

Introduction

On a cold December night in Quedlinburg, Germany, in 1589, thirty-two women were burnt at the stake, accused of possessing mysterious powers that enabled them to perform evil deeds. Thousands of people were similarly persecuted between the fifteenth and the seventeenth centuries.¹ However, this event was not unique, as fifty years earlier on a rainy night in August, 1549, ninety-seven maritime merchants were beheaded on the coast of Zhejiang 浙江 province for violation of the Ming maritime prohibition. In addition, 117,000 coastal people were immediately banished from their homes to prevent them from going to sea. Thousands of Chinese and foreign merchants lost their lives in the subsequent military campaigns in support of the maritime interdiction.² If historians were asked to list the early modern phenomena that have most ‘disturbed’ their academic rationale, the two centuries-long witch-hunt in early modern Europe (1500–1700) and the 200 year term of the maritime prohibition, or “*hajin* 海禁” (1372–1568), during the Ming dynasty (1368—1644) would probably be near the top of the list. For the past few centuries, scholars have debated vigorously the two phenomena and tried to identify the factors that led to their formation, maintenance and eventual change. While the study of the witch-hunt has generated a degree of consensus, there are still many questions surrounding the Ming maritime prohibition.

The maritime prohibition policy, introduced in 1371 by the newly enthroned Ming founder, the Hongwu Emperor 洪武 (r. 1368–1398), was institutionalised to maintain systematic control over foreign contact and foreign trade relations. Chinese people were prevented from leaving the empire and foreigners from entering it. The regulations stated: “Coastal people are prohibited from going to sea”,³ and “Coastal people are forbidden from contacting all foreigners.”⁴ It was decreed: “Those who have trade dealings with ‘barbarians’ deserve the death penalty and their family members will be sent into exile. Their neighbours, if found guilty of failing to report them to the authorities, will receive the same punishment.”⁵ Facilities for ocean-going voyages were purposefully destroyed. Regulations stipulated that “no ships with two masts are allowed to be built, and those already made have

1 H. C. Erik Midelfort, “Heartland of the Witch Craze: Central and Northern Europe”, *History Today* 31 (1981), p. 28.

2 *Huang Ming Jia-Long liangchao wenjian ji shi'erjuan* 皇明嘉隆兩朝聞見紀十二卷 (*Minutes of the Imperial Jiajing and Longqing Administrations in twenty volumes*) edited by Shen Yue 沈越 (*jinsbi* Jiajing era – 1522–66), in *Siku quanshu cunmu congshu* 四庫全書存目叢書 (*Complete Corpus of the Four Treasuries*) compiled by Siku quanshu cunmu congshu bianzhan weiyuanhui 四庫全書存目編纂委員會. (Jinan: Qilu shushe, 1997), 史, fasc. 7, j. 8, p. 14b [hereafter *Siku cunmu*].

3 *Ming Taizu shilu* 明太祖實錄 (*The Veritable Records of Ming Taizu*), in *Ming shilu* 明實錄 by Yao Guangxiao 姚廣孝 (1334–1418), Xia Yuanji 夏元吉 (1366–1430) *et. al.* (Nanjing: Jiangsu Chinese Studies Library printed copy 江蘇國學圖書館傳抄本影印, 1940), j. 70, p. 4a.

4 *Ming Taizu shilu*, j. 139, p. 8a.

5 *Piyu zaji* 璧餘雜集 (*Ritual of Brick-carrying to Sharpen my will, Miscellaneous Writings to Demonstrate my Zeal*) by Zhu Wan 朱紈 (1494–1550), in *Siku cunmu* 集, fasc. 78, j. 4, p. 27a.

to be dismantled without exception.”⁶ Trading ports were deliberately paralysed with stone, rocks and pine stakes. The export of Chinese commodities and the import of foreign goods were forbidden. “Foreign goods, if possessed, must be destroyed within three months.”⁷ The coast was heavily guarded: “Seventy-four military garrisons were established from Guangdong 廣東 to Shandong 山東. One in every four peasants was drafted to patrol the coast.”⁸ The grand ideal of the policy was to maintain an imagined situation where “not a single piece of wood was allowed to float in the sea.”⁹ The *haijin* was not only a policy of the Hongwu administration but was instituted as a part of the *Ancestral Injunctions* (*Huang Ming zuoxun* 皇明祖訓) to be upheld by all following administrations. For nearly 200 years, from its establishment in 1371 until its abolition in 1568, the policy remained an important part of the ‘established practices of the ancestors’ (*zuzong chengfa* 祖宗成法).

During the two centuries in which the maritime prohibition was enforced Chinese and foreign traders tried all ways possible to break the interdiction by smuggling and “piracy”. The wars with ‘pirates’ constituted a major part of the Ming defence. The threat from the “*beilu nanwo* 北廬南倭” (Mongols in the north and Japanese pirates in the south) dominated the Ming political, financial and defence agendas as long as the maritime prohibition policy stood.¹⁰

It is difficult to understand the logic behind this policy. From the political perspective, why did the Ming administration devote such effort to waging war on merchants who were not enemies of the state but rather people who sought to benefit China through their trading activities? The policy weakened the dynasty’s political strength by exhausting its resources in an effort to maintain this continual conflict, which could well have been avoided. Similarly, from an economic perspective, it is hard to fathom why the Ming government deliberately blocked a channel that would have enabled it to gain a considerable amount of revenue, especially when international trade was so lucrative and Chinese products were in such high demand throughout the world. And where was the logic in an administration shutting itself off from the opportunity to enhance its economy by importing what the empire most needed? Such questions as these provide an agenda for the historian to

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- 6 *Mingshi jishi benmo* 明史記事本末 (*A Complete Record of Important Events in Ming History*) by Gu Yingtai 穀應泰 (*jinsi* 1647), in *Wenyuange Siku quanshu* 文淵閣四庫全書 (*Wenyuange: Complete Library of the Four Treasuries*) compiled by Ji Yun 紀昀 (1724–1805) *et. al.* (Taipei: Taiwan Shangwu yinshu guan 臺灣商務印書館, 1986), fasc. 364, j. 55, p. 10b [hereafter *Siku quanshu*].
- 7 *Ming Taizu shilu*, j. 231, p. 2b. See also *Ming Yingzong shilu* 明英宗實錄 (*The Veritable Records of Ming Yingzong*), in *Ming shilu* 明實錄 by Yao Guangxiao 姚廣孝 (1334–1418), Xia Yuanji 夏元吉 (1366–1430) *et. al.* (Nanjing: Jiangsu Chinese Studies Library printed copy 江蘇國學圖書館傳抄本影印, 1940), j. 179, p. 15a.
- 8 *Zheng Duanjian gong nianpu* 鄭端簡公年譜 (*A Chronological Biography of Zheng Xiao, Posthumous Title Duanjian*) by Zheng Lüchun 鄭履淳 (*jinsi* 1562), in *Siku cunmu* 史, fasc. 83, j. 3, p. 25b.
- 9 *Ming shi* 明史 (*The Official History of the Ming Dynasty*) by Zhang Tingyü 張廷玉 (1672–1755) *et. al.*, in *Siku quanshu*, fasc. 300, j. 205, p. 1b.
- 10 *Yanzhou shiliao qianji* 兗州史料前集 (*Wang Shizhen’s Collection of Historical Materials; First Part*) by Wang Shizhen 王世貞 (1526–1590), *Siku cunmu* 史 112, j. 18, p. 37a.

explore. Why was such an apparently nonsensical institution created? What was the mechanism by which it was maintained for so long? And why was such a supposedly unchallengeable constitutional charter eventually challenged and abolished? But perhaps the most important question of all relates to the dynamic that was driving forward the change. What social and economic forces underlay this transformation? Who was it that wanted to see this apparently well-entrenched institutional structure removed and how were they able to succeed in this task?

We are often told that the Chinese emperors would make decisions with a strong regard to precedents and that “the literati officials always looked to the past for guidance in dealing with the present.”¹¹ But there is no evidence that the early Ming administration was following precedent in imposing the maritime prohibitions. International trade had been a major source of revenue in former dynasties. As early as the Tang dynasty (618–907), “the state treasury relied heavily on the income from maritime trade.”¹² During the Huangchao uprising (*huangchao qiyi* 黃巢起義, 875–883), when the rebels were marching on Guangzhou 廣州 in 878, Yuzong 於琮 (?–881), Prime Minister at the court of Tang Xizong 唐僖宗 (r. 874–888), warned the emperor: “If the rebels take over the Guangzhou Maritime Trade Office our state coffers may soon dry up.”¹³ This was no exaggeration. The income from maritime trade was never less than the total income from the summer and autumn land taxes (*xiaqiu liangshui* 夏秋兩稅).¹⁴ Once the Maritime Trade Office fell into rebel hands the administration soon encountered financial difficulties.¹⁵ The emperor “had no option but to borrow half of the government expenditure from wealthy families and even barbarian merchants from the steppe.”¹⁶

During the Northern and Southern Song dynasties (北宋 907–1127, 南宋 1128–1279), income from maritime trade rose to even higher levels. During the Southern Song in particular, “state revenue from maritime trade reached as much as 20 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 1128.”¹⁷ Customs duties from the three maritime trade offices of Fujian 福建, Guangdong 廣東 and Zhejiang 浙

11 Raymond Dawson, *The Chinese Experience*. (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1978), p. 22. See also L. S. Stavrianos, *A Global History: from Prehistory to the Present*. (Eaglewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1991), p. 149.

12 Yu Siwei 于思偉, “Guangzhou shibo si de lishi yange jiqi zai duiwai maoyi zhong de zuoyong he yingxiang 廣州市舶司的歷史沿革及其在對外貿易中的作用和影響” (The Evolution of the Maritime Trade Office at Guangzhou and its Role and Impact in Foreign Trade), *Haijiao shi yanjiu* 海交史研究 5 (1983), pp. 72–73.

13 *Jiu Tang shu* 舊唐書 (*The Old Tang History*) by Liu Xu 劉昫 (888–947) *et. al.*, in *Siku quanshu*, fasc. 271, j. 178, p. 16a.

14 *Jiu Tang shu*, j. 151, p. 12a.

15 *Jiu Tang shu*, j. 178, p. 16a.

16 *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑒 (*Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government*) by Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019–1086), in *Siku quanshu*, fasc. 309, j. 253, pp. 16a–b, 20b, 36b.

17 Chen Yan 陳炎, “Lun haishang sichou zhi lu yu zhongwai wenhua jiaoliu 論海上絲綢之路與中外文化交流” (The Maritime Silk Route and Cultural Exchanges between China and the Outside World), in *Zhongguo yu haishang sichou zhi lu* 中國與海上絲綢之路 (*China and the Maritime Silk Route*). (Quanzhou: Fujian Publishing House, 1991), p. 3.

江 alone reached 2,000,000 *min* 緡 in 1159, at a time when the Gross National Product (GNP) was about forty million *min*.¹⁸ The Shenzong emperor 神宗 (r. 1068–1085) proudly declared: “Maritime trade was the number one source of revenue from the southeast of the empire.”¹⁹ After the Mongol conquest of China, maritime trade became an important source of revenue that underlay both extensive government expenditure and aggressive military campaigns. In 1272, facing significant financial pressure in order to build a new capital in Dadu (now Beijing), Qubilai Qan (1215–1294; reigning as Yuan Shizong 元世祖, r. 1260–1294) budgeted the revenue from commerce at a new high of around 45,000 *ding* 錠 per year. Remarkably, in 1289 revenue reached 450,000 *ding*, largely as a result of administrative support for maritime trade and government protection for merchants.²⁰ During the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1279–1367) commercial activity reached a new high as the government put everything for sale into the ‘global market’. Along with the traditional Chinese goods of silk and porcelain, copper coinage and silver bullion were also significant export items. On account of trade policies that were conducive to maritime activity, the Yuan witnessed so great an outflow and inflow of goods that its paper currency, the *Zhongtong baochao* 中統寶鈔, was said to have become valid in all regions and for an unlimited time period.²¹ Indeed, Marco Polo noted that “the Yuan paper notes were as good and pure as gold. All his [the Qan’s] subjects receive it without hesitation ... because the holder can use it to purchase gold and silver or jewels.”²²

Whereas maritime trade was an important source of revenue during the Tang, Song and Yuan dynasties, it was disregarded and feared by the early Ming administration. Private trade was outlawed. Tribute trade (*gongbo* 貢舶) was the only legal form of trade and it was unilaterally arranged and monopolised by the Ming court. The items that could be traded and their prices were fixed and controlled by the

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- 18 *Jianyan yilai xinian yaolu* 建炎以來繫年要錄 (*Important Files Arranged by Year Since the Reign Period Jianyan*) by Li Xinchuan 李心傳 (1167–1244), in *Siku quanshu*, fasc. 327, j. 183, p. 20a. See also Lu Wei 蘆葦, “Song Dai haiwai maoyi he dongnanya geguo guanxi 宋代海外貿易和東南亞各國關係” (Maritime Trade and Relations with Southeast Asia during the Song), *Haijiao shi yanjiu* 海交史研究 1 (1985), p. 14.
- 19 *Song shi* 宋史 (*The Official History of the Song Dynasty*) by Tuo Tuo 脫脫 (1314–1355) *et. al.*, in *Siku quanshu*, fasc. 283, j. 186, pp. 24a–b.
- 20 *Yuan shi* 元史 (*The Official History of the Yuan Dynasty*) by Song Lian 宋濂 (1310–1381), in *Siku quanshu*, fasc. 293, j. 94, pp. 26a–b.
- 21 *Qinding xu wenxian tongkao* 欽定續文獻通考 (*Imperially Commissioned Encyclopaedia of Historical Works, Continued*) by Cao Renhu 曹仁虎 (1730–1786), in *Siku quanshu*, fasc. 626, j. 9, pp. 2a–5a. See also “Caiji yi 財計一”, in *Mingyi daifang lu* 明夷待訪錄 (*A Plan for a Prince*) by Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲 (1610–1695). (Sichuan cunqu shuju edition, 1767–1849), in *Xuxiu siku quanshu* 續修四庫全書 (*The Complete Library of the Four Treasuries: Continued and Revised*). (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002), fasc. 945, pp. 42b–43a (no *juan*) [hereafter *Siku xuxiu*]. See also Jacques Gernet, *A History of Chinese Civilization*, translated by J. R. Foster. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 371–372.
- 22 Marco Polo, *The Travels of Marco Polo*. Edited and Introduced by Manuel Komroff. (New York: Liveright Publication Corporation, 1953), Book II, pp. 159–160.

Ming administration.²³ Finance ministers issued the following directions to those involved in administering the trade: “Any foreign goods imported with the tributary mission, whatever, are tax-free”²⁴; “pay them a few times higher than the price offered in order not to lose their affection”²⁵; “always give more than we take.”²⁶ Qiu Jun 丘濬 (1418–1495), Senior Grand Secretary during the first part of the Hongzhi reign 弘治 (r. 1488–1505), claimed that the government did not make any money at all from the tributary trade.²⁷ In other words, during the early Ming dynasty foreign trade lost its economic identity and became primarily an aspect of the administration’s political activities. Even the Yongle emperor 永樂 (r. 1403–1424), notwithstanding his support for the famous maritime explorations led by Zheng He 鄭和 (1375–1435), still regarded profit from trade as shameful. When advised by his officials to levy duty on the goods brought in by the foreign merchants he was annoyed:

It is not for profit that the government should tax foreign merchants ... they are attracted by our morality and righteousness, not by profit! How shameful for us to make profit out of them. Even if we do levy duty on them, how little will that be? We lose more dignity than profit!²⁸

The early Ming approach to foreign trade presents a dramatic contrast to the approach undertaken by its predecessors, the Tang, Song and Yuan administrations, all of which did their utmost to facilitate and promote maritime trade. As early as the ninth century, the Tang Wenzong emperor 唐文宗 (r. 827–835) instigated a liberal framework for the Tang trade policy. In 834 he decreed, “Foreign goods in whatever quantity are to be free for sale throughout the empire so long as merchants have paid their ten per cent duty and completed *guanmai* 官買 (government purchase).”²⁹ Earlier still, Tang Taizong 唐太宗 (r. 627–650) made a great effort to protect the interests of merchants from being infringed by local officials. He outlawed the imposition of a surcharge on foreign merchants.³⁰ To enhance the confi-

23 The court demanded that its neighbouring countries show their political obedience ceremonially by paying tribute to the Ming court, and as a reward the court allowed them to trade some of their local products along with the tribute mission. The government was usually the main trade partner. The granting of permission to participate in such tributary trade arrangements became a form of political leverage that the early Ming administration used over its tribute states.

24 *Ming Taizu shilu*, j. 45, p. 17a.

25 *Shuyu zhoubu lu* 殊域周咨錄 (*A Comprehensive Record on Foreign Countries*) by Yan Congjian 嚴從簡 (*jinsbi* 1535), Wanli-edition, in *Siku xuxiu*, fasc. 735, j. 8, p. 18a (467).

26 *Ming Taizu shilu*, j. 71, p. 1b.

27 *Daxue yanyi bu* 大學衍義補 (*Supplement to the “Elucidation on the Great Learning”*) by Qiu Jin (1420–1495), in Cao Renhu, *Qinding xu wenxian tongkao*, j. 26, p. 26b.

28 *Ming shi*, in *Siku quanshu*, fasc. 298, j. 81, p. 27b.

29 *Tianxia jinguo libing shu* 天下郡國利病書 (*Strengths and Weaknesses of the Various Regions of the Realm*) by Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 (1613–1682). (Erlin zhaizang edition 二霖齋藏, 1901), j. 120, p. 3b.

30 *Quan Tang wen* 全唐文 (*Complete Documents of the Tang*) by Dong Gao 董誥 (1740–1818). (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1990), j. 75, p. 342.

dence of foreign merchants doing business in China, the Taizong administration granted permits for them to reside in China for as long as they wished: “Foreign merchants were allowed to buy and own property so long as this was purchased with income derived from their trade in China.”³¹ As a consequence of this, “some foreign traders lived in China for eight generations and became great property owners.”³² Furthermore, the government also provided them with a favourable insurance policy: “If a merchant died in China his property would be looked after by the government for three months pending claim by family or relatives.”³³ During the reign of the Daizong emperor 代宗 (r. 763–799), the combination of supportive business conditions and a free-trade atmosphere attracted around 4,000 merchant ships to Guangzhou each year.³⁴

The Song emperors went even further than the Tang in promoting international trade. For instance, ignoring his status as ‘Son of Heaven’, Emperor Taizong (r. 976–997), became personally involved in promoting trade abroad. During the Yongxi 雍熙 (984–987) era, he dispatched eight officials along four different routes to deliver his invitation to merchants overseas, a handwritten message on a piece of silk.³⁵ The Taizong administration encouraged its officials and merchants to engage in maritime trade by rewarding them with offices and promotion. A decree from the court states: “A higher office will be rewarded to any official who can generate one million *min* annually in tariff revenue from maritime trade in Fujian and Guangdong.”³⁶ As a result of this, Cai Jing 蔡景 (1046–1126) was promoted from the position of “*gangshou* 綱首” (leader of a transport mission) to that of “*chengxinlang* 承信郎” (Master of Ceremonies for Foreign Trade), as he managed to generate 980,000 *min* in revenue from business loan arrangements in trade with foreign maritime merchants. Over and above that, the emperor even awarded official titles to foreigners who made contributions to promoting trade. A “*Dashi fanke* 大食番客” (a guest from an Arab country) named Louxin 囉辛, was given the official title of *cheng-xinlang* owing to his business with China being worth some 300,000 *min*.³⁷ The Song government did not hesitate to spend hard-earned revenue in order to please foreign merchants and make them feel needed and respected. “The Song Zhenzong Emperor (r. 998–1021) in 1009 sent his special envoy to ride a thousand miles trip from the capital to Guangzhou, where a large number of foreign guests gathered, to pay visit

31 *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑒 (*Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government*) by Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019–1086), annotated by Hu Sanxing 胡三省 (1230–1302). (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1986), p. 1547.

32 Ibid.

33 *Xin Tang shu* 新唐書 (*The New Tang History*) by Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007–1072), in *Siku quanshu*, fasc. 275, j. 163 p. 4a.

34 *Jiu Tang shu*, j. 131, p. 3b. See also see Yu Siwei, “Guangzhou shibo si de lishi,” p. 73.

35 *Song shi*, fasc. 283, j. 186, p. 23b.

36 *Song shi*, fasc. 283, j. 185, p. 32a.

37 Ibid.

to them, reward them and entertain them on behalf of the court.”³⁸ Millions of *guan* 貫 had to be disbursed from the Treasury to pay the costs associated with this ‘etiquette’ (i.e. visits, rewards, and entertainment).³⁹

The Yuan (1206–1368) surpassed both the Tang and Song administrations in implementing policies designed to encourage maritime trade. Duties on foreign goods were reduced to 1/25th and 1/30th of the value of the transaction, whereas during the Tang and Song dynasties they were set at around at 10 per cent.⁴⁰ However, this favourable duty was not the real ‘magic wand’ which generated the vitality of maritime trade under the Yuan. It was the trading partnership between the government and merchants that made the real difference. Qubilai Qan made maritime trade a state monopoly in the 21st year of the Zhiyuan reign (1284): under this system, the “Government provided both capital and ships to merchants; with 30 per cent of the profit going to the merchants and 70 per cent to the government.”⁴¹ Such partnerships were compulsory, and wealthy families were not allowed to engage in maritime trade independently. This policy has two implications. On the one hand, the problem of limited finance that had restrained some merchants from expanding the scope of their businesses no longer existed, while on the other hand, it was the government rather than merchants that took most of the risk. As a result, merchants under the Yuan became more competitive and more ambitious. Foreign trade became so indispensable to Qubilai Qan that, in the fifteenth year of his reign (1278), he personally invited the Japanese to come to China for trade, in spite of the hostile bilateral relations at the time.⁴² Similarly, in very first year of his reign, the Wenzong emperor 元文宗 (r. 1328–1329) invited Japanese traders to Fujian for trade and selected officials to work out a favourable tariff for them.⁴³

This history of encouragement of maritime trade during the 750 odd years from the Tang to the Yuan seemed to have little effect on the early Ming government. The Hongwu Emperor deliberately reversed the general trend of maritime trade history in what seems like an irrational way. Instead of encouraging his subjects to engage in maritime trade, like his predecessors Tang Taizong and Song Taizong had done, the Hongwu Emperor deterred them: “If I do not prohibit you, you could be lured by profit in trade and eventually be punished by law.”⁴⁴ He believed that “the ignorant coastal people were so benighted that they contacted barbarians for

38 *Xu zizhi tongjian changbian* 續資治通鑿長編 (*Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government, Continued*) by Li Tao 李燾 (1115–1184), in *Siku quanshu*, fasc. 315, j. 72, p. 27a; also *Lingwai daida* 嶺外代答 (*Instead of Answers to What is Beyond the Mountain Passes*) by Zhou Qufei 周去非 (*jinsbi* 1163, ?–after 1178), in *Siku quanshu*, fasc. 589, j. 3, pp. 11b–12a.

39 Lu Wei 蘆葦, *Zhongwei guanxi shi* 中外關係史 (*A history of China's foreign relations*). (Lanzhou: Lanzhou University Press, 1996), p. 224.

40 *Yuan shi xinbian* 元史新編 (*The New Edition of the Official History of the Yuan Dynasty*) by Wei Yuan 魏源 (1794–1857), in *Siku xuxiu*, fasc. 315, j. 88, pp. 20a–b.

41 *Ibid.*, j. 88, p. 20a.

42 Cao Renhu, *Qinding xu wenxian tongkao*, j. 26, p. 15a.

43 *Ibid.*, j. 25, p. 25a.

44 *Ming Taizu shilu*, j. 70, p. 8b.

trade.”⁴⁵ He branded those people who went in for trade rather than toiled in paddy fields ‘vagabonds’, and decreed “Vagabonds are to be arrested.”⁴⁶ Even the legal tributary trade, the “*shibo* 市舶”, was constrained by harsh conditions. Japan was restricted to pay tribute only once every 10 years, with missions to comprise no more than 200 people and the port of entry limited to Ningbo 寧波. The state of Jiaozhi 交趾 (in present-day Vietnam) was allowed to pay tribute once every three years via a port in Guangdong. The Ryūkyū Kingdom 琉球 was permitted to send tribute missions twice a year but with no more than 50 emissaries each time and only through the port of Minxian 閩縣 in Fujian province.⁴⁷

Whereas Tang Taizong had issued ‘permanent residence’ to the foreign traders, and Song Xiaozong (r. 1163–1189) spent millions entertaining overseas merchants, the Ming Jiajing Emperor 嘉靖 (r. 1521–1567) organized 200,000 soldiers to attack and pursue foreign merchants.⁴⁸ Similarly, whereas the Yuan government had built numerous inns and business centres along trading routes for merchants’ convenience and had stationed government-dispatched military archers to guard their hotels and protect their lives and goods,⁴⁹ the Hongwu Emperor ordered the construction of fifty-nine heavily-manned fortresses along the Zhejiang coast and sixteen along the Fujian coast to prevent foreign merchants from getting ashore.⁵⁰ The Duke of Tang 湯國 (1326–1395) ordered a 300-roomed Grand Buddhist temple on Putuoshan Island 普陀山 burnt to the ground in 1387, suspecting it housed illicit traders passing themselves off as pilgrims.⁵¹ Anyone found to be trading with foreigners was to be evacuated from their hometown for good.⁵² Whereas during preceding dynasties the income from maritime trade had been an indispensable part of government income, the early Ming administration had no hesitation in spending

45 *Ming Taizu shilu*, j. 23, p. 2b.

46 “Dagao xubian 大誥續編” (Imperial Pronouncement, Continued) by Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 (r. 1368–1397), in *Zhaodai wangzhang 昭代王章 (The Great Law Code of a Venerated Dynasty)* by Xiong Mingqi 熊鳴岐 (*jinsbi* 1607), in *Xuanlantang congshu 玄覽堂叢書 (Collection from the Xuanlan Ancestry Hall)*. (Nanjing: Guoli zhongyan tushuguan, 1947), j. 1, pp. 57b–58a.

47 *Da Ming huidian 大明會典 (The Collected Statutes of the Ming Dynasty)* by Shen Shixing 申時行 (1535–1614), in *Siku xuxiu*, fasc. 791, j. 105, 4b–8a.

48 *Wobian shiluo 倭變事略 (A Record of Japanese Piracy)* by Cai Jiude 采九德 (Ming), in *Congshu jicheng chubian 叢書集成初編 (First Edition of a Comprehensive Collection of Documents)*. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), j. 3, p. 61.

49 Tian Changwu 田昌五, *Zhongguo fengjian shehui jingji shi 中國封建社會經濟史 (A Social and Economic History of Feudal China)*. (Jinan: Qilu Wenjin Publication, 1994), vol. 3, p. 728.

50 Gu Yingtai, *Mingshi jishi benmo*, in *Siku quanshu*, fasc. 364, j. 55, pp. 3a–b.

51 *Putoushan zhi 普陀山志 (Annals of Putoushan)* by Xu Yan 許琰 (Qing), in *Siku xuxiu*, fasc. 723, j. 2, p. 2a.

52 (*Guangxu*) *Dinghai ting zhi 定海廳誌 (The Gazetteer of Dinghai Prefecture)* by Huang Yizhou 黃以周 (1828–1899) and Chen Zhongwei 陳重威, in *Zhongguo difangzhi jicheng 中國地方誌集成 (The Collected Chinese Gazetteers)*. (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1991), vol. 38, j. 20, p. 6a.

two million *taels* of silver, the total annual cash revenue the government received, on blocking maritime trade.⁵³

What motivated the early Ming administration to go against the traditional current of maritime trade? What was the rationale for maintaining such a costly system? And why was the maritime trade prohibition lifted after being maintained so strictly for 200 years? It has been generally agreed by scholars that the fundamental reason for this policy, one that explains such a reversal of past practice, was the need to defend the Chinese coast against Japanese piracy. No alternate arguments have been put forward that seem more convincing than this.

John Wills directly related Japanese piracy to the policy of maritime prohibition. He argued: “It is clear that a very important determinant of early Ming policies toward maritime foreign relations was the court’s reaction to the menace of the ‘Japanese pirates,’ many of whom were actually Chinese. Private maritime trade by Chinese was entirely prohibited.”⁵⁴ Along the same lines, James Geiss argues that the eventual military victory over these pirates explains the lifting of the prohibition policy. The prohibition policy was lifted only after “much of the land and many people who had formerly been in the hands of brigands returned to imperial control” in 1567 (a year before the prohibition was lifted) and piracy was obviously no longer a serious problem along the southeast coast.⁵⁵ Similarly, John K. Fairbank emphasized the political and social disorder caused by Japanese piracy. He argued that the prohibition on maritime trade came from the government’s response to this growing problem.⁵⁶ Wang Gungwu approaches the issue from the perspective of resources, suggesting that the maritime prohibition was a necessary part of a larger policy aimed at controlling the Mongols. He argues that the maritime prohibition was an expedient measure because the Hongwu Emperor could not afford to carry out the same aggressive foreign policy as the Yuan had enjoyed. He faced a considerable threat from the north, where the Mongols remained powerful, and needed to secure his southern and south-eastern coast so that he could concentrate on pacifying the great Mongolian-Turkish confederation that occupied the region between western Manchuria and eastern Tibet. Consequently, the Hongwu Emperor sought to nullify any threat from the coast through the implementation of the maritime

53 *Chongkan jingchuan xiansheng wenji* 重刊荆川先生文集 (Reprinted Collected Works of Mr Tang Shunzhi, *Hao Jingchuan*), by Tang Shunzhi 唐順之 (1507–1560). (Shanghai: Shanghai hanfenlou cang, Wanli keben 上海涵芬樓藏明萬歷刻本, 1574–1619), in *Sibu congkan*, j. 8, p. 57b.

54 John E. Wills Jr., “Relations with Maritime Europeans, 1514–1662,” in Frederick W. Mote & Denis Twitchett (eds.), *The Cambridge History of China*, Volume 8, *The Ming Dynasty, 1368–1644*, Part 2. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 334.

55 James Geiss, “The Chia-ching reign, 1522–1566,” in Frederick W. Mote & Denis Twitchett (eds.), *The Cambridge History of China*, Volume 7, *The Ming Dynasty, 1368–1644*, Part 1. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 504.

56 John K. Fairbank & Edwin, O. Reischauer, *China: Tradition and Transformation*. (London: Allen & Unwin, 1989), p. 203.

prohibition.⁵⁷ Chen Xuewen 陳學文 argues that the main reasons for maritime prohibition were, on the one hand, the political fragmentation in Japan during the sixteenth century and the consequent loss of control by Japanese pirates, and on the other, the weakness of the Chinese coastal defences.⁵⁸

The defence policy approach seems convincing. No sooner had the new dynasty been established than the Hongwu Emperor realised the vulnerability in national security. The threat from the Mongols remained a reality. Although driven out of China, the Mongols still claimed to “have an army of one million archers on horseback.”⁵⁹ They still occupied a large territory, stretching across the north from Liaodong 遼東 to the east of Shanxi 陝西. In the three military confrontations after the Yuan court had fled Dadu, the Ming armies were defeated twice. A stalemate situation had lasted ten years until 1382.⁶⁰ The Hongwu Emperor told his government: “We must carefully prepare for war, we must choose capable generals and train soldiers in the north because the “*hu* 胡” (Mongols from the north) and *rong* 戎 (peoples from the west) are dangerous on the border.”⁶¹ When the Ming released Maidiribala 買的里八剌, son of the former Zhaozong emperor 元昭宗 (r. 1371–1378), then recognized the legitimacy of Mongol rule in the northern regions, the former Yuan court showed little appreciation.⁶² No one grasped the implication of this better than the emperor himself, who recognized that the Mongols were “roving along the border intending to restore the Yuan.”⁶³ Here we see the cogency of Wang Gungwu’s argument. Priority was given to defence against the aggressive Mongols in the northern border region and this gave rise to a passive attitude towards coastal defence. The inability to afford a more comprehensive policy along the coast was one of the vital factors behind the introduction of the maritime prohibition. As Wang Gungwu argues, the first Ming emperor could not afford to fight the Mongols in the north and “his southern neighbors at the same time.”⁶⁴ The human and material scarcity in the early Ming years was devastating. The late Yuan crisis and years of war exhausted the national resources. “The society and economy in the early years was in a destitute situation. In the ten counties of Changde prefec-

57 Wang Gungwu, “Ming Foreign Relations: Southeast Asia”, in Denis Twitchett & Frederick W. Mote (eds.) *The Cambridge History of China*, Volume 8 (1998), p. 308.

57 Gu Yingtai, *Mingshi jishi benmo*, j. 10, pp. 30b–31a.

58 Chen Xuewen 陳學文, “Mingdai haijin yu wokou 明代海禁與倭寇” (The Maritime Prohibition and Japanese Pirates in the Ming Dynasty), in Yang Guozhen 楊國禎 (ed.), *Zhongguo shehui jingjishi yanjiu* 中國社會經濟史研究 (*Studies in the Socio-economic History of China*). (Xiamen: Xiamen daxue chubanshe, 1983), pp. 33–36.

59 Gu Yingtai, *Mingshi jishi benmo*, j. 10, p. 31a.

60 Cai Meibiao 蔡美彪, *Zhongguo tongshi* 中國通史 (*A General History of China*). (Hongkong: Sanlian shuju, 1995), j. 7, p. 6.

61 *Huang Ming zuxun* 皇明祖訓 (*Emperor Taizu’s Ancestral Injunctions*) by Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 (1368–1396), in *Siku cunmu* 史, fasc. 264, pp. 5b–6a.

62 Cai Meibiao 蔡美彪, Li Xun 李洵, Nan Bingwen 南炳文 and Tang Gang 湯綱, *Zhongguo tongshi* 中國通史 (*A General History of China*). (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1993), pp. 6–7.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

64 Wang Gungwu, “Ming Foreign Relations: Southeast Asia” (1998), p. 303.

ture 常德 in Hunan province 湖南, nobody was found working in the fields. Most people had fled and their lands were unattended.”⁶⁵ In Yangzhou 揚州, once a thriving commercial city, there were said to be only 18 households that remained occupied.⁶⁶ The crisis of human and material resources and the continued tension along the northern border meant that maritime policy was given little attention; it was sacrificed to greater needs.

As a defence policy, the maritime prohibition was seen as a relatively effective way to deal with the Japanese, the so-called “*dongyi* 東夷” (eastern barbarians). The new dynasty hoped to use trade as a leverage for political manipulation. The huge demand for Chinese products in Japan, many of which were objects commonly used in Japanese daily life, such as cotton, sewing needles, porcelain and iron woks, meant that the early Ming administration believed it could use trade as a way to enforce its political interests. After the disruption to trade caused by the Mongol-Japanese wars, the Ming administration wanted to use the ‘carrot’ of trade access to restore the tribute relationship.⁶⁷ The ten-year restriction on tribute missions from Japan was devised as a means to strengthen Ming political control in the East Asian region. In practice, however, the restricted tribute trade resulted in continued instability along the coastal regions. The Japanese dependence on Chinese products meant that it was simply impossible to meet the demand for Chinese goods through a single tribute mission once every ten years. In addition, the long period of political disunity in Japan had shattered its society and economy. Trade with China came to be seen as critical for the survival of many people in Japan, so that smuggling and piracy became rampant. All sorts of people – frustrated warriors, discontented soldiers and bankrupt merchants – were pushed by poverty and social instability at home into piracy along the China coast. When confronted by Ming coastal defences “they would pillage the coastal areas and abduct men and women for ransom.”⁶⁸

The Hongwu Emperor regarded piracy as a sign of disrespect for his authority and blamed it on the Japanese emperor. The Ming court sent a letter of warning to the Japanese emperor, threatening military invasion if the Japanese government did not bring a halt to the piracy.⁶⁹ The Japanese response surprised and angered the Hongwu Emperor: “Your great empire may be able to invade Japan, but our small state is not short of a strategy to defend itself.”⁷⁰ The Japanese knew they had nothing to lose as the once-every-ten-year tributary trade (with no more than two ships) did nothing to solve their economic problems. Piracy was the only way to break the maritime interdiction. And the threatened military invasion never took place, as the

65 Li Longqian 李龍潛, *Ming Qing jingji shi* 明清經濟史 (*An Economic History of the Ming and Qing periods*). (Guangzhou: Guangdong Education Publishing House, 1987), p. 1.

66 *Ming Taizu shilu*, j. 5, p. 4b.

67 Gu Yingtai, *Mingshi jishi benmo*, j. 55, pp. 1b–2a.

68 *Ming Taizu shilu*, j. 36, p. 14a.

69 *Ibid.*, j. 138, pp. 2b–3a.

70 *Dongxiyang kao* 東西洋考 (*A Study of the Eastern and Western Oceans*) by Zhang Xie 張燮 (1574–1640), in *Siku quanshu*, fasc. 594, j. 6, p. 3b.

disastrous experience of the Mongol attempt to conquer Japan was still fresh in everyone's memory. All the Ming court could do was to restrict tribute trade further. When the emperor was informed that some Japanese had been discovered hiding in the tribute ships, and that they were allegedly attempting to conspire with his Prime Minister Hu Weiyong 胡惟雍 (?–1380), he decided to “to cut off the tribute trade relations and shut the door along the coast, leaving no room for piracy and conspiracy.”⁷¹ It was argued that there was no point in maintaining a relationship with a neighbouring state where “the ruler was too young to rule, his officials abused their imperial power, and his subjects bullied their own fellows at home and harassed others abroad.”⁷² Japan was seen as an enemy, side by side with the Mongols. Maritime prohibition was believed to be a comprehensive defence policy to keep the “eastern barbarians” away.

The resort to this maritime prohibition as a defence policy was also a consequence of the government's strategy to deal with another anti-Ming element: the remaining rebel forces that sought refuge along the coast. The remnants of Fang Guozhen's 方國珍 (1319–1374) and Zhang Shicheng's 張士誠 (1321–1367) forces, who used to be the Hongwu Emperor's political rivals, remained a significant problem for the new regime. The former warlords were said to have some ten thousand warships hiding out at sea waiting to attack.⁷³ Their military campaigns were not just the ‘hit and run’ kind of harassment mostly associated with pirates, but rather reflected a much more organised operation. From military bases in Vietnam, Thailand and Sumatra, they joined Japanese pirates, whom they used as their military vanguard, to launch ‘international joint force’ style operations.⁷⁴ The army of Zhang Shicheng, the former King of Wu 吳, had been 180,000 men strong and was credited with five significant victories over the Mongols in 1353. While they had been weakened by the victory of Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 and the formation of the new Ming dynasty and no longer constituted a direct threat to the young regime, the Hongwu Emperor nevertheless could not ignore the threat of invasion from his former rivals for the throne. They occupied a significant place on the Ming defence agenda. Traditionally, economic gain was always a secondary consideration, subsumed by the need to achieve political stability, and this was even more the case with a newly established administration like that under the Hongwu Emperor. The establishment and enforcement of the prohibition on maritime activity was seen as a price that needed to be paid in order to achieve political stability.

For these reasons, it seems sensible to explain the maritime prohibition solely in terms of defence policy. However, when we explore the issue in more detail we find that there are more questions than answers. For instance, there is a discrepancy between the decline in the significance of coastal piracy and the continuation of the

71 Gu Yingtai, *Mingshi jishi benmo*, j. 55, p. 3a.

72 *Ming Taizu shilu*, j. 90, p. 1a–b.

73 Gu Yingtai, *Mingshi jishi benmo*, j. 5, pp. 1a and 9a.

74 *Fengzhou biji houji* 鳳洲筆記後集 (*Random Notes from Fengzhou by Wang Shizhen; Supplement*) by Wang Shizhen 王世貞 (1526–1590), in *Siku cunmu* 集, fasc. 114, j. 3, p. 3a.

policy for 200 years. Harassment by pirates and the irritations caused by rebel activity were a periodical rather than a continuous occurrence. Japanese piracy almost disappeared after 1403 when the Yongle emperor relaxed his father's severe prohibition on tribute trade. In 1392, when Ashikaga Yoshimitsu 足利義滿 (1358–1408) had desperately wanted to improve the Japanese economy by encouraging trade with China, he wasted no time in eulogizing the new Ming emperor and vowing to be his loyal subject: “Your majesty is the sun in the sky, there will be no darkness in this world from now on. You are the timely rain, there will be nowhere that will not benefit; you are the greatest ruler of this world who can bring order out of chaos ... Japan is certainly protected by your care.”⁷⁵ In the second year of his reign, the Yongle emperor took the opportunity to dispatch Admiral Zheng He and his fleet to Japan to help resolve the issue of piracy. A *kanhe* 勘合, a certificate issued as official tributary permission by the Ming government, was issued, which secured Ashikaga Yoshimitsu's promise to crack down on piracy and in return saw the restoration of a full diplomatic and tributary trade relationship.⁷⁶ Minamoto Yoshimitsu was rewarded with the title “King of Japan”. The results were immediate: “No sooner had the king signed the treaty than he rushed out to suppress piracy. Twenty-two Japanese pirate-merchants were caught and sent to China for execution.”⁷⁷ This crackdown on piracy was likened to “thunder and lighting”.⁷⁸ To demonstrate his loyalty and sincerity Minamoto Yoshimitsu continued to pursue and extradite pirates until he died in 1408.⁷⁹ His son, Ashikaga Yoshimochi 足利義持 (1386–1408), followed in his father's footsteps, continuing to capture pirates and extradite them to China.⁸⁰ A great improvement had taken place along the coast and reports of piracy “greatly decreased.”⁸¹ Peace and order were restored, with commentators noting how “the sea has since become calm for a long time.”⁸² Piracy was no longer a major defence problem. Meanwhile, the rebel forces had also become much weaker by this time. These fugitive forces, hiding out on islands for 30-odd years, could not survive without new recruits: “The old has gone, the strong has

75 “Zheng fa 徵伐” (Military Expedition), in *Riben yijian* 日本一鑒 (*A Mirror of Japan*), j. 6, quoted in Pan Qun 潘群 and Shen Haitian 申海田, “Zheng He shi Ri zaitan 鄭和使日再談” (A Further Debate on Zheng He's Mission to Japan), *Haijiaoshi yanjiu* 2 (1985), p. 97.

76 Gu Yingtai, *Mingshi jishi benmo*, j. 55, p. 5a.

77 *Ming shi*, j. 322, pp. 6a–b.

78 *Ming Taizong shilu*, j. 40, p. 6a.

79 *Guoque* 國權 (*Annalistic Deliberations on State Affairs*) by Tai Qian 談遷 (1595–1658), in *Siku xuxiu*, fasc. 359, pp. 20, 47 and 53.

80 “Wangheng ji 王亨記”, in *Mingshan cang* 名山藏 (*Collection Hidden in Jingshan*) by He Qiaoyuan 何喬遠 (1558–1632), in *Siku quanshu jinbui shu congkan* 四庫禁燬書叢刊 (*Banned Books from the Complete Library of the Four Treasuries*) 史, fasc. 46, j. p. 21b [hereafter *Siku jinbui*].

81 *Chouhai tubian* 籌海圖編 (*Illustrated Compendium on Maritime Security*) by Hu Zongxian 胡宗憲 (1511–1565), in *Siku quanshu*, fasc. 584, j. 12, p. 3b. See also Tan Qian, *Guoque*, in *Siku xuxiu*, fasc. 358–359, pp. 8 and 20.

82 Tan Qian, *Guoque*, in *Siku xuxiu*, fasc. 359, p. 629.

become old, and they have come to rest at last.”⁸³ If the maritime prohibition had been put in place simply for defence purposes, what was the point in continuing to maintain the policy when the threat was no longer present? Why did the Yongle emperor not take the opportunity to abolish the prohibition policy once and for all and encourage international trade to generate state revenue, as had been the case in the preceding Tang, Song and Yuan dynasties?

Maritime prohibition was neither the most effective nor the only option to deal with piracy. Though the policy had been strictly implemented its effects were limited. By 1388, after the policy had been in effect for sixteen years, it was still the case that none of the provinces along the coast escaped pillaging by pirates. Shandong was attacked in 1369, Guangdong in 1371, Zhejiang and Fujian in 1372, and Nan Zhili in 1375.⁸⁴ On the other hand, by the time of the Yongle reign the Ming government had gained the military resources and the financial ability to undertake a much more active policy to deal with coastal piracy and did not need to rely on the passive maritime interdiction. It was also the case that by the end of the Hongwu reign the empire was in a much better financial condition: “The government granaries were full, with enough grain to last the whole empire for thirty years.”⁸⁵ One account claims: “People were content with their lives and there were few criminal cases reported. The society was so abundant that if someone lost his money he would not have to worry as it would stay where it was until he came to pick it up.”⁸⁶ Zheng He’s seven overseas maritime expeditions demonstrated the financial and military strength of the Ming Empire during the Yongle reign. It is hard to imagine that the Japanese pirates would have been able to challenge the Chinese maritime fleet, with its numerous warships, its thousands of marines and its extensive munitions.⁸⁷ It is equally difficult to understand why, if piracy was such an issue, the emperor dispatched this fleet to patrol the Indian Ocean rather than confront the problems along the China coast. If Admiral Zheng He’s naval power was able to besiege the Ceylonese capital, bombard the palace and defeat a 50,000 strong Singhalese army, as well as capture the Ceylonese King alive, then the Ming navy should have been able to protect merchants from pirate harassment along the China coast, if indeed piracy was a problem and the administration had been concerned to eradicate it.⁸⁸ Why, then, did the Ming government keep the maritime prohibition policy in place, despite changed circumstances and the availability of

83 *Zheng Duanjian gong wenji* 鄭端簡公文集 (*The Collected Works of Zheng Xiao, Posthumous Title Duanjian*) by Zheng Xiao 鄭曉 (1499–1566), in Chen Zilong 陳子龍 (1608–1647) (ed.), *Ming jingshi wenbian* 明經世文編 (*A Collection of Ming Writings on State Affairs*). (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1997), j. 218, pp. 9b–10a [Hereafter *MJSWB*].

84 Tan Qian, *Guoque*, in *Siku xuxiu*, fasc. 358, pp. 250, 299, 308–309 and 422.

85 *Ming Taizu shilu*, j. 83, p. 2b.

86 *Kezuo zhuiyu* 客座贅語 (*Superfluous Words to Entertain my Guests*) by Gu Qiyuan 顧啟元 (1565–1628), in *Siku cunmu* 子, fasc. 243, j. 1, p. 35b.

87 *Ming shi*, j. 304, p. 3a–b.

88 *Xingcha shenglan* 星槎勝覽 (*The Overall Survey of the Star Raft*) by Fei Xin 費信 (1388–?). (1599–edition), in *Siku xuxiu*, fasc. 742, j. 3, p. 5b.

resources? If we concentrate solely on the issue of piracy and coastal defence, we cannot satisfactorily explain the many contradictions surrounding the maritime prohibition policy.

The disjunction between the reality along the China coast and the perceived aim of the prohibition policy adds further confusion. Despite the interdiction there was not a decrease in piracy. Rather, as the dynasty progressed, activity along the China coast grew in intensity. While the original aim might have been to ensure that “not a single piece of wood would float in the sea”, in reality “thousands of people were sailing away and hundreds of pirate ships were sailing away fully laden with people and cargo.”⁸⁹ While the intention of the law was “to prohibit our people from going overseas to trade with foreigners”,⁹⁰ the fact was that “all sorts of people were involved with maritime trade, from courtiers in the palace to salt workers on the coast.”⁹¹ And “the coastal people regarded pirates not as their enemy, but rather as the suppliers of their ‘daily bread’.”⁹² The stricter the prohibition was maintained, the more violations of it appeared and the more destructive the piracy became. Tang Shu 唐樞 (1497–1574), Grand Coordinator of Fujian, alarmed the court in 1516 when he reported: “Pirates and traders are the same people. When trade flourishes, pirates become traders; and when trade is banned, traders become pirates.”⁹³ This indicated that the ‘enemy’ was not pirates but merchants. The aim of the policy was to restrict trade not control piracy. More disturbingly, it was obvious that many of the pirates were actually Chinese, not foreigners. Hu Zongxian 胡宗賢 (1511–1565), the Commander-in-Chief of coastal defence in Zhejiang 浙江, made a list of the leaders from more than ten pirate groups. They were not foreign pirates but Chinese merchants.⁹⁴ Similarly, it was found that the owners of ocean-going trading ships and the suppliers of cargo were also Chinese.⁹⁵ A message from Wang Zhi 王直, the so-called “king of pirates”, was more pressing: “Piracy will disappear when the trade prohibition is lifted.”⁹⁶ This statement was vindicated by what happened after 1568, when the policy was abolished: “The *wo* (Japanese pirates) have disappeared and ceased to cause trouble as people are enjoying doing business.”⁹⁷

89 *Qiantai wo zuan* 虔臺倭纂 (*A Record of the Qiantai Piracy*) by Xie Jie 謝傑 (1536–1604), in *Xuanlantang congshu xujì*, j. 1, p. 7b.

90 *Ming Taizū shilu*, j. 70, p. 40a, j. 139, p. 8a, j. 231, p. 2b.

91 *Zheng Duanjian gong nianpu*, j. 3, p. 29a.

92 Zhu Wan, *Piyu zaji*, in *Siku cunmu* 集, fasc. 278, j. 3, p. 38b.

93 “Fu Hu Hailin lun chu Wang Zhi 復胡海林論處王直” (A Reply to Hu Meilin’s Decision on the Punishment of Wang Zhi), in *Yu Wo zazhu* 禦倭雜著 (*Assorted Works on Defence Against Piracy*) by Tang Shu 唐樞 (1497–1574), in *MJSWB*, vol. 270, j. 1, p. 4a.

94 “Wozhi 倭志” (*A Record of Piracy*) by Wang Shizhen, in *MJSWB*, j. 332, p. 27a.

95 “Yi fang Wo 議防倭” (Debate Over Defence Against Japanese Piracy) by Jiang Bao 姜寶 (1514–1593), in *MJSWB*, fasc. 383, j. 1, p. 7a. See also *Wubei zhi* 武備誌 (*Coastal Defence Annals*) by Mao Yuanyi 茅元儀, in *Siku jinhui* 子, fasc. 26, j. 214, p. 23b.

96 Hu Zongxian, *Chouhai tubian*, j. 9, p. 62a.

97 Tan Qian, *Guoque*, in *Siku xuxiu*, fasc. 361, p. 620.

In other words, the painfully preserved maritime interdiction was not effective either as a defence policy or as a political strategy, and nor was it effective in economic terms, yet the Ming government maintained it for two centuries. What kind of logic would have persuaded Ming policymakers to persevere with such a policy for so long? Were there other reasons that help us understand the commitment to this policy? Research on the European witch-hunts may give us some clues which might help us seek a better explanation and resolve this apparent conundrum. Brian P. Lavack's approach is encouraging in this regard. He suggests that any phenomena that lasted centuries, as did the European witch-hunts, could not be simply the result of the whims of popes or emperors, nor should it be explained away as religious madness or the result of some external impact. He argues that it is now understood that social and economic changes influenced a great deal of activity in the early modern period, and thus the social history of witchcraft "becomes more than a study of deviant behaviour." He goes on to demonstrate how, in seeking to explain many cases of witch-hunting, social and economic considerations have "assumed paramount importance". Instead of focusing solely on politics and/or religion, he emphasizes the impact of a range of socio-economic factors, such as population growth, the rise in commodity prices, urbanisation and the fact that "both mercantile and agricultural capitalism were introduced in many areas."⁹⁸ Socio-economic changes rather than political manoeuvring or religious conspiracy thus became the main mechanism employed to try to understand the witch-hunts. Similarly, if we are to understand the consistency and magnitude of the Ming maritime prohibition, a policy that was of great significance and was maintained for such a long time, we need to develop a more coherent, structural and organic explanation than that of the periodic incidence of piracy and banditry.

Government policy is formed within the context of – and reflects – the configuration of political power. The disposition of political power is often made manifest through the power struggles amongst different factions within an administration. As the Chinese civil service system was based on the selection of candidates through an open imperial examination system, one of the factors influencing the formation of political power groups within the government was the conflict amongst various social interest groups. In this way, social and economic circumstances directly determined the political landscape and hence the policy direction of the government.⁹⁹ In order to understand Ming maritime policy it is important to explore the social and economic circumstances in which this policy was developed. To explain the policy simply in terms of piracy, what might be termed the 'defence approach', leads to what Lucien Febvre termed *histoire événementielle*, an event-oriented history. "Such a narrative history with its primary political content not only failed to grasp the fullness of human reality but even endangered the status of his-

98 Brian P. Lavack, *Witch-hunt in Early Modern Europe*. (London: Longman, 1995), pp. 125–127.

99 For a good case study of this at work see James M. Polachek, *The Inner Opium War, 1840–42*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).

tory itself.”¹⁰⁰ As Fernand Braudel argued, we should seek an understanding of humanity and human society in terms of all of the social sciences, including economics and sociology. The problem with an event-oriented history is that it can lead to a woefully inadequate and incomplete understanding of the past.¹⁰¹ Earlier still, James Harvey Robinson, advocate of what was called the “new history”, encouraged a comprehensive approach to a historical phenomenon: “Nothing could be more artificial than the scientific separation of man’s religious, aesthetic, political, intellectual and bellicose properties. These may be studied, each by itself, with advantage, but specialization would lead to the most absurd results if there were not someone to study the process as a whole; and that someone is the historian.”¹⁰² We need to bring these perspectives to bear on a study of the Ming maritime prohibition, as it seems most unlikely that such a policy was introduced and then abandoned simply as a response to fluctuations of a temporary external phenomenon such as Japanese piracy. Braudel reminds us that “we can no longer believe in the explanation of history in the terms of this or that dominant factor. There is no unilateral history. No one thing is exclusively dominant.”¹⁰³

A new structural approach is needed to re-interpret Ming maritime policy. It is my intention to undertake such an approach in this thesis. I will argue that the maritime prohibition policy did not stand alone. The prohibition against trade with foreign countries was a principle that was applied to all states, not just Japan. We need to understand the maritime policy in conjunction with the prohibition on the horse fairs with the Mongols and the prohibition on the tea trade with the “western barbarians”. Together, these policies constituted the whole foreign trade prohibition regime. The three policies were instituted and abolished around the same time, and they operated within the same overall environment.

All policy is based on a particular configuration of political power, and once that configuration is undermined then the policy is likely to be abandoned. It is only by studying the process of political struggle surrounding a particular policy that we can understand the configuration and reconfiguration of power within an administration and the consequent shift in policy. And only by analysing the social and economic situation can we understand how new economic circumstances gave rise to new social forces, and hence new power configurations within the administration. Though Japanese piracy was a persistent issue during the Ming period, it was not the fundamental cause for the implementation, continuation and eventual abolition of the maritime prohibition. Studying the policy in isolation can encourage us to place too much emphasis on the effect of piracy. My intention in this thesis is to study how the inner dynamics of policymaking within the Ming administration can help us reach a broader perspective on the maritime prohibition policy, and how an

100 Ernst Breisach, *Historiography. Ancient, Medieval and Modern*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 370.

101 Arthur Warwick, *The Nature of History*. (London: Macmillan, 1970), p. 121.

102 James Harvey Robinson, *The New History*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1913), p. 66.

103 Fernand Braudel, *On History*. (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1980), p. 10.

understanding of the social and economic undercurrents to the landscape of power within the administration can enhance our appreciation of why the policy was implemented, why it was maintained for so long, and why, after two hundred years, it was finally overturned.