

BOOK REVIEW

**CHINA GOES TO SEA: MARITIME
TRANSFORMATION IN COMPARATIVE
HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

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... First, something on the background to the book. In effect, it's been produced by some of the leading lights of the increasingly impressive China Maritime Studies Institute at the US Naval War College at Newport, Rhode Island. Their colleagues, James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara have already produced the first rate *Chinese Naval Strategy in the 21st Century: The Turn to Mahan* (Routledge, 2008). This group of academics working for the US Navy has the advantage of understanding Chinese, inestimable given the vast maritime literature that country is now producing. In a century likely to be dominated by the relationship of the G2—China and the United States—the American focus on this new big kid on the block is entirely understandable, since the day-to-day relationship between the two countries is formed and expressed first by their trade with each other and then by their naval interactions. In large measure, this relationship will determine the political architecture of the 21st century and helps explain why it will be the century of the Pacific.

But, so far as the Americans are concerned [and come to that the Japanese, the Koreans, the Russians, and the countries of South East Asia, all neighbours, as well] there's a big problem. And that's uncertainty about China's future. The Chinese have been saying that they will be a completely different sort of great power—one that threatens nobody; their 'peaceful rise' means, they claim, that they will be able to secure Chinese interests but without infringing anyone else's. Naval development will reflect this broad set of intentions. So, for the US Navy [and indeed the rest of us too] the question arises: what sort of sea power will China turn out to be? Will the People's Liberation Army (Navy) become a great power rival in the traditional sense, prepared to see off the Americans, the Japanese and anyone else as necessary, or will it become a new-style Navy anxious to help defend the international trading system by cooperating with the Americans and their allies? Will it be a competitor or a partner?

The confusing thing is that there's evidence either way, and it was partly to address all this that Newport's China Maritime Studies Institute was set up. The editors of *China Goes to Sea* have decided to go back to history to see if that helps us predict which way the PLA(N) will go. Specifically they have commissioned a series of clear and well-argued studies which looks at the way other countries have developed their seapower to see whether that will throw up any clues. Interestingly, they also have a chapter which makes the point that this is precisely what the Chinese researchers are doing themselves. It's particularly fascinating to see what the Chinese make of us, the British. They make the point that British seapower has to be seen in its social and political context: 'Without the great revolution,' the Chinese conclude, 'the industrial revolution

and the parliamentary democracy system in England's land space, England would not have had the status of a world power...' (Implications—China needs to be an economically strong democracy too?)

Interestingly, the editors have a rather different starting point to the Chinese researchers whose works they study, for the book's starting point is that China is essentially a land-power developing a Navy, so they look at countries like Persia, Rome, France, Russia and Germany but not Britain, the Netherlands or the Americans. Not everyone would agree with this: Gavin Menzies, author of the controversial *1421: The Year China Discovered the World*, for a start. It is perfectly possible to argue that China is a seapower but that this is characteristic, in the modern parlance, has been 'recessed' since the early fifteenth century, immediately after the famous voyages of Cheng Ho which inspired Menzies' book. In effect, since that time China has had all the essential characteristics of a seapower, but for various reasons has chosen not to develop them until recently. But now, China is getting back to normal, and we shouldn't be surprised or indeed particularly worried about it. This is a point of fundamental importance because 'real' organic trade-based seapowers often seem less threatening to their neighbours than artificial military based ones which have no trade to defend.

The last two parts of the book look just at China. They consist of three particularly stimulating chapters which look at the rise and fall of Chinese seapower in the past and four which explore possible trajectories into the future. What emerges is a picture of the Chinese pragmatically transforming themselves (back?) into a sea-faring nation because they have a developing interest in the defence of the sea-based trading system, and a variety of vital maritime concerns in what they regard as their sea areas that are being challenged by their neighbours (Taiwan, the islands of the South and East China Seas). Progress is steady rather than dramatic, and China still has 'continental distractions' such as disputed land-borders, environmental and demographic challenges, and a growing problem with internal order. How things develop in the future will depend in large measure on the reaction to all this by China's neighbors, most particularly the United States, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, and the other countries of ASEAN.

No firm and hard conclusions then, but for all that this is an excellent book which sparks ideas about a lot more than 'just' the maritime transformation of China. ...