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The Ming Maritime Policy  
in Transition, 1367 to 1568

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## Preface

The maritime prohibition imposed during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) has long been a subject of debate. While different interpretations of the policy have been proffered by historians, sociologists and political scientists, none have got to the heart of the issue. All have tried to decipher the rationale for the implementation of the policy during the very early years of the dynasty, explain why it was maintained for so long, and, why, in 1568, it was eventually abolished. This book is different from earlier interpretations in offering a structural analysis of these issues. In this book, ‘structure’ has two implications. On one hand, the process of policymaking is viewed as a super-structural activity, reflecting the distribution of power within the government, which, in turn, is seen as a product of deeper social and economic foundations. On the other hand, ‘structure’ also implies the period of some 200-odd years, from the Hongwu administration (1368–1399) to the Longqing administration (1567–1573), which is examined as a distinct entity. During this period, certain institutional forms structured the operation of the empire’s foreign relations and commercial activity. Against this background, and in the context of this wider perspective, I explore the institutional changes beginning in the 1560s which saw the abolition of the maritime prohibition and a dramatic shift in the political and economic orientation of the Ming administration.

The book envelops through five chapters. The introductory chapter surveys Chinese commercial and maritime history from the Tang (618–907), through the Song (960–1279) to the Yuan (1206–1368) periods. Against this background, I will show how the Hongwu administration (1368–1398) reversed the maritime tradition of these earlier periods, instituting an unconventional prohibition policy which was then maintained by subsequent administrations for nearly two centuries. The policy was enforced with great effort, despite the fact that it was extremely difficult for the military to maintain, and that it generated considerable economic disruption and political difficulties for the administration.

The second chapter begins the analysis of the issues surrounding the maritime prohibition by employing a new methodological approach. Instead of targeting the policy itself, I explore the early Ming social and economic structure in order to probe the very foundation on which the policy was initiated. I argue that the establishment of the maritime prohibition policy, far from being an isolated coastal issue, was an integral part of the overall domestic and foreign policy structure of the early Ming administration, which was closely conditioned by the dynasty’s general political and social situation at the time. The early Ming years were a distinctive period in Chinese dynastic history. After decades of destructive wars at the end of the preceding Mongol Yuan dynasty, there was considerable social polarization and economic dislocation. Because of this, during the early Ming the new administration came to place considerable emphasis on stability; constructing a stable society and economy became the over-riding goal of the administration. Radical institutional changes were initiated in order to achieve this, and the maritime prohibition policy was one of these. It was an integral part of a much wider and comprehensive network of institutions. These included a self-sufficient economic

system, extensive networks of social control, suppression of commercial activity in conjunction with a state monopoly over key manufacturing sectors, restrictions on social consumption, and a prohibition on private foreign trade. The maritime prohibition policy was one part of this comprehensive network and it would have been impracticable without the wider institutional structure.

Such a politically-arranged system could not survive without political coercion. But coercion was politically very costly. The third chapter traces the weakening and breakdown of the early Ming institutional structures. The combined costs of increasing domestic disruption and intensifying border wars meant the Ming administration did not have the political resources to maintain the institutional structure. As political intervention declined, the Ming society and economy underwent a great transformation. Powering the process of social re-structuring was the commercialization of the economy. With this went and increase in status for merchants. Gradually, political power was shifting to those who benefited most from this restructuring of the society and the economy, especially as more and more men with merchant family backgrounds or with connections to merchant families gained office through the examination system and through the sale of office. This re-configuration of the political landscape meant the legitimacy of many of the early Ming institutions was called into question. The maritime prohibition policy was one of the institutions that came under great scrutiny. Its viability became the subject of much debate.

During the sixteenth century, and the Jiajing reign (1522–66) in particular, there was a heated debate within the administration over many aspects of Ming policy. At the heart of these debates were concerns over foreign policy, because a viable foreign policy was seen as crucial to resolving the social, political and financial crises that confronted the administration. Chapters Four and Five deal with the world politics, exploring the debates about foreign policy in all their many aspects. Central to these debates were the contributions from a new political faction, the pro-trade faction, who argued that lifting the prohibitions that restricted foreign trade was fundamental to resolving the many crises plaguing the empire. They were opposed by a group of officials who insisted that the best way to negotiate the crises was to maintain the institutional structures established during the early years of the dynasty. The pro-trade faction would eventually gain the upper hand. They argued that engaging in business with foreign merchants, and allowing China's own people to make a living through foreign trade, would see an end to the costly border wars and also generate significant revenue for the state. As these arguments gained ground, a wave of policy changes was implemented. These involved relaxing the policy governing the tea and horse trade on the western border, the abolition of the maritime prohibition on the coast and the restoration of the horse fairs along the frontier with the Mongols. The final chapter concludes by emphasizing that it is crucial to understand the inner dynamics driving forward these policy changes, and that this can only be achieved by employing the structural approach that underlies the book.