

## **From *Haijin* to *Kaihai*: The Jiajing Court's Search for a *Modus Operandi* along the South-eastern Coast (1522-1567)<sup>1</sup>**

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### Abstract

*This paper examines the 1567 change in Ming dynasty prohibition on maritime trade against the backdrop of increasing wokou or Japanese piracy along the coast at that time. While the current interpretation argues that the 1567 policy change was a capitulation to littoral demands by the state, I argue that the adoption of a kaihai (open seas) policy was the outcome of the Jiajing court's incremental approach towards resolution of the wokou crisis and the permitting, albeit limited, of private trade along the coast. In this search for a modus operandi, littoral demands featured less prominently than the court's final acceptance of reality on the coast on its own terms.*

Keywords: Ming dynasty, maritime policy, *haijin*, *wokou*

### Introduction

Mid-sixteenth century Ming China experienced what might be described as an all-out anti-*wokou* (Japanese pirate) campaign along the south-eastern coast.<sup>2</sup> Not only did this campaign necessitate the commitment of manpower and resources against the *wokou* in the provinces of Zhejiang, Fujian and Guangdong, it also forced a recalibration of long-standing policies culminating in the relaxation of the *haijin* (maritime prohibition) in 1567.

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<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank the editors and the two anonymous reviewers for their critiques and suggestions of this paper. All errors remain my own.

<sup>2</sup> The term *wokou* literally means 'dwarf bandits' and it was first noted in the stele of Gwanggaeto the Great of Goguryeo (ca. 414) located in present-day Jilin Province. The term made its first appearance in Ming documents in a 1369 record in the *Ming Taizu shilu* (*Veritable Records of Ming Taizu*). See Ren and He (2008) and Tanaka (1987).

One current interpretation posits that, instead of a Sino-Japanese conflict, the *wokou* crisis was in fact the result of an internal class struggle between the forces of embryonic capitalism (the *wokou*) and feudalism (the anti-*wokou* campaign) that ended with the Ming court's acquiescence with a policy change in 1567 (Fan, 2000). However, a closer analysis suggests that the relaxation of the *haijin* took place only after certain necessary conditions set by the court were met. Imperial acceptance of flourishing maritime commerce along the coast and growth of international trade in the South China Sea was granted only after the court was satisfied that a workable *modus operandi* could be established to address issues of maritime security and customs revenue along the coast. Hence, this paper contends that throughout the *wokou* crisis in the Jiajing era (1522-1566), the court was in fact searching for acceptable resolutions to the crisis on its own terms, albeit in a somewhat ad hoc fashion. The 1567 policy reversal was thus neither an inevitable outcome (Fan, 2000) nor was it just one among multifarious factors contributing to the subsidence of the *wokou* threat in Fujian (So, 1975). Rather, it represented a pragmatic approach that gained confidence for a policy change from precedents set by local initiative. In such an approach, the centre-periphery relationship is perhaps less confrontational than is currently assumed.

### **Beyond the Centre-Periphery Framework**

Conventionally, maritime China is considered a 'minor tradition' (Fairbank, 1983: 9) or even 'peripheral history' (Wills Jr., 1979: 204) in Chinese historiography. This stance consequently downplays the place and significance of littoral society and actors in grand historical narratives, giving rise to the motif of 'failed efforts and dissipated power' that marked studies of late imperial maritime China (Wills Jr., 1979: 205). However, as John E. Wills Jr. points out, relations with the peripheral areas also helped to shape the dominant core system (and vice versa), and studies of the periphery would contribute to understandings of the core and the whole since researchers are, by necessity, 'drawn away from a capital-centred history into the distinctive histories' of the periphery (Wills Jr., 1979; Wills Jr., 2011: 16).

This move into the periphery can be observed in studies of the Ming dynasty *wokou*. Traditional scholarship in China and Japan, dating from the 1930s to 1960s, tended to situate the *wokou* issue within the framework of Sino-Japanese relations, though with differing interpretations. Chinese

scholars interpreted the *wokou* as Japanese invaders (despite evidence that most of the *wokou* in the Jiajing era were Chinese), emphasizing the nationalist patriotism of the Ming anti-*wokou* campaigns (Chen, 1957; Li, 1933; Fan and Tong, 2004). On the other hand, Japanese scholars focused on the causal relationship between the failure of the Ming tribute trade system and the increased incidence of smuggling and piracy, branching from there into investigations of the true nature of the *wokou*, thus moving the issue during the 1950s and 1960s from the realm of Sino-Japanese diplomacy into studies of Chinese local society (Wu, 1999). This discussion of the true identities of the *wokou* was taken up by So Kwan-wai (1975) in his work on the *wokou*. While So attempted to draw a link between court deliberations, local developments and the subsidence of the *wokou* threat, his somewhat truncated discussion identifying the 1567 policy change as but one reason for the subsiding of the crisis is less satisfactory as an answer that subsumes the significance of adopting the *kaihai* (open seas) policy within the larger picture.

Since the 1980s, scholars such as Dai Yixuan (1982), Fan Shuzhi (2000), Lin Renchuan (1980) and Chen Kangsheng (1980) representing the 'New *wokou* thesis' school in China have, following Japanese scholarship, posited that the Jiajing *wokou* crisis was a reaction by the Chinese along the coast against the state-mandated *haijin* policy. Hence, the subsequent adoption of *kaihai* in 1567 represented a victory for littoral forces. The centre-periphery relationship in this case takes on shades of a conflict between state and littoral. Their predisposition towards the inevitability of *kaihai* as a matter of historical course also tended to overshadow or ignore the dynamics of core-periphery relations (Fan, 2000).

In order to have a clearer picture of the dynamics and considerations that culminated in the *kaihai* policy, effectively a reversal of what constituted a *zuzong zhi fa* (ancestral law) by the Ming court, I would argue that it is crucial not only to scrutinise the policy deliberations that took place at the centre, but also to do so in the context of policy decisions affecting the periphery.<sup>3</sup>

Since the early Ming, the strong presence of the littoral at the centre would have created invisible yet tangible webs of connections that impacted positively or otherwise on policy deliberations at court (Elman, 1991; Chaffee,

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion on the impact of what were deemed ancestral laws and institutions on the changing nature of Ming maritime policies, see Zhao (2008).

1995; Chan, 1998).<sup>4</sup> Any official at the centre, hailing from the peripheral areas, would have felt compelled by his native ties and networks to push for, or at least influence, policies that could benefit provincial, local interests. At the same time, officials appointed to the periphery as the Emperor's proxies could be held 'hostage' to local interests by their very dependency on local actors to achieve administrative competency (Brook, 1985: 48). This was clearly illustrated in the case of Zhu Wan (1494-1550), the *xunfu* (grand coordinator) of Zhejiang and Fujian. Appointed by the court in 1547 to oversee maritime security, Zhu's strident anti-smuggling campaign offended powerful, wealthy families in Fujian and Zhejiang who in turn engineered his fall from office (*Ming shilu: Shizong*, 1962-1966: 347.5a; Higgins, 1980; So, 1975).

Instead of an acrimonious struggle between core and littoral, it is perhaps more instructive to examine the *wokou* issue through the dual lenses of state and society. By the mid-sixteenth century, Southeast China, particularly the Lower Yangzi delta, had been experiencing dynamic development due to 'demographic growth, expanding communication networks, rapid commercialisation, and new critical thinking' since the late fifteenth century (Brook, 2005: 20). Ming society and its economy were moving forward by their own momentum and the court at Beijing, secluded from the growth, was at best a manager attempting to impose some form of order in the wake of these changes.<sup>5</sup> The *wokou* attacks of the 1550s, the security and financial crises that these triggered—the threat to great southern cities such as Hangzhou, Suzhou and Nanjing as well as the loss of much-needed income from the grain tax and tribute trade revenues—and the resultant debates over the best possible solutions to the problems of maritime security and foreign trade in the late Jiajing period are thus illustrative of the gaps and tensions between a state roused to action and a society eager for the perceived benefits of trade liberalisation.

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<sup>4</sup> The dominance of southern literati in the imperial bureaucracy through civil service examination success began during the Song dynasties and continued into the Ming period, growing to the point that a mandatory 40:70 ratio of northern to southern examination candidates had to be instituted by the Hongxi emperor (*r.* 1425).

<sup>5</sup> This became a noticeable trend after the 1449 Tumu incident which provoked a general crisis in Ming government. Thereafter, piecemeal local administrative reforms began to take precedence over established practices such that when administrative changes were noted, they were usually local practices that had become wide-ranging and prominent enough to be noticed by the court.

### **Ming Foreign Policy: *Haijin* and Tribute**

The *haijin* promulgated by the Ming founder, the Hongwu emperor (r. 1368-98), was not a Ming innovation as precedents had been provided by the Yuan dynasty (Chen, 1997a). What makes the Ming *haijin* unique, however, was Hongwu's intention for it to become a perpetual cornerstone of Ming foreign policy by serving a dual purpose— the achievement of coastal security by limiting private Sino-foreign contact, and the creation of a state monopoly over foreign imports such as spices, aromatics, silver and other exotica under the tribute trade system. That the *haijin* fulfilled the function of a security measure in Hongwu's estimation can be observed from repeated promulgation of the policy, especially after the failed coup of 1380, and the classification of exports of weapons and human trafficking overseas as capital crimes (*Ming shilu: Taizu*, 1962-66: 139.7a; 231.2a-2b; 252.2a).<sup>6</sup>

Implementation of the *haijin* was draconian. The *haijin* first appeared in 1372 when Wu Zhen, the 'Marquis of pacified oceans', forcibly registered 'boat households' and landless people along the Zhejiang coast as military households, moving them into garrisons and stockades built along the coast for defence purposes (*Ming shilu: Taizu*, 1962-66: 70.3b; Chen, 1997a). A second forced migration took place in 1380 when Tang He, the Duke of Xinguo, offered offshore islanders the option of registered civilian status if they moved before noon and registered military status if they moved after (Wang, 1997). Given the heavy taxes imposed on the former and the hereditary nature of the latter, it was hardly a palatable choice. Similarly autocratic measures imposed in Fujian remained in force two centuries later as a local gazetteer records how the unexpected order for offshore communities to move inland within three days caused numerous deaths when door panels and beds were used as rafts (Xie, 1983: 66.30a-31a).

While meant to plug possible avenues of collaboration between the people and foreigners, the forced migrations created an unintended security loophole as offshore islands were left uninhabited, unpatrolled and unfortified. By the mid-sixteenth century, the islands had become deserted isles where wild fowl

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<sup>6</sup> An edict issued in 1381 prohibiting people on the coast from private intercourse with foreigners was repeated in more stringent terms that prohibited the use of foreign aromatics and goods, in 1394 and given the force of law with restrictions enshrined in the 1397 legal code (Liu, 1995: *juan* 8).

and dogs roamed freely among the ruins of stone balustrades and mills (Wang, 1997). Shielded from winds and tides, these islands became immensely strategic shelters and bases for trader/smuggler groups (Chen, 1997a). The strict enforcement of the *haijin* had, ironically, weakened Ming maritime defence and created the conditions for smuggling and piracy to thrive.

The sporadic incidence of *wokou* raids and a long period of peace on the south-eastern coast between 1392 and 1521 also lulled coastal authorities into complacency (Elisonas, 1991). Coastal fortifications fell into disrepair while naval patrols were discontinued due to a shortage of ships (Chen, 1997a). The *weisuo* system of garrisons and forts along the coast was plagued with problems and records of manpower and equipment were badly maintained as Zhu Wan discovered when he inspected coastal defences in 1547.<sup>7</sup> The deterioration of coastal defences was severe: many battalions had less than half of their personnel quotas filled; soldiers had not been paid, in one extreme instance for twenty months; and the number of patrol boats and warships fell well below mandated quotas and were badly maintained (Zhu, 1997: 2.17b-18b). It was perhaps no wonder that the *wokou* crisis developed to the extent it did.

Restrictions placed on traditional maritime activities by the *haijin* had the additional effect of creating a vacuum in the regional trade networks that had existed since the Tang dynasty (618-907) (Chen, 1997a; Leonard, 1984; Huang, 2003; Wills Jr., 1998). In place of his blanket ban on private maritime trade, the Hongwu emperor instituted a system of state-controlled *kanhe* (tally) trade that took place under the auspices of a tribute system based on the traditional rhetoric and worldview of China at the apex of a hierarchy of states.<sup>8</sup> One of his first foreign policy acts in 1369, therefore, was to dispatch envoys to Southeast Asian polities to proclaim the foundation of the Ming dynasty and to obtain recognition of Ming suzerainty (*Ming shilu: Taizu*, 1962-66: 39.2a-3a). In

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<sup>7</sup> Devised as a self-supporting defence system staffed by regular officials and soldiers from military households who were expected to farm in times of peace and fight in times of conflict, the *weisuo* quickly proved unworkable as military households deserted their posts and the *tuntian* (military lands) disappeared into private landholdings of local families.

<sup>8</sup> The *kanhe* was a certificate given by the Ming court to foreign states as a form of identification for the tribute missions. Tribute missions arriving in China had to present their half of the *kanhe* to the *shibosi* (maritime trade supervisorates). Only when the certificate was matched with another half held by the Ming authorities were the missions allowed to present tribute and to trade.

return, the privilege of presenting tribute and carrying on *kanhe* trade with state-appointed agents was granted to receptive polities (Chen, 1987). To gain access to Chinese goods therefore, states had to assume the role of vassal and express their diplomatic exchanges in suitably subservient language (Zhao, 2005). The balance was however tilted in their favour—gifts presented by the Ming emperor to tribute envoys were of such great value that tribute missions were so often sent without regard for the fixed schedule and the Ming court had to remind the ‘vassals’ repeatedly to observe the protocols on frequency, number of ships and personnel of their missions.

The tribute system and *kanhe* trade were not Ming inventions, but the Ming versions were unique in their assertion of monopolistic control over *all* foreign trade (Zhao, 2005). What developed in the Ming, therefore, was a symbiotic relationship between tribute and official trade:

Tribute presentation and tribute trade are the same. All tribute-bearing foreigners would be received by their respective *shibosi* [maritime trade supervisorates] and they would be allowed to bring along other goods that they would then exchange with the people through the *yahang* [agents of sales and procurement]. This form of trade goes hand in hand with the presentation of tribute. If no tribute is presented, then trade is not allowed. Tribute trade and commercial trade are two different matters. Tribute trade that is allowed under the law and managed by the *shibosi* is official trade. The maritime trade that is not allowed by law and not managed by the *shibosi* is private trade (Wang, 1995: *juan26*).<sup>9</sup>

Restrictions placed on tribute missions in terms of personnel, ships and frequency meant that whatever *kanhe* trade that took place proved an inadequate substitute and therefore created fertile grounds for ‘private trade’ to flourish. Traders arriving with the tribute missions were often subjected to discriminatory practices by the officially appointed *yahang* during the period of *hushi* (mutual trade), lasting between three to five days, carried out either in the *shibosi* along the coast or at the *Huitong guan* (Interpreters Institute) in Beijing. Oláh Csaba (2008) has shown that Japanese traders were often

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<sup>9</sup> Three *shibosi* were established in the ports of Ningbo, Quanzhou and Guangzhou to receive foreign tribute missions from Japan, Ryukyu and Southeast Asia respectively, oversee the *kanhe* trade and manage all matters relating to foreign trade.

subjected to artificially low prices imposed on their goods by the Ming court as well as the unscrupulous business practices of the *yahang* traders from whom they had no recourse for their grievances. As abuses by *yahang* merchants became more widespread during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, so illicit 'private trade' and subsequently *wokou* activities correspondingly increased along the coast, especially where intense competition between trading groups and government suppression necessitated the bearing of arms to protect one's turf and resist arrest and incarceration.

The *kanhe* system might have worked if there had been cooperation and compliance from the local officials. However, mindful of the pressing fiscal needs and other demands of their specific administrations, local officials often ignored the rules concerning the reception of tribute missions according to fixed schedules and numbers. The *Mingshi* notes:

During the time of the ancestors, there was a fixed date for tribute presentation and an established system for defence, and accordingly, not many [foreigners] arrived. In recent years [during the Zhengde reign (r.1506-1522)], because of the lack of aromatics for tribute purposes, the Administrative Commissioner Wu Tingju [of Guangdong] has accepted all goods that arrived [from overseas] without questioning the schedule. As a result, foreign ships are moored along the coast and barbarians come and go within the cities of the prefectures (Zhang, 1974: 325/8430).<sup>10</sup>

It would seem that by the early sixteenth century, it was established practice in Guangzhou to receive all ships from Southeast Asia without regard for nationalities, set timetables and stipulated numbers.<sup>11</sup> This taxed, non-tribute trade was so profitable that the *shibosi* in Guangdong even set up extra tax-collection centres along the coast to accommodate the arrivals (Wills, Jr.,

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<sup>10</sup> See also *Ming shilu: Wuzong* (1962-66: 149.9a-9b) which mentions approval of Wu Tingju's proposal to receive all incoming ships based on his argument that trade benefits outweighed the risks.

<sup>11</sup> By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Southeast Asia was experiencing what Reid (1990-93) called a new 'age of commerce' whereby indigenous rulers and elites carried on commercial exchange with traders from the Indian Ocean, and with Europeans, Japanese and Chinese. See also Atwell (1998).



1998). By this point, the supposedly inviolable *haijin* based on Hongwu's ancestral law was all but a dead letter in Guangdong (Zhao, 2008).

The Ming government's attempt at controlling all forms of maritime trade thus created the Ming narrative where illicit commercial activities along the coast were equated with *wokou* activity, regardless of the nationalities involved. This abuse of the *wokou* label led earlier studies to posit Sino-Japanese relations as a framework for understanding the phenomenon, disguising the true nature of the crisis. With the shift towards understanding the true nature of the Jiajing-era *wokou*, the *haijin* came to be reinterpreted as the root and manifestation of the class struggle between commercial elements, wrongly identified as *wokou*, and the ruling class. By this interpretation, the *wokou* crisis becomes the facade that concealed the reality of a brewing feudal-capitalist class struggle along the coast (Dai, 1982).

#### **The Mid-Sixteenth Century *Wokou* Crisis**

1555 has the dubious distinction of being the most disastrous year in the entire history of the *wokou* crisis. In this year, bands of supposed *wokou* criss-crossed the entire Jiangnan region at will, plundering all but three prefectures in Zhejiang, harassing neighbouring Fujian and even threatening the security of Nanjing (Lim, 2010).<sup>12</sup> The government response, despite the best efforts of field commanders and local magistrates, was ineffective and the increased mobilisation of troops and resultant spate of fortification building only served to evoke a sense of crisis that had been slowly building up since the late 1540s as the frequency of raids increased dramatically.

Official evaluations pinpointed the abolition of the Ningbo *shibosi* and the suspension of Japanese tribute missions in 1523 following a riot by two competing Japanese tribute missions a year earlier as the root cause of the crisis (Zhang, 1974: 322/8348-49).<sup>13</sup> Reprisals might not have been swift except for the fact that the Ningbo riot came on the heels of an earlier outbreak of hostilities between the Chinese and the Portuguese off the coast of Guangdong in 1521 (Wills Jr., 1998). These episodes only served to bolster the determination of the newly-enthroned Jiajing emperor to address the

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<sup>12</sup> In Zhejiang, only the three prefectures of Jinhua, Chuzhou and Quzhou were spared.

<sup>13</sup> As a result of the riot, the Ningbo and Quanzhou *shibosi* for the missions from Japan and the Ryukyu islands were abolished while the Guangzhou *shibosi* was ordered to shut temporarily. All tribute missions were turned away. See Zhang (1974: 75/1848).

hitherto blatant infringement of the *haijin* on the littoral with more stringent enforcement.

The first two decades of the Jiajing reign therefore saw the promulgation of increasingly strident imperial edicts warning against private maritime trade and prohibiting the construction of double-masted ships on pain of military exile and capital punishment (*Ming shilu: Shizong*, 1962-66: 38.4b-5a; 54.3b; 108.7a; 154.4b-5a). Zhu Wan's appointment in 1547 to address the problems of smuggling and piracy in Fujian and Zhejiang represented greater willingness on the court's part to be proactive and take increasingly harsh pre-emptive measures. These state initiatives, together with the suspension of tribute trade in Fujian, Guangdong and Ningbo, however only resulted in the counter-productive effect of encouraging illicit trade by Chinese traders who now found active collaborators among the Japanese and the Portuguese as their suppliers and middlemen (Atwell, 1982).

For Ming observers, the link between the *wokou* crisis and the enforcement of *haijin*, or lack thereof, was a direct one. Comparison with the early years of the dynasty was frequently drawn, as in the case of Wan Biao (1498-1556), a native of Yin County in Ningbo who offered a picture of the past where 'only fishing boats would venture out ... to fish and obtain firewood' and none dared to 'conduct intercourse with foreigners' (Wan, 1991: 1). As enforcement relaxed, cracks in the *haijin* appeared when 'one or two families in Fujian and Guangdong' traded with foreigners, relying 'on the local [retired] officials to pave the way for them' (Wan, 1991: 1). Despite this, Wan asserts that the 'ancestral law has not been damaged yet' (Wan, 1991: 1). It was only when 'the *haijin* grew lax' that:

covetous rascals enticed foreign ships and intercourse increased. At the same time, piracy on the seas increased as well. Each of the ships would have their acknowledged owners and they would fill their ships with trade goods and return. During this time, they carried out trade individually and had not, as yet, banded together. It was only when the strong and weak [traders] clashed on the seas, preying on each other, that the traders then formed alliances and sought the protection of strong men as their leaders. The groups numbered between fifty to a hundred ships and they would moor at different harbours and rely on

numerous smaller rafts to carry out trade and piracy along the coast. It thus grew chaotic (Wan, 1991: 1).

While Wan was somewhat reticent about the reasons for the clashes erupting, other observers were more forthcoming. One explanation suggests that the *wokou* crisis erupted because Chinese traders, together with their patrons from influential families on the coast, reneged on their debts, thus leaving their Japanese creditors with no option for recouping their losses except by force. Their investments thus threatened, the powerful families—identified as ‘pirates in gowns and caps’ by Zhu Wan (Zhang, 1974: 205/5404-05)—pressured local and central authorities into reprisals against the so-called *wokou*, thus escalating the crisis (Zhang, 1997; Ye, 1987; Shen, 1980). If this explanation is accurate, private maritime interests were thus responsible for evoking the *wokou* label and escalating business quarrels into a security crisis.

The coastal populace further perpetuated the crisis. Due to restrictions on their traditional livelihoods, general economic difficulties and rampant corruption, many joined the bands of *wokou* leading to a situation where ‘of the several tens of thousands of sea-bandits known as *wokou* today, those who were from Japan number only several thousand’ (Zheng, 1983: 11.1b). Large-scale participation of men from Zhangzhou, Quanzhou and Fuzhou (Fujian) and Ningbo and Shaoxing (Zhejiang) in the *wokou* raids was openly acknowledged as well (Chen, 1997b: 282.4a). Led by Chinese merchants from Anhui such as Wang Zhi, Ma Ye and Xu Hai, these rough and ready characters wreaked such havoc on the coast that it would eventually take the Jiajing court a decade of military campaigns to suppress them.

Thus, despite the traditional label of *wokou* attached to the wave of piratical attacks that swept across the south-eastern coast in the 1550s and 1560s, Ming popular opinion and officialdom were in fact unanimous in openly acknowledging that the crisis was caused by the Chinese rather than the Japanese. The causal link between the existing maritime policies of the dynasty and the crisis was perhaps best expressed by Tang Shu (1497-1574), a secretary in the Ministry of Justice hailing from Huzhou prefecture in Zhejiang, who observed that the ‘*kou* and traders are the same people; when trade was allowed, the pirates became traders; when trade was prohibited, the traders turned to piracy’ (Zheng, 1983: 11.4a-4b).

Despite the general unanimity on the cause of the crisis, there was no agreement on the solution. Conservatives favouring stricter enforcement of the *haijin* often used historical precedents to argue that because ‘not a single plank of wood was allowed to put out to sea [at the beginning of the dynasty], there was peace for generations’ (Zhu, 1997: 2.61a). Implicit in this argument is the idea that strict enforcement of the *haijin* would secure the maritime frontiers of China from all forms of foreign disturbance, including *wokou* raids, since it was lax enforcement that stimulated and created the *wokou* crisis. For the conservatives it was a clear-cut case of coastal security, and the tolerance or prohibition of trade was never the issue since that was provided for under the tribute trade system. For instance, Zhang Shiche (1500-77), the Minister of War in Nanjing and a native of Ningbo, accused those favouring a *kaihai* policy of mixing the two distinct issues of tribute trade and foreign trade, contending that it is not clear whether ‘relaxing the law of prohibition and opening the doors to non-scheduled tribute would damp down the flames or become additional firewood’ for the crisis (Zheng, 1983: 12.98b). In addition, he questioned the effectiveness of a *kaihai* policy: ‘even if tribute were allowed, could it really stop the *kou* of the various islands from plundering’, given the contemporaneous political fragmentation of Japan (Zheng, 1983: 12.98b).

Even more impassioned was the plea of another conservative, Feng Zhang, who placed a higher priority on security than profit. Describing foreigners as ‘crafty, cruel and unpredictable’, he argued:

The goods brought by the traders are mostly pepper and sapanwood, items not in high demand among the people. The huge imports would, in two to three years’ time, rob the traders of their profits and they may create problems as a result. Hence I do not see the benefits of relaxing the prohibition and imposing taxes instead. We also cannot guard against crafty merchants who export Chinese goods such as silks, iron and other valuables in exchange for gold and silver and who evade taxes by returning secretly after burning their boats. Where are the taxes going to come from then? The open trade could also result in foreigners buying firearms and gunpowder that they may use against us. ... It is not advisable for us to overthrow established policy for gains of the moment or abolish ancestral laws for minor profits. Once damaged, it may be

impossible to revive the law and this opening [of trade] may lead to endless troubles in the future (Chen, 1997b: 280.17b; 18a-20a).

The conservatives were not opposed to the idea of trade per se. Their opposition to the opening of China's ports to trade, whether licensed private trade or *kanhe* trade, was largely predicated on their reading of the situation and security concerns. To them, the *wokou* crisis was created by the Chinese traders and their Japanese collaborators who had flagrantly flouted the *haijin*. A relaxation of the trade prohibition was therefore interpreted as opening the floodgates to even greater chaos. As such, their preference was to plug the gap and restore the conduct of foreign relations and trade to the tribute system framework. These views apparently found resonance with the Jiajing emperor who rebuked Nie Bao, the Minister of War in 1555, for forwarding a memorial from a retired official by the name of Zhu Longxi asking for *hushi* to be permitted (*Ming shilu: Shizong*, 1962-66: 419.5b-6a).

#### **The Search for a Modus Operandi**

The conclusion that the Jiajing court was actively searching for a *modus operandi* along the south-eastern coast is one reached perhaps more with the benefit of hindsight. There is no indication in the sources that such a search was being consciously conducted and that policies and responses to the *wokou* crisis were being formulated with a specific end in mind. If anything, the only clear goal that the Jiajing court had was to restore peace and stability to the coast by dealing with the *wokou* by any means. Hence, deliberations for a time centred upon whether outright extermination or pacification through appeasement was preferable (Hucker, 1971). The fact that debate over enforcement or relaxation of the *haijin* was subsumed as part of the general discussion of anti-*wokou* strategies suggests that the court was primarily interested in restoring peace to the coast so as to secure the Jiangnan region which was the tax and grain basket of the empire. By examining the actions of the officials in the provinces and the policy deliberations proffered at court, the incremental process by which the decision finally to relax the *haijin* was ultimately made becomes clear.

Court attention was not uniformly focussed on the three provinces that formed the centre of the *wokou-haijin* issue. Throughout the 1550s and 1560s, the spotlight was trained on Zhejiang for the simple reason that it bore the

brunt of the *wokou* raids throughout the decade.<sup>14</sup> Zhejiang was the site of major battles fought by Supreme Commander Hu Zongxian (1511-65) against the bands of *wokou* led by Xu Hai, Ma Ye and Chen Dong (Hucker, 1971). Hu was eventually able to play successfully on Wang Zhi's desire for licensed trade to bring about the latter's surrender and incarceration (Lim, 2010). With the extermination of the major *wokou* leaders, the situation in Zhejiang had, at least by 1565, come under control.

Fujian, the acknowledged source of both *wokou* recruits and anti-*wokou* militias, began to feature more prominently in the policy landscape in the late 1560s and the 1570s when smaller, less organised bands of *wokou*—remnants of the large smuggling-trading conglomerates destroyed by Hu Zongxian in Zhejiang—made their appearance in the province. The experience gained in the earlier Zhejiang campaigns by military commanders such as Qi Jiguang (1528-88) and civilian officials such as Tan Lun (1520-77), the former prefect of Taizhou in Zhejiang who was transferred to Fujian in 1561, stood them in good stead as they cooperated steadily to whittle down the menace presented by the *wokou* (*Ming shilu: Shizong*, 1962-66: 538.3b-4a).

In contrast, Guangdong, which also provided recruits for the *wokou*, remained comparatively less harassed than Fujian and Zhejiang. This relative peace, coupled with the local administration's pro-active search for a way to accommodate the Portuguese into the existing trade framework, in fact brought home the possible benefits that could be accrued from the accommodation of non-tribute foreign trade and the relaxation of the *haijin*.

### **The Precedent Set by Guangdong**

Guangzhou was the port where cracks in the *haijin* first appeared. As early as 1509, during the Zhengde reign, permission to conduct non-tribute trade with Southeast Asian traders was granted by the court. Unlike the *kanhe* trade that came under the purview of the *shibosi*, this non-tribute trade was placed under the control of the *sansi* (three provincial offices), thereby effectively negating the official policy of 'trade when there is tribute and no trade when there is no tribute' (Zheng, 1983: 12.110a). However, this 'relaxation' of trade regulations was short-lived as entrepreneurs who had set sail on private

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<sup>14</sup> Throughout the Jiajing reign, it was estimated that Zhejiang was raided 172 times, compared to 128 raids in Fujian and a mere 38 disturbances in Guangdong. See table in Tanaka (1987: 114-115).

trading voyages quickly came under the suspicion of luring foreigners and supposed *wokou* to China (Li, 1990).

Enduring suspicion on the part of the court meant that the maritime trade policy in Guangdong was inconsistent. The authorities appeared to waver between security and fiscal concerns as a 1514 restriction of trade to tribute missions on grounds of security was soon relaxed in 1517 due to a shortage of spices and to precarious provincial finances (Fok, 1978). This attempt at trade liberalisation was, however, jettisoned after conflict with the Portuguese in 1521 and the subsequent suspension of the *shibosi* in 1523 (*Ming shilu: Wuzong*, 1962-66: 149.9a-9b). The pain of trade suspension was quickly felt as closure of the *shibosi* caused the Southeast Asian traders, who had hitherto called with the tribute missions, to utilise centres of smuggling such as Shuangyu Island (off the coast of Zhangzhou in Fujian) to the detriment of Guangdong's revenues and the local economy (Wills, Jr., 1998).

Guangdong's next vacillation took place in 1530 when Lin Fu, the Grand Coordinator of Guangdong and Guangxi, memorialised the throne requesting permission to reinstate the previously permitted taxed non-tribute trade with foreigners. While Wills Jr. (1998) claims that the reopening of trade in 1530 excluded the Portuguese, it is interesting to note that in his memorial, Lin Fu specifically lists four benefits of allowing mutual trade *with* the Portuguese. Noting that 'taxes from trade are the source of many official and private expenses [and that] if the foreign ships do not arrive, many official and private budgets would be hard-pressed', Lin argues that implementation of taxed non-tribute trade and the *choufen* system (which taxed excess goods in kind) would enable them to fulfil imperial quotas, meet defence expenses, alleviate Guangxi's financial dependence on Guangdong, and benefit the locals (Zhang, 1974: 325/8432). Concluding forcefully on the note of mutual benefits, Lin maintains that 'in this way, the state is aided, the people grow rich and there is something for everyone' (Zhang, 1974: 325/8432).

The attractiveness of Lin's forceful 'appeal to the central government not to ignore the realities of the local situation' (Fok, 1978: 52-53) was backed by the widespread acknowledgement that there is a higher propensity for the impoverished to join the *wokou* or dabble in smuggling. Lifting the trade restrictions would enable the Guangdong provincial government to satisfy the court's needs, save its local administration from fiscal crisis, give the people of Guangdong legitimate livelihoods and discourage new recruits for the *wokou*

in one fell swoop. Imperial assent was granted and the Portuguese were allowed to trade in Xiangshan harbour in Guangdong (Zhang, 1974: 325/8432) though many continued with their illicit activities in the harbours of Yuegang and Shuangyu until Zhu Wan's anti-smuggling campaign in the late 1540s.

Despite the setback in Fujian, the Guangdong solution worked. Though Guangdong did not escape the predations of the *wokou* completely, it remained least affected among the three south-eastern provinces. Records indicate that though Guangdong was attacked several times in the mid-sixteenth century (the last *wokou* attack occurred in 1560), most of the raids were easily and swiftly suppressed by local troops and militias (Zheng, 1983: 3.17b-20a). Perhaps even more significant, the bands that pillaged Guangdong had spilled over from neighbouring Fujian, suggesting that within the territory of Guangdong, security had been established, thus giving credence to Lin's argument.

The creativity of the Guangdong officials in circumventing the *haijin* and *kanhe* trade system also bought them peace and an eventual accommodation with the Portuguese. The chaos in Zhejiang and Fujian in the 1550s led the Portuguese back to Guangdong in search of peaceful trade. The realisation that trade at local discretion was viable and profitable, coupled with their lucrative middleman role in the Sino-Japanese silver trade made the Portuguese more willing to accommodate and compromise (Fok, 1978; Atwell, 1982). This eagerness for a win-win solution was matched by the Guangdong *haidao* (vice-commissioner of the maritime defence circuit) who willingly accepted an annual private payment of 500 taels (ground rent payment) in return for the Portuguese to trade in Guangzhou and build a settlement in Macao. The 'Macao formula' concluded in 1554 thus enabled the Portuguese to enter Guangzhou under various guises as Southeast Asian traders, subject to the same twenty percent duty on their goods that was imposed on all Southeast Asian traders. These terms were acceptable to the Portuguese who flocked to Guangzhou in such numbers that by 1562, there were close to a thousand Portuguese residing at Macao (Wills, Jr., 1998).

Even though it was only during the Wanli reign (1573-1620) that the Portuguese finally obtained imperial acquiescence of their occupation of Macao, the Macao formula held out some promise of an effective solution to the questions of maritime security and foreign trade. By instituting the *choufen* system of taxation, the Guangdong government had effectively



circumvented the seemingly ironclad *haijin* and *kanhe* trade policies and provided an alternative for foreign traders without tribute credentials to trade in China. Lin Fu's arguments seemed to have held their ground as well, especially with respect to the *wokou* raids. While extant records do not elucidate whether those who favoured relaxation of the *haijin* used Guangdong as an example of how a *kaihai* policy could benefit China, Guangdong's success in dealing with the issues of *wokou* and trade in a manner deemed acceptable by the court must have, to some degree, resonated with them.

### Arguments for Opening the Seas

Arguments for the relaxation of the *haijin* thus found their way into the *wokou* debate documented in the *Illustrated Compendium of Maritime Strategy (Chouhai tubian)*. Here it can be seen that many of the proposals focused largely on the strategic and military aspects, such as the recruitment and training of troops and mercenaries, defence construction and organizing the *baojia* neighbourhood watch system (Zheng, 1983: *juan* 12). It is only towards the end of the litany of suggestions that one can find the voices calling for re-instatement of tribute trade and *hushi*.

The backgrounds of the officials calling for the relaxation of the *haijin* are significant: they either hailed from the coastal provinces or they had spent part of their careers in the three provinces and thus could claim a good knowledge of the local situation. The general thrust of their arguments posits that the *haijin* had created the *wokou* crisis by taking away the traditional livelihoods of people for whom the seas were their 'fields' (Chen, 1991: 123). Restrictive trade policies further meant that not only was the court deprived of potential tax income, it had to shoulder the added expense of anti-*wokou* military campaigns. Lifting the *haijin* would therefore, they envisaged, kill two birds with one stone—the littoral people would be denied legitimate reasons to join the *wokou* while the state could gain the benefit of customs revenue, long lost to smuggling, through the *choufen* system. It was a win-win situation for both state and society.

The basis of the arguments put forth for lifting the *haijin*, so similar to Lin Fu's eloquent testimony, was in fact not new. Decades earlier, Qiu Jun (1418-95), a native of Hainan, contended that the lure of goods and profits would simply induce traders to smuggle in disregard of the *haijin*. Rather than

wasting resources to stem an unstoppable tide, a system of licensed trade from which taxes collected could supplement the annual grain tax would be more productive (Qiu, 1983: 25.15b-17a). It was, however, a proposal that went unnoticed, given the relative peace along the south-east littoral during the Hongzhi reign (1488-1505). In the decades that followed, nevertheless, officials began increasingly to repeat Qiu's argument. In June 1517, Wu Tingju, the Right Provincial Administration Commissioner of Guangdong, set the process in motion with his proposal that the *haijin* be relaxed in Guangdong and all incoming ships received. The approval for Wu's proposal set a precedent even though it was revoked shortly after and blame was cast on Wu for causing the rise of 'unceasing troubles' in Guangdong (*Ming shilu: Wuzong*, 1962-66: 149.9a-9b).

As the *wokou* crisis grew in urgency in the 1550s, voices from the pro-*kaihai* camp grew louder. Zhao Wenhua (d.1557), the Minister of Works and a native of Cixi in Zhejiang, fired the next salvo in 1553, with his contention that China's lack of foreign trade was both an economic and security liability. As his solution to the *wokou* crisis, Zhao posits that once trade was allowed, the Chinese *wokou* leaders would lose their supporters who no longer had the motivation for plunder and illicit activities and the court would even benefit from the lucrative profits of trade (So, 1975). It was, unfortunately, at the height of the *wokou* crisis that Zhao made his proposal and little wonder there was no resonance at court.

Tang Shunzhi (1507-60), a native of Changzhou in Jiangsu, took up Zhao's call for *kaihai* in 1560. In his memorial proposing a series of strategies to boost maritime defence, Tang suggests, as one of the strategies, the re-opening of tribute relations with Japan (Chen, 1997b: 260.1a-11a). Basing his suggestion on a proposal submitted to him by Regional Commander Lu Tang, whom he cites as having thirty years of experience on the coast, Tang's solution to the crisis was to give the *wokou* what they craved—trade—and thereby remove their inclination towards piracy (Chen, 1997b: 260.6a). At the same time, Tang further makes an indirect call for reconsideration of the *haijin* by recommending a re-examination of the original intentions behind establishing the *shibosi* in Ningbo, Guangzhou and Fujian, noting that with neither trade nor tribute allowed in Fujian, the original reasons for having the *shibosi* there remain unknown (Chen, 1997b: 260:10a-10b). Using the analogy of coal mining, Tang drives home the point that the most straightforward solution to

prevent private mining (closing the mines) might not be the most feasible option. Instead, the government would do well to adopt the option of allowing private mining activities under government supervision as it could benefit through taxation. The worst situation, in his view, was one where mines are closed, no taxes collected and yet the people continue to benefit from illicit mining. Thus, by extrapolation, legalizing and taxing private maritime trade instead of allowing profits to flow into private coffers was the most viable option available to the court (Chen, 1997b: 260.10b).

The pragmatism displayed by Tang Shunzhi was echoed in the arguments of Tang Shu, a native of Huzhou in Zhejiang. Reiterating Qiu Jun's earlier contention, Tang Shu opined that private maritime trade was next to impossible to restrict since foreign goods would always be in demand (Chen, 1997b: 270.3a-3b). Noting that the *haijin* had originated from a desire for internal security, he criticised the conservatives for their constant reference to the intentions of the Hongwu emperor, suggesting that it was quite possible the founder himself might have found it necessary to amend his own policy over time (Chen, 1997b: 270.4b). Tang Shu echoes Tang Shunzhi in asserting that it was more practical to allow private maritime trade and to gain from taxes levied rather than let illicit profits accrue to wealthy families on the coast. By opening the ports to private maritime trade and hence tax revenue, the court would in turn easily solve the difficulties of paying for mercenary troops and supporting the defence establishment on the coast (Chen, 1997b: 270.4b).

To push his point further, Tang Shu proposed a series of regulations that would govern the workings of a *kaihai* policy contained in an undated letter addressed, presumably, to Hu Zongxian. Tang recommended that while foreigners should be allowed into the ports to trade with the local people, they should leave once their transactions have been concluded, thus keeping Sino-foreign interactions to a minimum. Chinese traders venturing overseas should have their cargoes examined for prohibited goods before a license could be granted, and taxes paid before they were allowed to leave the port. The same process of inspection for contraband and tax payments would take place when these traders returned. To facilitate tax collection and prevent tax evasion, a specific port would be established as the entry and exit point for the traders. All attempts to leave or enter China via other ports would be classified as smuggling (Chen, 1997b: 270.9b-10a). These suggestions were later to be

instituted in Yuegang, which became the only port where the *haijin* was relaxed.

### The Final Act

Ironically, given the amount of attention devoted to debating the *haijin*, the documents provide scant information on the final resolution of the issue.<sup>15</sup> Despite the calls for *kaihai*, the *haijin* remained in place throughout the Jiajing reign, presumably due to the emperor's abhorrence of overturning what he deemed as ancestral law, though the foundations for an eventual relaxation of the *haijin* were laid throughout the 1550s and 1560s.

In 1549, Zhu Wan had identified Yuegang, the prime smuggling port in Fujian, as a port of strategic importance. Since then, incremental administrative changes took place in Yuegang, beginning with the establishment of a customs office in 1551, which was upgraded to a maritime defence office in 1563 (Chen, 1983). Yuegang's potential as a port was highlighted when yet another pro-*kaihai* official, Zheng Xiao (1499-1566) from Haiyan County in Zhejiang, proposed the transfer of the Ningbo and Guangzhou *shibosi* to Yuegang (Chen, 1997b: 218.5a-5b). While the two said *shibosi* were not moved, the 1566 elevation of Yuegang to county status, with a corresponding name change to Haicheng (lit. clear seas), only served to emphasise its potential (Zhang, 1981: 131).

It was in 1567, the inaugural year of the Longqing reign (1567-72), that imperial assent was granted to the petition by Tu Zemin, the *xunfu* of Fujian, to 'open the maritime prohibition and allow trade with the eastern and western oceans' (Zhang, 1981: 131). The trade thus permitted was originally carried out at the port of Meiling in Nanzhao, Fujian, but eventually shifted to Haicheng to avoid harassment of traders by pirates. In 1572, the sixth year of the Longqing reign, merchants and ships were taxed on the suggestion of Luo Qingxiao, the magistrate of Haicheng (Zhang, 1981: 132).

While the decision to relax the *haijin* has been interpreted as a capitulation of the centre to littoral demands, it was, in truth, a very limited response. Under the framework of licensed private trade, although trade with the traditionally non-problematic vassals such as Luzon, Sulu, Champa and Siam were approved, 'trade with the *wo* slaves was expressly and strictly prohibited

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<sup>15</sup> There is no mention of the relaxation of the *haijin* in either the *Mingshi* or the *Ming shilu* to the best of my knowledge.

and punishable according to the laws on illicit intercourse with and extension of aid to foreigners' (Zhang, 1981: 132). This restriction on Japanese trade suggests that though the court apparently acquiesced to the situation on the littoral in granting the freedom to legitimate maritime trade, it was made very much on the state's terms. Seen in this light, the 1567 relaxation was not so much a victory of the littoral over the state as claimed by Dai (1982) and Lin (1980) among others, but rather a pragmatic compromise by the state to make best of the situation on the maritime frontier. It can even be argued that the ultimate beneficiary of the entire crisis was the Ming state. Not only was its coastal defence strengthened as a result of reforms undertaken by officials and military commanders, tax revenue generated by the private maritime trade that flourished at Haicheng under the control of the local government benefited the state. In any case, the fact that any hint of troubles along the coast in the years that followed almost always provoked a reactionary re-imposition of the *haijin* suggests that it was trade carried on at the forbearance of the state (Zhang, 1981: 132-33).

The state, as final arbiter, ultimately retained control over when and where the *haijin* was relaxed. Despite calls made since the early 1550s, the relaxation of the *haijin* in 1567 suggests strongly that it was only after the *wokou* crisis subsided, and after a new emperor ascended the throne, that the option of *kaihai* was considered. Even though calls for *kaihai* were vocal and persuasive, that most of the *kaihai* proposals were expressed as part of possible solutions to the *wokou* crisis also indicates an underlying acknowledgement that maritime security and trade liberalisation went hand-in-hand; one was not possible without the other.

Ultimately, in the calculation of court officials, relaxation of the *haijin* was perhaps motivated in large part by the 1559 success of the Single Whip reform in Guangdong. Originally a means of simplifying tax collection by commuting corvée obligations and other miscellaneous taxes into silver payments, the Single Whip was implemented to ensure a regular supply of funds at the disposal of the local government that could pay for extra services such as the hiring of mercenary troops in times of crisis. The further success of the Single Whip carried out by Pang Shangpeng (1524-81), the regional inspector of Zhejiang, in the mid-1560s only served to impress the court how the monies collected not only provided extra revenue but also prevented corruption and evasion of taxes (Huang, 1974). Yet, the successful implementation of the

Single Whip was predicated on a steady supply of silver which was ironically flowing into the Chinese economy via the untaxed and unstoppable illicit trade. The 1567 relaxation thus suggests that considerations of making the supply of silver legitimate may have eventually played a part in the policy change.

### Conclusion

The 1567 adoption of *kaihai* does not constitute the capitulation of the state to the demands of the periphery. The cautious, incremental approach taken by the court in reaching the decision in 1567 was one that distinguished between the issue of maritime security and that of the people's livelihood. A reading of the proposals put forth by *kaihai* proponents suggests that, despite their belief in the benefits of liberalizing trade, the *wokou* crisis remained the key issue. Only when peace was restored to the south-east and the provincial military establishments had proven their worth, was the court confident of addressing the issue of the people's livelihood. Despite the early conclusion reached by court officials that the *haijin* was the root cause of the *wokou* troubles, decisions about the *haijin* had to be predicated on the restoration of law and order in the south-east. The important first step in highlighting a possible *modus operandi* in the management of foreign trade was made when informal trade liberalisation in Guangdong prior to 1567 validated the argument that open access to trade would reduce the incidence of piratical raids. Ultimately, the fact that one of the most notorious smuggling centres was chosen as the port for licensed trade speaks volumes for the confidence of a state that had won a hard-fought battle and acceded to local demands on its own terms.

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