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Constituents of Seapower: The Transformation of China's Identity

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Constituents of Seapower: The Transformation of China's Identity

Abstract: The academic debate about Chinese seapower is characterized by a discrepancy between a largely continental interpretation of the nature of the historical Chinese states and a vast amount of subject literature underpinning the relevance of the sea for contemporary China's development as a great power. This article applies seapower concepts developed in naval theory and classical geopolitics to examine the identity of Imperial China during the Southern Song, Ming and Qing dynasties and of the 21st century People's Republic of China. It makes the assertion that the development of China's identity cannot be explained by applying a single continental pattern. Rather, throughout its history, China's approach to the sea has depended on the varying relevance of different constituents, i.e. determining factors. By applying the aforementioned concepts, the 21st century People's Republic of China is characterized as a state shaped by the rising relevance of seapower. This, in turn, indicates a sustained maritime and naval commitment uncharacteristic of traditional continental powers.

Introduction

China's relationship with the sea and seapower has been a major subtopic in the debate about the rise of China since the 1990s. A wealth of literature has been written about modern Chinese maritime and naval affairs, consistently drawing attention to the enormous expansion of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), the significance of the Chinese maritime economy, and the interconnections between the maritime domain, Chinese military strategy, and foreign policy.¹

Beyond specific policy objectives, however, there is still serious controversy regarding the reasons for 'China's turn towards the sea' in the 21st century, the nature of the Chinese state as a continental power and the role seapower has assumed.

Academics have applied various concepts related to classical geopolitics in order to explain political and military developments in China in a discourse dominated by largely continental thinking. Applying such a continental approach, Robert Ross has argued for a Pax Sinica on mainland Asia, geographically limited to the Eurasian landmass and separate from the U.S. maritime sphere of influence.² Andrew Lambert has characterized the nature of modern China as terrestrial and military, as such being distinct from a seapower state's political and economic mechanisms, values and vulnerabilities.³ Furthermore,

1 Lewis/Xue 1994; Sakhuja 2001; Yoshihara/Holmes 2010; Cole 2010; Cole 2016.

2 Ross 1999: 99; Ross 2003: 352.

3 Lambert 2018: 6.

Peter Dutton has argued that China's expansion in Southeast Asia, most notably the construction of outposts in the South China Sea, follows a historical pattern of continental domination that in turn poses a severe challenge to the liberal maritime order.⁴

With regard to Chinese naval affairs, scholars of international relations frequently utilize a strategic interpretation of 'sea power' in the tradition of Alfred T. Mahan. The academic debate has ranged from the argument that a more powerful China possesses a natural geostrategic desire to reach out to the sea in order to exert control in its 'maritime backyard' to the argument that China's naval expansion and the range of the country's naval operations will be constrained by the characteristics of China as a continental power.⁵ Scholars have referred to modern China as an empire relying on 'extraordinary domestic resource bases in almost all areas' that does not view the 'defence of oceanic trade as a core mission'. Instead, the enormous expansion of the PLAN has been associated with the 'total, protracted struggle for regional and global supremacy' supposedly lying at the heart of the Communist Party's (CCP) China Dream.⁶

In contrast to the above views, there has been a shift in the debate driven by proponents of Chinese seapower, especially since the proclamation of China's 21st Century Maritime Silk Road as part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013. In this regard, Alexandre Sheldon-Duplaix argues that China intends to develop into a "sea power" mainly in the Indo-Pacific region', while Bernard Cole acknowledges that China has already 'completed the nearly unprecedented development into both a continental and maritime military power'.⁷

Apparently, there is discrepancy in the academic debate between the largely continental interpretation of Chinese maritime and naval affairs and scholars underpinning the relevance of the sea for China's development as a great power.

From the latter group of scholars' perspective, a 'historical pattern' of former Chinese states that were bound to continental thinking does not seem well suited to explain the nature of 21st century China and its accumulation of sea-power. This raises the question of what has changed about the Chinese state to allow seapower to play a much greater role.

Dismissing the idea of a fixed historical pattern that can explain a country's attitude to land and sea, this article draws upon land power and seapower concepts developed in naval theory and classical geopolitical literature to explain the rise and decline of Chinese seapower as the result of the changing nature of the respective Chinese states.

I seek to answer the above question by examining the cases of the Southern Song dynasty, an era commonly associated with seapower, the Ming and Qing dynasties, states often regarded as continental, and the 21st century People's Republic of China (PRC). I do not aim to provide a comprehensive maritime history

4 Dutton 2016.

5 Schreer 2017: 8; Bullock 2002: 57–63.

6 Lambert 2018: 313; Fanell 2019: 12.

7 Sheldon-Duplaix 2016: 51; Cole 2016: 84.

of these periods. Instead, this paper identifies the role seapower played within the respective eras by examining the geographical, political and economic forces that influenced the Chinese states' approach to the sea. It is less concerned with a strategic, Mahanian interpretation of sea power focusing on the use of the sea to exert power.⁸ In essence, that strategic dimension is about the '[...] ability to bring naval capabilities to bear on the interests and security of another state, thereby altering its behaviour.'⁹ Rather, this article applies Andrew Lambert's concept of seapower based on the ancient interpretation of the term as describing the national identity of a particular state.¹⁰ Using this interpretation, seapower is not understood primarily as a political instrument but as a necessary condition for the existence and economic well-being of a particular state.¹¹ Whether seapower plays a significant role for the national identity of a country, a rather limited one or none at all, depends on certain factors that are, in turn, heavily influenced by physical or human geography. Acknowledging the vast amount of literature dealing with Chinese naval and maritime activities, capabilities and policy analyses, I seek to make a conceptual contribution to the debate by providing practical examples for the application of sea and land power concepts. Differentiating a maritime power's navy from the military navy of a continental power is of great relevance, because, as Geoffrey Till points out, '[...] the latter is often said to be shallow-rooted and unlikely to last [...].'¹²

Structurally, this article is divided into five sections. The first section provides some conceptual clarification of the terms 'seapower' and 'continental power' and their determining factors. Then, the imperial Chinese dynasties of the Southern Song, Ming and Qing are examined with a view to those factors. Subsequently, the 21st century PRC is analyzed and differentiated from its most recent imperial predecessors to illustrate why the categorisation of China as a purely continental power no longer holds true. In its last section, this article elaborates on the implications of the rising importance of seapower for China's foreign and maritime policy. Ultimately, this article argues that in order to understand contemporary China's relationship with the sea, the country must no longer be regarded solely as a continental power because the increasing relevance of seapower has changed the nature of the Chinese state profoundly.

1 Differences between the Maritime and Continental Nature of States

The analysis of the relationship between land powers and seapower states is one of the most traditional research topics within the study of classical geopolitics. As such, the role of the land or the sea as a source of power and as an enabler to

8 Patalano 2012: 2–3.

9 Grygiel 2014: 19.

10 Lambert 2018: 4.

11 Patalano 2012: 3.

12 Till 2013: 87.

exert power has been a key component of the geopolitical models presented by geographers and strategists since the days of Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840–1914), Sir Halford Mackinder (1861–1947) and Nicholas Spykman (1893–1943). There is a wide academic consensus that these two different identities of states, land powers and seapowers, are quite distinct from each other with regard to function, dependencies and vulnerabilities concerning geographical, economic and political factors as well as the way they seek to exert power and which kind of military they develop to support their strategies.

The term seapower, as it is used in this article, refers to the maritime nature of states that are ‘[...] dependent on the control of the ocean communications for cohesion, commerce and control.’¹³ In this article’s interpretation, the term is not used in an absolute sense, which means it is assumed that different states can possess varying degrees of seapower. The amount of seapower a state develops, and the significance the sea possesses for that particular state, depends on certain constituents that, in the words of Geoffrey Till, ‘[...] are attributes of countries that make it easier or harder for them to be strong at sea.’¹⁴ Over the course of several centuries, various naval theoreticians have presented different catalogues of such constituents.¹⁵ While the manifestation and importance of these factors serve to explain why a certain state harnesses seapower, the absence, insignificance or reversal of these constituents is used to characterize the nature of a state as a land or continental power.¹⁶ For ease of applicability and comparability, this article limits itself to three principal factors that are widely cited in naval-related academic discourse and cover the essential elements of more voluminous catalogues. These include a geography favouring maritime enterprise, the socio-political structure of a state and a maritime economy. Firstly, geographical factors may include the security of a country’s land borders,¹⁷ access to global sea lanes,¹⁸ the physical conditions of the territory of a state and the respective state’s ability to provide the necessary resources to sustain its population and its economy, as well as the need to preserve the national unity of a country by sea lines of communication (SLOCs).¹⁹

The second aspect used to explain the relevance of seapower relates to the form of government in a state. As the natural environment of human beings is the land, considering maritime affairs is not a natural priority for humans and the societies they live in. Consequently, governments need to be influenced to take maritime interests into consideration and support projects related to the sea financially, politically and legally. As this process requires a certain degree of political influence on the part of the advocates of maritime enterprise, for

13 Lambert 2018: 4.

14 Till 2013: 87.

15 Mahan 1890: 23–82; Till 2013: 87; Lambert 2018: 327, 330–331.

16 Due to the country’s enormous dimensions, the term continental power is used throughout this article when referring to China.

17 Mahan 1890: 35; Grygiel 2014: 19, 22–25.

18 Mahan 1890: 31; Rodger 1999: 197.

19 Mahan 1890: 36–37; Till 2013: 94.

example trading and insurance companies, shipping lines and owners of capital, inclusive political systems in various forms are key characteristics of states shaped by the possession of great amounts of sea power.²⁰

The third factor used in this article to determine the relevance of seapower for a particular state refers to the nature of the state's economy. It assesses the importance of the maritime sector for the economy and addresses the question of whether economic growth and tax revenue are driven by the wealth generated by the people and the soil under the control of the respective state or by foreign commercial relations that depend on seaborne trade.²¹

The application of this theoretical model covering the three factors explained above provides the framework in which to examine the nature of the respective Chinese states and dynasties.

2 The Southern Song – High-Water Mark of Chinese Seapower

The Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279) can be regarded as the Chinese state associated most closely with the interpretation of seapower as an identity. In order to protect maritime commerce from piracy, China, under the Song emperors, maintained a professional and permanent blue-water navy,²² established a convoy system for merchant vessels and built a chain of naval bases.²³ Issues related to the development and preservation of seapower were of great concern to the Song government because the sea had proved to be vital for the security of the state in both geographical and economic aspects and the Southern Song dynasty, unlike other Chinese dynasties, was inherently vulnerable to loss of control over sea communications.

Compared to many other Imperial Chinese states, the geographical features of the Southern Song state contributed much more to the development of seapower. Located in the south-central portion of the Yangtze River Delta, Lin'an,²⁴ the capital of the Southern Song dynasty, had a major seaport. A city full of canals, bridges and beautiful houses built for wealthy merchants, this was the 'Venice of the Far East.'²⁵ Its geographical location made it a perfect hub for riverine, coastal and oceangoing trade.²⁶ Even though the Southern Song, like other Chinese dynasties, faced the threat of invasion by northern steppe nomad nations, in this case the Jurchen Jin dynasty and the Mongols, the geographical situation of the Southern Song state meant that maritime security was given a much higher priority. Following the retreat to southern China after the Jurch-

20 Lambert 2018: 8–10, 327.

21 Münkler 2005: 82–104; Darwin 2008: 96; Till 2013: 3–4; Lambert 2018: 327.

22 Schottenhammer 2015: 455; Lo 1955: 491.

23 Forage 1993: 8; Till 2013: 21.

24 Modern Hangzhou.

25 Vogelsang 2012: 340.

26 Wilson 2009: 242.

en invasion in 1125, the Southern Song dynasty secured the Huai River as the state's northern border. In effect, the outcome of conflicts between the Southern Song and the Jurchen Jin dynasty, for example during the Song-Jin War of 1161–1164, was heavily influenced by naval battles on the Huai and Yangzi River and along the Chinese coast.²⁷

Yet, the impact of the Southern Song state's geography on the role of seapower extended far beyond the question of border security. According to naval theory, the geographical location of a state is of great relevance because the need to protect long, insecure land borders severely limits the resources the respective state and its society can provide for the development of seapower.²⁸ Its maritime endeavours are significantly disadvantaged in comparison with a state that has the '[...] very unity of its aim directed upon the sea.'²⁹ Consequently, Jakub Grygiel argues that insularity, both as a geographical and a geopolitical condition, serves as the key prerequisite for the development of seapower.³⁰ In this regard, the Southern Song state, with the Himalayan Mountains to its west, the Huai and Yangzi Rivers at its northern border and the South and East China Seas to its south and east, was one of the most geopolitically insular states among China's imperial dynasties. Without access to Central Asia and the plains of northern China, under the Southern Song, '[...] the Chinese world turned resolutely to the sea.'³¹

With regard to the political conditions of the respective era, the political system of the Southern Song dynasty was especially favourable for the development of seapower. First and foremost, the social status of the merchant class was greatly elevated during the Song dynasty. Increased social mobility and the great consideration given by the empire to economic conditions led to a permeation between the social groups of merchants and the bureaucrat scholars in charge of administrating Imperial China.³² Furthermore, as the Chinese economy was in the process of a transition favouring the financial and reducing the agrarian sector, merchants and entrepreneurs were replacing the declining aristocracy in Song China's social hierarchy.³³ The change in relationship between the traditional elite and the merchant class was a significant development given that Chinese bureaucrat scholars had traditionally had strong aversions against mercantile activities and the merchant class in general. At times, even during the Southern Song era, the traditional Confucian value system challenged the role of foreign and shipborne commerce as in 1127 when the Gaozong Emperor deemed foreign items superfluous luxuries and stopped the import of drugs and aromatics. However, the Southern Song state and its

27 Lo 1955: 490; Wang and Wright 2015: 245; Schottenhammer 2015: 457.

28 Mahan 1890: 35; Grygiel 2014: 19, 22–25.

29 Mahan 1890: 29.

30 Grygiel 2014: 25.

31 Gernet 1996: 328.

32 Guo 2006: 120–125.

33 Wheatley 1959: 27.

economy were so dependent on the maritime sector and their wealth so reliant on shipborne commerce that very soon maritime interests prevailed against Confucian ideology.³⁴

In addition to interpersonal relations, the interconnection between the merchant class and the state developed further on a system level. While the first period of the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127) had already witnessed mutual dependence and competition between the state and the merchant class,³⁵ the Southern Song era continued to be characterized by a strong interaction between profit-oriented stakeholders and government agencies.³⁶ One of the reasons the interests of the merchant class could influence governance in Song China was the strong position of the commercial guilds. While, on the one hand, serving as a means by which the Song government sought to exercise control over the merchant class, the guilds, on the other hand, were a strong multiplier of the interests of private businessmen, thus greatly enhancing the merchants' power in negotiation vis-à-vis the Song government and their influence on society.³⁷ Apart from the guilds, the relationship between the state and the merchant class was further institutionalized in the second half of the 12th century when the administration of all major government monopolies was assigned to members of the merchant class.³⁸ Thus, by way of informal and institutionalized formats, the socio-political conditions of Southern Song China allowed for an accommodation of the interests of the merchant class.³⁹

To sum up, Song China, even though not in possession of a representative form of government in the sense of classic seapower states such as England or the Dutch Republic,⁴⁰ did feature mechanisms for the inclusion of merchant interests in the political decision-making process as demanded by seapower theory.

Ultimately, Southern Song China's economy reflected the country's close relationship with the sea most strikingly. The development of large commercial centres offering new employment and income opportunities for a diversified class of merchants was characteristic of the Southern Song dynasty.⁴¹ Legal constraints and urban administrative divisions, designed for the strict control of commercial activities by public authorities, were relaxed or abolished, leading to a great expansion of market and economic life in Chinese cities.⁴² Furthermore, in the mercantile society of the Song era, professions involving long-distance travel, such as boatmen, itinerant merchants and sailors, flour-

34 Wheatley 1959: 29–30.

35 Pee 2010.

36 Wills 1979: 215.

37 Fan 2011: 79–80.

38 Wheatley 1959: 28.

39 Till 2013: 21.

40 Lambert 2018: 6, 333.

41 Franke/Trauzettel 1968: 195; Gernet 1996: 315–316; Schmidt-Glintzer 1999: 82.

42 Gernet 1996: 317.

ished, while society as a whole became more mobile and thus accustomed to means of long-distance transportation⁴³ – vital ingredients for the development of seapower. For instance, the rise of domestic, interregional trade and long-distance transportation triggered the expansion of the shipbuilding industry, which in turn also proved beneficial for the construction of blue-water vessels as foreign trade during the (Southern) Song era was still largely dominated by Chinese merchants.⁴⁴

One of the principal reasons for the economic expansion during the Song era was the development of a wealthy urban elite made up of rich landowners and merchants, who boosted demand for luxury products and, consequently, the import of foreign luxury items.⁴⁵

The most important import trade items both by value and volume were aromatics and drugs such as frankincense, myrrh or nutmeg. The total list of import commodities, nevertheless, was extremely varied.⁴⁶ An inventory assembled in 1141 listed 339 import goods originating from the entire Indo-Pacific region: among others, nutmegs and cloves from the Moluccas, sandalwood from eastern Java and the Lesser Sunda Islands, Gharuwood from the Malayan Peninsula, rhinoceros horn from the Kingdom of Delhi, from Africa, Tong-king and Champa⁴⁷, myrobalans and indigo from Gujerat, ivory from Africa, myrrh from the Berbera Coast and ambergris from the East African shore.⁴⁸ Chinese traders also acted as intermediary merchants, reselling goods that had been imported from the ‘South Sea’, such as Ivory, to clients in north-eastern Asia, for example in Japan.⁴⁹ Technological advances had made possible the creation of such intercontinental networks of seaborne commerce: since the end of the 11th century, Chinese navigators had been able to employ the compass, and Song-era ships could be built sufficiently large to carry several dozen tons of cargo and sustain crews as large as 500 to 600 sailors.⁵⁰

Song China, too, exported a variety of luxury goods with silks and ceramics making up the majority of Chinese exports by sea.⁵¹ Having acquired the technology to mass produce and refine both green and white ceramics in the 10th century, the Chinese began shipping porcelain in large quantities throughout the Song Empire and the Asian and Indian Ocean littoral, including to the entrepôts of Gujerat and Murbat at the Arabian sea and to markets in North and Southeast Asia, Ceylon, India or the Zanzibar coast of Africa.⁵²

43 Gernet 1996: 317–318.

44 Schmidt-Glintzer 1999: 81–82.

45 Fairbank/Goldman 2006: 92.

46 Wheatley 1959: 31.

47 In modern Vietnam.

48 Wheatley 1959: 32–33.

49 Clark 1991: 137.

50 Franke/Trauzettel 1968: 193.

51 Gernet 1996: 322.

52 Wheatley 1959: 40; Rawson 1993: 75.

The importance of foreign commerce also had a striking impact on the development of China's regional economic development. As So Kee Long points out, in the southern Chinese Province of Guangdong the ceramics industry developed in spatially concentrated areas in the coastal belt close to the major maritime centres, while there is little historical evidence for ceramics production in further inland areas of the region.⁵³ In fact, So Kee Long goes on to argue that foreign demand for Chinese 'trade ceramics' during the Song dynasty became so strong that it drove regional expansion of the ceramics industry as was the case in Fujian Province.⁵⁴ Similarly, while referring to the very same province of Fujian, Hugh Clark argues that the rising importance of commerce, movement of goods and long-distance trade routes on the one hand and changes in rural cultivation such as the decrease in food crops cultivation and the increase in cash crops and non-agricultural production on the other hand, were closely interrelated.⁵⁵

As a result, sea trade increased rapidly and along with it commercial activities at Chinese harbours like Guangzhou, Quanzhou, Xiamen, Fuzhou and Lin'an.⁵⁶

The Song government understood that foreign trade and sea power created enormous potential for wealth and adopted a tax system suited for mercantile activities.⁵⁷ For example, in the 12th century, import duties were fixed at one-tenth and one-fifteenth of the respective product value, depending on whether the import goods were classified as 'fine' quality goods or 'coarse' commodities.⁵⁸ Apart from generating revenue through direct customs duties and taxes on trade, Song China had also established the Bureau of Licensed Trade that bought foreign imports and resold them at a profit or traded them in exchange for sheep, camels and horses with the peoples bordering the Chinese Empire to the north.⁵⁹ As a result, in the 12th and 13th centuries state revenue from commercial taxes and monopolies far exceeded the income generated from agrarian taxes,⁶⁰ in effect turning China into the largest and wealthiest commercial empire in the world.⁶¹

It is important to note that even Southern Song China, this analysis' most suitable case study of a Chinese state shaped by maritime interests and in possession of significant amounts of sea power, does not fulfil all the criteria commonly found in the theoretical discourse surrounding seapower. The economic model employed by Southern Song China does not correspond well with

53 Long 1994: 17.

54 Long 1994: 1, 6.

55 Clark 1991: 158.

56 Clark 1991: 1,120–140; Fairbank and Goldman 2006: 92.

57 Gernet 1996: 322; Wilson 2009: 245.

58 Wheatley 1959, p. 22.

59 Wheatley 1959, p. 23.

60 Gernet 1996: 323; Fairbank/Goldman 2006: 92.

61 Forage 1993: 6.

the theoretical ideal of a seapower economy that features a free market driven by private and public-private enterprise with comparatively little interference from the state. In fact, as Paul Smith argues, direct bureaucratic participation in the market through institutions like the Bureau of Licensed Trade and government monopolies meant that Southern Song China exhibited clear features of a command economy.⁶² Its complex and excessive customs and tax regime vitiated the economy and turned China's 'entrepreneurial state' of the 11th century into a 'rentier state.'⁶³

Nevertheless, applying the above-introduced relative understanding of seapower leads to the conclusion that Southern Song China was decisively shaped by its relationship with the sea, and seapower played a central role for the survival of the state. Its seaborne wealth was not a luxury but a necessity: the above-mentioned loss of North China to the opposing Jin dynasty and the destructions in the Yangtze River Valley brought about by the Song-Jin War completely disrupted China's economic system.⁶⁴ Paul Wheatley argues that Southern Song China, given the loss of North China's agricultural and industrial production, a drastic loss of state revenue, uncontrollable inflation and high defence expenditures due to the war, '[...] would have been quite unable to meet these demands had it not been in possession of one dependable source of income, namely, the South Seas trade.'⁶⁵

As economic, social and ultimately dynastic stability rested to a large degree on maritime commerce, the Song administration promoted foreign trade by a wide range of measures. As Paul Wheatley points out, these measures included, among others, dispatching missions under the imperial seal that offered special import licenses to merchants engaged in overseas commerce, if they called in South Chinese ports; launching government investigations into the attractiveness of Chinese harbours to foreign merchants; renewing trading licences for successful Chinese merchants on a yearly basis and granting honorary titles to traders engaged in transactions of exceptionally high value.⁶⁶ Furthermore, in order to maintain the foundations for seaborne trade and harness the benefits generated by seapower, the Southern Song government became deeply involved in the maritime sector by setting up customs and constabulary offices, expanding harbour facilities, constructing warehouses and developing a blue-water navy capable of defending merchant ships.⁶⁷ What Geoffrey Till calls 'the virtuous maritime circle' had been completed in (Southern) Song China at

62 Smith 1991: 314.

63 Smith 1991: 313.

64 Wheatley 1959: 21, 26; Forage 1993: 6; Gernet 1996: 324; Schottenhammer 2015: 455.

65 Wheatley 1959: 22.

66 Wheatley 1959: 24–25.

67 Forage 1993: 6; Gernet 1996: 324; Schottenhammer 2015: 455.

least since 1127 when a tax on ocean-going ships was introduced.⁶⁸ This source of income was solely used to cover military expenses.⁶⁹

Even though Chinese maritime expansion had been made possible by astonishing advances in seafaring technology and was driven by the initiative of individual merchants, the overall development towards Chinese seapower depended on the maritime commercial character of the economic system during the Southern Song era and government support.⁷⁰ China during the Southern Song dynasty was able to harness significant seapower because state and private interests in developing seaborne trade intersected. This intersection is an integral aspect of the development of seapower as, in the case of the Southern Song, revenue generated from seaborne trade provides the necessary funding for the maintenance of the state's naval and maritime sector and thus its security.⁷¹

In summary, the combination of a very restricted but favourable geography, a political system amenable to the interests of the merchant class as well as an economy and a state treasury flourishing under the expansion of commerce and seaborne trade meant that during the Southern Song dynasty the role of seapower was vital for the state.

3 The Ming – Maritime Endeavours of a Continental Power

Other than in the Southern Song period, Chinese policies during most of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) were dominated by continental considerations.

From the outset, the geographical situation of Ming China dictated a land-oriented focus.

Having emerged from the lower Yangzi and southeast coastal regions of China, the founders of the Ming dynasty were initially attuned to maritime commerce and naval power played a significant role in their conquest of China.⁷² Once they had finalized their conquest and established themselves as the ruling Chinese dynasty, however, the Ming adopted a much more continental approach. The vast extent of their empire, stretching from the shores of the South China Sea to the Great Wall in the north and from the foothills of the Himalayan Mountains in the west to the Liaodong Peninsula in the east, prioritized policies optimized for land control. Whereas overseas trade had been an essential element in the well-being and survival of the Southern Song state, internal cohesion and interconnectivity among the various regions were crucial for the endurance of the Ming state. Instead of the open ocean, the Grand Canal, reopened in 1415, and various inner waterways served as the Ming Empire's primary aorta, securing south-north trade and the distribution of goods without

68 Till 2013: 17–18; Wheatley 1959: 22.

69 Wheatley 1959: 22.

70 Gernet 1996: 328.

71 Elvert 2018: 43; Lambert 2018: 327.

72 Wilson 2009: 243–244.

interference from seagoing threats.⁷³ Similarly, the re-establishment of Beijing as the imperial capital in 1420 shifted the political centre of gravity from the riverine, trade-oriented lower Yangzi area to the North China Plain, a region amenable to rapid equestrian communication and shaped by a strong military presence along the empire's northern border.⁷⁴ As Andrew Wilson argues, both the revival of the Grand Canal and the transfer of the capital to Beijing lessened the importance of maritime commerce and naval affairs for the Ming government.⁷⁵

With regard to the empire's geopolitical situation, the conquest northwards had expanded the territory under Ming control, but it had also significantly altered the nature of the Ming state and its threat perception. The territorial expansion resulted in long, unstable land frontiers in China's north and north-west that were under threat from steppe nomads such as the Mongols and later the Manchus, while rebellions of ethnic minorities in the south threatened cohesion from within.⁷⁶

To sum up, the Ming dynasty's geopolitical situation was all but beneficial to maritime endeavours. With the threat of land-based invasion close to the Ming capital, naval affairs could only be a minor and/or temporary concern for the Ming government's security policy.⁷⁷ In fact, the Hongwu Emperor (ruled 1368–1398), founding emperor of the Ming dynasty, instructed his successors not to expand overseas and not to attempt to conquer the littoral states of East and Southeast Asia.⁷⁸

As for the political system, once the Ming leadership had matured, conditions for possessing and developing seapower deteriorated. Despite their southern Chinese heritage, the Ming quickly adopted the governance style and political culture of their preceding Mongol dynasty, which had included prioritization of continental expansion and internal consolidation.⁷⁹ The strong interaction between the merchant class and politics, which had been characteristic of the Southern Song, disappeared after a short period of Ming rule, while accumulation of commercial wealth became a private concern for merchants.⁸⁰ It is against this backdrop that the termination of the voyages of Ming China's great treasure fleet, undertaken under the leadership of Admiral Zheng He at the beginning of the 15th century, can be explained. Zheng He's voyages are often referred to as a particular Chinese expression of seapower.⁸¹

73 Needham/Wang/Lu 1971: 526; Fairbank 1983: 12–13; Elleman 2009: 290.

74 Darwin 2008: 87.

75 Wilson 2009: 253.

76 Gernet 1996: 416–417, 435.

77 Wilson 2009: 253; Patalano 2016: 125.

78 Dreyer 2007: 16.

79 Wilson 2009: 245.

80 Wills 1979: 215.

81 Lambert 2018: 315; Kollakowski 2019: 18.

Applying the concept of seapower as the identity of a state, however, offers a different interpretation. By order of the Ming Emperors Yongle (ruled 1402–1424) and Xuande (ruled 1425–1435), the Chinese treasure fleet conducted seven great voyages in the Indo-Pacific region between 1405 and 1433. Sailing through waters already known to the Chinese, Zheng He's objective was neither the exploration of new markets,⁸² as had been the case for European discoveries, nor territorial conquest. Instead, the motivation behind Zheng He's voyages was primarily political, diplomatic and military, especially in terms of the display of Chinese power to South and Southeast Asian countries and, subsequently, the enforcement of the Chinese tributary system on these states.⁸³ As Edward Dreyer points out, Chinese soldiers on board ships of the treasure fleet exercised military force over Sumatra and Ceylon in order to enforce the Chinese political order,⁸⁴ not to pursue economic objectives, as for example the Portuguese seafarers did later in the same sea zone to get seaborne trade under control.⁸⁵ Though there is some evidence that expanding existing trade relations might have been a secondary objective,⁸⁶ overall promotion of trade remained a marginal incentive for Zheng He's voyages.

In fact, despite sending Zheng He and his treasure fleet overseas, the Yongle Emperor maintained his predecessor's anti-commercial legislation, which banned Chinese merchants from engaging in foreign trade.⁸⁷ These laws were strongly opposed by the merchant class, but being excluded from the political system, the merchants' resistance was futile.⁸⁸ With no joint public-private agents involved, for example European-style trading companies, it was hard to sustain economic and subsequently political interest in long-distance seafaring. This situation was made worse by the lack of influential maritime-affiliated background institutions, e.g. a powerful banking sector specialized in funding maritime enterprise, as was the case for important European seaports. With the costs of the voyages escalating, opposition to the treasure fleet by Ming officials grew stronger and after not even 30 years, the maritime endeavour of China's treasure fleet came to an end.⁸⁹ As there were few commercial incentives associated with Zheng He's voyages and wealthy merchants were excluded from the political decision-making process, the voyages of the treasure fleet depended completely on the sponsorship of an adventurous Yongle Emperor who was willing to order and support Zheng He's journeys despite the antipathy of the Neo-Confucian bureaucrats at the imperial court.⁹⁰ Thus, the voyages were the

82 Wilson 2009: 251; Dreyer 2007: 3.

83 Wilson 2009: 251; Dreyer 2007: 1,3, Lambert 2018: 315.

84 Dreyer 2007: 28.

85 Dreyer 2007: 3; Elvert 2018: 62–66.

86 Wilson 2009: 251–252; Needham, Wang and Lu 1971: 288.

87 Dreyer 2007: 3.

88 Wilson 2009: 258–259.

89 Dreyer 2007: 4; Wilson 2009: 252–253.

90 Needham/Wang/Lu 1971: 524–525; Dreyer 2007: 34–35; Wilson 2009: 253.

result of the personal ambitions of individual stakeholders and not due to an established mechanism that institutionalized state interest in seafaring. Consequently, with the death of the key stakeholders, such as the Yongle Emperor, and a change in imperial priorities, there was no influential voice able to lobby effectively for the preservation of an active imperial engagement with the sea.

Therefore, Zheng He's voyages should not be interpreted as an example of seapower but rather as an example of how quickly state-sponsored maritime endeavours dry up when they are not well connected to a country's commercial sector within a greater system shaped by seapower.

As regards the economy, Ming China featured a command economy that firmly rested on agrarian production provided for food payments and land taxes.⁹¹ Economic development was driven by the regional exchange of goods within China's vast domestic market, a system dependent on internal waterways, not oceanic SLOCs.⁹² Seaborne trade, on the other hand, was regarded as a source of instability and a security threat, prompting efforts to restrict it to the dimensions controlled within the framework of the tributary system and leading to increasingly anti-commercial and anti-maritime legislation.⁹³ In addition to the above-mentioned imperial prohibitions on Chinese merchants engaging in foreign trade at the end of the 14th and the beginning of the 15th century,⁹⁴ further legislation introduced at the beginning of the 16th century included, among other things, legal bans on building ships with more than two masts (1500) and the destruction of all high-seas vessels as well as the incarceration of Chinese merchants engaged in overseas trade (1525).⁹⁵

After 1567, the Ming government loosened the restrictions on maritime trade,⁹⁶ although conditions for maritime merchants remained difficult.⁹⁷ Gradually, the significance of seaborne commerce for Ming China increased and the country prospered from sales of export goods, especially silk, tea and porcelain, and imports of large amounts of silver.⁹⁸ However, even during this heyday of maritime trade, the essential link between maritime commerce and the development of seapower remained fragile. While the economic benefits for the southern Chinese coastal region were spectacular,⁹⁹ the opening of ports to trade was not accompanied by a profound change in the nature of Ming China's tax system, a system that relied on revenues gained from taxes on land and agricultural production rather than from taxing trade. Thus, state revenues gained from maritime trade continued to be a minor source of funding from

91 Darwin 2008: 87; Wilson 2009: 245.

92 Darwin 2008: 40–41, 45.

93 Darwin 2008: 88–89; Wilson 2009: 241, 255.

94 Dreyer 2007: 3.

95 Wilson 2009: 239.

96 Darwin 2008: 89; Zhao 2013: 26.

97 Zhao 2013: 26–27.

98 Wills 1979: 213; Wilson 2009: 264.

99 Wilson 2009: 264.

Beijing's point of view.¹⁰⁰ This helps to explain why the role seapower played with regard to public policy differed so much depending on the level of government. While local governments in Chinese coastal regions had been very active in administrating maritime and naval activities throughout the Ming era,¹⁰¹ the partial abolition of the anti-maritime legislation did not result in policies aimed at the proactive expansion of the maritime commercial sector but rather, as Alessio Patalano argues, in a 'largely laissez-faire economic approach' on behalf of the Ming Empire's central government.¹⁰²

The economic model adopted by Ming China was essentially one of a land-based export economy, not the economy of a seapower state. The model depended on the export of agricultural products (e.g. tea) and manufactured goods (e.g. silk and porcelain). But Chinese interest was limited to the exchange of goods in the relevant harbours. Ming China cared little about the transcontinental transportation of its goods on the world's oceans and access to the consumer markets.

As a consequence, even though Ming China's market attracted trade, its success depended on foreign maritime agents that transported commercial goods to East Asia where they were often bought and delivered by Chinese merchants, bypassing the Ming government's maritime ban in the process.¹⁰³ European long-distance merchants, starting with the Portuguese and soon followed by others, fulfilled these tasks by operating via a global web of sea-lanes that connected the world's markets. They were, in the words of John Darwin, '[...] convenient middlemen for a Ming Empire that disliked overseas activity by its own subjects.'¹⁰⁴

In conclusion, Ming China was a country caught up in continental considerations in which sea power could only decisively shape policy locally. The state's geography demanded policies that prioritized the Asian continent, and the political system did not grant significant political influence to economic stakeholders. What is more, the Neo-Confucian bureaucratic elite that administered the empire was strongly opposed to any mechanism beyond their control that could secure government funding.¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, the nature of Ming China's economic system was largely land-oriented. When foreign trade became more important, it was enabled by foreign maritime stakeholders reaching out to Asia and not by China reaching out to the sea in order to access foreign markets. Andrew Wilson argues that at times economic or security conditions brought about a policy change, leading the Ming government to prioritize the maritime domain.¹⁰⁶ While this did happen, the lack of a system shaped by sea-

100 Wills 1979: 215.

101 Wilson 2009: 239.

102 Patalano 2016: 125.

103 Lambert 2018: 20; Zhao 2013: 27–33.

104 Darwin 2008: 54.

105 Wilson 2009: 265–266; Needham/Wang/Lu 1971: 524.

106 Wilson 2009: 241.

power meant that interest in the sea could not be sustained and soon vanished again. This is what put an end to Zheng He's voyages and ensured that even after achieving great successes during the anti-piracy campaigns at the end of the 16th century and during the naval campaigns of the Imjin War,¹⁰⁷ the importance of the Chinese Navy soon declined again. In contrast to European states in possession of great amounts of seapower, where merchants were competing for access to world markets, China's overseas interests remained limited. It is against this backdrop that the Ming government did very little to protect the interests of Chinese overseas,¹⁰⁸ even when 23,000 Chinese, searching for new sources of revenue,¹⁰⁹ were massacred in the Philippines at the beginning of the 17th century.

4 The Qing – A Continental State and Private Maritime Trade

Following the end of the Ming era and the seizure of Beijing by the Manchus, Qing China (1644–1912) continued with its land-focused policies drawing its strength from the enormous landmasses under its control.

With respect to the geography of the Great Qing Empire, the geostrategic situation remained a serious obstacle to the development of Chinese seapower. Internally, the new Manchu rulers were faced with severe threats including the lack of control over China's southern provinces, an uprising of powerful Chinese generals revolting against the Manchu-led Imperial centre, the so-called Three Feudatories, and the creation of a rebel state on the island of Taiwan. Led by the Ming loyalist Koxinga, the rebels on Taiwan were trading and privateering along the southern Chinese coasts and the maritime trade routes of the South China Sea.¹¹⁰ It was only here in the southern coastal provinces and on Taiwan that local seapower identity provided the remnants of the former Ming empire with the maritime expertise necessary for naval resistance based on the exploitation of maritime trade.¹¹¹ Dealing with these maritime threats was a continuous headache for the newly established Qing rulers in Beijing for several decades. Ultimately, in order to deny Koxinga's state access to resources, the Qing government enforced the extreme of any anti-seapower policy: the evacuation of the coastal belt.¹¹² Even when Qing China was finally consolidated domestically after a 40-year struggle, external rivals continued to threaten the Qing state. The geopolitical focus of Imperial China remained land-centred while subjugating and/or repelling continental opponents as diverse as the Dzungarian Kal-

107 Wilson 2009: 264–268.

108 Jacques 2012: 34.

109 Wills 1979: 214; Darwin 2008: 131.

110 Darwin 2008: 126–127.

111 Wills 1979: 221–231.

112 Wills 1979: 228.

myks, Turks, Tibetans or Russians.¹¹³ In accordance with this threat perception, the Qing located their most elite military assets, Manchu cavalry units, at the frontier and along the critical Yangzi River. Naval units, on the other hand, received a very low level of priority with regard to the allocation of administrative resources and competent personnel.¹¹⁴

As far as the political system is concerned, the political mindset of the Manchu rulers and the power structures inherent to the Qing system were even less amenable to sea-related affairs than those of their Ming predecessors had been. Even after having taken control of China territorially, it took the Manchus approximately a century to transform from a confederacy of clans into a unitary state.¹¹⁵ By embracing their heritage as Eurasian steppe nomads, the world's most continental style of life and governance, the new Chinese rulers preserved their ancestors' perspective on both domestic and global affairs. Consequently, Qing rulers aimed for traditional continental policy objectives: taking control of territory and consolidating power domestically.

By the second half of the 17th century, China's participation in international trade was very limited.¹¹⁶ Even when internal peace was established in southern China after 1683 and foreign trade grew again, there was, as John Wills argues, '[...] no revival of the maritime positive interaction of profit and power.'¹¹⁷ The connection between commercial profit and its influence on political power, however, is one of the essential elements of states shaped by a seapower identity. The only force capable of changing this system, a politically influential urban bourgeoisie made up of wealthy merchants, was deliberately prevented from evolving by various administrative means.¹¹⁸ In China, the lack of a political culture formed by the intersection of maritime commerce and political decision-making revealed itself at the beginning of 19th century when Sino-British trade tensions triggered the First Opium War. Bruce Elleman explains that one of the main reasons why China slid into war was the inability of Chinese officials to correctly assess the influence that merchants, especially the British East India Company, could exert over their government.¹¹⁹

As regards the economic state of affairs, the Qing Empire featured an agricultural economy just like its Ming predecessor.¹²⁰ Its strength rested on a huge landmass and very dynamic domestic economic development.¹²¹ As in the preceding dynasties, the critical infrastructure connecting and supplying the regions of this continental empire was the Grand Canal. As China's principal

113 Elleman 2009: 289, 292–293; Darwin 2008: 126–127.

114 Elleman 2009: 293.

115 Kessler 1976: 6.

116 Darwin 2008: 125.

117 Wills 1979: 231.

118 Lieberthal 2004: 18.

119 Elleman 2009: 296.

120 Lieberthal 2004: 17.

121 Darwin 2008: 125, 130.

internal line of communication, it was also inextricably linked to the empire's economic and political system, serving as a key source of income for both government officials and state revenue. As Bruce Elleman describes, when in the early 19th century sea transport along the Chinese coast challenged the use of the less profitable Grand Canal, the Qing emperor imposed strict limits on seagoing ships, forcing them to return without cargo to northern Chinese harbours.¹²² In contrast to the domestic situation, overseas commerce remained comparatively insignificant in terms of its scope.¹²³ Deeply suspicious of the political impact of trade,¹²⁴ the imperial court in Beijing continued to view commerce as a dispensable tool. Just like their continental-minded Ming predecessors, at times the Qing used restrictions on seaborne trade as a weapon against opponents, such as Ming loyalists and rebels. For example, during the 1720 rebellion on Taiwan, the Qing government identified the sea as the 'centre of subversion.' Three years before it had prohibited trade with the 'Southern Ocean' as the government had already been very mistrustful of potential collaborations between the Chinese and foreigners.¹²⁵ Eventually, the Qianlong Emperor's rejection of the trade requests made by the British envoy Lord Macartney in 1793 can be interpreted as the ultimate expression of Qing China's ignorance in terms of overseas trade.¹²⁶

With the rise of academic literature critical of western-centric approaches, the narrative of a closed and anti-maritime Qing dynasty has recently been challenged. The author Gang Zhao goes so far as to argue that '[n]o modern study of the early modern global economy that fails to address Qing maritime policy can be considered complete [...]' as '[...] the decisions of the Manchu emperors relating to overseas trade played a key role in the [...] early globalization.'¹²⁷ To support his assertion, the author refers to the 1684 lifting of the maritime trade ban and the internal conditions that enabled this policy, the opening of Chinese harbours to foreign trade, the installation of a maritime customs service and a global maritime economic integration that was driven by private enterprise as opposed to the European model of state-sponsored maritime endeavours.¹²⁸ According to Gang Zhao, the new prohibitions against trade with Southeast Asia put in place in 1716 do not impede this logic because the prohibitions were revoked in 1728 for economic reasons.¹²⁹

By framing Qing China as a continental power, I do not want to deny the fact that Chinese maritime merchants were important economic agents in Asia and for centuries connected China with different parts of the Indo-Pacific. In this

122 Elleman 2009: 296.

123 Darwin 2008: 130.

124 Darwin 2008: 92.

125 Wills 1979: 233.

126 Till 2013: 3–4.

127 Zhao 2013: 2–3.

128 Zhao 2013.

129 Zhao 2013: 168.

regard, Gang Zhao's recent scholarship makes an important academic contribution by elaborating on the significance of private Chinese merchants' maritime enterprises during several imperial dynasties.

However, in line with this article's argumentation, opening harbours to commerce and even supporting active maritime merchants is not enough to establish seapower as a decisive force shaping the nature of a country. While private Chinese merchants could operate successfully in East Asian waters, the nature of Qing China as a continental power prevented their individual maritime interests from dominating their country's interests. From this perspective, profits gained from maritime customs were a nice supplement and could, as Gang Zhao points out, provide for enormous wealth in some coastal provinces,¹³⁰ but as outlined above, taxes and fees generated by the use of the Grand Canal were crucial for the survival of the overall agrarian Qing Empire. As Gang Zhao notes, imperial security and regime stability were top priorities in the Qing emperors' decision making.¹³¹ As long as trade was not perceived as a threat to these priorities, it was welcome, otherwise it was interfered with. Without any kind of inclusion in the legislative process, merchants, and in this case even officials from the coastal provinces,¹³² could only try to mitigate the consequences.

Without government support, a joint public-private maritime financial sector, a state foreign policy supporting economic agents in accessing new markets and a Qing Navy offering global sea lane protection, Qing China, as a state, could not be transformed into anything resembling a seapower state, no matter how successfully private Chinese merchants operated in East Asian seas. By no means did Qing China play a decisive role in shaping globalisation by creating a global maritime order, as did great seapower states such as Great Britain.¹³³ Furthermore, identifying the influence of the maritime sector, among other factors, on the state is not a euro-centric approach to maritime affairs, as critics might suspect,¹³⁴ as Imperial Spain, for example, is equally excluded from this interpretation of sea power for the same conceptual reasons.¹³⁵

All in all, using the concept of seapower as applied in this article, Qing China can be best characterized as a continental power. Like the Ming dynasty, at times the Qing government did make use of naval assets. Naval forces, for example, played a major role in the conquest of Taiwan. However, this use of naval force serves as a classic example of the strategic use of sea power. It was not an expression of a state's self-identity as a seapower. In fact, over the course of the 18th and 19th century the importance of the navy as a political tool of the Qing government decreased until the middle of the 19th century when superior navies of European states destroyed Qing naval power and compelled Qing

130 Zhao 2013: 116–136.

131 Zhao 2013: 153–154.

132 Zhao 2013: 160–161.

133 Lambert 2016; Sharman 2019.

134 Zhao 2013: 1–18.

135 Lambert 2018: 204, 205.

China to open their ports. The Qing Navy, designed for littoral and riverine defence against pirates, minor Asian nations and domestic Chinese rebels,¹³⁶ did not stand a chance against the highly capable blue-water navies employed by European states during the ensuing conflicts of the 19th century.

Finally, the example of both the Ming and Qing dynasties shows that the sea remained a marginal concern for the imperial court of China over the course of several centuries. These great dynasties were continental powers in every respect, and the sea was too insignificant to shape the policy of these states decisively and for the long term. On the other side of the world, European competitors harnessed significant seapower that could finally be translated into naval superiority to overthrow Imperial China.¹³⁷

5 The People's Republic of China – Revival of Seapower

Today, at the beginning of the 21st century, seapower has once again assumed a principal role for China as the nature of the Chinese state has undergone a profound change.

As far as geography is concerned, the changes that have taken place since the end of the Cold War have been highly beneficial for the development of seapower. The collapse of the USSR and the subsequent Sino-Russian rapprochement lifted the threat of a continental invasion.¹³⁸ Similarly, border agreements with neighbouring countries reduced the need to secure China's long land borders, allowing China to shift political attention and resources to the maritime domain.¹³⁹

Like the Grand Canal of the imperial era, strategic lines of communication continue to be a major factor in 21st century China's economy. In contrast to the Ming and Qing dynasties, however, this critical infrastructure rests to a much higher degree on oceanic waterways. The import of energy resources underlines this point. In fact, since the early 1990s, when China's economic growth transformed the country from an energy self-sufficient state into an importer of energy, access to overseas energy resources has become a principal Chinese political concern.¹⁴⁰ According to information provided by the U.S. Energy Information Administration, in the year 2014, Chinese dependency on imported oil reached 57% with an upward trend.¹⁴¹ Up to 80% of these oil imports reach China by sea transport.¹⁴² The US EIA also identifies the Middle East as the principal origin of China's oil imports, while stressing the rising proportion of oil sup-

136 Elleman 2009: 288–289.

137 Darwin 2008: 96.

138 McDevitt/Velluci 2013: 75; Schreer 2017: 511.

139 Schreer 2017: 511.

140 Cole 2016: 133.

141 US EIA 2015.

142 Cole 2016: 136; Jiang/Li/Gong 2018: 83.

plied by African countries.¹⁴³ Consequently, long-range SLOCs, extending from the Red Sea in the west through the Indian Ocean to the East China Sea, have become vital for China's economic well-being.¹⁴⁴ The geostrategic relevance of these sea zones for China, however, is not only limited to the transport of oil. China's economic development also rests on the import of raw materials, in effect turning the country into the world's largest importer of minerals.¹⁴⁵ Given that African countries are also key suppliers of raw materials, Indian Ocean SLOCs have also become crucially important in connecting African seaports such as Dar es Salaam with the Chinese market.

The significance of these western sea lanes for China's economy has shaped the academic debate on the 'Malacca Dilemma', the lack of capabilities of the PLAN at the beginning of the 21st century to protect China's critical sea lanes passing through the Strait of Malacca.¹⁴⁶

The vulnerability of China's merchant ships became particularly apparent in 2008 when Somali pirates attacked about one fifth of the Chinese ships that passed through Somali waters from January to November,¹⁴⁷ in turn providing a key incentive for the China's leadership to deploy a permanent naval task force to the Horn of Africa.¹⁴⁸ As Bernard Cole argues, safeguarding SLOCs has also been a key driver for naval expansion.¹⁴⁹ For example, the need to engage with the oceans has had a profound impact on the Chinese fleet design. In contrast to the fleet operated by the PLAN during the 1980s and 1990s, a force composed of few and very limited oceangoing vessels,¹⁵⁰ after two decades of naval expansion the PLAN now possesses significant blue-water capabilities including the world's largest frigate fleet and a proficient sea-based logistic support force.¹⁵¹ The high number of frigates, vessels ideally suited for high-sea escort missions, underlines the priority given by the PLAN to sea lane protection in distant sea zones.

Furthermore, the same sea zones that ensure the influx of vital commodities into the Chinese market are also located at the geographical centre of China's grand project designed to reach out to the world – the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI, an infrastructure development and investment initiative of intercontinental dimensions, was launched in 2013 and aims at fostering economic development by connecting Asia, Africa and Europe through various economic corridors. It consists of two initiatives – the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road – with an estimated sum of external

143 US EIA 2015.

144 Cole 2010: 55.

145 Schuster 2013: 58.

146 Collins 2009: 113–114; Collins 2012: xiv.

147 Jiao/Kuang 2008.

148 Erickson 2010.

149 Cole 2016: 15.

150 Schuster 2013: 59.

151 U.S. Office of the Secretary of Defense 2019: 59, 116.

funding of up to US\$1 trillion, according to PricewaterhouseCoopers, provided by the Chinese government over a period of ten years.¹⁵² It is very likely that the maritime component will turn out to be the predominant of the two initiatives as transporting goods by sea from Asia to Europe remains the much more cost-effective option.¹⁵³ Additionally, the number of countries connected by the Maritime Silk Road as well as the size of their populations and markets is much larger than is the case with the Silk Road Economic Belt.¹⁵⁴

Consequently, harbours and port infrastructure take on a major role within the BRI. According to information provided by the Mercator Institute for China Studies, more than 30 non-Chinese harbours, including Colombo, Gwadar and Piraeus, form part of the BRI's infrastructure network, while several land-based corridors, like the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor, link seaports with their respective hinterland and often with Chinese territory.¹⁵⁵ As David Brewster argues, if fully developed economically, these corridors could turn out to alter profoundly the strategic nature of the Indian Ocean region and have the '[...] potential of making China a resident power in the Indian Ocean and not just an extra-regional power.'¹⁵⁶ Correspondingly, what is so far the largest free trade zone in Africa inaugurated within the framework of the BRI, the Djibouti International FTZ, is located in Djibouti, the major maritime logistics hub for the Horn of Africa.¹⁵⁷ Djibouti is also the location of China's first overseas military base designed primarily to support PLAN deployments to the Gulf of Aden and the Western Indian Ocean.

In addition to the above-mentioned commercial BRI projects in Pakistan, China has also significantly expanded the naval dimension of its strategic partnership with the Islamic Republic. Since the beginning of the 21st century, China has become a key supplier of naval arms to Pakistan, and both countries have initiated a series of bilateral naval exercises.¹⁵⁸ For example, in January 2020, the navies of China and Pakistan held the nine-day exercise 'Sea Guardians – 2020' in the northern Arabian Sea. This naval drill included a Chinese destroyer, frigate and fleet replenishment vessel in addition to a submarine support ship and very likely a submarine; Pakistan contributed two frigates and fast missile craft. Furthermore, four helicopters and a maritime patrol craft participated in the exercise.¹⁵⁹

As shown in Fig. 1, China's military footprint in the region, including the PLA military base in Djibouti, the PLAN anti-piracy task force in the Gulf of Aden and the maritime and naval cooperation with Pakistan all fall within close

152 PwC's Growth Markets Centre 2016: 4.

153 Du/Shi 2017: 162; Simon 2019.

154 Zand 2016.

155 Eder 2018.

156 Khurana 2008; Brewster 2017: 288.

157 Pacory 2019.

158 Upadhyaya 2020: 60; Kollakowski 2020.

159 Elmer 2020; Qiu 2020; Kollakowski 2020.

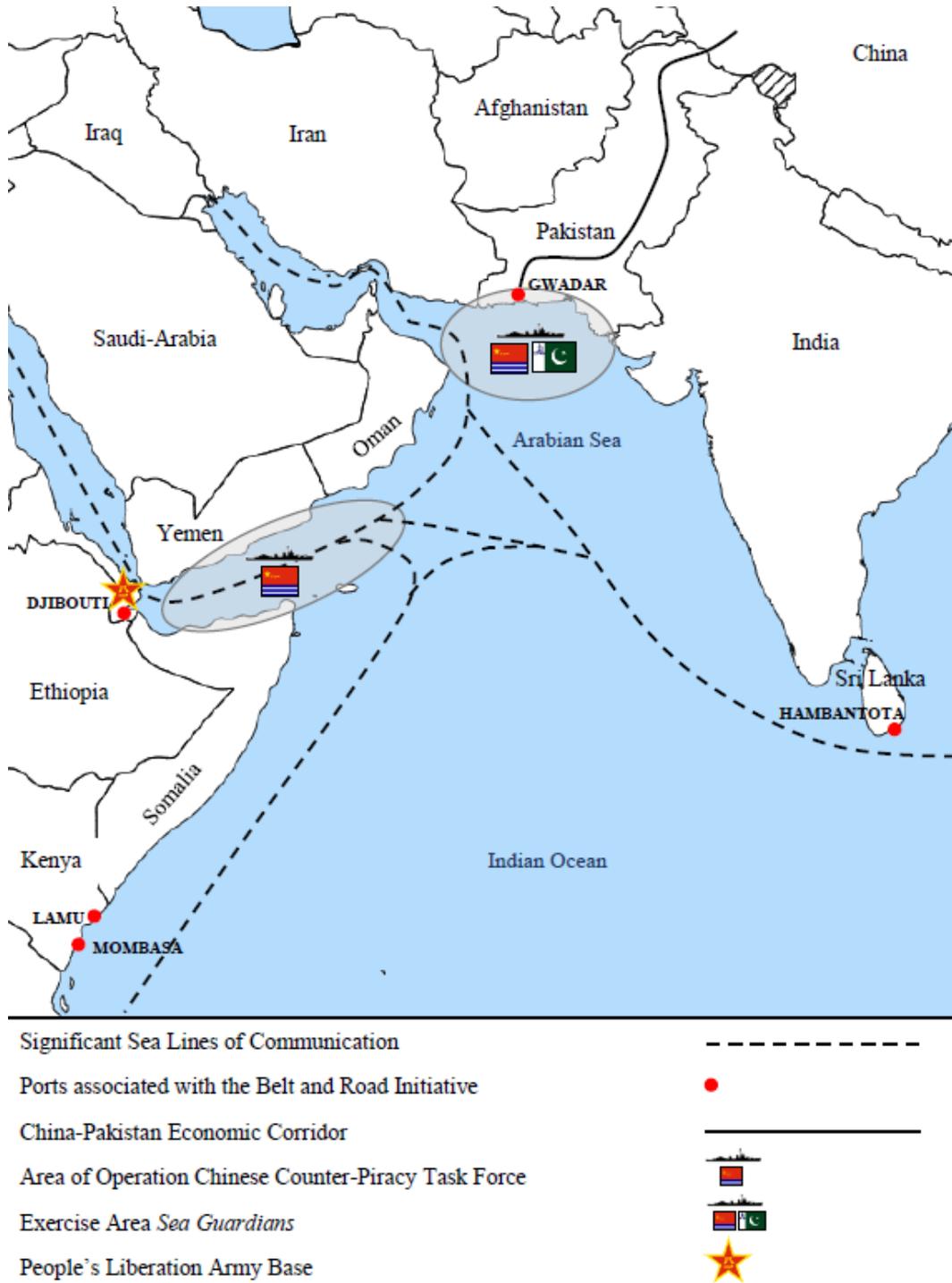


Fig. 1: China's naval and maritime presence in the Western Indian Ocean © 2020 GIDS. Blank Map: Wikimedia Commons. Permission is granted to copy, distribute and/or modify this document under the terms of the GNU Free Documentation License, Version 1.2 (Wikipedia 2018).

geographic proximity of the regional network of global sea lanes and China's Maritime Silk Road. This establishment of Chinese military and commercial facilities along China's critical sea lanes has entered the academic debate under the term 'string of pearls strategy.' Pointing to Chinese naval and maritime

facilities stretching all the way from southern China through the South China Sea, along South Asia's littoral zone up to China's military base in Djibouti and emphasising the dual-use (commercial and military/intelligence) character of some of these facilities, the expansion of China's overseas presence has been interpreted as a strategic placement of bases aimed at establishing Chinese maritime superiority in the Indian Ocean.¹⁶⁰

Other scholars offer a more restrained interpretation of China's overseas civilian and military facilities, highlighting the limited nature of these facilities and emphasising their vulnerability to hostile actions during conflicts.¹⁶¹

While the strategic role China's string of pearls could play during a war between the great powers remains contested, it seems safe to state in general that by locating infrastructure along the world's principal sea lanes China is creating much more beneficial geographical conditions for maritime-commercial and military purposes, both during times of peace and minor conflicts. Thus, referring to Mahan's elements of sea power, China is improving its physical conformation, which in turn positively impacts the country's ability to develop and sustain both strategic sea power and a seapower identity.¹⁶²

The implementation of the BRI only works because a variety of agents are involved, including enterprises carrying out the construction work, banks providing loans to fund the projects and the Chinese government supporting the projects politically. These forces can drive China's overseas engagement and sustain the state's interest in the maritime domain due to the tremendous post-Mao transformation of the Communist command economy into a state-capitalist system. As a result of the step-by-step approach to market liberalisation, the role of private enterprises has increased significantly. In 2015, the share of GDP attributed to private enterprises was approximately 70%.¹⁶³ Nevertheless, Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) remain very significant economic stakeholders as they dominate strategic industries such as steel, energy and transportation.¹⁶⁴ According to Scott Cendrowski, 76 out of 98 Chinese companies categorized as the world's largest companies in the year 2015 were state-owned.¹⁶⁵ They are principal agents of China's going out strategy¹⁶⁶ accounting for more than 70% of the value of contracts signed under the above-mentioned BRI by the year 2018.¹⁶⁷ These enterprises are also closely intertwined with China's political system. Senior leadership positions of core SOEs are appointed by the CCP's Organisation Department and the leaders of these SOEs possess ranks

160 Ashraf 2017: 170–171.

161 Brewster 2017: 279.

162 Mahan 1890: 35–42.

163 University of Alberta, China Institute 2018: 3.

164 University of Alberta, China Institute 2018: iii; Lin 2017: 112.

165 Cendrowski 2015.

166 Jakobson/Know 2010: 24.

167 Zhou/Shen 2018.

equivalent to a vice-minister.¹⁶⁸ As the headquarters of most of the core SOEs are located in Beijing, there is strong interaction between the enterprise sector and the party state.¹⁶⁹ More specifically, as Linda Jakobson and Dean Knox argue, with regard to certain economic topics SOEs can influence policy-making as senior SOE leaders are also members of relevant party organs.¹⁷⁰ SOE commercial activities abroad, often dealing with issues of national interest such as energy security, also affect Chinese foreign policy interests.¹⁷¹ The case of the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) in Sudan provides a suitable example in this respect. As Jones and Zou argue, based on William Norris's study of the CNPC,¹⁷² while the CNPC was primarily pursuing commercial activities in Sudan, Chinese involvement in the country triggered a foreign policy change leading to the abandonment of China's traditional non-interference policy and to the provision of support for peacekeeping interventions in Sudan.¹⁷³

Referring to the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC), another mighty SOE, political scientist Alice Ba provides another example of how a semi-official stakeholder acting in the maritime domain drives Chinese foreign policy.¹⁷⁴ In 2014, the CNOOC dropped an oil rig in waters claimed by Vietnam, in consequence setting off a major confrontation between Vietnam and China.¹⁷⁵ In her assessment of the situation, Alice Ba argues that even the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs '[...] is often bypassed or overshadowed by other more powerful actors.'¹⁷⁶

From a conceptual point of view, SOEs, with their intended activities and unintended effects, assume a function similar to that of private merchants or the public-private trading companies in traditional seapower theory, which involves the close interrelation between economic interests and political decision-making.

While the above-mentioned example took place in continental Sudan, projects related to the Maritime Silk Road create similar conditions. Given pirate, terrorist, warlord and other security threats looming close to many of the Maritime Silk Road's harbour and coastal projects, overseas activities by China's powerful SOEs will sustain future interest by China's political leadership. In this context, Jean-Marc Blanchard and Colin Flint go as far as to argue that the Maritime Silk Road could draw China closer towards a 'reluctant hegemony' as the necessity to protect overseas Chinese assets overrides modern China's

168 Lin 2017: 109; Leutert 2018: 1–2.

169 Leutert 2018: 7–8.

170 Jakobson/Know 2010: 24.

171 Leutert 2018: vi.

172 Norris 2016: 69–89.

173 Jones/Zou 2017: 749.

174 Ba 2016: 113–114.

175 Long 2020.

176 Ba 2016: 114.

traditional aversion to entanglement with overseas security issues.¹⁷⁷ Notwithstanding the degree of future Chinese overseas involvement, it is already clear that the PLAN plays a key role as the country's maritime geographical reality is changing. As early as in 2004, former President Hu Jintao emphasized the fact that national security has to reflect the country's expanding overseas interests, presence and investments.¹⁷⁸ Consequently, safeguarding overseas interests has become a consistent policy aim in Chinese white papers. For example, the 2015 Chinese Military Strategy states that

[i]t is necessary for China to develop a modern maritime force structure commensurate with its national security and development interests, safeguard its national sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, protect the security of strategic SLOCs and overseas interests, and participate in international maritime cooperation, so as to provide strategic support for building itself into a maritime power.¹⁷⁹

In addition to enterprises, Chinese banks have to be regarded as important agents of foreign policy as well. Major government-controlled banks such as the Export–Import Bank of China (Exim Bank) and the China Development Bank (CDB) are funding China's overseas activities with loans, export credits, guarantees and foreign aid.¹⁸⁰ In fact, the investment capital for the BRI is provided by China's largest state-owned commercial banks, such as the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, and the country's largest policy banks such as the Exim Bank and the CDB.¹⁸¹

To sum up, in contrast to the situation under Ming and Qing rule, the strong involvement of the present-day ruling elite in the management of major enterprises and banks sustains government interest in economic developments and, through the overseas activities of these institutions, in foreign trade and affairs. In fact, the Chinese economic system is shaped by the close interrelation between capital, including private capital, major enterprises, of which many operate internationally, and the strong involvement of the state,¹⁸² noticeable features of a system associated with seapower.

Apart from the strong connection between the state and economic agents, the influence of business affairs on the ruling elite itself has reached a level unprecedented in China's history. In 2002, at the 16th Party Congress, the CCP allowed capitalists to join the party.¹⁸³ With this final move of the pro-market Jiang–Li–Zhu Administration, the Chinese government aimed at broadening

177 Blanchard/Flint 2017: 235.

178 McDevitt/Velluci 2013: 83.

179 China Daily 2015.

180 Jakobson/Knox 2010.

181 Thomas/Chen 2018: 294.

182 Jacques 2012: 228–230; Lin 2017: 127.

183 Lieberthal 2004: 240.

the representation of the party and embracing private entrepreneurship.¹⁸⁴ As the following years have shown, opening the CCP for capitalist agents has completely altered the composition of the CCP and the professional orientation of party members. In 2012, only ten years after the opening, more than 20 million of the CCP's 85 million members worked in enterprises (private and public) or in China's technological sector, thereby forming the second largest professional group within the CCP.¹⁸⁵ Even more important than the professional affiliation of grassroots members is the influence of economic and trade-related issues on the CCP's leadership. The party faction most closely associated with free market policies, privatization, private entrepreneurship and economic growth is the so-called Shanghai Faction, which was predominant under the leadership of Jiang Zemin.¹⁸⁶ More than two decades after the end of the Jiang–Li–Zhu Administration, the Shanghai Faction still serves as an influential force within the CCP.¹⁸⁷

Whether or not party groups associated with private entrepreneurship such as the Shanghai Faction are dominant, economic considerations are given highest priority within CCP policy-making. For instance, economic performance has been identified as one of the most important criteria for the promotion of CCP officials.¹⁸⁸ As a state without democratic legitimacy and a range of domestic issues, safeguarding high levels of economic growth has been credited as one of the principal ways to ensure the authority of the CCP.¹⁸⁹ Given the nature of 21st century China's economy, issues of economic growth are closely linked with the country's foreign trade relations.

With regard to the economic situation of 21st century China, developments characteristic of systems closely associated with seapower, such as foreign trade, the need to access overseas markets and maritime commerce, among others, have gained in importance.

Since the beginning of the reform era in 1978, Chinese economic policies have taken a step-by-step approach towards greater application of market forces, deeper integration within the global economy and more efficient use of financial capital.¹⁹⁰ As a result, according to information provided by the Observatory of Economic Complexity, in the year 2017, China was the world's second largest economy, largest export economy and largest trading nation with annual trade in goods exceeding \$3.9 trillion.¹⁹¹

184 Jacques 2012: 283; Jiang–Li–Zhu Administration – The name given to the Chinese leadership generation led by CCP General Secretary Jiang Zemin (1989–2002) and his Premiers Li Peng (1987–1998) and Zhu Rongji (1998–2003).

185 Yang/Zhao 2014: 48.

186 Jacques 2012: 284.

187 Lam 2015: 56.

188 Chen/Li/Zhou 2005; Li/Zhou 2005.

189 Lieberthal 2004: 247–248.

190 Lieberthal 2004: 249.

191 OEC 2019.

Referring to the deficiencies of 21st century China's free market, some scholars argue against China being a seapower.¹⁹² This seems somewhat exaggerated. While there is a strong link between seapower and free trade, traditional seapowers also imposed tariffs and other non-tariff barriers to trade when it was in the economic interest of the respective power. For example, Great Britain promoted free trade in order to export manufactured goods and thus foster economic growth and internal cohesion within its empire. But, as British colonial administrator Sir Alfred Moloney shows, Britain equally, at times, imposed tariffs in order to shield for example the Canadian and Australian markets from '[...] foreign capture by under-cost importation [...]'.¹⁹³ Yet there is universal consensus that Great Britain and its empire qualify as a classical seapower.

In contrast, Chinese economic policies over the past three decades have taken consistent steps towards market liberalisation and reduction of tariffs. As Chang Hong shows, average tariff rates were approximately 42.5% in 1992, followed by a step-by-step reduction. In 1996, the simple average tariff rate was lowered to 23% and, in the aftermath of China's entry into the WTO, several trade liberalisations followed, reducing the arithmetic mean of China's import duties from 13.66% in 2001 to 9.87% in 2010.¹⁹⁴

Having significantly lowered its tariffs and having received enormous investments of foreign capital, China has turned into a major, global manufacturer and thus from one of the countries with the lowest per capita foreign trade volume into the 21st century's major trading house.¹⁹⁵ In fact, the large percentage of foreign trade within the Chinese GDP in comparison with other major economies, like the United States, India or Brazil, has been a much-debated feature of China's economy over many years.¹⁹⁶ Since the 2010s, as China's government policy has aimed at transforming the country's economic model from an export-driven manufacturing economy to a consumer-driven economy, the situation has undergone profound change: the share of China's GDP attributable to exports fell by 50% between 2006 and 2018.¹⁹⁷

Nevertheless, as Francoise Lemoine and Deniz Unal argue, even though its participation in the global manufacturing chain is declining, China will remain a major trading nation as the nature of China's foreign trade is changing.¹⁹⁸ They point out that while China's trade of processed exports has been declining as a consequence of the Chinese economy's advances and decreasing demand by developed countries, the significance of China's ordinary exports has significantly increased. Consequently, emerging markets, as principal destinations of Chinese ordinary exports, have become dynamic drivers of Chinese foreign

192 Lambert 2018: 314.

193 Moloney 1908: 432–433.

194 Hong 2013: 1298–1299.

195 Lieberthal 2004: 259; Jacques 2012: 180–182.

196 Lieberthal 2004: 259; The Economist 2004: 6; Cole 2010: 54.

197 Shan 2019.

198 Lemoine/Unal 2017.

trade.¹⁹⁹ It is against this backdrop that Kuiwen Li, spokesperson of the Chinese General Administration of Customs, claims that markets accessed through the BRI are functioning as a '[...] new engine propelling China's foreign trade development [...].'²⁰⁰ From a theoretical perspective, it is ultimately of secondary importance whether access to developed or emerging markets dominates Chinese trade relations. More significant is the fact that 21st century China's economic well-being cannot be secured solely by the supply and demand of its own vast domestic market and its continental neighbours. Instead, there are strong domestic needs causing China to engage markets overseas.

For example, China's economy suffers from severe over-capacities in certain sectors, especially the construction industry. Investing in overseas infrastructure projects in order to export these over-capacities has been a frequently cited economic motive for China's BRI and its general desire to reach out abroad.²⁰¹

The expansion of Chinese commercial activities on a global scale has resulted in vast numbers of Chinese citizens working overseas and, subsequently, has prompted the need for the Chinese government to protect Chinese citizens abroad, for example during the sea-based evacuation operations from Libya in 2011 or from Yemen in 2015.²⁰² While commercial activities of powerful Chinese SOEs are expanding globally, so do security interests of the Chinese state.²⁰³ Unlike the Ming dynasty at the beginning of the 17th century, the Chinese government of the 21st century cannot afford to ignore the safety of Chinese citizens abroad because strong overseas economic and political interests require political action by the Chinese government. Consequently, the nature of 21st century China as a global commercial agent demands a Chinese naval force capable of global reach.

Furthermore, the maritime sector itself has become a major component of the Chinese economy that is driving China to the sea. With the percentage of China's sea-based foreign trade import and export cargo volume fluctuating between 90% and 95% during the second decade of the 21st century, over the past decades oceanic sea lanes have become the highways of China's economic development.²⁰⁴

Seaports are very significant in this respect. According to Lloyd's List, seven out of the ten largest container ports in the world are located in China, with Shanghai operating the world's largest container port by far.²⁰⁵ As such, China has a dominant position in world port logistics. Developing strong port infrastructure capable of handling the country's tremendous trade volume has been both a result and a condition of China's economic rise. However, Shanghai's im-

199 Lemoine/Unal 2017: 9, 19.

200 Chen 2019.

201 Horsley 2019; Li/Zeng 2019; MERICS 2020.

202 Schuster 2013: 71; BBC 2015; Parello-Plesner/Duchâtel 2015.

203 Parello-Plesner/Duchâtel 2015.

204 Cole 2010: 54; Blasko 2015: 4; Li 2020.

205 Lloyd's List 2019.

portance as a global maritime centre goes far beyond its role as a major container port. In the 21st century, Shanghai has become a major centre of maritime agglomeration including businesses specialized in maritime services such as maritime insurance and finance.²⁰⁶

Another element of 21st century China's vibrant maritime economy is the shipbuilding sector. Since 2012, the Chinese's shipbuilding sector has been the world's largest, accounting for 45% of the global shipbuilding market in 2019.²⁰⁷ The acquisition of new merchant vessels, especially a modern national tanker fleet, has been a policy objective of the Chinese political leadership since the 2000s and has been achieved through long-term shipbuilding.²⁰⁸ As a consequence, China's merchant fleet consists of a high percentage of new vessels. According to Richard Scott, at the end of 2014, 80% of Chinese tankers, 68% of its bulk carriers and 51% of its container ships were less than 10 years old.²⁰⁹

In addition, China's merchant fleet has not only acquired a lot of new vessels but has also expanded enormously. As Richard Scott highlights, between 2015 and 2018 the Chinese merchant fleet expanded by 1/3 measured in million gross tonnes.²¹⁰ According to data provided by UNCTAD, in 2017, the fleet of Chinese owned vessels was the world's largest in number of vessels and third largest in dead-weight tonnage.²¹¹ It features exceptionally high numbers of nationally registered merchant ships with 46% of the merchant fleet as a percentage of total deadweight flying a Chinese flag and 76% flying a Hong Kong flag.²¹² Still, the Chinese shipping industry has also been faced with issues of over-capacity in global shipping and subsequent low freight rates leading to fierce competition and financial problems.²¹³ However, as Bao Jiang, Jian Li and Chunxia Gong show, at least for Asian maritime routes, low freight indexes have had stimulating effects on Chinese foreign trade,²¹⁴ thus providing benefits for the whole Chinese economy. As Dennis Blasko and Richard Scott see it, the Chinese merchant fleet is expected to grow further, thereby expanding an already very strong global position.²¹⁵

The relevance of the sea for China's economic well-being and the population's nutrition is also reflected in the country's vast fishing industry.²¹⁶ China has developed into the world's top producer of marine catch. In 2016, China

206 Yang 2016: 210.

207 Zhu 2019.

208 Collins 2009: 111–119.

209 Scott 2015.

210 Scott 2018.

211 UNCTAD 2017: 28.

212 UNCTAD 2017: 28.

213 Blasko 2015: 10–11.

214 Jiang/Li/Gong 2018: 88.

215 Blasko 2015: 11; Scott 2018.

216 Cole 2016: 16.

produced more marine captured products than the next two largest producers, Indonesia and the United States, combined.²¹⁷

Lastly, many Chinese maritime and economic projects are only achievable because a strong financial sector is securing and providing the necessary funding. In addition to the above-mentioned importance of Chinese banks as significant agents in the country's going out strategy, the banking sector, as Douglas Elliott and Kai Yan point out, '[...] plays a critical role in fueling the expansion of China [...]', among others, by '[...] providing the private sector with credit amounting to about 128% of GDP.'²¹⁸ By 2018, this number had reached 161.1%.²¹⁹

The role of the banking sector is of particular importance because seapower theory outlines a strong interrelation between an affluent financial sector, a capital-intensive economy, maritime commerce and navies.²²⁰ Even though there are still limits to the capital system, e.g. a dysfunctional stock exchange,²²¹ over the past decades China has advanced tremendously towards the creation of a capital-intensive economy. According to the Global Financial Centres Index, four Chinese cities, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Beijing and Shenzhen, rank amongst the top ten global financial centres.²²² Chinese banks take positions one to four in Standard and Poor's list of the world's largest banks, and in 2016 the IMF added the Chinese currency Renminbi to the basket of currencies that make up the Special Drawing Right, thus reflecting the Chinese economy's increasing weight within the global financial system.²²³

6 Implications of the Rising Importance of Chinese Seapower – Concluding Remarks

As argued throughout this article, China's approach to the sea has changed over time, depending on the nature of the respective Chinese state. Geographical factors, politics and economics all resulted in the Southern Song harnessing significant seapower and maintaining an impressive naval force, while continental priorities and an agrarian economy dominated the agendas of the Ming and Qing dynasties, ensuring that maritime affairs remained a marginal concern for the Chinese state. A common narrative employed by Communist China is the assertion that, in contrast to foreign imperialist powers, China has always taken a defensive, non-expansionist position. Even though this argument appears to be somewhat overstated, given Chinese military campaigns into Vietnam, Tibet and Dzungaria at various points during history, indifference and sometimes hostility towards crossing the oceans in order to engage with the

²¹⁷ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations 2018: 9.

²¹⁸ Elliott and Yan 2013: 1,8.

²¹⁹ World Bank 2020.

²²⁰ Till 2013: 298–299, 327.

²²¹ Elliott/Yan 2013: 4.

²²² Yeandle/Wardle 2019: 4.

²²³ IMF News 2016; Ali 2020.

wider world has indeed been a recurrent theme throughout this article's sections on both the Ming and Qing dynasty. British academic Martin Jacques refers to the cultural interpretation of China's universal, civilizational supremacy as a key reason why Imperial China restricted its policy interests to the Middle Kingdom and the tributary states within the Sino-Confucian cultural space and largely refrained from overseas engagement.²²⁴

In addition to this cultural interpretation, as demonstrated in this article, geopolitical factors are equally important in explaining the lack of interest in overseas affairs by Imperial China. Understanding the continental nature of Imperial China helps explain why the country did not develop into a more active foreign policy agent on a global level as contemporary European powers did. As outlined above, geographical, economic and political reasons all contributed to the fact that there was no consistent internal mechanism in place driving China to reach out to the world. To the contrary, forces nurtured by internal and border security concerns, a vast, largely self-sufficient domestic market and a government that cared little to nothing about overseas markets exerted a strong gravitational pull towards the Asian continent. Consequently, from a global perspective China appeared, as famously coined by Napoleon Bonaparte, as a dormant great power.

This interpretation of the nature of the Chinese state, however, can no longer be upheld. As shown in the previous section of this article, the geographical, economic and political conditions of 21st century China have changed profoundly. This development in turn served as both a precondition and consequence of the enormous rise of Chinese seapower.

Admittedly, certain characteristics of the Chinese state, most notably its enormous dimensions, do not correspond well with certain criteria used in naval theory to describe traditional seapower states. However, as argued throughout the article, the amount of seapower China has accumulated and the importance of maritime affairs for the well-being of China's economy and stability go far beyond the traditional interpretation of the term continental power, too. Conceptually, this does not need to be a contradiction. If seapower is not understood in absolute terms – an approach according to which classifying a country as a seapower state inevitably excludes any country that shares characteristics of a continental power – but rather understood in relative terms, it can be noted that China has harnessed significant sea power since 1978, and even more so since 1990, and that the nature of the Chinese state, and subsequently its policies, are now influenced to a much higher degree by seapower. In this regard, China seems to be a very rare case. In his comparative study of 21st century states featuring significant economic and naval power, French naval officer Pierre-Louis Josselin draws the conclusion that the People's Republic of China is one of the very few states still in existence that meet the traditional catalogue of attributes of sea power postulated by Alfred Thayer Mahan.²²⁵

²²⁴ Jacques 2012: 303–307; Jacques 2019.

²²⁵ Josselin 2018: 27–28, 44–47, 59.

What are the consequences of the increased significance of seapower for 21st century China? In accordance with the change in China's identity, Chinese overseas interests have expanded to encompass nearly every corner of the world while internal drivers encourage China to extend its influence on a global level. As a result, this has had a profound impact on the principles guiding Chinese foreign policy. For example, in order to support the PLAN's ever-expanding naval presence, the PRC has even broken with the country's historical tradition of never establishing a permanent naval base outside Chinese territory.²²⁶ It is highly likely that China's maritime expansion, including political, economic and military components, is going to continue not only because it is a policy choice but also because the systemic features of 21st century China make overseas access a necessity.

The rising importance of the sea for China also has a strong impact on the transformation and the fleet design of the PLAN. With growing Chinese interest in the oceans, the above-mentioned acquisition of blue-water capabilities by the PLAN is likely to continue. Similarly, it also seems safe to assume that far-sea training and operations in distant waters, which have both become routine PLAN procedures in the 2nd decade of the 21st century,²²⁷ are going to increase further in number and range in the future.

While the gradual expansion of naval operations has historically applied to most growing navies in modern time, the rising significance of seapower for 21st century China implies a sustained naval development. From this perspective, it seems very likely that China would maintain its naval and maritime commitment even if maritime short-term policy issues, such as the territorial disputes in the South or East China Sea, were miraculously solved.

The same logic applies to the role of political leaders. Under President Xi Jinping China's naval expansion has reached new dimensions, including the procurement of naval power projection capabilities such as carrier and amphibious readiness task forces. In the words of President Xi, the creation of a mighty People's Navy is 'the guarantee to realize the rejuvenation of the Chinese people.'²²⁸ According to naval theory, when naval expansion of continental powers is driven by powerful individuals such as Russia's Peter the Great or France's Louis XIV, the fleet tends to diminish when the particular individual's reign ends.²²⁹ However, even if President Xi were succeeded by a leader less interested in the pursuit of strategic sea power, the increased relevance of sea power for the 21st century Chinese state makes it very probable that China would nevertheless sustain a strong naval force in order to protect its maritime and overseas interests.

It appears that contemporary developments validate this article's assertion. According to naval theory, a truly continental power reduces its naval strength

226 Schuster 2013: 69–70.

227 Cole 2016: 73–75.

228 360doc.com 2018.

229 Lambert 2018: 264; Till 2013: 90.

when economic pressure results in budgetary discipline. Shaped by their continental identities, these countries view fleets, in Winston Churchill's words, as mere luxury. With no politically influential stakeholders lobbying on behalf of expensive navies, fleets quickly diminish in size and capability when governments look for ways to save money. Developments in 21st century China, however, tend to go in the opposite direction. While Chinese economic growth has been continuously slowing down from 14.2% in 2007 to 6.6% in 2018,²³⁰ there seems to be no slowing of China's naval expansion. With China's aircraft carrier programme increasing in speed and the number of large amphibious vessels, such as the Type 071 dock landing ships and Type 075 helicopter carriers, on the rise, it seems that China's naval build-up has accelerated further. Moreover, according to information released by the Chinese government, the size of the PLA ground forces has been significantly reduced, while the PLAN has gained in personnel strength.²³¹

On 24 April 2019, during the opening remarks for the symposium panel of the 70th anniversary of the PLAN, Lew Chuen Hong, Chief of the Republic of Singapore Navy, stated that '[...] while a historical lens often casts China as a continental nation [...] the future of China is fundamentally a maritime one [...].'²³² Given the rising importance of Chinese seapower, as demonstrated throughout this article, Admiral Hong's prophecy is already becoming a reality.

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²³⁰ Congressional Research Service 2019: n.p. (Summary).

²³¹ Zhen 2019.

²³² Hong 2019.

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