

PROOF

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## Trade and Conflict in the South China Sea: Portugal and China, 1514–23

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It used to be a truth universally acknowledged that the Chinese state was historically hostile to foreign trade, and that if the Chinese were in want of anything, it was the freedom to trade. This truth has been so resilient that it has for five centuries anchored the perception that China needed to be knocked out of its complacency, and for two centuries supported the argument that capitalism arose in Europe because the European state, precisely unlike the Chinese state, was the proponent, patron and benefactor of foreign trade that it organized, or at the very least chartered, through monopoly corporations. This chapter argues the fallacy of these assumptions and proposes that the history of the early modern world be written not as a polarity of East and West, each counterexemplifying the other, but as a joint process of engagement and alternation in which both sides struggled over the relationship between foreign trade and the state, which violence alternately destabilized and maintained.<sup>1</sup>

The prejudices against this view have deep historiographical roots running down through diverse soil strata: Western hostility to the command economy of the Communist period; before that, the Western belief that China needed to be ‘opened up’ (a phrase that the reform faction in the Communist Party curiously chose to resuscitate in the 1980s to describe China’s re-entry into global capitalism); before that, the imperialist conviction that only force of arms could batter down the Great Wall; and before that, the mercantilist notion that China was a benevolent autocracy that protected domestic assets by demeaning merchants and placing all decisions in the hands of ‘mandarins’ (curiously, a Portuguese loan-word from Sanskrit). It is true that at no point during this half-millennium did China unconditionally open its borders to foreign trade, but then neither, with few exceptions, did any European state. The relationship between foreign trade and the state has never been as cleanly bisected as it is in neoliberal ideology, which gives the state the role of an arm’s-length regulator whose purpose is to clear the deck for the circulation of commodities and the accumulation of capital. In practice, the trade–state relationship is quite the

opposite, as the contemporary Chinese state fully, though not exceptionally, demonstrates. Trade could not happen without the infrastructure, legal regulation and security that the state alone can supply.

This chapter goes back to the first encounters between Portuguese merchants and Chinese officials in the 1510s, encounters that were closely followed by observers at the time and have been carefully scrutinized by historians subsequently, on the hunch that we may have read past what actually happened at that time in our rush to confirm what happened later. One way of opening up these encounters is to see them from the perspective of Ming China. Narratives of this history tend to represent the Portuguese as acting, aggressively but more or less effectively, and the Chinese as reacting, invariably ineptly. In fact, by attending more carefully to what Chinese officials were doing at the time, a logic of trade–state relations that does not conform to later characterizations comes into view. Indicative in the context of China, it is also striking for being much closer to the norms prevailing in Europe at this time. The relationship between China and Europe would subsequently change, for a host of reasons. At the time, though, it was not so clear that they were each other’s counterexample. Grasp this possibility, and the conventional images of both China and Europe have to change. Rather than reading back from later developments, this chapter presents the context in which the Portuguese found themselves as dynamic and changing on both sides, not as passively continuing age-old proclivities. The context is important, because at the moment the Portuguese arrived, officials of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) were revising institutional arrangements governing maritime trade. This revision was partially derailed in the following decade, allowing Europeans to tell a very different story about China’s hostility to trade, which has obscured not only the actual history of the period but the general ‘premodernity’ of trade that prevailed across the sixteenth-century globe.

The principal source on which this chapter relies is the internal summary of daily court deliberations known as the *Veritable Record*. Every reign had its own, compiled after the death of the emperor on the basis of the court diary. The *Veritable Record* was vulnerable to retrospective political interpretation, as we shall see, but it is the closest we come to watching the administration of the realm unfold on a daily basis. Not a source on which earlier historians of the Portugal–China relationship have drawn, the *Veritable Record of the Zhengde Emperor* reveals policy debates on the Chinese side missing from the standard source, the dynastic history of the Ming, produced long after the dynasty had gone. This record chronicles the debates and decisions people at the centre of the political system made in the face of conflicts arising from the demand for trade by both Chinese and Portuguese. The state appears here not as a monolithic abstraction but as a field of action in which personnel worked within the institutions and policy-making processes available to them to address problems, able to look back to earlier precedent but never forward to the new

situations their own precedents would create. Most had their eyes on securing the wealth and stability of the Ming regime, although this did not mean that they were unified in how to achieve that goal. Some had their eyes on benefits that might accrue to local interests favouring trade, although not if doing so would produce a local benefit that entailed a loss for the government. It was through their debates over what was the best course to follow that the Chinese 'state' emerges as an actor in this history of trade and conflict.

### Trade and tribute

Portuguese mariners reached the south coast of China in 1514. The sea journey from Lisbon may have been long, but the time between the first Portuguese forays out into the Atlantic and their arrival in China was remarkably short: not much more than three decades to navigate the Indian Ocean, establish a base at Goa, annex the port of Malacca, sail into the Spice Islands and move north to Canton. They did so by piggybacking onto existing trade networks that laced together the South China Sea world economy, partly through trade, occasionally by exploiting a modest advantage in weapons technology.<sup>2</sup>

On their way eastward around the Indian Ocean and into the South China Sea, the Portuguese encountered mostly small littoral sultanates. They were entirely unprepared for a state as institutionally complex as Ming China. Chinese had long been major players in maritime trade. The Song (960–1279) had suffered little anxiety over this trade beyond requiring that foreign traders report their cargoes to the Supervisorate of Maritime Affairs. When Khubilai Khan invaded China in the 1270s as the new founder of the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), he interdicted maritime trade to prevent Song loyalists from receiving foreign aid to fund their resistance against the Mongols. In 1284, he imposed a monopoly on foreign trade, although this time from a desire to capture revenue. He relaxed the monopoly a year later, although the option to monopolize was always a temptation. The Yuan imposed a complete state monopoly on overseas trade in 1303, and for the next two decades alternately lifted and reimposed it until 1322, when it lifted it altogether.<sup>3</sup>

It was the founder of the Ming dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang (r. 1368–98), who brought the inconsistent policies and relaxed enforcements of earlier dynasties to an end. Zhu prohibited private foreign trade in the first years of his reign. This applied to both foreign merchants coming to China and Chinese merchants sailing abroad. Thenceforth, all foreign trade would have to pass through diplomatic channels. The only foreigners allowed to enter the Ming realm to trade were those who came as members of tribute missions. These missions, carefully regulated as to size and schedule, were permitted to engage in trade through designated Chinese brokers, but their formal purpose was to present tribute to the emperor and receive his gifts to take home to their rulers.

The tribute system was an institutional reality; it was also a consensual fiction. On the Chinese side, the fiction was that the emperor ruled the world on Heaven's behalf, and that all other rulers, of lesser status, should acknowledge his suzerainty by sending tribute as a token of submission to his authority. Rulers outside China went along with this fiction, as the posture of submission gave them diplomatic access to China and opened space for trade. Although the system predated the Ming, it was the Ming state that insisted on channeling all foreign trade through this mechanism. Zhu Yuanzhang's purpose in funnelling trade through the tribute system was, as prohibition had been for the Yuan state, strategic. Like Khubilai, he believed it was essential to control the comings and goings of people along the coast in order to consolidate his grip on power. He regarded absolute prohibitions on not just overseas trade, but overseas contact, as fundamental conditions that made this degree of control possible.<sup>4</sup>

Since the nineteenth century, comparative history has counterposed the tribute system, in which a regional hegemon imposes subordination on lesser states, to the Westphalian system of interstate relations based on the formal equality of all nations. The contrast is sensible so long as we resist the modernist temptation to treat the Westphalian system as inherently superior in terms of the norms it imposes, and the tribute system as a premodern atavism that could only survive in backwards Asia. Consider them, rather, as possible outcomes of two very different state contexts: the Westphalian system (itself as rich in fictions as the tribute system) emerging in the densely and hostile multistate context of Europe, and the tribute system organizing interstate diplomacy within a regional system consisting of one superstate and many much smaller states.

Such is theory; practice took matters in a different direction. Everyone understood that maritime trade, while it could be risky and expensive, could also be hugely profitable. Commercial families were keen to pool their assets and invest in overseas ventures, both as sole owners or as share investors. Sailors were keen to sign on, and the marginal and unskilled went aboard ships going abroad in the hope of finding wage labour in Chinese enclaves abroad. The state also understood the enormous wealth that maritime trade could generate. It was not in Zhu Yuanzhang's intellectual repertoire to imagine growth; he sought to monopolize foreign trade not to make money from it, but to prevent individuals from amassing wealth that could serve as a base for resisting his state. His descendants came to think differently. During the reign of the madcap Zhengde emperor (r. 1506–21), some officials began suggesting that the monopoly could generate fiscal income. Informal coastal trade had been increasing since the 1470s, such that by the time Zhengde was on the throne, the idea that it was legitimate to permit and tax foreign trade was growing at the expense of the ideal of maintaining the old tribute system.

### **The contradiction between trade and diplomacy**

The idea of encouraging maritime trade posed institutional contradictions over which the Zhengde court would struggle for years. It was not a fundamental adage of Ming statecraft that the state should exploit every possibility to extract revenue; the state's role was rather to ensure the physical and moral well-being of the people. Revenue from land taxes was the foundation of the state's fiscal income, and this was generally considered adequate to meet the needs of the people and the state. Commerce was also taxed, but at a level so modest (between 3 and 10 per cent) that it constituted only a minor line item in the state budget. The tribute system was even less a generator of state income. Its reason to exist was entirely diplomatic; indeed, what the Ming government paid to cover the expenses of diplomatic missions far exceeded what it received in gifts and payments. However, the lavish profits that maritime trade yielded gradually encouraged officials in regions where foreign trade was conspicuous, especially the southernmost province of Guangdong, to consider the possibility of looking to increase revenue through trade. Doing so meant detaching foreign trade from the tribute system. As the Ming founder had explicitly forbade his descendants from altering the basic institutions of the dynasty, this was a tall order. But many were willing to try.

The institutional fabric within which trade and diplomacy were conducted was somewhat complex, and needs to be sketched. Foreign envoys arriving at China's shores were handled by an agency called the Office of Commercial Shipping (Shibosi), conventionally translated as the Supervisorate of Maritime Affairs. Early in the fifteenth century, this agency passed to the control of eunuchs, who constituted a parallel state administration responsible not to the government but to the imperial household. Their mandate was to protect the interests of the emperor, particularly his financial interests. Diplomacy more generally was handled by the Ministry of Rites, which oversaw the protocol governing Ming relations with foreigners. Border security was under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of War. As tribute missions arrived by ship on the south coast of Guangdong province, the day-to-day business of trade and diplomacy was the responsibility of officials posted there. Guangdong and neighbouring Guangxi were under the supervision of a grand coordinator (a civil bureaucrat) and a grand defender (a eunuch). Beneath them, the Guangdong provincial leadership in Canton was split three ways among an administration commissioner, a surveillance commissioner or censor and a military commissioner. Problems arising from relations with seaborne foreigners tended to land on the desk of the administration commissioner. Neither the Ministry of Rites nor the Ministry of War had direct appointees at the provincial level. The only way they could be involved was by reviewing regional decisions at the request of the throne or by petitioning the throne directly for action on a particular issue.

The first moves in the direction of treating maritime trade as a revenue generator may have come from the eunuch administration, which had a reasonably free hand to run palace affairs and sidestep troublesome precedents, for the benefit of the privy purse (as well as themselves) while the Zhengde emperor was off fishing or playing soldiers.<sup>5</sup> The earliest case in the *Veritable Record* suggesting eunuch activism in this matter is in the spring of 1509, when several Siamese ships were discovered moored along the Guangdong coast. The sailors claimed that the wind had blown them off course. That was probably a convenient excuse to cover their appearance on the coast without tribute authorization. The grand defender and grand coordinator conferred and advised the throne to permit the ships to unload their cargo but charge an import duty on these goods. The funds collected would be put into the southern regional military budget, which had to bear the cost of controlling smuggling.

This could have constituted a precedent to allow foreign trade to expand under state supervision, had no one objected. But someone did. According to the unsympathetic account in the *Veritable Record*, the eunuch director of the Maritime Supervisorate, Xiong Xuan, 'figured that he could intervene in the matter and obtain great benefits, and so memorialized a request to the Emperor'. He sent in a memorial (a communication addressed by an official to the emperor) requesting that his office be given complete authority for collecting duties on irregular cargoes. The Ministry of Rites strenuously objected, arguing that the supervisorate's job was to oversee the management of tribute embassies, not get involved in revenue collection. Emperor Zhengde sided with the ministry. He chastised Xiong for overstepping his authority, had him recalled to Nanjing, and replaced him with another eunuch, Bi Zhen.<sup>6</sup>

Bi's mandate was to limit the supervisorate to tribute affairs, yet in August 1510, seventeen months later, he asked the emperor to allow the supervisorate to take over the levying of duties on non-tribute-bearing vessels: exactly what Xiong had asked for. Bi noted that not just the grand defender and the grand coordinator, but the provincial commissioners as well, were involved in managing the profitable revenue from these ships. He wanted the revenue diverted into the imperial household stream. Bi's memorial to the throne was passed to the Ministry of Rites for an opinion, and again it objected. 'The function of the Maritime Trade Supervisorate is to manage local products brought as tribute. Merchant ships and other foreign ships forced by the winds to find an anchorage are not included within the original purview of the imperial orders. The regulations should not be meddled with.' Was the ministry anxious to prevent the revenue from being diverted to the eunuch agency, which seems likely; or was it concerned lest diplomacy be submerged by revenue concerns? It is difficult to say. The emperor sided with precedent, confirming that the system should return to the status quo ante before Xiong had tried to take over import duties in March 1509.<sup>7</sup>

The entry on the imperial decision in the *Veritable Record* ends with the note that 'Liu Jin had sought private gain from Bi Zhen and had thus falsely stated that this practice had a precedent.' Liu Jin (c.1452–1510) was Zhengde's chief eunuch. Just two weeks after turning Bi Zhen's request down, Zhengde ordered the arrest and execution of Liu Jin on the charge of plotting to overthrow him. Whether that charge was true is open to question. What is undeniable is that Liu operated a massive scheme of kickbacks and intimidation that had corrupted and demoralized the entire state bureaucracy while the Zhengde emperor looked the other way. His arrest was the most popular decision Zhengde ever made. It is probable that Bi Zhen was indeed being pressured by Liu Jin for bigger payoffs, although that may not have come out until after Liu's downfall. But it would be a mistake to reduce the issue of taxing foreign trade to eunuch corruption or the perennial battle between the eunuch administration and the civil administration. The point is that a notable transformation was underway on the south coast. More ships were ferrying an ever greater volume of commercial goods in and out of China, and officials in south China were struggling to figure out how to alter the monopoly on maritime imports to benefit the state.

### Conflict over trade policy

The next glimpse of developments in the taxing of maritime trade in the *Veritable Record* comes four years later, in 1514, when Assistant Administration Commissioner Chen Boxian, otherwise an unremembered figure, sent in a memorial to the Zhengde emperor accusing his superior by two grades, Administration Commissioner Wu Tingju, of letting maritime trade get out of hand:

The commodities circulating in south China come from foreigners from Malacca, Siam and Java. These products are nothing but pepper, sappan-wood [used as a dye and a pharmaceutical], elephant tusks, tortoise-shell and such like, not daily necessities such as cloth, silks, vegetables and grain. Recently, the administration has been permitted to levy taxes *ad valorem* and there has been open trade. This has resulted in thousands of evil persons building huge ships, privately purchasing arms, sailing unhindered on the ocean, illicitly linking up with foreigners and inflicting great harm to the region. This must be stopped at once.<sup>8</sup>

The regional official behind this dreadful state of affairs, Chen declared, was Wu Tingju. The throne asked the Ministry of Rites for its opinion. It responded on 27 June by supporting Chen, insisting that foreign ships arriving outside the tribute regulations should not be taxed – for the reason that they should

not be allowed to land in the first place. The Ministry added that ‘all evil persons who continue to collude with the foreigners should be punished’.

What was Wu Tingju doing to draw Chen Boxian’s fire? Wu has left relatively few traces in the documentary record. He is best known for Chen’s attack, for it became a touchstone for opponents of a more liberal approach to foreign trade. The way to stigmatize an official who favoured expanding trade and increasing customs revenue was to call him another Wu Tingju. Three years after Chen’s memorial, for example, another official in south China refers back to the debate in 1514 and notes that Wu ‘had plausibly argued for the benefits to be gained and requested that all ships be received. The grand coordinator, regional inspector, and Ministry of Revenue were all deluded and this proposal was approved.’<sup>9</sup> In the same vein four years later, another hostile censorial official sought to lay subsequent difficulties with the foreigners in Guangdong province at the feet of Wu Tingju:

On the strength of Wu Tingju’s claim that there was a lack of aromatics to send to the court and a shortage of provisions for the armed forces, frequency restrictions were ignored and the goods of any ship that arrived were even taxed. As a result, foreign ships continually come into our coastal bays, foreigners live among us in our cities, the laws and coastal defence are neglected and our domestic routes are becoming increasingly familiar to them.<sup>10</sup>

These repeated references show that Wu Tingju was seen in the late 1510s as the official leading the charge for arguing for the benefits of foreign trade to China, in particular the fiscal benefits of that trade; or in other words, the champion of the idea of separating trade and diplomacy. What Wu himself actually advocated is difficult to reconstruct, as no document in his name has survived. The appreciative biography in the local gazetteer of Shunde county south of Canton, which is where Wu got his first official posting as a county magistrate after passing the metropolitan exams in 1487, remembers him with great fondness as a tall, unkempt man whose word could be trusted and whose acts produced results. During his tenure as magistrate he revitalized the county, swept away objectionable popular practices, and resisted the corrupt blandishments of his superiors, which may be why he languished in his first post for nine years before being promoted. Wu was back in Guangdong as an assistant commissioner in 1505. He was rotated out to Jiangxi, the province to the north, but returned to Guangdong as Right (Junior) Administration Commissioner.<sup>11</sup> So he spent most of the first 25 years of his career in Guangdong, and must have been reappointed there in post after post because he was seen as having a good understanding of the challenges of administering the region.



Unfortunately, little else is known of Wu Tingju, of what was at stake in his stand-off with Chen Boxian, or of how it played out politically. The result is puzzling: the emperor agreed with the Ministry of Rites and approved Chen's recommendations, yet Wu Tingju remained in post; not only that, but he was promoted to Left (Senior) Administration Commissioner of Guangdong within a year. So despite the opposition to his apparently outspoken advocacy for a more open policy on maritime trade, that policy enjoyed sufficient support at higher levels to protect him.

Wu Tingju was again the target in May 1515 when the Ministry of Rites forwarded a memorial complaining that the judgment the previous year limiting foreign imports to tribute envoys was not being enforced. The ministry phrased the situation somewhat elliptically by complaining that 'those who were supposed to carry out the orders have let things continue as before'. It does not actually name Wu in the summary that survives in the *Veritable Record*, but his role is implied. However, the ministry this time enlarged its target beyond Wu and claimed that 'the grand defender profited from [illegal traders] and relaxed the prohibitions a little'.<sup>12</sup> The grand defender of Guangdong and Guangxi from 1506 to 1514, a long tenure in such a post, was the eunuch Pan Zhong.<sup>13</sup>

Was Wu Tingju in cahoots with a corrupt grand defender? His biography suggests that this is unlikely, for it reveals that he had a history of open conflict with the eunuch establishment going back to his time as magistrate of Shunde county. In one incident, he blocked a move by his superiors to build a family shrine for a powerful eunuch who was a native of the county. In another, he refused a bribe from a eunuch official in the Maritime Supervisorate, which led to his being thrown in prison on the pretext that he had overstepped his authority in another matter. When he returned to Guangdong as an assistant commissioner in 1506, he got into conflict with none other than Grand Defender Pan Zhong. Wu accused Pan of 20 crimes, and Pan counterattacked. Eventually Wu Tingju was arrested – by none other than chief eunuch Liu Jin who would later be executed for corruption – and exposed with a cangue around his neck in front of the Ministry of Personnel for over ten days, an ordeal that almost killed him.<sup>14</sup> Wu survived, physically and politically, but he could not be posted back to Guangdong so long as Pan remained grand defender. Not until the eunuch retired in 1514 could Wu be moved back to the region.

How then did the incorruptible Wu Tingju and his arch-enemy, the eminently corruptible Pan Zhong, end up on the same side of the maritime trade issue, at least in the ministry's view? The only way to resolve this puzzle is to suggest that Pan had been relaxing restrictions on foreign trade in order to benefit either himself or the Maritime Supervisorate; that this created a precedent for allowing a broader interpretation of the rules on foreign trade; and that Wu Tingju followed suit when he returned to Guangdong in 1514. His

purpose was not to benefit the eunuch administration, much less himself, but to ensure that the duties collected on imports be taken away from the eunuchs and more properly allocated to the provincial budget.

Reconstructing the accusation against Wu Tingju exposes to view what should by now be obvious, which is that the politics surrounding Ming foreign trade policy in the 1510s were complicated and anything but united against trade. Two views contended. One was that maritime trade should be restricted to authorized tribute missions. The other was that maritime trade should be recognized as a useful source of state revenue, and that overseas traders should be permitted to unload cargoes regardless of their tribute status so long as import duties were paid. This second view had also a third to contend with, which is that traders outside the tribute system be permitted to trade on payment of fees to agencies that were not legally designated to collect them.

To reach the sort of metaphysical conclusion that Paul Kennedy does in *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* that 'Ming China was a much less vigorous and enterprising land than it had been under the Song dynasty,' or to explain China's failure to act 'European' on 'the sheer conservatism of the Confucian bureaucracy', whatever that might be, is to polarize the past rather than historicize it.<sup>15</sup> Not only was Ming China not beset by lassitude and conservatism; but it was also a political regime in which the institutional context of maritime trade and the policies governing its taxation were in flux. Even the Ministry of Rites, the site of foreign policy analysis within the Ming government, vacillated in its opinions. Although the flux did not ultimately lead to the sorts of policies that European states adopted *after* the sixteenth century, as we will see, focusing on flux reveals what people at the time actually did and thought. There is neither the need nor the justification to fall back on later stereotypes claiming that the Chinese state was hostile to trade, or that any official who sought to encourage trade must have been on the take. This was the context in which the Portuguese arrived, a context of which they were utterly unaware and on which they would have a regrettable impact.

### Conflict

The first Portuguese voyages to Canton in 1514 and 1515 did not reach the notice of the Ming court, or at least did not earn a mention in the *Veritable Record*. The first reference to the 'Franks' (Folangji, a transcription of the old Persian word for Europeans) in that source comes on 15 June 1517 as an appendage to a larger directive on maritime trade. The directive states:

It is ordered that ships from foreign countries sending tribute and carrying trade goods be taxed at 20 per cent, a portion to be forwarded to the capital and a portion to be locally retained to meet military expenses. This

is entirely in keeping with the old regulations, and no one shall use recent regulations to obstruct it.[Not entirely true, as the 'old regulations' were imprecise about import duties.]

This order did not open the border to foreign trade by non-tribute-bearing missions, but it did recognize the revenue value of allowing missions to import full cargoes, which was halfway toward a serious revision of maritime trade policy.

The compiler of the *Veritable Record* then inserts some history:

Previously, evil persons of Guangdong and Guangxi privately traded in foreign goods, linked up with the distant foreigners and tribute bearers in order to scheme for profits, who beguiled people into absconding, kidnapping or purchasing boys and girls, coming and going as they pleased to the general harm of the people.

The compiler refers to Chen Boxian's attack on Wu Tingju, and then introduces the Portuguese:

Within a few years, the troubles with the Franks started. Vice Commissioner [of Maritime Defence] Wang Hong put forth all his efforts to eliminate or capture them, and was just able to defeat them. For this reason, what has been spent yearly on building ships and casting guns for defence has been crushing. Also, because of the Franks, all the foreigners whom we are duty-bound to receive were blocked and their cargoes could not get through, causing inestimable harm.

The entry ends with the now standard complaint: 'it was all Wu Tingju's fault.'<sup>16</sup>

This brief history is fascinatingly retroactive. The naval stand-off between Vice Commissioner Wang Hong and Duarte Coehlo did not take place until 27 June 1521, four years after the date of this entry. It was a later development, which means that an editor must have inserted it to lend retroactive sense to an earlier situation. In the summer of 1517, it was not yet clear which way the Ming state would go on maritime trade, nor was it entirely clear how the Portuguese would conduct themselves or how that would play out in Beijing. The facts are that Wu Tingju had been persuasive in opening up trade around 1514, Chen Boxian and others were counselling limitation in 1514–15 (just as Portuguese vessels started to arrive), and the court between then and 1517 prevaricated over the course it wanted to take. The crisis had not yet come, but there were difficulties on the horizon.

Two months after this first reference to the Portuguese in the *Veritable Record*, Fernão Peres led a fleet of eight well-armed ships and arrived on the Guangdong coast and requested permission to land as a tribute mission. The Commissioner

of Maritime Defence was obliged to relay his request to officials in Canton, but Peres grew impatient and moved some of his ships into the mouth of the Pearl River to press his case, a move that the Chinese viewed, not unreasonably, as hostile. Eventually he was given permission to moor at the courier station on the riverbank outside Canton, but did so flying the Portuguese flag and firing a salute. Both gestures were also regarded as hostile, the one as an inappropriate assertion of foreign sovereignty (extraterritoriality was not yet a principle of international law in China or Europe) and the other as a threatening demonstration of military preparedness. Peres was dressed down for these actions by none other than Wu Tingju, who naturally feared that such highhanded conduct might poison the delicate policy situation he was trying to manoeuvre in favour of maritime trade. Peres, who understood none of this, explained his actions and apologized. He was then given the opportunity to put Portugal's case for recognition as a tributary of the Ming before Wu's superior, the grand coordinator of Guangdong and Guangxi, who agreed to forward the appeal to Beijing. Peres was permitted to leave behind an 'ambassador', Thomé Pires.<sup>17</sup>

The issue was not purely whether the Ming would recognize a new tributary state, however. The issue was Malacca. In 1511, the Portuguese had used force to unseat the sultan of Malacca, Mahamet. The problem was that Malacca was a legitimate and observing tributary of the Ming. Bound by its tribute obligations to support Mahamet against a military power that ousted him, the court was not immediately disposed to hear the Portuguese petition with sympathy. Peres may have been deaf to why Malacca should be a stumbling block to Ming–Portugal relations, but the grand coordinator was keenly aware that it was. The portion of his memorial to the throne excerpted in the *Veritable Record* on 11 February 1518 reveals that he was not the sympathetic conveyor of the Portuguese request that Peres assumed he would be:

Of the foreign maritime countries to the south [listed in Chinese diplomatic records], there is none called the Franks; furthermore, the envoys do not have any documents from their country. They cannot be trusted. We have detained their envoys and now request orders.<sup>18</sup>

The cannon salute that so alarmed Wu Tingju may have echoed menacingly through the political system, but what did the greatest damage to the Portuguese case was their military annexation of Malacca. Once again the emperor's advisers referred the question to the Ministry of Rites for deliberation. The ministry came back advising against enfeoffing Portugal as a tributary state. An edict was issued ordering the Portuguese to return home and take with them the goods they had presented as gifts.

Their official request for tributary status still stood nonetheless, and a passing comment in the *Veritable Record* in October 1520 about the Zhengde emperor's

failure to respond signals that the issue had not been completely settled.<sup>19</sup> The emperor had yet to make a final judgment. Meanwhile, however, Portuguese conduct on the Guangdong coast did not strengthen support for their appeal. Simão d'Andrade, brother of Fernão Peres and captain of the next mission in 1519, 'soon committed a series of outrages which completely destroyed the amicable relations between the Portuguese and the Chinese established by his brother, and even turned the Chinese into deadly enemies'.<sup>20</sup> What historian T'ien-tsê Chang here terms 'outrages' included performing an execution on Ming territory and blocking other ships from landing before the Portuguese had sold their cargo. By the time the court was willing to hear arguments on the case for granting tributary status in January 1521, the mood was against a liberal interpretation of the laws. Censor Qiu Daolong argued that no recognition could be given until the still outstanding appeal for help from Malacca was sorted out. He suspected that the only solution would be military, and realized that the Ming state was unlikely to project its military presence so great a distance abroad. Qiu's view was not a categorical refusal, however, for his concluding advice was 'that their tribute be refused, that the difference between obedience and disobedience be made manifest, and that [the Portuguese] be advised that only after they have returned the territory of Malacca[to its ruler] will they be allowed to come to court to offer tribute'.<sup>21</sup> The door for accommodation was left open. Qiu Daolong earlier in his career had served as magistrate of the same county, Shunde, where Wu Tingju had first been posted, and was similarly praised in local records for his virtuous administration there.<sup>22</sup> That experience must have exposed him, as it did Wu, to possibilities for maritime trade that were invisible to most of his contemporaries.

Qiu's was the moderate position. Another censor, He Ao, took a harsher view, complaining that 'the Franks are infamous for their cruelty and guile, and their weapons are better than those of all other foreigners'. Recalling Peres' cannon salute, he noted that:

the sound of their guns shook the city and suburbs. The persons they left at the courier station violated the ban on communication, while those who came to the capital were fierce and reckless and vied for supremacy. Now, if their private ships are permitted to come and go in trade, it will certainly lead to fighting and injury and the calamities in the south will be endless.

He Ao wanted a final solution to the leaky southern border: expel all foreigners not connected to tribute missions and restore the original rules of the system. He too could not restrain from once again naming Wu Tingju as the original culprit in the whole business.

Surprisingly in light of its earlier decisions, the Ministry of Rites sided with Qiu Daolong. It suggested that the Portuguese might be recognized once a

thorough investigation of the Malaccan situation had been made. It too singled out Wu Tingju and stressed the need to tighten border security, but it asked for no further measures.<sup>23</sup> At no point, then, earlier or later, was action taken against Wu Tingju, despite his recurrent demonization. The possibility of opening maritime trade had not yet been crushed, and the ministry was prevaricating over the issue.

Two incidents in the first half of 1521 crushed it. One was the sea battle between Wang Hong and Duarte Coelho that an editor interpolated back into the *Veritable Record* entry of 1517. Having proved themselves a direct military threat to the security of the border and Ming sovereignty, the Portuguese had to be excluded. The other incident, entirely fortuitous, was the death of the emperor on 20 April. The effect was not immediate, but the awkward imperial succession from Zhengde to his cousin Jiajing (r. 1522–66) suspended all court business for half a year. As the succession unravelled into a massive political problem, it produced such polarization at court that no move to liberalize policy on any issue could go forward.<sup>24</sup> It also put on the throne a 13-year-old from the interior who had no grasp of maritime issues, and no interest in them either.

That summer, the Portuguese commander Martim Affonso asked the authorities in Canton for permission to unload cargo to supply the diplomatic mission. They referred the request to Beijing, and the response was negative. The Ministry of Rites hardened its position, charging the Portuguese with espionage (which was true) and advising that the grand defender and grand coordinator in Canton 'be ordered by imperial edict to drive them away quickly so that they do not enter the borders'. The Ministry of War proved slightly more accommodating, if only because it had to come up with a practical solution. It advised that the throne rebuke the Portuguese over their annexation of Malacca, but stopped short of recommending the inconceivable: a naval expedition to return Malacca to the ousted sultan.<sup>25</sup> But that was a few weeks before the Portuguese went into battle against the Ming navy, and suffered considerable losses in two engagements.<sup>26</sup> The skirmishes sealed the fate of the Portuguese: they were banned.<sup>27</sup> The result in this fraught political environment was that the Ming effectively shut down all maritime trade, forcing traders to become smugglers. This need not have been the outcome, but the forms of conflict that the Portuguese chose to adopt were too profoundly incompatible with Chinese diplomatic norms. In effect, it was the Portuguese and not the Chinese who shut down Ming trade.

Wu Tingju may have hoped that trade could be reopened under the new emperor, who approved his promotion to Minister of Works, a significant reward for his work. But the political climate at court was so poisoned that policy reverted to the most conservative interpretation of tribute trade, and the new emperor was not interested in the issue. In 1525, the court responded to the smuggling and piracy that closing the coast had caused by banning

the embarkation of all ships of two masts or greater, with the exception of officially authorized tribute embassies. A new grand coordinator appointed in 1529 tried to revive the campaign for reopening trade, estimating that it could yield a monthly customs revenue of several tens of thousands of taels (ounces) of silver, but the relaxation of trade restrictions he won applied only to tribute missions.<sup>28</sup> Not until 1567 would a newly enthroned emperor reopen the coast, this time in response to the rising demand for trade from the Spanish in Manila.

### Consequences for trade with China

The immediate consequence of this history was to ban the Portuguese from trading in China. But there were two other, more serious consequences.

The first was the impact of Portuguese misconduct on Ming policy more generally. As this chapter has noted, some officials in Canton had been attempting during the 1510s to let maritime foreign relations shift away from tribute restrictions toward more open trade. Despite periodic objections, they had some success in deflecting the court's half-hearted attempts to keep the old tribute system intact. There was no notion that trade should be free. Ming officials understood that international trade should be conducted as a state monopoly, and that goods coming in be registered, inspected and, now, taxed. The monopoly was shifting from a diplomatic logic to a revenue logic, but it was still a monopoly. This should not have surprised any European of the time, least of all the Portuguese.<sup>29</sup> Not until the nineteenth century were European mariners operating free of government monopolies.

If the Portuguese badly misjudged the situation in Canton, it was perhaps because their eastward progress had been a chain of encounters with small, weak states that generally lacked the political clout or military power to set the terms of trade. Their experience taught them the benefits of resorting to coercion and intimidation to solve trade conflicts. Only when they got to China did the Portuguese find themselves in the presence of a state that expected its monopoly to be observed, and that had the naval capacity to enforce observance. The Ming navy did discover that the Portuguese had some advantage in marine gunnery, and moved quickly to acquire the technology, but the weapons gap in 1520 was not such as would later cripple China's capacity to defend itself.<sup>30</sup>

Portuguese misconduct was not uniquely responsible for altering the direction in which Ming maritime policy was moving, however. The decision to turn away from open trade came about in relation to pre-existing policy conflicts internal to Ming politics. But in politics, timing is often everything. The Portuguese resort to violence, both at Malacca and on the China coast, was spectacularly mistimed. It may have provided them with profit windfalls in

various locations around the South China Sea, but it did not win them entry into trade with the Ming. Indeed, the conflict the Portuguese sowed had precisely the opposite effect. Although Portugal did manage to acquire the use of the peninsula at Macao as a trading base in 1557, it lost the opportunity to build a more effective commercial relationship that might have staved off the decline of its brief Asian empire.

The second consequence has to do with how this bit of history has come to be thought of, and what larger impression of Chinese foreign relations it has created. Shutting out the Portuguese has been treated as the original sin of Chinese foreign relations, sufficient to prove the claim that the Ming was lost in a haze of 'consciously anachronistic grandeur' that prevented it from responding intelligently to the coming of Europeans. Ming Chinese were caught 'gazing abstractedly out from the Flowery Kingdom with a kind of measured dignity', lost in 'a fine, Chinese, obscurantist dream. The hostile world was more or less successfully excluded for the time being as China prolonged that intensely national reverie, a sleeper reluctant to wake to the morning of the world's reality.'<sup>31</sup> This is all hilariously silly nonsense, dressed up in anachronistic remnants of anti-opium rhetoric from the nineteenth century. It is easy to laugh at this sort of language; less easy when it comes to spotting the legacy of misunderstanding that still pervades most textbook accounts of China's foreign relations right up to today: that China operates an arrogant foreign policy; that the Chinese state is inherently hostile to foreign trade; that it favours monopoly over free trade; that it imposes unfair disadvantages on its trading partners; and that any sign of deviation from this posture must be attributed not to policy debate but to factional interests and, of course, corruption, eunuch or otherwise.

This chapter has argued that Chinese trade policy in the mid Ming was fluid, but more than that: that this policy was sensitive to shifts going on in the world out beyond China's borders. Trade was not in itself good or bad; its virtue or vice depended on whether its promotion generated conflict or minimized it. Some Ming officials, most famously Wu Tingju, saw the benefits for state revenue that could be used to strengthen his government's capacity to impose greater security along the south coast. Others saw only the violence and disorder that foreign sailors brought to China's shores, and reasoned that there were no gains in trade sufficient to offset these losses. The court's decisions may have been made on the basis of insufficient knowledge or in response to short-term anxieties, but this is a universal trait of state decision-making. The irony in this case is that short-term anxiety about Portuguese disruption of both foreign trade and diplomatic relations in the 1510s should have scuppered a change in policy direction that could have put trade between China and Europe on a very different footing from the one it took at this particularly unpropitious moment in time.



It could be argued more strongly that there was little difference between what the Ming state did to protect its borders and interests in the 1510s and what European states did in the same era. Had armed Chinese ships appeared at the edge of its coastal border, the Portuguese Crown would have acted no differently in defending its monopoly on maritime trade into its ports. So Ming China is not really the counterexample to Renaissance Europe that historians have supposed it to be. If there was significant difference between them in maritime policy, it emerged only after the mid seventeenth century, as the global structure of empires shifted and rapid advances in military technology gave European states the means to enforce unequal terms of trade.

### Notes

1. The idea that the histories of Europe and China constitute an alternating Eurasian history has been popularized most recently by Goody (2010).
2. For an introduction to the South China Sea world economy during this period, see Brook (2010), ch. 9.
3. So (2000), pp. 117–19.
4. Hok-lam Chan (2009), p. 160.
5. Zheng (2004), pp. 113–14.
6. *Wuzong shilu*, 48.1b–2a (23 March 1509). This and subsequent translations from the *Veritable Record* have been taken, and freely modified, from Wade (trans.) *Southeast Asia in the Ming Shi-lu*. In most cases, the Chinese text can be conveniently found in Chiu (Zhao) et al. (1976), pp. 475–94.
7. *Wuzong shilu*, 65.8b–9a (1 September 1510). Some of this history is recounted in Chang (1933), pp. 28–31.
8. *Wuzong shilu*, 113.2a (27 June 1514); Chiu (1976), p. 479.
9. *Wuzong shilu*, 149.9b (15 June 1517).
10. *Wuzong shilu*, 194.2b (13 January 1521). The dynastic history quotes from the memorial, and so preserves the accusation against Wu; Zhang (1974), p. 8430. This incident is not mentioned in Wu's biography, pp. 5309–11.
11. *Shunde xianzhi* (Gazetteer of Shunde county, 1853), 21.3b–4b. *Guangdong tongzhi* (Gazetteer of Guangdong province, 1853), 7.23b, 25a, 36b; Wu also had the distinction of having his biography included in the dynastic history, although the struggle with Chen Boxian is omitted; Zhang Tingyu (1974), pp. 5309–11 and 8221. The two sources contradict each other on dates, so it is difficult to be as precise as one would like in reconstructing his biography.
12. *Wuzong shilu*, 123.4b (2 May 1515).
13. *Guangdong tongzhi* (1853), 7.19b.
14. Zhang Tingyu (1974), p. 5309. Subsequent to the events narrated in this chapter, Wu stood up to another powerful eunuch in an incident in the Nanjing region in 1622 (*ibid.*: 5310).
15. Kennedy (1987), pp. 7–8.
16. *Wuzong shilu*, 149.9a–b (15 June 1517).
17. Chang (1933), pp. 40–4. On Pires' failed mission to the Ming court, see Cameron (1970), pp. 131–48. As I note below, the reader will want to filter out the discourse of *la Chine immobile* that laces this otherwise informative book.

18. *Wuzong shilu*, 158.2a–b (11 February 1518).
19. *Wuzong shilu*, 191.1b–2a (23 October 1520).
20. Chang (1933), p. 47.
21. *Wuzong shilu*, 194.2b (13 January 1521). This and the following passage are also translated, with some commentary, in Chang (1933), pp. 51–2.
22. *Shunde xianzhi* (1853), 21.5a.
23. *Wuzong shilu*, 194.3a (13 January 1521).
24. For a brief account of the politics of this succession, see Brook (2010), pp. 98–100.
25. *Shizong shilu*, 4.27b (31 August 1521). On Portuguese spying in Canton, see Chang (1933), p. 44; on Affonso's request, p. 58.
26. An account of this conflict appeared in the *Veritable Record* two years later, when the emperor confirmed death sentences arising from the conflict: 'Pedro Homen of the country of the Franks attacked Guangdong and was captured by the defence officials. Relying on big guns and crack troops, Pedro Homen previously had plundered Malacca and other countries, acting highhandedly on the high seas. He then led his subordinate Syseiro [actually the name of Homen's ship] and over 1000 men in five ships to capture the country of Pasai by force. Subsequently, they attacked Xicao Bay in Xinhui county. Ke Rong, a commander engaged in defence against Japanese pirates, and Company Commander Wang Ying'en led troops in mounting a sea blockade against them. The fighting then moved to Shaozhou. Pan Dinggou from Xinghua was the first to board their ships, and then all the troops pushed forward. Forty-two persons including Pedro Homen and Syseiro were captured alive. Thirty-five heads were taken, ten men and women who had been kidnapped were taken into custody, and two ships were captured. The remnant bandits Martim Affonso and Dom Manuel [the king of Portugal; another error] again brought their three ships into battle and burnt the ships that had previously been captured. During the engagement, Battalion Commander Wang Ying'en was killed. The defeated bandits then fled' (*Shizong shilu*, 24.8a–b, 6 April 1523).
27. Chang (1933), p. 61.
28. *Shizong shilu*, 106.5a (7 November 1529); Chang (1933), pp. 73–4.
29. On the Portuguese monopoly on their maritime trade, see Boxer (1969), pp. 48 and 60–2.
30. Thanks to an enterprising police officer named He Ru, who forced some Portuguese to surrender to him, the Ming acquired Portuguese cannon. In May 1524, the military commander of south China, based in Nanjing, asked the court for permission to learn the casting technology involved and suggested that they be manufactured in both Canton and Nanjing; *Shizong shilu*, 38.13–b (15 May 1524), 154.7b–8a (7 October 1533). He Ru's subsequent extraordinary promotion to the position of Assistant County Magistrate in Nanjing was probably tied to this development, either as a reward for capturing the cannon in the first place or because it provided him with a post from which he could continue to be involved with the project. In 1533, He Ru earned another extraordinary promotion, this time from the unranked position of Assistant County Magistrate to the ranked post of vice-magistrate in Beijing.
31. Cameron (1970), pp. 129 and 131. It is a bit unfair to parade Cameron as the negative example, as he makes a sincere effort to get his reader to understand the Chinese side of Sino-Western relations. This verbiage was simply what passed for reasonable rhetoric in the popular press in 1970.