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Ronald C. Po
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The Blue Frontier

In this revisionist history of the eighteenth-century Qing Empire from a maritime perspective, Ronald C. Po argues that it is reductive to view China over this period exclusively as a continental power with little interest in the sea. With a coastline of almost 14,500 kilometers, the Qing was not a landlocked state. Although it came to be known as an inward-looking empire, Po suggests that the Qing was integrated into the maritime world through its naval development and customs institutionalization. In contrast to our orthodox perception, the Manchu court, in fact, proactively engaged with the ocean politically, militarily, and even conceptually. *The Blue Frontier* offers a much broader picture of the Qing as an Asian giant responding flexibly to challenges and extensive interaction on all frontiers – both land and sea – in the long eighteenth century.

Ronald C. Po is Assistant Professor in the Department of International History at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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The Blue Frontier

Maritime Vision and Power in the Qing Empire

Ronald C. Po

London School of Economics and Political Science



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Preface

This book provides a bird's-eye view of the maritime endeavors of the eighteenth-century Qing Empire. Even if the Qing was commonly seen as a continental-oriented regime, at least by the end of the eighteenth century, it does not follow that it was incapable of exerting its influence across the sea. To prove my proposition, I approach the topic by examining the conceptual framework of Qing maritime policies, its maritime militarization and the institutionalization of its Customs Offices, as well as some nonofficial maritime writings. In a nutshell, I attempt to place in the foreground the indigenous dynamism of high Qing maritime policies and its maritime consciousness so as to substantiate the history of frontier and maritime studies in Asia. I also hope that the present study will contribute to the existing research by introducing both a theoretical and a historical analysis that positions the Qing Empire as a maritime player in the early modern period.

I am immensely indebted to the works of previous scholarship for the insights I have gained on the issues to be discussed in *The Blue Frontier*, from the inner-outer model to maritime militarization, and from the Customs Office to maritime writings. I am particularly obligated to the work of John E. Wills Jr., Wang Gungwu, and Jane K. Leonard, who noted that late imperial China was also a sea-based society whose elaborate civil bureaucracy can be studied from a maritime point of view. Timothy Brook, Chen Guodong, and Zheng Yangwen see the Qing as a prime mover in maritime and global history, beginning in the seventeenth century, during the first wave of globalization. Therefore, the dynasty's participation in the maritime sphere should be studied in parallel with its ambitious achievements on land. Research conducted by Huang Hongbin and Li Qilin further inspired me to focus on the naval development of the high Qing across the East Asian Sea; and Hans van de Ven's, Gang Zhao's, and Angela Schottenhammer's studies inspired me to trace the origins and significance of the Customs Office in the early modern period. Above all, this book connects their discerning perspectives to the works of Peter C. Perdue, Leonard Blussé, and many others,

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who have pioneered a refreshing Qing history that is based on the study of both land and sea frontiers within the broader global context. I have learned tremendously from their substantial and stimulating academic contributions to late imperial China and maritime Asia. Without their insights, this book, in its present form, would never have seen the light of day.

Acknowledgments

I habitually enjoy reading authors' acknowledgments, usually after spotting the titles of their works and consulting the tables of contents. I consider these several pages of gratitude to be the most sincere part of a book. I am not saying that the chapters following the acknowledgments are less genuine. What I want to emphasize is that authors usually write the acknowledging section of their books at the very last. To me, at least, this is a critical phase when a writer is ready to reflect on what they have achieved, so far, both academically and professionally, and to whom they owe an array of debts. If we treat the acknowledgments as a type of primary source, then we should be able to map out the social networks and concrete linkages these authors have developed throughout their academic journeys and whether or not these journeys have been voyages or treks.

I am also curious about whom the writers would like to thank. By reading their names, along with their affiliations, I feel as if I am expanding my circle of friends, even though I may not have personally met those being mentioned. In any event, I still find joy in making these associations. At the same time, I continue to be amazed by the enormous and growing circle of scholars who are interested in Chinese, Asian, and maritime studies. Some acknowledgments consist of more than 100 names, and I believe that every single individual listed therein has played a crucial role in making those books possible. By the time I began typing this sentence, I did not know how many names and affiliations I would be writing out. But to all of you listed below, from the bottom of my heart, I want to say that you mean a lot to me and, indeed, more than you will ever know.

Unlike most acknowledgments, which usually begin with "I thank the following people for their support and inspiration . . .," I would like to begin with a couple of apologies. This book has taken me a long time to complete. During the course of researching this project, I have always prioritized this book over my family and those who have been supporting me unfailingly, specifically Sharon and Hermine. They are not academics

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and sometimes they have no idea why I am so interested in this discipline. Yet they never question or complain about my decisions. So, I would like to take this opportunity to extend my apologies to them. I am not a good son, nor am I a good brother. But I am very certain that I love you all. To my little sister Erica, particularly, I want to apologize for not being able to stay in Hong Kong over the past nine years and fulfill my role as a big brother. I know that you have done a lot for our family and you are amazing. I also want to let you, Daddy and Mami, know that this book is something I take very earnestly; therefore I have decided to dedicate it to you both.

The idea for this book came to me during my high-school years. The first few pages of the forthcoming Introduction explain the reasons for my curiosity and ensuing dedication to this subject. I only decided to embark on this academic project as a graduate student. And I was occasionally asked if this project was even possible, as it was questioned whether the Qing was either a maritime power or a sea power and the period I wished to cover – the long eighteenth century – was simply too vast. However, I am deeply indebted to my teachers, who never suggested this project could not be done and coupled this reassurance with their constant support. My largest debts are to Clara Ho, Ricardo Mak, Angela Leung, Joachim Kurtz, Harald Fuess, Robin D. S. Yates, and Grace Fong. Your astute guidance and words of encouragement have been invaluable gifts over many years. Not only have you all been fantastic mentors, but you have also taught me how to mentor others. It would be impossible to count the many ways you all helped me during this journey. I will remain forever grateful.

Peter C. Perdue, Hans van de Ven, Robin D. S. Yates, Mark Elvin, and Robert Antony took the time to read my early drafts. Their insightful comments and inspiring suggestions helped sharpen my ideas and arguments. The late John E. “Jack” Wills Jr. also provided indispensable vision as I was formulating the theme of the project. Helen Siu, likewise, inspired me to look at coastal China from not only a historical angle, but also an anthropological one. Without their blend of wisdom, incisive feedback, and intellectual stimulation, this book would almost certainly never have come to exist. I would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their incredibly constructive, thoughtful, and meticulous reports. Needless to say, while all of them helped sharpen and improve the manuscript, the responsibility for any remaining errors is mine alone.

My sincere thanks also go to Rudolf Wagner, Barbara Mittler, and the postgraduate community I became part of when I was in Heidelberg, particularly Xu Chun, Yi-wei Wu, Liying Sun, Emily Graft, and Arthur Yang. Meanwhile, I have to express my appreciation for the grant

generously provided by the Heidelberg Center for Transcultural Studies toward the cost of publishing this book project. The same level of gratitude goes to Philip Buckley, Griet Vankeerberghen, Macy Zheng, Shi Song, Cuilan Liu, Allen Chen, Anne-Sophie Pratte, Dan Blurry, Ina Lo, Wenyi Huang, Shuojun Chen, Zhifeng Wang, Wanming Wang, Tracy Cui, and Danni Cai, whom I met when I was at McGill University, where I received my first academic position as a postdoctoral fellow. All of you made this Canadian, or Quebec, metropolis a warmer hub. The year 2016 was a remarkable turning point in my career as I was offered a position as a faculty member at the London School of Economics. Since then, I have been surrounded by stimulating, devoted, and supportive colleagues. I am especially grateful to Janet Hartley, Matthew Jones, Antony Best, Gagan Sood, David Motadel, Paul Keenan, Paul Stock, Leigh Jenco, Demetra Frini, Nayna Bhatti, and Jacque Minter for their comradeship and for creating such a stimulating environment for historical studies. Beyond LSE, I have had the privilege of obtaining love and support from a cluster of friends and colleagues who are either based in or have visited the UK. Lily Chang, Victor Fan, Leon Rocha, Andrea Janku, Xuelei Huang, Loretta Kim, Pauline Khng, Ada Yung, Catherine Chan, Shing-ting Lin, Bin Xu, and many others have made England even more likable. I'd like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to you all.

My copyeditors, Glenna M. Jenkins and John Gaunt, have been with me at various stages of my writing. I deeply appreciate their perception, endurance, and care with the text. I would also like to thank my editor Lucy Rhymer and the Cambridge University Press, particularly Natasha Whelan and Lisa Carter, for their enthusiastic support. The editors of *Late Imperial China*, the *American Journal of Chinese Studies*, and the *European Review of History* kindly accepted for publication portions of some chapters of this book. They also generously granted permission for those pieces to appear here.

By reading my acknowledgments, I hope you now have a better sense of who I am and also of the people who are so very special to me. If you have skipped ahead to this last paragraph, then I strongly recommend you go back to the first sentence and start all over again before moving on to the next page.

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Emperors of the Qing Dynasty, 1644–1912

Name by which most customarily known	Reign
Shunzhi	1644–1661 (18 years)
Kangxi	1662–1722 (61 years)
Yongzheng	1723–1735 (13 years)
Qianlong	1736–1796 (60 years)
Jiaqing	1796–1820 (25 years)
Daoguang	1821–1850 (30 years)
Xianfeng	1851–1861 (11 years)
Tongzhi	1862–1875 (13 years)
Guangxu	1875–1908 (34 years)
Xuantong	1909–1912 (3 years)

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