Chapter 1

Exordium

Before the massive and spectacular display of naval power by China during the early Ming period, the Chinese had already experienced over two millennia of seafaring traditions. It was a story of great maritime accomplishments that any nation would have proudly proclaimed and preserved. In China, however, unlike other countries, this record of its past achievements at sea has been largely relegated to the shadows, uncelebrated and unsung. Why did this happen? Although China has a long sea frontage, it is still a continental country. The age-long involvement with the great mass of Asia absorbed the primary attention of the Chinese people, overriding all other considerations. The major events and developments of China's history and civilization have taken place on land and so eclipsed the activities at sea, which were pushed off the center stage and thereby made a minor sideshow.

The first home of the Han Chinese people was in the great plain of North China watered by the silt-laden Yellow River.[1] From low-lying foothills in the West the plain slopes eastward to a huge delta before slipping gently either into the Yellow Sea or the East China Sea, depending on time period. The coastline is even and lifeless, shallow and sandy, with sparse vegetation and largely unbroken by coves and inlets. In most coastal areas of China the local inhabitants were hampered by poor geography from accessing the sea.

Denied convenient outlets for expansion by sea, the Chinese turned

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1 Although the first unified dynasty in China was the Qin, from whence the name "China" is derived, the second—considered more refined and humane—was the Han Dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE), the name the ethnic group has taken to describe itself.

inward and devoted their energies to the land. They spread mainly by land to populate their extensive domain, built towns and cities, defense fortifications and roads, and communicated with each other by foot, horseback, litters, and oxcarts. They excavated canals, connecting them with rivers to form a dense network of waterways over the empire so that, at an early date, a traveler could go from any place in China to another by inland routes—both land and riverine—without the risk of voyaging out onto the seas. But, as shown by the building of the Great Wall, the Han Chinese were almost constantly engaged in fighting wars with their fierce nomadic neighbors on China's lengthy borders to the North and West. This put a special importance on China's continental geography.

China's Continental Geography

As most of the terrain of China consists of plains, the arable land was used extensively for farming. The majority of the Han people were peasants, who eked out a marginal existence by tilling. Tied to the soil, they generally assumed the traditional mentality of most peasants, which have been summarized as home-loving and frugal, stolid and hardworking, conservative and backward-looking, submissive and peace-loving, fatalistic and unadventurous, afraid of change and progress, and inclined to the gentle arts. Overall, they were contented with their lot and were highly suspicious of strangers.

The only break in the monotony of mudflats and sandbanks along the North China coastline was the rugged Shandong peninsula, where the rockbound shoreline, richly covered with verdant forests, favored seafaring pursuits. It was from Shandong's ports that the Northern Chinese first engaged in maritime activities. Records show that as early as the 7th century BCE, or about when the city-states of Greece first adopted an alphabet, mariners from Shandong ventured forth in their frail craft to cross the Yellow Sea and the East China Sea to Korea. By the 6th century BCE they were trading by sea with South China and were engaged in fighting naval battles with the southern Yue (Viet) seamen. In the 4th century BCE the rulers of Qi, a state in modern-day Shandong, were outfitting and sending out fleets to explore the Eastern and Yellow Seas. These expeditions prepared the way

for the naval expeditions of the 2nd century BCE under the first Qin emperor, which may have led to the discovery of one or more islands in the Japanese island chain.

These maritime activities were the work mainly of the residents of Shandong, and so did not affect the people of the rest of China. It was not until the Northern Chinese had spread south to the lower Yangzi River basin and beyond to the seacoast of southeastern China that the Han Chinese as a whole made a significant advance to the sea. The region of southeastern China, comprising the three modern provinces of Zhejiang, Fujian, and Guangdong, is starkly different from the North topographically. Its shoreline is sharply indented with innumerable coves and bays. Of the approximately 3,350 islands along the entire coast of China, 2,950 are located off the coast of southeastern China. The hills are heavily wooded, which provides much needed resources for ship-building. Crisscrossed by mountain chains and deep rivers, the land is not as favorable for intensive farming, so a larger percentage of the people looked to the sea for their livelihood. What is more, the original inhabitants were a non-Han Chinese ethnic group known as the Yue. There were serious ethnic tensions between the Han and these other groups.

Ethnic Tensions between Han and Yue

Before the coming of the Han Chinese, the southeastern seaboard regions were inhabited by the Yue people, who were by tradition seafarers. Scholars have conjectured that intrepid Yue mariners may have sailed to Japan and perhaps across the Pacific Ocean to reach North America. They gave their names to many of the ancient states established in the southeast littoral of China: Yue (in what is now Zhejiang province), Dong Yue (Fujian province), and Nan Yue (Nam Viet, now Guangdong province). The Han may well have acquired the art of seamanship from the Yue people.

The Han had migrated to the South and East gradually. Living in the harsh and bleak environment of the North, they had been attracted by the warm and clement climate of the South and by the fertility of the Yangzi River basin. At other times they were driven by floods, drought, deforestation, and impoverishment of the soil to leave the North. Further to the North, nomadic tribal peoples, living in a still more inhospitable land,

were tempted to move southward into the Han agricultural lands, resulting in sporadic forays and incursions. Sometimes the alien people broke through the Chinese defenses, including the Great Wall, to occupy large areas and to establish kingdoms of their own, which forced many Han Chinese to migrate southward.

The flight of Han Chinese often carried them beyond the rich flatlands of the Yangzi River valley to the mountainous southeastern coastlands. Preoccupied with the onerous burden to build and develop their vast empire, and with the ever-present necessity of defending themselves against barbarian intruders from the North and West, the Han Chinese were too busy to move out onto the sea. It was not until the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) armies of Emperor Wu had pacified the North that the Chinese were able to turn their full attention to maritime expansion. In 119 BCE Han Dynasty forces broke the confederation of the northern nomads and eliminated for the time being the threat from nomads. Then, in 112–111 BCE, the Han emperor took advantage of dissension among the Yue leaders to send four strongly armed fleets to conquer Nan Yue, followed by taking possession of Dong Yue and colonizing it with Han Chinese colonists. In 108 BCE, the Emperor even sent his fleets from Shandong province to conquer Korea.

A major uprising of the Annamese led by the sisters Trưng Trắc and Trưng Nhị provoked the Han court (now the Later Han Dynasty) to send a fleet of two thousand tower ships to defeat the insurgents in a naval battle at Cửu Chân (near modern Thanh Hóa) in 42 CE. This victory for the Chinese commander Ma Yuan won him the sobriquet *fubo*, the "tamer of waves," and a place in the Daoist pantheon as a sea god.

By the Han period, the Chinese were not only waging wars with neighboring peoples but they were also beginning to establish contacts with distant countries. By the land route, often referred to as the Silk Road, they learned about the Roman Empire in the Far West. By sea they opened commercial relations with Southeast and South Asia. *The History of Former Han* has a passage about a party of court officials who traveled from a port in Guangdong to Malaya. Crossing the Kra Isthmus they sailed across the Bay of Bengal to reach Huangji, which scholars believe may be the Coromandel coast of India. On their return voyage they touched at a place called Sichengbu, believed to be Ceylon or Sri Lanka. At the close of the Han period, Near Eastern merchants, claiming to be Roman citizens, landed at a

port that Ptolemy called Cattigara (perhaps modern Hanoi). Compared to northern-based dynasties, the sea would be more important to southern-based dynasties.

North vs. South China

So far, the seaward thrust of the Chinese had been occasional and weak. During periods of strength and unity the imperial capital, as the administrative and economic center, was invariably located far inland in the northern part of the empire and the country's attention was focused on domestic problems and on defense against enemies from the North. During these times, the empire turned its back to the sea. It was only during times of division when the political center was located in the South that the Chinese faced the sea. When the Han empire disintegrated in 220, China was partitioned into three kingdoms. The state of Wu occupied the southeast coastal region of China and with its capital in a city in the Yangzi River delta, now known as Nanjing.

Wu discovered that it needed to supplement its revenue by engaging in maritime trade. Under the state of Wu an extensive merchant marine grew up to carry on seaborne trade and a strong navy was created to protect it. In 208 a Wu fleet destroyed the navy of its northern neighbor, Wei, in a battle at Chibi (Red Cliffs), near modern-day Hankou on the Upper Yangzi River. At sea, in 232, a Wu fleet defeated a Wei squadron off the coast of Shandong. The Wu navy also set out on voyages of exploration of the East and South China Seas. They sought the fabled islands of Yizhou and Tanzhou, which are thought to have referred to Japan and the Philippines. Meanwhile, a naval expedition reasserted Chinese domination over Annam so that a Wu diplomatic mission sent to Cambodia was able to induce the Khmer state of Funan to send tribute in a token of friendship. The Wu mission also toured Malaya and returned with a wealth of exotic information about the lands and people of Southeast Asia.

After a century and a half of unification, the Chinese empire was again partitioned into the North and the South, with barbarian—i.e. any non-Han—states occupying North China. The Chinese states in the South were left with only one direction to expand—out to sea. The navy of Song, a South China state, fought piracy and also engaged in privateering. Its principal adversary was the Champan kingdom of Linyi, a semi-Indian state south of

Annam. Linyi was reputed to be fabulously rich, with gold-bearing mountains and temples containing gold statues of over two cubits in circumference. In 446, the Song navy routed the defenders of Linyi, pillaged their capital, and carried away a large hoard of gold from the melted remains of the statues.

The sea route to western India was now opened. Religious teachers from India came to proselytize Buddhism and scores of Chinese Buddhist pilgrims made the perilous ocean voyage to India. The most famous was the monk Faxian who left a famous written record of his journeys. (More of his travels below.)

Merchants came to China from as far away as the Roman Orient. Maritime commerce increased. With the growing sophistication of the people and with the expansion of industry there developed a need for imported raw materials, including metals, pigments, rosins, glues, hides, drugs, spices, and aromatics. As for luxury items, these included gems, cosmetics, rhinoceros horn, and peacock feathers. Chinese products also found markets abroad. When warlike states blocked the Silk Road caravans, Arabian and Indian ships continued to conduct trade by sea. Foreigners soon lived in their own districts in many major seaports along China's coast.

The short-lived Sui Dynasty (581–618) that reunited China at the end of the 6th century also increased momentum to expand seaward. In 605 its fleet successfully invaded the Liuqiu Islands (modern-day Okinawa). Lured by reports of gold and treasure, it raided Champa, which was the successor of the ancient Linyi state in Indochina.

The Tang Dynasty (618–907), which overthrew the Sui, continued the Korean war of its predecessor. It sent a fleet to Korea to aid its protectorate, the state of Silla, and found itself in conflict with the rival Korean state of Paeche, which was allied to Japan. In 663, a Tang fleet sailed from Shandong ports to Korea to engage the joint Japanese and Paeche fleets. In four engagements, the Tang fleet of five hundred ships commanded by Liu Rengui defeated the four hundred ships of the Japanese aided by an unknown number of Paeche ships. In the last battle, at the mouth of the Hakko River (modern-day Tongjin River) the Tang navy destroyed the Japanese-Paeche fleet.

Rather than just an era of aggressive action, the three hundred years of the Tang Dynasty was also a time of economic development. Through contacts and intercourse with foreign peoples, the intellectual horizons of

the Chinese had broadened. Buddhist missionaries from India and Muslim merchants from the Near East came and left their influences on the culture of China. At the ports of Guangzhou (aka Canton) and Yangzhou and at the imperial capital of Chang'an (now Xi'an) foreign settlements grew and became centers of foreign religion: Islam, Manichaeism, and Nestorian Christianity. Industrial growth demanded foreign imports. Trade by sea increased. "Superintendencies of Merchant Ships" were established to administer the foreign residents and to control trade. The Chinese adjusted their mindset to learning from the outside world as their scholarship, arts, and technology became enriched by cross pollination with ideas from abroad.

Technology of all kinds flourished, most notably the science of ship-building. The Chinese built ships that were larger, sturdier, faster, and more seaworthy than the less sturdy sewn ships of the Arabs. Learning from the experience and nautical techniques of the Arabs, the Chinese advanced their arts of navigation and methods of sailing on the endless ocean, thus preparing the way for the great seafaring age of the Song and the Yuan periods. Therefore, it was during the Tang Dynasty that Chinese shipping gradually wrested away the former Arab and Indian monopoly on passenger and freight traffic. This shift ushered in the dazzling epoch of maritime enterprise of the Song and Yuan dynasties. This success, counter-intuitively, was the result of a divided China.

A Divided China

After the collapse of the Tang Dynasty in the 10th century, China was again divided. In the Five Dynasties period (906–960) and in the Song period (960–1279) there were again many competing warlike states in the North and the Chinese states in the South were once again oriented to the sea. The seaboard states of Nan-Tang, Wu-Yue, Min, and Nan-Han all possessed navies and merchant marines for their political and economic survival. In the battle of Langshan near the mouth of the Yangzi River in 919 between a Nan-Tang fleet and a Wu-Yue fleet, flaming oil fired from a tube (probably some form of Greek fire, a type of combustible composed of naphtha and quicklime first used by Greeks besieged at Constantinople in 672 CE) was first used in a war in China. When a Nan-Han naval force invaded Annam in 939 to reassert its authority, the Chinese were defeated in the battle of Bạch Đằng River (now

the Cua Nam-triu). The light ships of the Annamese feigned retreat, drawing the heavy Chinese warships after them into the shallows to be impaled by iron-tipped stakes planted below the surface of the river.

The epoch that marked the fall of the Tang and the rise of the Song was a period of convulsive transformations that drastically changed the face of China, altering in the process the character and society of the Chinese people. This transformation was the culmination of a series of gradual modifications that had taken place during the centuries before. Most fundamental was geographic change. The North, the region surrounding the Yellow River and once the home of the Han, had become progressively more impoverished. The reckless destruction of trees for fuel and for building materials denuded the forest cover so that the soil could not retain rainwater. Floods washed away the top soil, which then silted up the rivers. Productivity declined and famines increased.

By contrast, in the southeast, in the region watered by the Yangzi River, the soil was fertile, the resources plentiful, and the climate mild. These favorable conditions drew impoverished people from the North to the South. By the Song–Yuan era (10th through 14th centuries) the South and southeastern seaboard provinces already contained one-half to three-quarters of the empire's population and supplied 80 percent of the empire's revenues.

With the rapid increase in population came the building of cultural centers, schools, and libraries. During the Song–Yuan era the majority of the prominent men of the empire were natives of the southeast. The lower Yangzi River Basin became both the cultural and economic heart of the empire. Politically, a growing trend toward absolutism that had developed previously made further inroads during the turmoil of the Five Dynasties. All powers were centered in the emperor and not, as in the past, shared with the chancellor. These powers included: (1) control of the military forces, (2) control over economic resources, and (3) the supremacy of the civilian bureaucracy over the military.

In the scholarly realm, the spread of literacy, to a degree never achieved before in Chinese history, significantly widened the elite's intellectual horizons. The invention and spread of printing brought books within easy reach of all who could afford them. Schools and libraries mushroomed, especially in southeastern China. The institution of the civil service examinations enabled the poor and underprivileged classes to rise in society.