

# VISIBLE CITIES



Canton, Nagasaki,  
and Batavia  
and the Coming  
of the Americans

Leonard Blussé

*Visible Cities*

THE EDWIN O. REISCHAUER LECTURES, 2006



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CANTON, NAGASAKI, AND BATAVIA  
AND THE COMING OF THE AMERICANS

LEONARD BLUSSÉ

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*In fond memory of Marius Jansen*



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## *Preface*

To survey a historical period or a society by narrating a tale of the rise and decline of one or two cities is a well-proven rhetorical device. It has actually become a “biographical” genre both in fiction and in non-fiction. More than any other kind of human settlement, cities, with their critical mass, their comparatively free atmosphere, their multiethnic populations, and also their often exploitive nature, provide a wide choice of subthemes for approaching the history of human society. Fernand Braudel structured his epic study of capitalism by following its rise via a succession of port cities—Venice, Genoa, Antwerp, Amsterdam, and ultimately London, where the modern world system took off.

Shortly after I had been invited to teach Dutch colonial history and Indonesian history as Erasmus Lecturer at Harvard University in 2005–2006, Wilt Idema, then director of the Fairbank Center for East Asian Research, kindly suggested that I should deliver the Reischauer Lectures during my stay in Cambridge. Having no idea what kind of audience I would be talking to, I somewhat recklessly decided to put off choosing a subject until I had crossed the great pond. It was actually Rod MacFarquhar, who in the meantime had taken over the reins of the Fairbank Center, who suggested that, given my Leiden academic background, I should talk about cross-cultural encounters in early modern East Asia. Because I had been involved in source-publication projects about Batavia, Nagasaki, and Canton, I wondered whether it

would not be fun to get some mileage out of the useful but admittedly thankless task of editing such publications by comparing the trajectories of this urban trio toward the end of the early modern period. These port cities were connected not only by their trading links across the South China Sea but also by the fact that they were affected in one way or another by the global transformations of the late eighteenth century. Different cultural backgrounds notwithstanding, all three happened to harbor Dutch and Fujianese expatriate communities.

Thanks to the diaries of Dutch East India Company servants who were resident in the three ports, we are comparatively well informed about daily life there. Curiously enough, no one has used this material before to draw comparisons and point out the similarities or differences between these emporiums, which operated as the windows on the world for Qing China, Tokugawa Japan, and Dutch-controlled Java. When additional research reminded me that American seafarers began frequenting the three cities in the last decades of the eighteenth century, the decision was readily made to address the ups and downs of these three China Sea ports during the rather chaotic and interesting period at the end of the 1700s. I found in the Peabody Essex Museum of Salem, Massachusetts, a surprisingly rich supply of historical visual material with which to illustrate my lectures.

Planning a marathon of three successive lectures forces one to come up with a balanced and well-timed menu in order to feed the audience with information in easily digestible chunks. I attempted to reach that goal by shamelessly copying the “Braudelian” feast—whetting the appetite with a taste of the long-term perspective, serving a main course of conjunctural developments, and finishing with the *faits et gestes* of individuals as the refreshing dessert. That schema has been preserved in this volume. The first chapter provides the broad outlines of the developments in the China Sea after China, Japan, and the Indonesian Archipelago witnessed epochal regime changes in the early seventeenth century. In the second chapter, the diverging trajectories of the three ports are followed through the eighteenth century, and in the final chapter I take the liberty of following the adventures of several colorful individuals who portray different characteristics of the era in which they lived.

With its unique library facilities and vibrant intellectual life, Harvard University offers unequalled opportunities for research and teaching.

My wife, Madelon, and I were privileged to be given the opportunity to teach in a back-to-back appointment in the History Department and thus to connect with the department's students and staff. That feeling of being a full member of the group was reinforced by our stay in Adams House. We gratefully remember the hospitality of Sean and Judith Palfrey at that wonderful establishment, which, thanks to the mysterious powers of its inhabitants and its able staff, stands apart as the most artistic house, with the most exotic habitués (Norman Shapiro and Yon Lee), and the best kitchen at Harvard. When our university ID cards expired on 30 June 2006, giving us that tactful but unmistakable nudge to return home, we were already prepared to go, because once the students had left at the end of the term, the soul of the house had seemingly gone on vacation too.

This is not the place to mention the names of all the friends we made during our stay, but I would like to thank the following people for the help they gave in one way or another while I was preparing these lectures: Rod MacFarquhar and Ron Suleski of the Fairbank Center; Holly Angel of the Asia Center; Peter Bol, Wilt and Eveline Idema, and Kuriyama Shigehisa of the Harvard-Yenching Institute; David Armitage, Bernard Bailyn, Philip Kuhn, and Joyce Chaplin of the History Department; and the staff members of Robinson Hall and the Widener and Harvard-Yenching libraries.

Arnout van der Meer and Cynthia Viallé helped me with collecting the more than one hundred beautiful color pictures that I showed during the talks, of which only a few are represented, in black and white, in this book. Matsukata Fuyuko and Haneda Masashi of Tokyo University sent the latest Japanese materials, and Dan Finamore, the late Jacques Downs, H. A. Crosby Forbes, and Frederic Delano Grant, Jr., shared with me their extensive knowledge about Canton. Felipe Fernández-Armesto, Eric Tagliacozzo, and Daniel Botsman gracefully commented on the three talks. Maritime historian and longtime friend Lincoln Paine went to great lengths to turn my "double Dutch" into decent English.

Finally I would like to thank Frans Spaepen, Peter Bol, and Wilt Idema of the board of the Erasmus Foundation, and Andrew Gordon, chairman of the Harvard History Department, for inviting us to and hosting us in Cambridge. May this book serve as a happy memento of what was a very rewarding experience for both Madelon and me.



*Visible Cities*



# 1

## *Three Windows of Opportunity*

Navigare necesse est.

In the introduction to *Utopia*, which he dedicated to his learned friend Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam, Thomas More tells where and when he was inspired to write his philosophical romance. In 1516, when More was sent as an envoy to Flanders “to solve some differences of no small consequence in the English wool trade,” he visited Antwerp. In that Flemish port city he was introduced to a certain Raphael Hythloday, “who seemed past the flower of his age; his face was tanned, he had a long beard, and his cloak was hanging carelessly about him, so that by his looks and habit I concluded he was a seaman.” It turned out, however, that the weather-beaten man was a philosopher from Portugal who had accompanied Amerigo Vespucci on his explorations to the fabled new continent. A few days later More invited this globetrotter to the house of a friend with whom he was lodging, and after an exchange of civilities the three men sat down on a bench in the garden and started to discourse about the different customs and laws of European nations, and of those across the ocean. At the end of the afternoon More and his host were so enthralled by the wisdom and cosmopolitan knowledge of their visitor that they asked him to tell them after dinner all about the island called Utopia, “the best state of the commonwealth,” which he had visited somewhere off the coast of the newly discovered American continent.<sup>1</sup>

It is not a coincidence that More situated his putative encounter with



the narrator of *Utopia* in Antwerp. In the sixteenth century strangers from all points of the compass came to sell their goods at the famous bourse in that city's commercial center. Trade was the bride around whom everyone danced in Flanders. In Europe's port cities, policies that favored and facilitated commerce found their expression in particular customs and institutions accepted by all those who traded their wares. Commercial towns along the land and sea routes were indeed the places where life was most cosmopolitan, where travelers from far away met to exchange their goods and gossip. Port cities, situated by the estuaries of rivers that reached inland like veins of ore into mineral-rich rocks, were treasure troves for those who were curious about the overseas world.

In Italo Calvino's novel *Invisible Cities*, the narrator Marco Polo, squatting on a carpet at the feet of the great Kublai Khan in the imperial gardens of Cambaluc, tells his host a succession of tales about the myriad forms of city life in his extensive empire, but, as the reader gradually realizes, the serial story is a melancholic variation on one theme: Messer Million's longing for his native town, faraway Venice.<sup>2</sup> Kublai Khan knew that he would never be able to visit the cities on the edge of his empire, but enticed by the Venetian merchant's tales, every evening he asked for the story of another town about which to dream.

In later years, scores of artists would make the City of the Doges probably the most portrayed port city of Europe. Even if northern Europe's kings did not all have a Venetian storyteller at their court, they must have possessed at least a few Canaletto paintings to hang on the palace walls and gaze at dreamily. Nowadays the enterprising tourist, a Lonely Planet guide in his pocket, can reach any exotic destination in the world within twenty-four hours, or if he is a lazy armchair traveler he can enjoy them by watching Discovery Channel on television. The romance of world travel has been turned into instant-consumption fare.

In this book, I would like to invite you to travel back in time to visit three famous Asian port cities of yore: Batavia (Jakarta), Canton (Guangzhou), and Nagasaki, a journey that used to take European travelers at least six to eight months. In the days of sail these three emporia fired the imaginations of sailors and writers alike because of their extraordinary appearance and exotic attractions. Each has left a prodigious legacy of archival material and pictures, which will enable me to

[To view this image, refer to  
the print version of this title.]

Canton in the second half of the seventeenth century. From Johan Nieuhof, *Het gezantschap der Neêrlandtsche Oost-Indische Compagnie, aan den grooten Tartarischen Cham, den tegenwoordigen Keizer van China* (Amsterdam, 1665).

act as your guide without having to fantasize too much about them.<sup>3</sup> I call Batavia, Canton, and Nagasaki “visible cities” because no other cities in eighteenth-century Asia were portrayed (and possibly even written about) as often as these ports, where East and West met in strikingly different but also similar ways. But before we embark on our real and imagined *Bildungsreise*, let me explain why I singled out these three early modern markets as the topic for the Reischauer Lectures.

The most obvious and immediate reason was the academic institution where I was to deliver the lectures, Harvard University, the alma mater of John King Fairbank and Edwin O. Reischauer. Those two intellectual giants provided for me, as for so many students of my generation, the gateway to the histories of China and Japan, traditional empires that, challenged by the West, developed in their own ways into the distinct world powers they are today. Reischauer and Fairbank’s *The Great Tradition* and *East Asia: The Modern Transformation* formed the alpha and the omega of my undergraduate work at Leiden University, where every sinologist-to-be also had to learn about Japan.<sup>4</sup> Apart from his organizational genius, John King Fairbank is best remembered for his pioneering work on the treaty port system, *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast: The Opening of the Treaty Ports 1842–1854*. It

is often forgotten that the Japan scholar Edwin O. Reischauer also liked to teach and write about ancient China and its maritime frontier. In one book that is particularly dear to me, the two fields fade into each other: Reischauer's *Ennin's Travels* narrates the harrowing adventures at sea of a Japanese monk in search of the Buddhist scriptures in China of the Tang dynasty.<sup>5</sup> So it would be fair to say that both scholars had some salt on their lips, and as it was the Fairbank Center that invited me to deliver the Reischauer Lectures, it was only fitting that my talks had to do with maritime matters.

### The Maritime Sphere

The history of the maritime world of Monsoon Asia is a subject that in recent years has been somewhat neglected by scholars at Harvard University. Contemporary Japan and China's relations with Southeast Asia also do not seem to stir a particular interest among the political scientists of the Fairbank and Reischauer Centers. By focusing on two ports in the Far East and one in Southeast Asia, I hope to suggest that knowledge of China's and Japan's traditional relationships with the maritime sphere is crucial to our understanding of the global implications of Chinese and Japanese history in early modern—and contemporary—times. Indeed, if China and Japan contest each other's strategic and economic influence anywhere in the world, it is in the China Seas region, where both superpowers are vying for regional precedence.

The South China Sea became the starting point of the maritime "Silk Road" of the Indian Ocean more than a millennium ago, but it was not until the eighteenth century, when its port cities were directly connected with those in Europe, Africa, and America, that it turned into a crossroads for the global maritime trade. In the same way that Ayutthaya, Manila, and Pusan served in early modern times the political economies of Siam, Spanish-ruled Luzon, and Korea, the port cities of Batavia, Canton, and Nagasaki served as gateways to large portions of Java, China, and Japan. What makes these three ports particularly interesting to the historian is that they served not only as destinations in China's overseas trading network but also as nodes in the network of the largest Western trading power in the region, the Dutch East India Company, or *Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (VOC).<sup>6</sup> In all three markets, VOC personnel stationed at trading factories kept

diaries or wrote reports about the local situation, and their writings about port life are unequalled in detail and volume by any other contemporary source materials.<sup>7</sup> As a result, we are provided with abundant archival sources that thus far have been tapped only sparingly.<sup>8</sup>

Situated on the Pearl River, Guangzhou has served for almost two millennia as the maritime gateway to the Chinese empire. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Canton, as it was then known in the West, became, together with its satellite Macao, the port of call for foreign merchants in the huge Qing empire.

Nagasaki, the port officially designated by the shogunal regime of Tokugawa Japan, famous for its strict border laws and its angst about keeping its own identity, played host for more than two hundred years to Chinese and Dutch merchants who, to the exclusion of all others, were allowed to trade on two small, man-made islands in the Bay of Nagasaki.

Batavia, designated as the rendezvous point for the ships of the Dutch East India Company's trading empire, lived by the grace of maritime trade. Ideally located near the Sunda Strait, the thoroughfare between Java and Sumatra that connects the Indian Ocean with the China Seas, Batavia sat as a spider in its web. While Canton and Nagasaki were the outlets of two more or less self-absorbed agrarian empires with rich but in many ways also suppressed commercial traditions, Batavia was established as the emporium of a vast maritime trading empire that fed on the regional economies of Monsoon Asia and provided Europe with Asian consumption goods for almost two centuries.

All three ports were relatively recent configurations in the millennia-old monsoon trade: the Canton-Macao tandem dates from 1567, and Nagasaki and Batavia were established as international ports of trade in 1571 and 1619, respectively. But the vicissitudes of Canton, Nagasaki, and Batavia cannot be properly understood without referring to the traditional Chinese world economy of which they were part, or to which they were so closely connected. The economies of China's southeastern coastal provinces, and in particular the business acumen of the merchants from Fujian Province, directly or indirectly served as the driving force for all trade in the China Seas. Fujianese merchants formed the large majority in the Chinese communities in Batavia and Nagasaki, and even the networks of Co-hong merchants, with whom the foreigners had to deal in Canton, also hailed from Fujian Province.

Last but not least, it was exactly in these three port towns that the Chinese, Japanese, and Dutch welcomed the first American newcomers to Asia in the 1780s and 1790s. The three decades that sit astride the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries formed in many respects a turning point in the regional history of East Asia—as they did worldwide—and that is why I have decided to let them mark the end of this study.

## The Time Frame

In his book *Origins of the Modern Chinese State*, Philip Kuhn labeled the 1790s a period of crisis in China.<sup>9</sup> A series of popular rebellions erupted along the margins of the Chinese empire, in the frontiers of the west and along the coastal borders of the south. The Yellow and the Yangzi Rivers spilled out of their riverbeds, flooding extensive tracts of the central regions of the empire. Less visible to the eye but no less perceptible was the impact of China's enormous demographic expansion. In the latter half of the eighteenth century the population more than doubled, increasing from 140 to 300 million, causing such related phenomena as regional famines, internal migration, and the tipping of the ecological balance through deforestation. Finally, this period marked the transition from the by then senile Qianlong Emperor and his corrupt grand councilor, Heshen, to his successor, the Jiaqing Emperor, who, the felicitous name of his reign period (Prosperous Age) notwithstanding, faced the thankless task of clearing up the mess and, as it turned out, the nigh-impossible task of restoring order to his chaotic domain.

In Japan we see similar phenomena: natural disasters such as the eruption of Mount Asama in 1783 caused unprecedented rainstorms, floods, and crop failures. The so-called Tenmei Famine lasted from 1782 to 1787. Peasant rebellions occurred all over the country, at a rate of more than fifty per year. When Shogun Tokugawa Ieharu passed away in 1786, a new, austere policy of frugality and moral redress was introduced, which led to the further limitation of overseas trade.

In the Indonesian Archipelago the Dutch East India Company, which saw its hegemony challenged by shifts in the nature of maritime trade in Monsoon Asia, suffered tremendous financial losses owing to the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War (1780–1784), when many of its ships were seized by the enemy near the English Channel. When the Napoleonic Wars broke off Dutch shipping connections with Asia at the end of the

1790s, the VOC was declared bankrupt and its East Indiamen on the Batavian roadstead were replaced by vessels under neutral flags, among which the Stars and Stripes figured predominantly.

If we take a global view, this same juncture in time was a period of crisis brought about by two simultaneous revolutions, the Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution. In economic affairs, Adam Smith presented a new paradigm of free enterprise and predicted the end of mercantilism with its monopolies and chartered long-distance companies like the VOC. A new age of information was in the making, in which knowledge about and awareness of other great civilizations on other continents were brought to everyone's doorstep, if not to everyone's tea table, in western Europe.

Old regimes in Europe were swept away by the winds of political change when revolutionary France invaded its neighbors, including the Dutch Republic in 1795. In the early 1780s, Britain lost one empire in the Western Hemisphere and started building a second one in Monsoon Asia. And while this was happening, pioneers and sailors from the ever-expanding Russian empire and the newborn United States of America set out on long treks and voyages, and reached for the eastern rim of Asia.

Of course, these revolutionary changes worked out differently in terms of the speed with which they had an impact on the world, depending on place and circumstance. Around 1800 we witness significant changes in the maritime trade in the China Seas, including the lapse of almost two hundred years of Dutch control in the seas surrounding the Indonesian Archipelago, and a spectacular rise in piracy and the number of interlopers seeking new corridors of trade.

As early as the 1780s new policies were formulated in the European metropolis vis-à-vis overseas "possessions" in Asia. The relative political independence of the chartered East India Companies as rulers of trade in the East was checked by the home governments in London and The Hague. Within Monsoon Asia itself the trade monopolies of the East India Companies were challenged by the rise of local agency houses and shipping companies. Members of the emerging industrial entrepreneur class in England even persuaded their government to send a royal envoy, the Earl Macartney, to the Manchu throne in 1783 with coffers full of British-made goods they hoped to sell to the land of the 300 million customers.

[To view this image, refer to  
the print version of this title.]

The departure of the return fleet of 1657. Governor-General Joan Maetsuyker sends off Commander Joan Cunaeus to the *Peerl*, flagship of the fleet. Artist: J. Isings, 1940. Collection of KITLV (Royal Institute of Anthropology), Leiden.

In short, the turn of the eighteenth into the nineteenth century was a period of global transition and changing overseas entanglements to which the regimes of China, Japan, and Java were forced to respond. The control mechanisms that were worked out or refined in Canton and Nagasaki probably give more insight into the mindsets of the Chinese and Japanese empires—and, we might add, the changes in Western thought and ambition—than any study of the center of those empires would give us. Through the windows of Canton, Nagasaki, and Batavia we can witness the advent of modernity.

## Port Cities

Ports have continually captivated those engaged in historical research, but ironically there is no satisfying definition for the concept of the port city, even though historians have given these cities an important role in global history.<sup>10</sup> Fernand Braudel, for instance, pointed out the particular role that a succession of port cities has played in the development of the *économie-monde*, or the modern world system, as Immanuel

Wallerstein has termed it.<sup>11</sup> Almost twenty-five years ago, an Australian team under the late Frank Broeze and Kenneth MacPherson started a comparative research project on port cities around the Indian Ocean and produced two interesting collections of essays, *Brides of the Sea* and *Gateways of Asia*.<sup>12</sup> They did not aspire to formulate big theory and declared themselves quite happy should the case studies provide “building stones which individually and collectively may lead to a better understanding of the development, functioning and the historical significance of port cities throughout Asia, and ultimately throughout the world.” This same kaleidoscopic vision underlies a Japanese research program on port cities that recently produced three volumes of case studies under the title *Minatomachi no sekaishi* (The World History of Port Cities).<sup>13</sup> Yet the subtitles of the trilogy—*Minatomachi to kaikyoku sekkai* (Port Cities and Seascapes), *Minato no topography* (The Topography of Port Cities), and finally *Minato ni ikiru* (Living, or Life, in Port Cities)—suggest Braudelian inspiration because they vary from *longue durée* perspectives to snapshots of daily life, *le temps du monde*.

My aim is more modest. I intend to discuss three port polities around one seascape within a rather limited time frame. Taking the port towns of Canton, Nagasaki, and Batavia as focal points of human activity around the China Sea Basin, I will compare the radically different and at the same time curiously dovetailing maritime polities of the Qing empire, Tokugawa Japan, and the Dutch East India Company in the second half of the eighteenth century. Before I do this, however, let us look at the geographic features and the *histoire structurale* of the China Sea region to see how during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries certain patterns of trade developed that would decide the settlement patterns of the European newcomers to the area.

### China's Maritime Frontier

The China Sea region is often portrayed as an annex to the Indian Ocean, to which it is directly connected by the Strait of Malacca and the Sunda Strait.<sup>14</sup> Hemmed in by the coast of the Asian continent to the west and a string of volcanic islands on the eastern side, closed off in the north by Japan and in the south by the Indonesian Archipelago, the shape of the China Sea region reminds one of an hour glass, with the Strait of Formosa forming its waist. So while the Indian Ocean is



open to the east where it connects with the Pacific Ocean, the shallow, land-locked China Sea is basically an inner sea, or a “Chinese Mediterranean,” as it has occasionally been called.<sup>15</sup> The lower part, the South China Sea, comprising the whole region surrounded by the Philippines, the Indonesian Archipelago, Indochina, and South China, is almost completely situated within the tropics, while the upper section, the North or East China Sea, surrounded by China, Korea, Japan, and the Ryukyu Archipelago, tends to have a more rugged climate.

In the old days of sail, all traffic in the China Seas was directed by the predictable monsoon winds that blow alternately from the southwest and northeast. This basically meant that Chinese junks setting out for the southern sea—the Nanyang, or maritime Southeast Asia—would weigh anchor around the lunar New Year and reach their destination three or four weeks later, and then return after the change of the monsoon in early June. Unlike in the Indian Ocean where, depending on the direction of the monsoon, many ports were inaccessible for months on end, cabotage was feasible almost all year round in the South China Sea, thanks to its indented coasts and myriad islands that offered shelter and anchorage.

Navigation on the China Seas in the summer months from July to as late as October was—and still is—a very risky operation, owing to the typhoons that ravage the area with winds blowing at speeds of more than sixty miles per hour. Skippers of Chinese junks returning home from overseas destinations in the Nanyang would therefore make sure to leave as early as possible in June so that they could make it home safely before the typhoon season set in. All this of course also applied to Western shipping in the area.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, when they first encountered the Europeans in Asian waters, the Chinese fishermen and traders had been reconnoitering and sailing the South China Sea for almost a millennium. They sailed along two corridors leading southward and westward from China. The eastern trunk route ran via the Philippine Islands in the direction of the Moluccas, or Spice Islands, while the western route skirted the coast of South China and the island of Hainan, crossed over to the coast of Vietnam, and then forked at the coast of Cambodia, one route leading in a westerly direction into the Gulf of Thailand, the other southward toward the Malay Peninsula and from there onward along the coast of Sumatra to its terminus at Java.

In addition to geographical considerations and their effect on maritime traffic in the China Sea region, man-made factors influenced the patterns and rhythms of trade and set the China Sea region apart from the Indian Ocean. These included the particular institutional restraints that Chinese and Japanese imperial administrations exercised on overseas trade in the region. Although the impact of the so-called Chinese tribute system, which from the Chinese point of view represented a Chinese world order extending into maritime and mainland Southeast Asia, has been greatly overestimated, it cannot be denied that the momentous changes of dynastic regimes and the subsequent state-formation processes that occurred during the seventeenth century in both China and Japan had an enormous impact on the China Sea trade. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, just when the *haijin*, the maritime prohibitions that forbade Chinese private merchants to sail to overseas destinations, had lost their practical use in China, the Japanese started to apply such prohibitions to secure their coastal borders, and perfected their execution to a degree of which the Chinese could only have dreamed.

### The Limitations of the Official Mind

China's seaside border and its overseas connections have been studied by historians mainly from the viewpoint of the "official mind" of the Chinese imperial administration. John King Fairbank's work on the tribute system is based on those foundations, and his students have more or less followed in his wake—with the exception of John Wills, perhaps, who in his more recent writings about Sino-Vietnamese relations admits the shortcomings of this approach.<sup>16</sup> As a result we are saddled with a very one-sided view of the past, largely built on presumptions about how affairs along the coastal border should be conducted, according to the central government, instead of what they were really like. The doyen of the study of early imperial China, Hans Bielenstein, in his recent publication *Diplomacy and Trade in the Chinese World, 589–1276*, reaches the same conclusion when he boldly states that "a tributary system centered on China did not exist."<sup>17</sup>

Little effort has been made so far to compare the imperial myth (with its particular ideas about "how the imperial order should be extended to the surrounding peoples") with the real situation along the

maritime frontier. The central government was more concerned about keeping its own “Han rascals” (*hanjian*) from mingling with (*jieji*) or enticing (*gouyin*) barbarians than it was about the threat of barbarian incursions, even along the northern border, which was perpetually menaced by nomadic tribes. How persistent this attitude was can be seen in the lively correspondence conducted by the Qianlong Emperor during the visit of the Macartney mission to China. The emperor was not particularly concerned about the conduct of the red-haired barbarians—that could be taken care of with the time-honored ritual for dealing with visiting vassals—but he dreaded that Chinese traitors might conspire with the visitors and give them subversive ideas.<sup>18</sup>

Insufficient attention has been paid to the steadfast denial by the court of the realities of an increasingly widespread “informal” Chinese presence and influence in the Nanyang from the sixteenth century onward. “Out of sight, out of mind” is an apt saying when it comes to the problematic relationship between the imperial administration and Chinese entrepreneurs in Monsoon Asia during the Ming and Qing periods. Contrary to European expansion overseas, the Chinese flag did not follow the trade, and as a result the importance of this creeping overseas expansion and economic penetration, which adapted itself to local conditions wherever it went, has been underestimated and misunderstood in current scholarship. What bothered the Chinese authorities from the beginning to the end was not the foreigners themselves but the way in which foreigners might be taken advantage of by their own subjects and as a result create problems along the border.

It was not until the outbreak of the first Opium War in 1839 that the Manchu government woke up to the real threat posed by the West.<sup>19</sup> Until then, the imperial authorities had worried mainly about the uncontrolled exploits of their own subjects abroad, whom they labeled as “pirates” and “unruly elements,” but not about the challenges that European expansion might pose to the Chinese world order. Always looking within, always concerned with such “internal security problems” as piracy and smuggling, they were simply unable to glean much information about what was going on abroad because, in contrast to the Tokugawa administration, they made no concerted effort to collect such information. This is how, around 1800, a Chinese mandarin explained why China’s elite was almost totally ignorant about the over-

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the print version of this title.]

Chinese map of the South China Sea, 1852. From Wei Yuan, *Haiguo Tuzhi*  
(Illustrated Treatise on the Maritime Kingdoms), 1844. Collection of the author.

seas world at the end of the Qianlong reign (I quote him with much abbreviation): “We have almost no references to overseas kingdoms, because they do not pay tribute and have no intercourse with our central kingdom . . . Our countrymen who trade abroad, merely think about hunting after gain, and they have neither much knowledge of

books, nor any inclination or ability to record what they have seen. This constitutes a big problem.”<sup>20</sup>

## Policies toward Chinese Overseas Trade

In two pioneering articles written fifty years ago, the Chinese historian T'ien Ju-k'ang (Tian Rukang) was the first to draw attention to the importance of the Chinese junk trade with Southeast Asia during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>21</sup> Since then other historians have paid serious attention to different aspects of this early modern shipping network, thus gradually opening up new avenues of inquiry.<sup>22</sup> This research shows that early modern Chinese overseas trade expansion should be seen as resulting not from the tribute system of the imperial government, as many Sino-centric historians have maintained, but rather from the commercialization of the local economy and extravillage opportunities in the trade throughout China's southeastern coastal provinces.<sup>23</sup>

Before going further, let us look at the Chinese maritime trade network to see how this transportation system developed into the driving force that created and continued to shape overseas Chinese settlements in Southeast Asia in early modern times. To do this we should first look at the institutional background of China's overseas trade relations.

Official Chinese sources handed down over the past thousand years deal with metropolitan strategies toward the maritime frontier in a highly stereotypical manner. They tend to explain how China's relations with the overseas world were expressed in terms of the rituals connected to overseas tributary relationships, or in security measures applying to coastal defense, such as garrisons placed in strategic spots and the imposition of maritime prohibitions. While the administrative procedures for the reception of foreign traders in coastal cities remained remarkably uniform through the ages, the policies of the Chinese government toward its own subjects' sailing to foreign destinations were remarkably fickle. The tribute system that seemed ideal for channeling the comings and goings of foreign envoys and merchants to designated ports such as Guangzhou, Fuzhou, and Ningbo did not function well at all vis-à-vis the indigenous Chinese traders, whom the

imperial administrators regarded as interlopers and infringers on imperial rule and order.

This situation became very clear when the Ming dynasty was established in 1367 after more than a century of Mongol domination. To gain full control over the border and do away with the Islamic traders at the coast who, during the *pax Mongolica*, had basically run China's overseas trade from coastal port cities like Quanzhou in Fujian Province—the well-known Zayton of Marco Polo—the first Ming ruler, Zhu Yuanzhang (1368–1398), forbade all private Chinese trade with foreign countries.<sup>24</sup> From 1405 onward, the Yongle Emperor (1403–1424), a usurper who desperately desired to establish his name and fame, sent seven large fleets under Zheng He, the “three jewels eunuch,” via Southeast Asia to the Indian Ocean. The Chinese ships visited no fewer than thirty-seven countries. May it suffice to state here that as soon as overseas rulers, spurred by Zheng He's expeditions, started to send regular tribute missions to China, the Ming imperial government saw fit to withdraw from its overseas ventures and again reinforce the *haijin* maritime prohibitions for its own seafaring folk. Under the motto *Cun ban bu xia hai* (Not even a little plank is allowed to drift to the sea), stern warnings were issued forbidding Chinese private traders to sail to overseas destinations. Thus the tribute system that the early Ming emperors imposed on China's neighbors, ostensibly to achieve political stability by establishing proper relations between them and the Middle Kingdom, in effect prohibited their own subjects from linking up with foreigners.<sup>25</sup>

Although the maritime trade ban was intended to stem the swarming forth of Chinese private shipping, it produced a contrary effect. Defiant Chinese traders in the Malay Archipelago sought protection from local rulers and continued their activities as before. They even dressed up as “southern barbarians” and pretended to be tributaries from afar. The Ryukyu connection is also of interest in this respect. Fujianese families moved over to the island kingdom situated between China and Japan and not only became the main transporters of goods between China, Ryukyu, and Japan but also formed a link with Southeast Asia. Thus the interplay between legal (tributary) and outlawed (private) ventures kept the Fujianese maritime tradition alive. The crews sailing on tribute missions between Southeast Asia and Fujian basically

remained “Chinese”: they changed only in attire and in the flag they carried.<sup>26</sup>

Little effort has been made so far to dismantle imperial mythology with its particular ideas about “how the imperial order should be applied to the surrounding peoples” in the maritime sphere. Official policy toward Chinese trading overseas swung wildly from one extreme to the other, from the endorsement if not promotion of overseas trade during the Southern Song and Yuan dynasties to its total prohibition during the Ming dynasty. The widely divergent policies of the Ming court underscore this point.

At first overseas private trade was strictly forbidden, in order for the rulers to keep control over their own subjects and, of course, to ensure that only the throne reaped the profits of foreign trade, and only at designated gateways. In the long run, however, the court policy of monopolizing overseas trade through the tribute system turned out to be counterproductive and inefficient. While foreign trade in South China’s main tributary port of Canton decreased to a mere trickle, there was a large-scale expansion of illicit overseas trade from the province of Fujian. This illegal activity, together with the arrival of the Portuguese, who were lured to China’s coasts by Chinese smugglers, gave rise to a wave of piracy along the China coast during the 1550s.

### Toward the Lifting of Maritime Prohibitions

By the middle of the sixteenth century, roving bands of Japanese and Chinese pirates, the *wo kou*, reigned in the East and South China Seas, from Japan to Luzon in the northern Philippines. Illegal trade and piracy networks spreading over the eastern seas had reached dramatic proportions. Efforts to enforce the maritime ban intensified, but it was observed that “the more strictly the prohibitions were enforced, the more the piracy increased.” Consequently the Ming court was forced to revise its maritime policies.<sup>27</sup> The people of the southern coastal provinces, especially in Fujian, which depended on maritime trade, were desperate to have the trade legalized.

Thus in 1567 a two-tiered trade network with Southeast Asia, the so-called Dongxi-yang, or Eastern and Western Ocean network, was of-

ficially established for private traders from Fujian, the traditional home province of China's overseas traders.<sup>28</sup> Under the new regulations, the Fujianese were entitled to send out some 150 trading vessels along the eastern and western coastal routes of the South China Sea to destinations in the tropics at the start of each northern monsoon season. The southern Fujian port of Haicheng in the Bay of Xiamen, which under its former name, Yuegang, had been a smugglers' lair, was designated as a terminus for these trunk routes. Yet the government made it very clear that this outlet for Chinese shipping should remain off limits for foreign shipping. At the same time, the southern province of Guangdong kept its port on the Pearl River, Guangzhou, open as the traditional gateway to foreign tributaries arriving from the Nanyang. Ten years earlier local authorities had even allowed Portuguese merchants to set up a trading beach on a small peninsula in the estuary of the Pearl River, at Macao, from which they were allowed to trade in designated seasons with the merchants from Guangzhou. Thereby a pattern was created in which traders from Fujian Province were allowed to sail overseas while Guangzhou was kept open for foreign traders coming to China.

### The Arrival of the Europeans

In one way or another, the European maritime powers that moved into the South China Sea at the end of the sixteenth century managed to capture a share of the China Sea traffic and attempted to adjust to the newly created transport situation: they either tried to sail to Guangzhou, as the Portuguese did, or they linked up to the Eastern Ocean route, as the Spaniards did at Manila, or the Western Ocean route, as the Dutch did at Batavia. Taking advantage of the embargo that the Ming government had imposed on all Sino-Japanese contacts, the Portuguese also opened a direct trading route between Macao and Japanese ports on the island of Kyushu.

Before I turn to the arrival of the Dutch in East Asian waters, let me summarize the operations of the first two European actors on the scene. The Portuguese settled down close to the outer end of the Xiyang, or western route, in the Strait of Malacca in 1511, and established fixed trading posts on the China coast at Macao in 1557 and in



Japan at Nagasaki in 1571. In this way they tried to gain control over the main thoroughfare between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea and to tax the maritime traffic between the two. In addition, from their bases at Macao and Nagasaki they monopolized the trade between a Chinese market in want of silver bullion from Japan to grease its system of taxation, and a Japanese market that craved silks, porcelain, and other Chinese products.

The Spaniards situated themselves along the Dongyang, or eastern route, by establishing their headquarters in Manila in 1571, and they gave a further boost to the existing traffic by importing South American silver to the Philippines for the purchase of silk and porcelain from Chinese traders there.

### The Newcomer

The Dutch East India Company, or VOC, owing to the expansive nature and inordinate scope of its activities in Asia, has sometimes been characterized as the world's first multinational company. It was founded in 1602 in the midst of the Dutch Republic's protracted war for independence from the Spanish crown. The Dutch States-General conferred on this long-distance company an extraordinary number of privileges, including the rights to wage war and to conclude treaties with "Oriental Princes and Potentates" east of the Cape of Good Hope. With such powers at its disposal, the VOC became an effective offensive weapon in the Dutch revolt against the crown of Spain and Portugal.<sup>29</sup>

By the time the first Dutch ships arrived in Southeast Asia, in 1595, the Chinese, Spanish, and Portuguese trading links had already been in full operation in the area for thirty years. Another two decades passed before the Dutch settled on an ideal location from which to direct their trading activities in the Indian Ocean, the China Sea, and the seas of the Indonesian Archipelago. This was Batavia, which Governor-General Jan Pietersz Coen, mastermind of the Dutch empire in the East, situated quite consciously on the western edge of the island of Java near the Sunda Strait, an important thoroughfare between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. Built on the ruins of the former kingdom of Jayakarta, which under the name of (Sunda) Kalapa already figured in Chinese sources as a port of trade, the Dutch intended Batavia to be



The trading world of the Dutch East India Company.

the terminus of the Chinese Xiyang route. For Coen there was no doubt that Batavia would have to depend on Chinese trading networks and Chinese manpower for its survival in the Indonesian Archipelago. More important, he believed that the opening of the China market held the key to any further success for the expansion of the VOC's trading networks in Asia.

Emulating the trading networks of the Portuguese Estado da India, the Dutch, who had far more ships, men, and financial resources, set out to create a self-supporting trading network in Monsoon Asia that would link the textile-producing regions in India with the spice-producing Moluccan islands and the enormously profitable silver-for-silk trade between China and Japan that was monopolized by the Portuguese. As this agenda was linked directly to the Dutch struggle for independence from the Spanish Habsburgs, a considerable amount of fighting occurred in the China Sea between the Spaniards and the Portuguese, on the one side, and the Dutch interlopers, on the other, until the signing of the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648.

### The "Red-Haired Barbarians" in the Far East

The struggle for the markets of China and Japan was no less protracted and demanded constant adaptation and readjustment to local circumstances. The first VOC factory in Japan was established at Hirado in 1609 after a letter from the Dutch stadtholder Prince Maurice had secured a personal pass from the shogun. The Dutch (and the English, who followed a few years later) faced enormous competition. With their bases in Macao and Nagasaki, the Portuguese had acquired an almost unassailable position in the China-Japan trade.<sup>30</sup>

In the early decades of its existence, the Tokugawa shogunate (1603–1868) devised all kinds of stratagems to lessen its dependence on the Portuguese monopoly. Because Japanese shipping was not allowed in China, and Chinese vessels were still forbidden by the Ming imperial government to sail for Japan, the only way for the Japanese to acquire Chinese goods was to provide Japanese junks with shogunal passes, or *goshuin*, so that they could sail to destinations in Southeast Asia and there do business with Chinese traders. To this end, Japanese settlements, or *Nihon machi*, were established on Formosa, in Manila, at Hô An and Tonkin on the Indo-Chinese coast, and in the capital of Siam, Ayutthaya.

The construction of a Dutch fortress at the entrance of the Bay of Tayouan (Formosa) in 1624 soon led to such friction with visiting Japanese traders that the Tokugawa *bakufu* declared a total embargo on Dutch shipping to Japan between 1628 and 1633. After this incident was resolved diplomatically, the directorate of the Dutch East India Company came to the conclusion that total subservience by its personnel in Japan to the local rules and customs was the only option, if the Company wished to continue to trade in that proud empire:

Company officials . . . should above all be provided with modesty, humility, politeness, and friendship, being always very obliging in regard to the Japanese, so that their hearts shall in the end be won over to us. *Modesty* consists of prudent behavior and circumspection in all transactions; *Humility* means that one shall never raise jealousy with haughty actions towards this easily offended nation, but will always behave oneself as the lower one in rank; *Obedience* means that we should not resist their laws, without being too timid, or too indulgent, always trying to maintain the Company's rights in a discrete manner.<sup>31</sup>

These rules of conduct—along the lines of “When in Japan, do as the Japanese do”—became the guiding principle for all further action in the years to come and would serve the Dutch well, as we soon shall see.

Japan's wide-ranging overseas mercantile expansion, which occurred at exactly the same time that Dutch and English expansion in Southeast Asia began, was suddenly interrupted by the intervention of the *bakufu*. As part of his campaign to extirpate the Christian religion in Japan, where it was seen as dangerous and subversive, Tokugawa Iemitsu promulgated a succession of maritime prohibitions, or *kaikin*, between 1633 and 1636, bringing overseas Japanese traffic to an end and forbidding his (often Christian) subjects living abroad in the *Nihon machi* to return to Japan. In their rivalry with the Portuguese to gain part of Japan's foreign trade, the Calvinist Dutch only too gladly played up the Japanese hatred for the Catholic mission.<sup>32</sup> They assured their Japanese hosts that they, too, were involved in a ferocious struggle against the popish religion. As a matter of fact the Dutch East India Company presented itself to the shogunate as a nonthreatening alternative to the Portuguese. The fervent wish of the Dutch to replace the Portuguese

in the profitable China-Japan trade was fulfilled in 1639 when the Portuguese were banished “forever” from Japan.

Yet when François Caron, head of the VOC’s Hirado factory, cautiously inquired whether it would be a good idea for the Dutch stadtholder, Prince Frederik Hendrik of Orange, the “king of Holland,” to send an ambassador to the shogunal court in Edo to buttress trade relations, the answer was clear. The shogunal authorities felt there was no need: “Why should their ambassador come to express gratitude for the fact that the Dutch Company’s merchants live and prosper in Japan? Such business does not merit an ambassador. We only esteem kings and potentates of substance, when they speak of royal business and not of merchant business, when they request assistance in war or offer assistance. Sending another ambassador will only result in trouble.”<sup>33</sup> In other words, real ambassadors spoke about royal matters and not about trade. This response reflected the full submission of the Dutch merchants to the state’s regulations.

The true test came in 1640 when the shogun issued a decree that the Dutch warehouses in Hirado should be razed, and ordered the Dutch to move to the small island of Deshima in the Bay of Nagasaki, where the Portuguese had been living. The shogun had been informed that the Hollanders had had the insolence to engrave a Christian date, *Anno Domini 1639*, on the gable of their newly built storehouse. Upon receiving this order, Caron replied, “What His Majesty faithfully ordered, we shall punctually execute [*kashikomatta!*]” and promptly ordered the building to be demolished. The Japanese official who had transmitted the order sighed with relief when he saw it immediately obeyed and is reported to have said: “This spares us considerable trouble and bloodshed.” He had actually received orders that the Hollanders in Hirado should be cut down to size at the least sign of resistance to the shogun’s order.<sup>34</sup>

What was the direct effect of the implementation of these Japanese maritime prohibitions? First of all, Japan’s diplomatic relations with Korea to the west and Ryukyu in the south remained intact, thanks to the mediating function of the daimyo of Tsushima and Satsuma. The Dutch, seeing new business opportunities, dispatched vessels to overseas ports that held more or less sizable communities of Japanese expatriates now cut off from their mother country. VOC ships were sent to Cambodia, Hôï An, and Tonkin to carry on the trade of the Japanese

ships that had suddenly been interrupted. The same was true for the trade with Siam and Formosa, on sea routes where Dutch and Japanese merchant vessels had previously competed with each other. When the Dutch conquered Portuguese-held Malacca in 1641 and thereby gained control over the Strait of Malacca, the second thoroughfare between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, they became *the* dominant Western maritime power in the region.

In China the cards were shuffled in a quite different manner. No matter what they tried, the Dutch were unable to gain a foothold on the Chinese shore and initially had to follow the Japanese example and trade with the overseas merchants of the Chinese shipping network in ports throughout the Indonesian Archipelago, Siam, Cambodia, Hôï An, and Tonkin in Vietnam. Making no headway in this manner, Governor-General Coen opted for more aggressive methods to open the China market. In 1622 he dispatched a fleet of twelve ships to lay siege to Macao and thus make himself master of the China trade at Canton. When that gambit misfired, the Dutch built a base in the Pescadores Archipelago, hoping that they could plug into China's overseas trade from there. Instead, they were chased from the islands by a large Chinese invasion force in 1624 and withdrew to nearby Tayouan, where they built Zeelandia Castle, the second-largest Dutch fortress in Asia. During the thirty-seven years that the VOC ruled on Formosa, steadily extending its power over all of the island and bringing in large numbers of Chinese to develop the local agriculture, the Company grew into a regional power to be reckoned with, strategically situated, as it were, between China, Japan, and the ports of the various polities bordering on the South China Sea.

### Angst over Imperial Overstretch

After forty years of intermittent struggle with the Portuguese, the Spaniards, the English, the Javanese, the Chinese, and the populations of the Spice Islands, it was time for the Dutch to draw up the balance sheet. Having first obtained a monopoly in the Moluccan spice trade, they had become engaged in nearly every important line of commerce throughout Asian waters by the middle of the seventeenth century. VOC merchants sent Indian textiles to the Indonesian Archipelago in exchange for spices and forest products, which they shipped through-

out Monsoon Asia. From Chinese traders at Tayouan they purchased Chinese silk, which they sold for silver in Japan. Now that they had attained mastery over both thoroughfares between the Indian Ocean and the China Sea—the Sunda Strait and the Strait of Malacca—their position in Eastern trade seemed almost unassailable.

In the early 1620s the Company's directors, the Heren XVII, or Gentlemen Seventeen, who knew that all expansion was achieved at tremendous expense, were already cautioning the imperial strategist Governor-General Jan Pietersz Coen that the Company should avoid and excuse itself from costly warfare "if it is at all compatible with the preservation and safety of our estate. No great attention should be paid to the question of reputation or honor, which is often taken too seriously: in our opinion (for we are merchants) he has the honor who without doing injustice or violence has the profit."<sup>35</sup>

In a letter written in September 1633 to one of Coen's successors, Hendrick Brouwer, they further expanded on this theme and argued: "The best [way] is to submit to the laws of these Asian countries . . . we deem it to be much better for us to be subject to the laws and customs of those lands than to resort to arms, as long as it is tolerable and one can still trade profitably there."<sup>36</sup> From the beginning to the end, the managers and directors of the world's most powerful trading company were conscious of their limitations and afraid of imperial overstretch.

Confirmation for their concern was not long in coming. The promulgation of the *kaikin* edicts in 1636 had led to a veritable Dutch commercial boom in Japan, and within a few years the Far Eastern trade became "the principal trade in the Indies" for the Company, which served Formosa and Japan with, in those early years, up to twenty-two Dutch ships per year. As sole purveyors to the Japanese market, the Dutch were even able to contribute to the emergence of a separate "Japanese world order" alongside China's. By providing plenty of Chinese goods via Formosa, they softened the first blows of the *kaikin* edicts on the import sector of Japan's island economy and gave it time to adjust to the policies of the *bakufu* and eventually to reach an autarchic economic policy. Ironically, the Chinese trading partners of the Dutch now saw that the coast was clear for them to share in this booty, and they began to disregard the prohibitions of the Ming administration, which was occupied fighting a fierce battle with the Manchus along the northern frontier. Shortly afterward, silk deliveries from





















































































































































































































































