermittent disruption caused by the state re-imposition of the maritime ban during the Ming-Qing transition.