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Opening Up to the Ocean: The Changing Shape of Maritime East Asia

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Xing Hang. *Conflict and Commerce in Maritime East Asia: The Zheng Family and the Shaping of the Modern World, c. 1620–1720*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. 344 pp. \$100 (cloth).

Gang Zhao. *The Qing Opening to the Ocean: Chinese Maritime Policies, 1684–1757*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013. 280 pp. \$56 (cloth).

The past decade has seen a surge of impressive new work in early modern East Asian maritime history. The trail first blazed by pioneering scholars like Jack Wills, Leonard Blussé, and Iwao Seiichi has been followed in recent years by that of a new wave of historians, including Tonio Andrade, Patrizia Carloti, Wei-chung Cheng, and others. These scholars have brilliantly combined European, especially Dutch East India Company, materials with Chinese, Japanese, and Korean sources to produce a composite picture of a rapidly changing maritime world (Andrade 2005, 2011; Carloti 1996; Cheng 2013).

Xing Hang's excellent new book, *Conflict and Commerce in Maritime East Asia: The Zheng Family and the Shaping of the Modern World, c. 1620–1720*, is not only the latest but also one of the most impressive entries into this field. At its heart, Hang's monograph is a superbly contextualized set of three overlapping biographies: of Zheng Zhilong (1604–1661); his son Zheng Chenggong, or Koxinga (1624–1662); and his grandson Zheng Jing (1642–1681). Together, these three generations of the Zheng family created a formidable maritime organization that sprawled across East and Southeast Asia before establishing a territorial state with a distinct maritime orientation on the west coast of Taiwan.

Hang uses these overlapping biographies to make three arguments. First, the Zheng organization succeeded in adapting traditional Chinese institutions and orthodoxies in a way that enabled them to harness merchants and mercantile interests. Second, they were able to

convert these modified structures into a successful state-building program that allowed them to establish a territorial state on Taiwan and “informal economic hegemony over much of maritime East Asia” (15). Third, and even as they moved to craft hybrid structures with a clear maritime orientation, the Zheng continued to rely on what Hang calls “continental modes of legitimacy” (16). The result is that the Zheng were remarkable innovators who nonetheless remained trapped within a constraining framework that tied them to Ming restoration even as they charted a new path that took them further and further away from past models of Chinese statehood. All of this meant that Koxinga and Zheng Jing in particular were able to come close to, but never make, the leap to a “fully legitimate maritime Chinese kingdom” on Taiwan (3).

After an initial introductory chapter, chapters 2, 3, and 4 focus on Zhilong and his son, Koxinga. Both are well-known figures and, while there is much that is new here, the book’s primary contribution lies in its later chapters, which focus on the neglected grandson, Zheng Jing. Any discussion of Koxinga always returns to the same questions regarding motivation. Was he truly loyal to the Ming, willing to sacrifice his own interests in order to achieve Ming restoration, or was it all just a show? Hang shows a Koxinga torn between “political loyalty” to the Ming and “filial piety to his father.” He argues that these conflicting priorities allowed him a significant degree of freedom but that the struggle between the two roles “plagued conscience for the rest of his life” (77). I agree with the former, but find (on my reading at least) little evidence of the latter. Rather, Koxinga switched easily and opportunistically between identities. Political loyalty and filial piety were not opposing poles, but components of an expansive repertoire that changed according to circumstance.

Conflict and Commerce in Maritime East Asia really comes into its own when it turns to Zheng Jing, long dismissed as the unworthy successor to his charismatic father. Emerging from a wayward youth that included an array of dalliances that led him dangerously close to an early death, Zheng Jing was the true creator of the territorial state on Taiwan, and he established an effective bureaucratic structure in the territory under his control. Far from diminishing (as past scholarship has suggested) after the collapse of Dutch rule, revenues surged under his leadership. Sifting through the figures, Hang shows that sugar exports grew, deerskin sales remained largely unchanged, and overall revenues went up by 30 percent. The result was that the Zheng organization, as is shown again and again in this study, was able to beat the formidable Dutch East India Company, long feted for its successes in this period, at its own game.

Conflict and Commerce in Maritime East Asia follows Andrade's groundbreaking first book, *How Taiwan Became Chinese*, which examined the Dutch East India Company's move onto the island. Andrade showed us a hybrid Dutch colonial state built on a basis of Chinese labor via a process he labels "co-colonization"; Hang describes its successor, a hybrid Chinese territorial state that made expert use of Dutch technologies of rule. These two books in conjunction should be required reading for any class on empire.

The great struggle for Zheng Jing was to articulate an identity that enabled coexistence with the Qing regime across the Taiwan Strait. Here, he displayed a brilliant capacity to improvise. Refusing Qing demands to publicly submit by shaving his head, Zheng Jing suggested instead that Taiwan should be treated as a foreign country. Taiwan would, he explained, simply "follow the example of Korea, not shaving the hair but calling ourselves your ministers and paying tribute" (185). It was a remarkable formulation. If accepted, Taiwan would be transformed overnight from a renegade territory at war with the Qing to a loyal tributary, and Zheng Jing would gain Qing protection without having to accept Manchu customs or political intervention. Not surprisingly, Qing officials refused, explaining that "Korea has always been a foreign country (*waiguo*), but Zheng Jing is a man of the Middle Kingdom (*Zhongguo zhi ren*)" (187).

By 1673, more than a decade after the end of Dutch rule, Zheng power seemed more secure than ever, and the island was well on its way to becoming an autonomous maritime kingdom. But rather than continuing on this path, Zheng Jing opted to intervene spectacularly in the mainland after the Rebellion of the Three Feudatories broke out. Hang argues, first, that the decision to intervene was entirely political and was not prompted, as some scholars have suggested, by a poor economic situation. The military struggle initially went well and then swiftly deteriorated, but, as late as 1677–1678, Zheng Jing was offered a way out when Qing officials actually approved the ambitious Korean solution put forward years earlier. Zheng Jing refused. Why he opted not to take the obvious exit ramp and why the Zheng persisted in doomed continental adventures are the key questions at the heart of Hang's study. The answer, which I find very persuasive, is that the Zheng, for all of their multiple innovations, remained boxed in by an "internalization of their professed loyalty to the Ming" (249). This meant that, rather than devoting all of their energies to the creation of a maritime-oriented state, they persisted again and again in returning to the impossible dream of Ming restoration. Here, then, we see the great paradox of the Zheng: their success and continued

survival was based on their skillful deployment of Ming credentials, but it was precisely the refusal to abandon these attachments that ultimately doomed the Zheng enterprise on Taiwan.

The most compelling works on maritime East Asia reveal the impossibility of following conventional area studies boundaries by drawing a line between Japan and China in this period, and this is especially clear in Hang's study. The Chinese coast, Taiwan, Japan, and even the Philippines, Cambodia, and parts of Southeast Asia were all part of the same interconnected maritime zone. *Conflict and Commerce in Maritime East Asia* goes further than this, and it makes a significant contribution to our understanding of Tokugawa trade and foreign relations.

Hang demonstrates, first, the remarkable intimacy of the Zheng relationship with Japan. This was most clearly evident during Koxinga's lifetime, when close connections were forged with all of the key actors in Nagasaki politics. This meant that Zheng merchants could draw on the protection of Tokugawa officials who intervened to protect shipping against Dutch East India Company attacks. Even more strikingly, the Zheng treated Japan as a military labor pool from which to draw soldiers. Japan specialists will be fascinated to read of a "special samurai division known as 'iron men'" in Zheng service (105).

Second, Hang reworks our understanding of the status of Chinese merchants in Tokugawa Japan. It has long been standard in Tokugawa history to talk of a hierarchy of relations running from sovereign-to-sovereign relations with Korea to commercial relations with the Dutch, who retained the right to visit the court, to Chinese merchants with no diplomatic status. In my own work, I have argued that the Dutch in Japan did end up in this position, but that they got there by following a roller coaster ride that saw them drop in status from full diplomatic partners, emissaries of a fictive "King of Holland," to vassals of the Tokugawa state (Clulow 2014). In the process, they lost diplomatic privileges that the Dutch East India Company took for granted in other parts of Asia. The Dutch were an important commercial presence in Japan, but Chinese merchants dominated Nagasaki trade. In this book—and the author makes the point even more strongly in a recent article in the *Journal of Asian Studies*—Hang argues that, rather than occupying the bottom rung, Chinese traders initially enjoyed a far higher status and position than other foreign groups that enabled them to draw on Tokugawa protection and support (Hang 2015). It was only when the alliance between the Tokugawa regime and the Zheng family started to collapse, and then after the Qing invasion of Taiwan, that Chinese traders experienced a precipitous drop in status. Given

how significant Chinese traders were to Nagasaki, this is an important argument that shows the far-reaching impact of the fall of the Zheng.

Third, Hang provides a detailed assessment of the scale of trade between the Zheng, Taiwan, and Japan. In the process, he has significantly extended the pioneering work done by Japanese scholars like Iwao Seiichi to show just how profitable this connection actually was (Iwao 1953). Appendix 3, which offers detailed tables listing Zheng market share, revenues, and profitability, will be widely quoted for years to come.

In short, *Conflict and Commerce in Maritime East Asia* is a hugely impressive work that makes important contributions to multiple fields. Brilliantly combining Asian and European sources, it moves the analysis away from Koxinga to provide the best account yet of the Zheng regime's influence on Taiwan and its place in global history. Hang concludes his work by showing how the People's Republic of China has in fact embraced the notion of "maritime China as defined and articulated by the Zheng organization" (258). The recent surge of work focused on Zheng He and his remarkable fifteenth-century voyages is entirely deserved, but Xing Hang has drawn much-needed attention to Zheng Jing and his important place in China's long maritime history.

In *The Qing Opening to the Ocean*, Gang Zhao picks up the story where Hang leaves off by focusing on Kangxi's 1684 open trade policy. Far from withdrawing from the ocean, the Qing regime was, Zhao convincingly argues, supportive of maritime commerce, which it saw as a key mechanism to enrich the state. In making this argument, Zhao suggests that past scholarship has focused too heavily on the Canton system and assumed quite wrongly that Qing treatment of Western traders should be viewed as the sole indicator as to the open-or-shut nature of overseas trade. For scholars of Tokugawa Japan, this trajectory will look familiar, as the same dissatisfaction with past approaches prompted the pioneering work of Ronald Toby (1988) and Arano Yasunori (1988), who argued that the focus on Japan's relations with Europeans obscured the continuing importance of diplomatic contacts with Asian states like Korea. For Zhao, the emphasis on Western merchants hides the fact that it was Chinese private traders who connected China to global circuits of trade.

The 1684 open trade policy had four components, which contribute to Zhao's overall argument about Qing engagement with maritime commerce. First, Manchu and Chinese private merchants were permitted to trade freely. Second, foreign merchants from non-tributary as well as tributary states were allowed free access to China's ports. Third, a clear division was made between trade and tribute; hence, the absence of tributary relations was

not a barrier to trade. Fourth, trade was managed by an expansive customs system. Zhao uses these components to make an important revisionist argument that “imperial Qing trade policy was the most open in Chinese history” (18).

Whereas Hang explores the complicated lives of individual merchants, Zhao presents a useful complement by telling us about the Qing state. In this way, *The Qing Opening to the Ocean* presents a more traditional top-down approach, focusing on Chinese officials and intellectuals rather than on the merchants themselves. Chapter 2, for example, is concerned with the ways in which prominent Chinese scholars and officials responded to the question of long-distance trade, while chapter 4 examines how Kangxi broke from Zhu Xi by embracing a more positive attitude toward private trade and profit. Although this is a book about maritime trade, one of its most interesting innovations is to take us away from the sea by focusing on what Zhao calls “Manchu procommercial policy” in the decades before the formation of the Qing regime (65). There was thus, Zhao argues, a preexisting “mercantile tradition” that flowed directly into the 1684 open trade policy (85).

The Qing Opening to the Ocean makes a powerful case, but its argument is undermined by sweeping statements about the failures of past scholarship that do not do full justice to the field. Zhao has read widely, and his incorporation and synthesis of Japanese scholarship is particularly impressive, but he is unnecessarily dismissive of European sources as not especially helpful for understanding Chinese trade (16). While it is unreasonable to expect all new books on East Asian maritime history to have mastery over European archives, the reality is that European sources, as so clearly shown by Blussé and others, have a huge amount to tell us about precisely the issue at the heart of Zhao’s work: Chinese private trade. In Nagasaki, for example, Dutch officials provided detailed accounts of Chinese private traders arriving and the cargoes they carried, and these sources merit closer scrutiny.

I find Zhao’s argument that the Qing regime was broadly supportive of private trade persuasive, but putting his book in conversation with Hang’s is instructive. Kangxi may have opened up trade, but there was nothing approximating the kind of maritime-centered polity described by Hang. Reading these books together reminds us that China—or Japan, for that matter—was never closed to the world during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and that the focus on the European experience has obscured a great deal. Merchants continued to sail, goods continued to flow, and the great East Asian powers continued to be connected to global commercial circuits. But Hang’s study in particular shows the remarkably open nature of the seventeenth century, when maritime entrepreneurs like Zheng Zhilong or Koxinga on

the Chinese side (or Suetsugu Heizō and Yamada Nagamasa on the Japanese) constructed sprawling maritime networks and organizations capable of defeating the most powerful European overseas enterprises. There was never a withdrawal from the ocean, but the seventeenth century bore witness to an intensity of East Asian maritime activity that was not matched until long after the collapse of the Qing and Tokugawa regimes.

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