

Introduction

Imagine being aboard a vessel that is facing a naval base situated behind a line of war junks. Imagine sailing toward these war junks and standing in wonder at their size, number, and exquisite naval architecture. These floating sentinels sit at anchor, keeping watch over the harbor. They are a testament to your years of hard work, and you feel satisfied with your efforts and proud to be Chinese. But as you approach, something seems amiss. On closer inspection, you find that most of these battleships are either wrecked or in disrepair. As you sail past them, you see that the soldiers guarding the upper decks are wearing dirty uniforms, having trouble standing at attention, and armed only with crude spears. The rest of the crew are drinking, chatting, relaxing in the sun, or napping. When you ask them about their mission, they have difficulty answering your queries. They cannot tell you the type of cannon they are lounging around, let alone load and fire the machine guns that have been mounted on board. Once they are off duty, these soldiers usually wander around with hookers and party along the coast. They are no different from a group of undisciplined hedonists.

A nineteenth-century Qing official who worked tirelessly to strengthen his country, Zheng Guanying (1842–1922) captured something very similar to the above shortly after the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895).¹ Based on the state of the troops he described, Zheng declared the Qing naval force to be unprepared for any potential acts of aggression on the part of imperialistic Western military powers. Beyond this disappointment, he also recognized the complications inherent in mounting a large-scale reform. Nepotism and corruption were everywhere – from the imperial office in Beijing to the naval office in a small dockyard. The Qing navy

¹ Zheng Guanying, *Shengshi weiyan* (Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou guji chubanshe, 1998), p. 430. For more about Zheng Guanying, see Guo Wu, *Zheng Guanying: Merchant Reformer of Late Qing China and His Influence on Economics, Politics, and Society* (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2010), pp. 2–8; Yi Huili, *Zheng Guanying pingzhuan* (Nanjing: Nanjing daxue chubanshe, 1998), pp. 2–3.

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Figure 0.1 A satirical cartoon featuring Sino-Japanese relations after the First Sino-Japanese War.
 Source: *China Punch*.

lagged far behind the other military sea powers, whose vessels were equipped with the most dreadful weapons of the time.

To most Chinese scholar-officials at the turn of the twentieth century, China's defeat in the Sino-Japanese War was humiliating for the Qing Empire (1644–1912). The Chinese had long regarded the Japanese as their “tiny little brothers” and could not have conceived of such a defeat – just as the Americans could hardly have imagined losing a war against Vietnam. In China and the sinophone sphere, the Sino-Japanese War marked the climax of China's so-called “century of humiliation” (*bainian guochi*),² after which it could no longer present itself to other world powers as the master of East Asia (see Figure 0.1). The defeat was disastrous for China, both politically and economically, and it has

² Alison Adcock Kaufman, “The ‘Century of Humiliation,’ Then and Now: Chinese Perceptions of the International Order,” *Pacific Focus*, vol. 25 no. 1 (2010), pp. 1–33; Paul Cohen, *China Unbound: Evolving Perspectives on the Chinese Past* (London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003), p. 148.

remained so in the memories of most Chinese to this very day. To the best of my recollection, I was told to analyze the causes and consequences of this war as a secondary-school student in colonial Hong Kong. I had to answer the following questions: “Why was China so weak in sea battles?” “Why was the Qing court incapable of defeating the Japanese navy?”

Focusing on China’s defeat by Japan in 1895 would lead us to believe that China was a weak or even a failed state. Yet, if we were to investigate the Qing Dynasty of the early modern period, we would find that it was once a superpower with a prosperous economy and a military whose expansion shone in Inner Asia.³ So, in essence, the conventional image of the Qing as an Asian giant that was determined to be weak and incapable in sea battles does not make sense. The conflicting halves of this image – China as a powerful continental empire and, at the same time, a weakling at sea – seems contradictory and calls for a convincing explanation, one that goes beyond the simplistic “model answers” provided by my secondary-school teachers who noted that “the Qing was defeated by the Japanese and by other European seafaring powers because it was a continental, land-based power.”⁴ My enduring dissatisfaction with this view and also in the absence of substantial evidence to support it have compelled me to investigate further and, ultimately, to write this book.

The primary purpose of this book is to give the eighteenth-century Qing Empire its due as a maritime power, which has arguably been

³ As a superpower in East Asia, the Qing mobilized its troops to inner Asia during the Kang–Yong–Qian period (the long eighteenth century). In Peter Perdue’s description, the Qing was in fact an evolving state structure engaged in mobilization for expansionist warfare. see Peter C. Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), pp. 524–532, and his “Empire and Nation in Comparative Perspective: Frontier Administration in Eighteenth-Century China,” in Huri Islamoglu and Peter C. Perdue (eds.), *Shared Histories of Modernity: China, India, and the Ottoman Empire* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 21–45.

⁴ In fact, many scholars have an aversion to thinking of the Qing as a sea power. “For the greater part of its long history,” as John K. Fairbank (1907–1991) once put it, “Chinese naval power in the modern sense of the term remained abortive.” See his *China Perceived: Images and Policies in Chinese–American Relations* (New York: Knopf, 1974), p. 25. Likewise, US Admiral Bernard D. Cole, commander of Destroyer Squadron 35, adamantly asserts that “China historically has been a continental rather than a maritime power, despite its more than eleven thousand miles of coastline and six thousand islands.” See Bernard D. Cole, *The Great Wall at Sea: China’s Navy in the Twenty-First Century* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2010), p. xvi. Even in the context of contemporary China, a Chinese analyst argues in the same vein that “for a power like China, possessing strong sea power can only be a component of China’s land power.” See Ye Zicheng, “China’s Sea Power Must Be Subordinate to Its Land Power,” *Xiandai guoji guanxi*, vol. 20 (April 2008), pp. 53–60.

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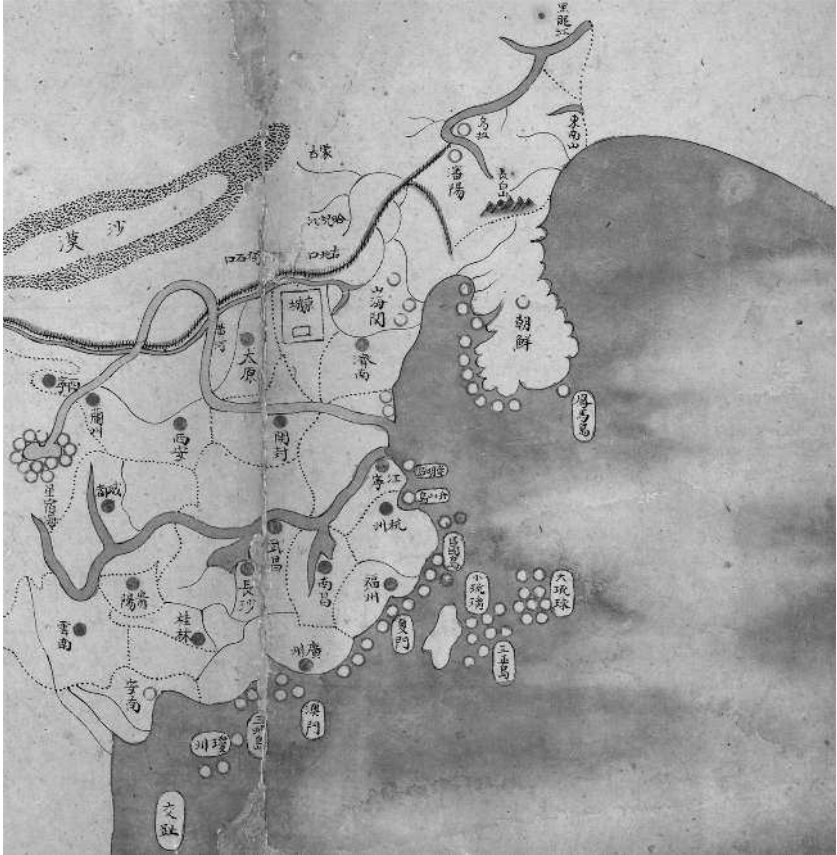


Figure 0.2 The *Da Qing fensheng yutu* 大清分省輿圖 (Provincial Atlas of the Qing Dynasty), showing the coastline of the Qing Empire (late eighteenth-century edition).

Source: Library of Congress.

overlooked, if not discounted, by most historians. With a coastline of almost 14,500 kilometers (see Figure 0.2),⁵ the Qing was not a land-locked state, nor was it always inward-looking. In fact, since the late

⁵ China's coastline in the early modern period spreads about latitude 20° to 42° north, and longitude 103° to 125° east. Some scholars, such as Mark Elvin and Caroline Blunden, describe it as a giant "fishhook lying on the West Pacific Rim toward the heart of what may be called the Asian Mediterranean." See Caroline Blunden and Mark Elvin, *Cultural Atlas of China* (New York: Checkmark Books, 1983), pp. 34–35. According to Gang Deng, in the Qing dynasty, China had a land boundary of about 16,000 kilometers, whereas the coastline was over 18,000 kilometers (probably closer to 14,500 kilometers). The ratio of land boundary to coastline is therefore about 0.9 to 1. For details, see Gang

seventeenth century, the empire had been integrated into the maritime world through its maritime militarization and seaborne shipping. Even if the Qing was commonly seen as a continental empire, at least by the end of the eighteenth century, it does not follow that it was incapable of exerting its influence across the sea. I believe this refusal to acknowledge the Qing or China as a maritime power is largely conditioned by an ingrained notion that an early modern empire can either be a land power or a maritime power but cannot be both, and that its focus is primarily influenced by social and cultural factors, such as traditions, religions, and beliefs. This book will present a more balanced picture of the geopolitics of the Great Qing, which has long been obscured by the reductive logic that divides land and sea. It has been suggested that “empire building was dependent upon the ability to mobilize irresistible armies and navies.”⁶ I aim to counter the conventional wisdom as I argue that Qing land and sea policies were closely linked. Indeed, I will prove that the state’s engagement with the sea, in terms of its political vision, its military deployment, and its administrative practice, was proactive and substantial throughout most of the long eighteenth century, which spanned from around 1680 to the decade after the death of the Qianlong emperor in 1799.⁷

In other words, I suggest we avoid the kind of reasoning that a country’s political and military policies are based on certain identifying factors of its civilization or culture, thereby pointing to it being either land-based or sea-based and not both. Georg Hegel (1770–1831) and Max Weber (1864–1920), the creator and the chief proponent of ideological determinism, respectively, believed that social development is predominantly fostered by a spirit or an ideology.⁸ One advantage of this approach is that ideological factors that are associated with differences in developmental performance, and are usually unique to specific civilizations or cultures (such as traditions, religions, and ideas), are not difficult to recognize

Deng, *Chinese Maritime Activities and Socio-economic Development, c.2100 BC–1900 A.D.* (London: Greenwood Press, 1997), pp. 1–4.

⁶ Palmira Brummett, *Ottoman Seapower and Levantine Diplomacy in the Age of Discovery* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), p. 7.

⁷ Chinese historians generally agreed that the “long eighteenth century” stretched from Kangxi’s final consolidation of Qing rule, around 1680, to the death of the Qianlong emperor in 1799. See Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China’s Long Eighteenth Century* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997). For some global historians, the long eighteenth century extends even further, from 1660 to 1830. In this book I side with the “global historians’ definition,” expanding the period to include the first few decades of the nineteenth century.

⁸ Juan Segundo, *Faith and Ideologies* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1984), pp. 234–235; Jonathan E. Dyck, *The Theocratic Ideology of the Chronicler* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), pp. 55–56.

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and trace. Hence, certain identifying factors of civilization or culture can be directly attributed to ideological or spiritual origins. Many observers, including my own secondary-school teacher, have applied this reasoning to explain the Qing's weak connection to the sea. They believe that Qing ideology and cultural values were primarily focused on land-based campaigns and developments, which chilled their interest in the ocean and left the nearby seawaters open to Western Europeans. This view has an obvious weakness in that it is tainted as fatalistic – as if all development is preprogrammed. Modern investigations into the determinants of development show that spirit and/or ideology do not singularly determine societal growth.⁹ Changes in geography, ecology, political climate, economic structure, and even random factors may also have decisive effects on the path of human progression. Therefore, in our analysis of the Qing's maritime history, we should not cleave to a single explanation of a civilization's cultural makeup, especially as it pertains to the long eighteenth century.

Standing in the Shadow of the Nineteenth Century

An understanding of Qing maritime capabilities requires stepping outside the confines of the traditional views of a country's approach to ideological determinism. It also requires no longer adhering to the short-sighted notion that the Qing's attitudes toward the maritime world were responsible for its disastrous outcomes on the nineteenth-century battlefield. The First Opium War (1839–1842), the Arrow War, and the Sino-Japanese War undoubtedly dealt heavy blows to the Qing regime by draining its treasury and exposing its ineptitude in battles at sea. As a classic saying goes, “those who win become champions; those who lose become bandits.” Many scholars use these events to conveniently indicate that the Qing Empire fell victim to Western, and later Japanese, imperialism because it ignored its maritime frontier and suffered crushing defeats at sea. Some maritime historians, for instance, argued that the Qing were not interested in “incorporating the maritime space into their empire” and “the Manchu had almost totally neglected the strategic considerations [of the maritime world] prior to the Opium War.” A naval historian even commented, “during the Qing dynasty, the Chinese did not understand the developing maritime dimension of their

⁹ For instance, see Mark Moberg, *Engaging Anthropological Theory: A Social and Political History* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 248–249; Susan A. Wheelan, *Group Processes: A Developmental Perspective* (New York: Pearson, 2004), p. 42; and Katie Wills, *Theories and Practices of Development* (Oxford: Routledge, 2005).

national security and prosperity. So the Qing never turned to the sea and suffered dire foreign policy consequences as a result.”¹⁰ This perspective may contain a measure of truth, but, in effect, it is more or less a view of history that has been filtered through the consequences of history. That is, it fails to capture the complex dynamics and full significance of the high Qing period (c.1680s to 1800), much less its intricate connections with the preceding and succeeding eras. This view also obscures the important fact that the three prominent high Qing emperors, Kangxi (r. 1661–1722), Yongzheng (r. 1722–1735), and Qianlong (r. 1735–1795), initiated a series of proactive, extensive, and deliberate maritime policies that served to prepare the dynasty for any (potential) challenges it faced in the long eighteenth century. After all, even if the Qing was repeatedly defeated during the chaotic period that followed the two Opium Wars, it does not follow that the empire was oblivious to maritime affairs before then. Too often the Qing is viewed from the perspective of external patterns, both Western and Japanese, and the influences of the nineteenth century, whereas it was an independent entity with its own history and momentum. Indeed, I believe a different picture comes to light when one analyzes how the Qing interacted with its maritime frontier in the early modern period, and in the process, a new lens featuring new Qing history from a maritime perspective (*haishang xin Qingshi*) could also be formulated.¹¹

Those familiar with eighteenth-century Qing history might immediately assume that the Qing enjoyed prosperity in both its domestic and foreign sea trade at the time because this was a splendid century

¹⁰ S. C. M. Paine, “Imperial Failure in the Industrial Age: China, 1842–1911,” in N. A. M. Rodger (ed.), *The Sea in History: The Modern World* (Martlesham: Boydell Press, 2017), p. 308. See also Bodo Wiethoff, *Chinas dritte Grenze: Der traditionelle chinesische Staat und der küstennahe Seeraum* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1969), p. 79; and Jane Kate Leonard, *Wei Yuan and China’s Rediscovery of the Maritime World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 1. Leonard elaborated her argument by saying that the eighteenth-century Qing’s approaches to its maritime frontier were based upon the idea of “coastal control.” In other words, its policy was mainly directed toward what were perceived as threatening internal security problems. I agree with Leonard totally that the Qing prioritized internal problems over potential threats from the outside world in administering its maritime frontier, but I would like to highlight that the high Qing emperors also took “potential threat from the maritime world” into account. I will further explicate this point in my forthcoming chapters, but I will briefly bring to light my proposition here: the Qing had its navy ready throughout most of the long eighteenth century. It is invidious to argue whether or not the navy, and by extension its naval strategy, were simply designed for internal threat as the only single objective. In fact, the naval plan of the eighteenth-century Qing court changed over time, and occasionally was subject to disruption. Moreover, the Yongzheng emperor, for instance, was always aware of the potential threats from the external world, ranging from the Japanese to overseas Chinese settling in Southeast Asia.

¹¹ In light of the School of New Qing History (*xin Qingshi*), I attempt to name this new lens of analysis as a New Qing Maritime History (*haishang xin Qingshi*).

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Figure 0.3 *Yuti pingding Taiwan zhantu* 欽定平定臺灣戰圖 (Military Diagram of Pacifying Taiwan) – section “Shengqin Zhuang Datian” (Catching Zhuang Datian), showing how the Qing mobilized its navy to Taiwan in the Qianlong era.

(*shengshi*) wherein there was not much trouble at sea.¹² Yet, as I will demonstrate in this book, even in peacetime, the Qing navy played a significant role in monitoring and policing its maritime frontier, which included suppressing marauding pirates. My argument, here, is candid and straightforward: if we concede that there was rapid growth in both domestic and foreign sea trade along China’s coast in the early modern period, then the role the navy played must be considered a factor in this economic development. In fact, the eighteenth-century Qing state was not as prosperous as we commonly assume. In the late Qianlong era, in particular, the Qing Empire was overburdened with domestic strife, a slowing economy, and piracy at sea. Consequently, it was pushing the limits of premodern empire building. These pirate attacks, including some domestic rebellion in Taiwan, and economic imbalances became acute structural problems (see, for example, Figure 0.3).¹³ Yet the result was not just the state’s diminished capacity and increased challenges; the

¹² John Bowman (ed.), *Columbia Chronologies of Asian History and Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), pp. 47–48; Daniel Woolf, *A Global History of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 320–323.

¹³ G. B. Cressey, *China’s Geographical Foundations: A Survey of the Land and Its People* (Columbus: McGill-Hill, 1934), p. 337; Wensheng Wang, *White Lotus Rebels and South*

Qing court attempted to adjust its governing priorities and strategies in order to establish sustainable control of its troubled waters. For instance, the reorganization of the navy and the establishment of a customs structure in the Qianlong era are examples of a moderate, decisive reform aimed at remedying the situation. This, in turn, helped sustain the position of the Qing Empire in the East Asian Sea, which was patrolled by both Asian and later distant Western European powers.

Historical Connections and Continuity

Knowing more about maritime circumstances in the early modern Qing helps us understand Chinese history. It also helps illuminate a broader picture of the maritime tactics China uses today. One of this book's underlying arguments is that most of the present maritime strategies and maneuvers of the People's Republic of China (PRC) can be traced to the Qing in the eighteenth century. Although the Qing court was determined to conquer its adversaries in Inner Asia by horse and bow and arrow,¹⁴ it was also practical and strategic in its use of war junks, patrol boats, and batteries to stabilize its maritime frontier by maintaining tight supervision and effective control. In the words of the Qianlong emperor, "the maritime frontier is of utmost importance; we (the Qing) can never ignore or neglect it" (*haijiang guanxi jinyao, bushi liuxin jicha*).¹⁵ Therefore, what the Qing court strove to achieve through managing all of its borders – both land and sea – was a sustainable balance between naval management and westward inland expansion. This might be seen as a historical footing of China's "one belt, one road" initiative (*yidai yi lu*). "Road" (*lu*) refers to the Silk Road, which links China with Europe through Central and Western Asia; and "belt" (*dai*) refers to the maritime Silk Road – the seas of East and Southeast Asia. China's current *yidai yilu* initiative somehow parallels the maritime and frontier

China Pirates: Crisis and Reform in the Qing Empire (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), pp. 17–36.

¹⁴ By the mid-eighteenth century, Qing aggressive expansion was at its peak, putting China among the most powerful polities in the world. Aside from the pan-Asian *Pax Mongolica*, the Great Qing was the largest political entity ever to govern Central Eurasia. See Perdue, *China Marches West*; William T. Rowe, *China's Last Empire: The Great Qing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), pp. 1–10; Piper Rae Gaubatz, *Beyond the Great Wall: Urban Form and Transformation on the Chinese Frontiers* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996).

¹⁵ Qianlong's words were recorded in his response to the memorial of Wang Deng, chief commander of the Jiangnan Susong naval force. See Wang Deng, "Zoubao xuncha haijiang suijing qingxing," *Junjichu dangan* (Qianlong 13 *nian*, June 30; no. 002501 [archive preserved at Academia Sinica, "Neige daku dang'an" database]).

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politics that were formulated in the Qing period, particularly in terms of its maritime consciousness. Its current efforts to extend control over its natural resources and seaways in the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean thus give this study broader relevance. This book might also be seen as a maritime counterpart to Peter C. Perdue's impressive volume *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia*, on imperial China's western landward expansion.¹⁶ While the Qing Empire, as argued by Perdue, significantly transformed the economies and societies on its Inner Asian frontier, the state also played a crucial role in shaping the patterns of political development and the velocity of economic interactions across its maritime frontier. If we agree that the Qing conquest of Central Eurasia has much contemporary relevance as it seems to underpin the claim of the PRC that these territories have always been part of China, the Qing's control over some particular sea spaces (for instance, Taiwan and its outlying islands) would serve the similar purpose of justifying such an aspiration endorsed by the Chinese government in the present century.

In addition to the historical continuity between the Qing and the PRC, this book also focuses on that between the Ming (1368–1644) and the Qing. In effect, the Ming Empire is generally considered to be a successful maritime power; this is mainly based on the seven voyages of the famous admiral and navigator Zheng He (1371–1433/35).¹⁷ Compared to the Manchu-ruled Qing, the Han-ruled Ming seemed to pay closer attention to the sea and to be more attached to it. In terms of maritime cartography, for example, the Ming court produced more coastal maps (*haitu*) and sea charts than the Qing. At times, the Ming court was politically involved in maritime affairs (*haiyang zhishi*), especially during its early years. Yet this book does not mean to compare the two dynasties based on their maritime achievements. Rather, its purpose is to situate the Qing more carefully within the maritime context of the early modern period. Nonetheless, this does not mean that the Ming dynasty and its engagement with the sea will be ignored. On the contrary, the many connections in maritime affairs between the Ming and the Qing are noteworthy. For example, the Ming set up a foundation that the Qing was able to use to actualize its military and naval plans for maritime militarization, which I call maritime defensive realism. Yet, despite the

¹⁶ Perdue, *China Marches West*.

¹⁷ See Edward L. Dreyer, *Zheng He: China and the Oceans in the Early Ming Dynasty, 1405–1433* (New York: Pearson Education Inc., 2007); Jan Julius Lodewijk Duyvendak, *China's Discovery of Africa* (London: A. Probsthain, 1949); Louise Levathes, *When China Ruled the Sea: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1405–1433* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).