Introduction

In 1684, forty years after a Manchu army had seized power in Beijing, an extraordinary rumor shot along the Chinese coast, then across the ocean to Nagasaki, Batavia (Jakarta), and Manila: the three-hundred-year-old embargo on Chinese private maritime trade was being lifted. Soon the rumor caught the attention of English merchants serving the East India Company. Then it was confirmed: the Kangxi emperor had promulgated a new policy opening the gates of his empire in November 1684.

That year, 1684, a series of decisions were made that proved momentous in the history of Chinese foreign trade. First, the maritime trade ban would be lifted and Manchu and Chinese private traders would be allowed to trade abroad. Second, all merchants from both tribute and nontribute countries would be permitted to enter coastal ports. Third, a clear distinction between trade and tribute would enable those countries having no tributary relationship with China to participate in private trade. Fourth, a maritime customs system would manage seaborne trade and collect tariffs. Later that year, an imperial communication was sent to surrounding countries to request their assistance in rescuing Chinese maritime merchants in distress. These policies, the most important elements of High Qing trade policy, remained in force for the subsequent century and a half.

But that is not the whole story. During the eighty years after 1684, China’s Manchu rulers faced a series of new political, ethnic, and diplomatic challenges from within and without. From the Rites Controversy to the hairstyles of Chinese merchants living in Batavia, a wide range of issues arose in connection with the 1684 open-door policy. The Qing emperors reaffirmed, fretted over, and adjusted the policy, deciding to permit the private trade with Japan to continue, then to ban private trade in Southeast Asia, and then to restrict European merchants to a single Chinese port.

Most important, and surprisingly, as they worked out these policies the Qing emperors maintained a view of China and the outside world as closely intertwined: their economic and political interactions were the starting point for the new maritime policies. For example, the Kangxi emperor said of the open-door policy, “The development of maritime trade will benefit the
people of Fujian and Guangdong. As the people of these two provinces get rich and commercial commodities smoothly circulate, this prosperity will benefit other provinces.” In 1717 he explained the necessity for prohibiting the trade with Southeast Asia by analyzing the threat that the Qing faced from abroad:

The Russians, Dutch, and Portuguese, like the other Europeans, are able to accomplish whatever they undertake, no matter how difficult. They are intrepid, clever, and know how to profit themselves. As long as I reign there is nothing to worry about from them for China. . . . But if our government were to become weak, if we were to weaken our vigilance over the Chinese in the southern provinces and over the large number of boats that leave every year from Luzon, Batavia, Japan, and other countries, or if divisions were to erupt among us Manchus and the various princes of my family, if our enemies the Eleuths were to succeed in allying with the Tartars of Kokonor, as well as our Kalmusk and Mongol tributaries, what would become of our empire? With the Russians to the north, the Portuguese from Luzon to the east, the Dutch to the south, [they] would do with China whatever they liked.

In 1724 Li Wei, the governor of Zhejiang, cautioned the Yongzheng emperor that China was facing a new international situation: European countries and Japan now communicated with one another by sea and might well form an alliance against China.

These developments raise many new questions: What host of causes led Kangxi and his successors to implement open trade policies? While Western states organized government-sponsored explorations and chartered state monopolies, why did Qing rulers depend on private entrepreneurs to develop foreign commerce? How did the Qing ruling class, which conventional wisdom has characterized as fundamentally anticommmercial, manage the empire’s overseas trade? Why was the Qing maritime customs system better at developing overseas trade than comparable institutions under the Song, Yuan, and Ming? How did links to the global economy complicate the political, diplomatic, and ethnic situations in Qing China? As we advance into this inquiry, we may feel a need to reconsider our presuppositions about early globalization.

EARLY GLOBALIZATION AND QING MARITIME TRADE POLICY

No study of the early modern global economy that fails to address Qing maritime policy can be considered complete. Too long ignored, the decisions of the Manchu emperors relating to overseas trade played a key role in the
genesis of what I term early globalization (ca. 1500–1800), a transitional period that laid the foundation for modern globalization. From the 1970s to the present, scholars of global history have gone from stressing the central role of European expansion to concentrating on the roles of China, India, and Southeast Asia in global integration, from focusing on the state as the major unit of analysis to emphasizing transnational networks, from conventional political and economic history to a novel history of flows of goods, capital, information, and culture. A fresh theoretical and methodological framework is a first step to reappraising early globalization.

It may be useful to reconsider some of the questions the new global history has yet to answer. One of the earliest historians to take an interest in the functioning of networks was Immanuel Wallerstein. The factors of the world system that his theory highlights include the rise of strong centralized European governments that oversaw extensive bureaucracies and powerful militaries and, second, overseas expansion. In other words, for Wallerstein the West created the modern world system. This Eurocentric approach presents the non-Western world as peripheral, acting only in reaction to the changing reality of the core region. Whereas his emphasis on the role of the state, as I discuss, deserves further treatment, Wallerstein's Eurocentric pattern has had to face more and more questions and rebuttals since the 1980s.

One of the most important challenges to the Eurocentric pattern is Janet Abu-Lughod's *Before European Hegemony*. Abu-Lughod denies that the world system was created exclusively by the West. She shows that a global network had appeared long before 1500, when the Europeans started their overseas expansion, and that the influence of the network peaked in the first decade of the fourteenth century. Nonetheless, the book's significance is limited. Abu-Lughod does not inspect the continuity of the pre-1500 world system before and after Western hegemony, let alone the question of how the former laid a foundation for the latter. Quite the contrary, she speaks of the non-Western system as having declined in the fourteenth century and collapsed 150 years before the discovery of the New World.

The more radical challenge to the Eurocentric model has come from Andre Gunder Frank. His *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age*, published in 1998, describes the growth of the world system as a long and continuous process that started early in human history and has continued to the present. More important, he argues that it was China and other non-Western countries that occupied the central position in the world system until 1800. A number of Asian scholars have described for the same period transnational trade networks centered on Asia. One such historian is Hamashita Takeshi, who views the Asian trade network as the product of
the Chinese tribute system. Although adding a much-needed corrective, Frank and Hamashita go too far, occasionally exaggerating the role of the non-Western world while focusing on the flow of capital and losing sight of the role of the state.

Whereas Wallerstein’s theory minimizes the part that the non-Western world played in global integration, revisionist theories have underestimated the historically unprecedented changes brought by the discovery of both the New World and new sea routes around familiar landmasses—both achievements of European navigators. To overlook those is to fail to grasp why crucial changes in China and other Asian states took place only after 1500. One example is the tax reforms initiated in the 1570s. Silver had become an important medium of exchange long before the 1550s, but it replaced copper coins as the required medium for tax payments nationwide only after silver bullion entered China from the New World. China’s tax policies cannot be fully understood without taking into account Western trade.

Many scholars today underestimate the role of the state in global history. In the past thirty years, whereas more and more scholars, especially outside Europe and North America, have emphasized marginalized groups and nonstate or transnational entities, the significance of the state has received little attention. This has distorted our perception of globalization.

The two problems can be solved by highlighting the distinctive characteristics of early globalization, the period between 1500 and 1800. Too many, including Wallerstein and Frank, have treated the period as part of a monolithic thing called globalization without noticing its distinctive features. Let us turn now to some of those important characteristics.

First, it was during this period that the West gradually laid the foundation for global hegemony, achieved after 1800. However, it is an exaggeration to place the West at the center of global history during the early modern period. The reason is simple: except in the New World, Europeans were one among many groups that explored, traded, developed networks, and so on. Merchants from Portugal, Spain, and the Netherlands may have been frequent visitors to East Asia, but their impact was superficial and contact with locals would have been impossible without adapting to local conditions.

Moreover, the role played by European visitors to Asia was shaped by the places they visited. For example, Manila rose to regional prominence between the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries—roughly the same time that Yuegang, a port on the southern coast of China, was open to private maritime traders. In the late seventeenth century, Qing law permitted private merchants to sail from coastal ports to Southeast Asia. The number of Chinese ships that sailed to Batavia increased so quickly that Dutch colonists...
cancelled plans to expand the China trade. Into the 1830s, government support ensured the rapid prospering of trade between Shanghai, Ningbo, and Singapore. Since those cities were among the most important pillars of Western global expansion, there can be no doubt of the influence imperial Qing trade policy had on the rise of European overseas empires and modern globalization.

A great constraint on Europe’s overseas expansion was the emergence of a multipolar world. Certainly military and navigational technologies facilitated Western trade. Except in the New World, however, dominion over foreign lands was often superficial and temporary. In the Indian Ocean, Turkey, and Persia, for instance, mighty empires inhibited political and economic expansion. Imperialists who hoped to maintain a lasting grip on foreign trade had to adapt to local practices. For example, Portuguese and Dutch traders offered generous tribute payments to the rulers of late imperial China and Tokugawa Japan to maintain their commercial interests in Macao and Nagasaki, respectively. In maritime Asia no single group achieved absolute dominance over the rest, so Chinese, Japanese, Southeast Asian, and Western powers formed a multipolar network.

Another feature of early globalization was the central role of the state in political, social, and economic life. After 1500 the emerging global economy created new transnational powers based on the flow of silver, vast networks, and the rise of private traders. Most of the states successfully adapted to such changes by implementing more flexible commercial policies. Global integration meant greater profits for states such as Portugal, Spain, Qing China, and Tokugawa Japan—all emerged strengthened rather than weakened.

To be sure, the maritime policies of those countries varied according to their different commercial circumstances. In the West, official sponsorship and intervention defined oceangoing trade: private traders were not able to bear the financial burden of overseas exploration without royal patronage. In the Middle East, the Indian Ocean, and maritime Asia, it was foreign merchants, such as Armenians, Chinese, and then the Spanish, Portuguese, and Dutch, who played important roles in transregional trade. Their lack of other than commercial ties to most of the places where they did business made them seem, to local potentates, reliably disinterested. Thus they could function as a useful channel for communicating with the outside world.

The rulers of the Ottoman Empire, Mogul India, Safavid Persia, Southeast Asia, and Tokugawa Japan centered their maritime policies partly or wholly on foreign businessmen. To weaken native merchants, the Tokugawa bakufu (shogunal government) handed the rights to all overseas trade to two groups of outsiders: the Chinese and the Dutch. The case of China was completely different. In maritime Asia, as I indicate in this work,
Chinese private traders held sway until the 1820s. This ensured the flow of New World silver that filled the imperial treasuries of the late Ming and Qing. The enormous economic contribution made by Chinese entrepreneurs rendered the concurrent security problems quite tolerable, and the imperial government consequently adopted an open maritime policy. In other words, the peculiar commercial environment faced by Qing China led it to a maritime policy quite different from the xenophile policies of many other states.

A review of previous scholarship on the Qing court’s trade policies may prove useful here.

FROM OPEN TO CLOSED: CHANGING DISCOURSES ON QING MARITIME POLICY

Almost all English-language works on the history of Chinese foreign relations during the Ming and Qing, ranging from H. B. Morse’s chronicle of the East India Company trade with China to John King Fairbank’s classic Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast, at least mention Kangxi’s open trade policy of 1684. Surprisingly, however, so far there have been no books or articles, either in China or in the West, systematically examining the causes and effects of the 1684 maritime policy, not to mention the above issues. Most of this policy has remained unclear. For example, no studies accurately revealed how many and which coastal cities were opened under the new policy until Huang Guosheng’s pioneering work came out in 2000. As a result, most pre-2000 works merely follow the incorrect view of the nineteenth-century Chinese historian Xia Xie that Kangxi opened four coastal ports—Zhangzhou in Fujian, Guangzhou in Guangdong, Ningbo in Zhejiang, and Yuntaishan in Jiangsu—in 1684. Actually, according to Huang, there were at least fifty large and small ports in these four provinces opened for developing overseas trade. The effacement of the 1684 Chinese open trade policy from the historiography is not accidental. To a great degree, it is the product of the dominance of a Eurocentric discourse on the history of Chinese foreign trade that emerged in the late eighteenth century.

Before the second half of the eighteenth century, even in the eyes of the Europeans, including the English, China appeared as a country aware of the significance of overseas trade for both the well-being of its people and the wealth of the state and one active in developing commercial exchanges with surrounding countries. Du Halde, a French scholar who was famous for his works on China in the early eighteenth century, viewed China as more open during the Qing than during the Ming. Another French scholar, the politician Silhouette, stressed in his work on China that because the new Qing dynasty was more eager for bullion than the Ming had been,
all countries were welcome to enter its ports. In a dictionary published in Paris and then in London in the 1751, Qing China was characterized as a mercantilist country that grounded its wealth and power upon developing trade with surrounding countries:

At present . . . by opening commerce with other countries, the Chinese have increased the means of enriching their own. They now not only suffer, but encourage both near and distant nations . . . to come and trade with them; and bring them the most valuable commodities; and, at the same time, allow their own people unto a great number of foreign parts, whether they carry their silks, porcelain, and other curious manufactures and knick-knacks, as well as their tea, medicinal roots, drugs, sugar, and other produce. They trade into most parts of East India; they go to Batavia, Mallacca, Ache, Siam, etc. No wonder then that it is so opulent and powerful, when all the four parts of the globe contribute to make it so.

Contemporary Englishmen recorded the same impressions after visits to Beijing. In 1719, a British doctor by the name of John Bell accompanying a Russian mission to China was impressed by the prosperity and order he witnessed in the capital of the empire. Contrary to George Macartney, whose portrait of China as a closed, backward, and stagnant civilization molded the West’s views of the country, Bell painted a different picture: for traders, Beijing was as safe and convenient as Amsterdam or London, and China’s industries and foreign trade set an example for the Europeans. It is clear from such accounts that, in the eyes of early eighteenth-century Europeans, Chinese foreign trade was flourishing. The Chinese attitude toward foreign trade was positive, entrepreneurial, and adaptive, and the Qing government’s policies were far from anticommercial but, on the contrary, open, lenient, and mercantilist. More important, for those observers, the openness of Chinese foreign trade policies was best demonstrated by China’s measures relating to trade with surrounding countries, rather than with the Europeans. Nonetheless, these China-centered views, to use Paul Cohen’s term in a broad sense, gave way to a new Eurocentric discourse that emerged around the second half of the eighteenth century, when the West, especially the British, “construct[ed] a superior English national identity” and demonstrated that they “had now transcended all the past global orders.” It was at this time that British traders and scholars began to depict China as closed, isolationist, anticommercial, and lacking the spirit of free trade.

Dutch traders criticized China for violating the principle of free trade for the first time in the early seventeenth century. But the “free trade” they sought from Beijing was an equivalent of their monopoly on maritime Asian
trade and excluded the native Chinese private traders there for the purpose of maximizing Dutch commercial interests. The Ming government’s rejection of such demands led the Dutch to condemn the Ming court as disregarding the spirit of free trade and failing to respect Dutch commercial privileges in Chinese seas.23

But this Dutch view received little attention even in Europe until about the mid-eighteenth century, when the British capitalist class came to have more interest in the Chinese market and, as a result, sought new commercial privileges from China. Like the Dutch, the British traders saw their own commercial interests and privileges as symbolizing the spirit of “free trade.” Beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, the emerging English capitalist class claimed its standard of “civilization” as one with which every nation on earth ought to comply.24 Thus, China’s disregard, denial, and rejection of British commercial privileges became a challenge to “civilization” and, more important, clearly reflected the isolationist nature of China’s trade policy as well as the backwardness and closed quality of the Chinese empire.25 As an immediate and ultimate result of this logic, a new Eurocentric view of the history of Chinese foreign trade began to take shape. Obvious examples are Adam Smith’s and then Max Weber’s views.

Witnessing the rapid industrial and commercial growth in eighteenth-century England, Smith argued in his famous *Wealth of Nations* (1776) both that British trade occupied the central position in world trade and that the Western, especially the English, approach to wealth and prosperity constituted a model applicable to the rest of the world. In contrast to Bell’s as well as Jacques Savary’s positive pictures, Smith’s depicted China as ignorant of the significance of maritime trade, a portrait based on the Chinese attitude toward European traders as told by British merchants returning from China. Since they had not undertaken Western-style maritime expeditions and imposed restrictions on Western trade, he concluded that “the Chinese have little respect for foreign trade” and have “never excelled in foreign commerce.”26 In other words, China would remain stagnant until it appreciated the importance of the Western model of foreign trade and the value of commercial exchange with Europe. Compared with pre-1750 accounts, Western trade replaced Chinese trade with maritime Asia as the focus of the history of Chinese foreign trade, and the centrality of Chinese private trade was completely overlooked. Smith thus claimed that “the great part of the surplus produce of [China] seems to have been always exported by foreigners.”27 Despite the simplism and shallowness of Smith’s view, it became the basis of later historiography of Chinese foreign trade. No matter how much later scholars might refine, modify, and extend his view, their studies never went beyond his basic framework.
Following the same logic as Adam Smith, Max Weber, in his well-known *The Religion of China* (1951), identified the eighteenth-century commercial link between China and Europe with the whole of Chinese foreign trade. From this perspective, China's restrictions on European trade, as represented by the Canton system, naturally testified to the fact that China lacked, to use Weber's words, “progressivism” “in the European sense.” In speaking of Chinese private traders, he saw no hope of their changing the system, because they had no power to do so:

The once considerable export trade of China did not revive and there was only passive trade in a single port (Canton) which was open to Europeans but strictly controlled. Popular endeavor, such as might have been nourished by internal capitalist interests, did not arise to shatter this barrier. All evidence points to the contrary, for in the European sense, “progressivism,” generally speaking, emerged neither in the field of technology, nor economy, nor administration.28

The Eurocentrism of Weber’s account is clear, and, as Wang Hui has pointed out, it found its way into his analysis of many aspects of Chinese history.29 He attempted to fit the Chinese case into the Western pattern, characterized by the expansion of sea power, concluding that China lacked the necessary basis for developing foreign trade because “for centuries China had renounced sea-power, the indispensable basis of export trade.”30

In fact, however, because Chinese private traders enjoyed a close and stable commercial relationship with maritime Asia from the eleventh century on, the lack of “sea power,” crucial to the Western presence in East Asia from 1500 onward, did not prevent them from expanding their commercial presence there. Western traders, especially the Dutch, tried to exclude Chinese private traders from maritime Asia, but their efforts proved fruitless.31 Although not backed by any Western-style naval fleet, Chinese maritime traders nonetheless won the competition in maritime Asia against Western merchants armed with powerful navies. Not only did their commercial network survive numerous challenges posed by the Western intrusion during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, but also it continued into the twentieth century. To a certain degree the establishment and development of Manila, Batavia, and Singapore as Western colonies was inseparable from the contributions of these Chinese maritime traders.32 If sea power were “the indispensable basis of [China’s] export trade,” as Weber claimed, none of this would be comprehensible.

Yet these contradictions failed to capture the attention of either Western or Chinese scholars, let alone prompt them to question the received wisdom.
Instead, by the late 1970s, the Eurocentric discourse filled the works on Chinese history not only in English but also in Chinese and Japanese. For most historians, the Chinese empire had no way out of its “stagnation” unless stimulated by an external impact. The presence of the West in East Asia brought the necessary opportunity for China to catch up with Europe. But Chinese rejection in the eighteenth century of Western demands for commercial privileges, the argument goes, caused China to miss that opportunity and, at the same time, planted the seeds of later tragedies. These views formed the basis of nearly all research on China’s late imperial past, but no scholar elaborated them as systematically as did John King Fairbank.33

**FROM FAIRBANK’S CANTON-CENTERED PARADIGM TO THE MYTH OF ZHENG HE**

In the 1940s and 1950s, John King Fairbank mobilized, for the first time, these assumptions into a new interpretation of Ming-Qing Chinese foreign trade policies, in his articles and books on the tribute trade system, the Canton system, and other Chinese maritime policies. According to Fairbank, during the Ming and Qing and until 1840, the Chinese ruling classes, adhering to a Confucian anticommmercial doctrine, viewed trade economically as far inferior to agriculture while, in political terms, seeing it as a potential threat because it would create a channel for potential rebels to collude with foreign supporters. To prevent all such potential economic and political troubles, the Qing minimized Chinese commercial links to the outside world by imposing the Canton system. Throughout the Qing until the Opium War, the system simultaneously served two opposing functions. On the one hand, it was used to curb Chinese economic relations with the outside world; on the other, it maintained a minimal degree of contact with the West. As the product of a period characterized as closed and backward, the Canton system further isolated China from the contemporary European experience of the Industrial Revolution during the eighteenth century and was at the root, at least partly, of modern China’s tragic history.

Like Max Weber, Fairbank believed that “[China’s] Confucian society was agrarian and bureaucratic, of a type not able to adapt itself to the commercial, industrial, and nationalist revolutions brought about by free trade and free contact under the Western treaties.”34 Inevitably, therefore, the Chinese trade system, characterized as closed and anticommmercial, could change only through an external impact. These views constitute the core of Fairbank’s interpretation of Chinese foreign trade, views that center on the Canton system and that, quite rightly, have been characterized by scholars as “Canton-centered.”35
Fairbank was by no means wrong to choose the Canton system as the focus of his study, because it was indeed an important aspect of late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Chinese maritime policy. His studies were exemplary in terms of the discovery and use of a great many source materials, so much so that later scholars have felt that little room has been left for further exploration. But, like Smith and Weber, Fairbank went too far in assuming the central position of the West in the development of Chinese foreign trade and in equating Chinese regulation of Western trade with the whole of its maritime policy. As a result, official measures relating to Chinese private maritime trade were completely overlooked. Fairbank's classic *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast: The Opening of the Treaty Ports, 1842–1854*, a book of more than three hundred pages, devotes only three lines to Qing maritime policy on Chinese private trade. His account of Chinese foreign trade during the Ming and Qing is thus, not surprisingly, greatly one-sided.

From the 1950s on, Fairbank's Canton-centered interpretation became the most influential and authoritative explanation in the area of the history of Chinese foreign trade. Whether in China or the West, in both academic and popular works, imperial Qing maritime policies have, without exception, been described as passive, conservative, and isolationist, based primarily on Fairbank's paradigm. Little has been done toward reconsidering the Eurocentric assumptions underlying his model.

Undeniably, some scholars, especially after the 1950s, sought to discover the positive aspects of imperial maritime policy, but their studies see the case of China through a Western lens. One focus of these studies is on the role of the state in the Chinese maritime enterprise, simply because it was state sponsorship that shaped the direction of Western maritime explorations, especially in the Indian Ocean and maritime Asia. Interest has been directed at the Zheng He's voyages in the early fifteenth century—the only large-scale state-sponsored voyages in Chinese history. In both the West and East, much work has been done relevant to the impetus and actualities of Zheng He's voyages, discovering many interesting details of that history and demonstrating China's ability to organize a European-style exploration long before Columbus and da Gama. But in considering why, after Zheng He, China withdrew from the Indian Ocean and replaced an open policy with a closed and isolationist one, these studies assume that the Chinese maritime enterprise could only have followed a Western model, thus returning to a Eurocentric discourse.

In fact, Zheng He's voyages arose out of a context completely different from that of the West, and, furthermore, the voyages to the Indian Ocean predated Western exploration and probably exceeded in scale and tonnage da Gama's and other Western fleets active in Chinese waters in the sixteenth century. Relying almost completely upon the navigation achieve-
ments made by Chinese private traders during the Song-Yuan period, however, these voyages made no breakthroughs at the technological and geographic levels. Moreover, in economic terms, the voyages were unnecessary because private trade had already expanded into the Indian Ocean long before and met Chinese needs for foreign products. It is thus clear that the received wisdom of Zheng He as “China’s Columbus” has led scholars to ignore the contribution of China’s private traders in discovering the sea route to the world of the Indian Ocean.42

Under the influence of the Western-centered approach, the post-Zheng He period of Chinese maritime history has consistently been characterized as isolationist and backward. Qing China has been said to have retreated from the world economy and been drawn into it again only by the coming of the West. Consequently, beginning with Fairbank, historians have viewed the imperial Qing treatment of Western traders, especially via the Canton system, as the only aspect by which to determine whether its trade policies were open or not.43 Few have paid attention to Chinese private trade as evidence of the openness of Qing trade regulation. Such neglect prevents us from challenging received Eurocentric wisdom on the history of Chinese foreign trade.

For example, according to Fairbank, Chinese concern that maritime traders might cooperate with foreigners in possible rebellions pushed Qing rulers to establish the Canton system in order to separate China from the outside world. Looking at actual policies related to Chinese private trade, however, casts doubt on this view. During the High Qing, official policy (which I examine later in this book) allowed Chinese traders to sail to Japan and Southeast Asia, and, as a result, there were a great number of Qing subjects who were beyond the control of the court and might easily have formed anti-Qing alliances or colluded with foreigners. This suggests that security considerations did not lead Qing rulers to adopt a suppressive maritime policy against private maritime trade, as Fairbank and other scholars have assumed. More important, because Chinese private traders, not Western traders, dominated Chinese seas until the 1820s, examining imperial Qing policy, which contributed much to this domination, on private maritime commerce both challenges the Eurocentric discourse and reveals a long-ignored aspect of Chinese maritime history.44

STUDIES OF CHINESE MARITIME POLICY AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The 1980s and 1990s saw a series of transformations in the field of imperial Chinese history: the rise of regional studies, the replacement of Fairbank’s model of impact and response with a new China-centered approach,
a reevaluation of the role of China in the early modern world economy, and the emergence of a Manchu-centered model of Qing history. All these have greatly undermined the dominance of Fairbank’s paradigm in the field of Chinese history.

In the area of Ming-Qing Chinese foreign relations and maritime history, many new works have advanced our understanding. In China, Ge Zhaoguang has explored the transnational cultural and political interactions among Qing China, Tokugawa Japan, and Chosôn Korea. Lin Renchuan has detailed the development of Chinese private maritime trade during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Chen Dongyou, Chen Shangsheng, Huang Guosheng, Li Jinming, Li Qingxin, Li Tiangang, Wu Boya, Zhang Bincun, Zheng Yongchang, Zhong Weimin, and Zhuang Guotu have all dealt with many important aspects of Ming-Qing maritime policies. Cao Yonghe, Cheng Shaogang, Lin Weisheng, Liu Xufeng, and Zhu Delan have examined a variety of important issues connected to Ming-Qing China’s trade with Japan, Southeast Asia, and the West. One significant event in the field has been the publication of the Academia Sinica series Zhongguo haiyang fazhanshi lunweji (Collection of Papers on the History of China’s Maritime Development). Based on many long-neglected source materials, the articles included in the series explore and provide important insights related to aspects of Ming-Qing China’s maritime history. In Japan, Fuma Susumu, in tracing the Korean emissaries to both Beijing and Edo, has investigated the cultural exchanges between China, Japan, and Korea during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Matsuura Akira and Ōba Osamu have examined various aspects of Qing China’s trade with Tokugawa Japan. Hamashita Takeshi has studied the evolution of the Asian trade network from the early Ming to the twentieth century. Kishimoto Mio has shown how Chinese intellectuals changed their views from despising trade to encouraging it in response to the impact of Ming-Qing commercialization.

In the West, Ng Chin-keong has traced the development of coastal private trade during the High Qing while touching on some aspects of Qing maritime policy, especially in relation to private trade. Sarasin Viraphol has shown the important role of Chinese merchants in Siamese trade. William Atwell’s influential essays have brought to light the great impact of the flow of world silver upon the Ming-Qing Chinese economy. William Rowe’s study of Chen Hongmou has made clear how the Chinese official elite adapted their attitudes to the new and changing social and economic realities during the High Qing. Benjamin Elman has explored the cultural interactions between High Qing and Tokugawa Japan by analyzing the divide between “Sinophobes” and “Sinophiles” among Japanese doctors of the time.
In sum, the past sixty years have seen a radical shift in views of Chinese maritime history: from seeing the Ming-Qing as a quite conservative era to noting how realistic and flexible attitudes were at the time, from stressing the role of Western merchants to viewing Chinese private traders as agents of change. This shifting perspective entered a new phase with Frank's study.

Still, we have only begun to appreciate how an obsessive focus on silver, another feature of the long-persistent incomplete understanding of Chinese maritime history, has distorted the general picture. Was the flow of silver the reason why China was active in the early global economy? If China had an active role, how are we to understand the ban against private maritime trade enacted in 1717 and the formation of the Canton system? What did these limitations mean for the relations between China and the global economy? How do we explain the rise of the treaty port system in the middle of the nineteenth century? These questions were the starting point for this book.

**Themes, Methodology, Structure**

In the present work, I offer a new interpretation of late imperial China's maritime history by exploring the relevant policies promulgated by the Qing throne between 1684 and 1757. I aim to contribute to our understanding of early globalization, which came about with the so-called discovery of the New World and the new sea route to the East. My research reveals that Qing China responded to globalization quite differently from the West.

I begin by suggesting that the silver economy was merely a small part of the interaction between China and the early global economy. The consequences of opening Chinese ports to foreign trade were extensive, felt by private traders, local and court officials, and by the emperors. Economically and socially, one notes the gradual return, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, of the Chinese private trader to his former position as the dominant player in maritime Asia. Intellectually, one sees how the Chinese elites, especially those high officials, came to think of China (especially the coastal area), maritime Asia, and even Europe as a tightly interrelated entity.

Scholar-officials shifted from insisting on the old maritime restrictions to promoting private maritime trade as a new source of revenue. Moreover, the interaction between China and early globalization, which included the formation of a transnational trade network, influenced the thinking of the proto-Manchu Jurchens; after the Manchu conquest of China, the Manchu elite joined Han Chinese officials in pushing for a liberal trade policy.
The impact of early globalization on economic, religious, political, and military matters eventually obliged Qing emperors—Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong—to deal with it. Although their attitudes toward overseas trade varied over time, generally these emperors recognized it as an irreplaceable source of wealth for both the state and its citizens. Even as the emperors enacted new trade regulations, they put an end to the tribute trade system that had lasted for more than three hundred years.

I wish to open a new window onto China and early globalization, which far too many scholars have viewed from the perspective of “a chance” to modernize that China’s imperial government foolishly spurned. Early globalization was more complicated than we have assumed: like modern globalization, it presented many problems that governments sought to handle. Eighteenth-century China, for example, needed a constant flow of foreign silver to fuel a new taxation system based on silver. Foreign trade also led to stiff competition—both domestic and international—for other commodities, such as copper. The result was official controls, such as the Canton system and, in Japan, stringent limits imposed on foreign trade.

What started out as an economic issue soon became far more complex. For example, as trade picked up between China, maritime Asia, and Europe, Chinese rulers came to believe that their empire was being threatened by the apparent maritime power of Japan and the West. And there was the matter of the illegal penetration of Christianity into China. Increased trade speeded up the spread of rumors and reminded the Chinese of past wars and conflicts, such as the outbreak of Japanese piracy during the Ming. In view of these factors, it was natural for the Qing emperors to impose limits on overseas trade.

My study of the 1684 trade reforms suggests that assessing the Chinese experience according to European benchmarks is misleading. China developed its overseas trade along a different path. Contrary to the familiar image of imperial China as hidebound, the case of the 1684 trade policies demonstrates the adaptiveness, flexibility, and openness of the Qing.

To keep things manageable, I have limited the scope of my study to four coastal provinces—Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian, and Guangdong—and I have built the narrative around the year 1684, when the Kangxi emperor lifted the long-term ban on private overseas trade and reformed the official tribute system.

I have drawn mainly on Chinese source materials, ranging from official documents to private writings and local gazetteers. The reason is obvious: only these materials can tell us how Chinese rulers, elites, and merchants perceived and reacted to the emerging global economy. I have also examined materials from Korea, Vietnam, and Japan for many details available nowhere else.
I have not overlooked materials in Western languages, without which it is difficult to grasp the number and size of vessels coming and going from East Asian ports. But, in my opinion, they are not very useful for examining the Chinese response to early globalization. Why? First of all, all those materials were produced by either merchants or commercial officials, who cared only about profit and wrote about little else. Second, those merchants remained only very briefly in the coastal ports: they had neither the time nor inclination to investigate Chinese maritime regulations. Third, the records left by those Western merchants often treated what they saw as the whole of Chinese maritime policy, which they characterized in highly tendentious terms. Though the Jesuits serving the Qing court left voluminous commentaries on the country, they failed to say much about maritime policy.

The present book consists of nine chapters. The first three contextualize the 1684 open-door policy. Chapter 1 emphasizes the continuities in policies and practices surrounding private maritime trade from the Song and Yuan to the Ming and Qing; it shows that the solid foundation laid in the Song and Yuan made it that much easier for Chinese merchants to dominate international trade. Chapter 2 examines how globalization affected high officials’ thinking, obliging them to acknowledge the importance of overseas trade for the coastal economy and society. Chapter 3 discusses how the emerging northeast Asian trade network inclined the Jurchen and Manchu peoples to develop a way of consciously enriching the state through trade. The banner elite influenced by this procommerce tradition pushed the Kangxi emperor to lift the maritime trade ban.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 focus on the open-door policy itself. Chapter 4 describes how the Kangxi emperor arrived at his decision to break with the past, connecting his decision to his new understanding of neo-Confucianism. Chapter 5 deals with a single aspect of the new policy, the customs house system, showing how the imperial Qing court regulated private trade. Chapter 6 handles a crucial aspect of the open-door policy: the end of the tribute trade system, which had profound repercussions on the Asian trade network.

The final three chapters consider the eighteenth-century sequels to the reform of 1684. Chapter 7 discusses Kangxi’s reaction to the Tokugawa bakufu’s decision to license Chinese private traders, showing how economic interdependence affected relations within East Asia and led Manchu rulers to abandon the tribute system in dealing with one of its major neighbors, Japan. Chapter 8 traces how external and internal factors, especially the imagined Western threat caused by the Chinese Rites Controversy that peaked in the second decade of the eighteenth century, and the conflict between the Manchus and Han, led Kangxi to limit private trade with Southeast Asia, limits that proved short-lived. Chapter 9 shows why it is wrong to treat the Canton
system as proof that China’s rulers wished to cut the country off from the outside world. The policy grew out of concerns about Christian missionaries and the competition among different provinces for limited commercial opportunities rather than from an imperial swing from liberal to coercive policies.

Before proceeding any further, however, it is important that I define the word “open” as I use it in describing Qing trade policy. I use it in the same way it has been used to refer to the maritime policy in the Song and Yuan and in post-Deng China. Such an open policy possesses the following features: (1) the central government believes that a lively economic interaction between China and the outside world benefits imperial finance and the people, (2) the central government endorses measures and institutions promoting and protecting overseas trade, and (3) legal statutes and practices permit foreign traders to visit China’s ports for commercial purposes and Chinese merchants to sail abroad for the same purposes. Though all three features held from 1685 to 1820, two factors have been cited by scholars convinced that the Qing dynasty was not fully open: (1) the existence of the Canton system and (2) the relative inertia of the Qing government in encouraging overseas trade when compared with the Song and Yuan. Many scholars, especially those in China, have argued that the Qing did not understand the positive aspects of overseas trade, let alone its importance for the Chinese economy; that its maritime policies and institutions were unfavorable to overseas trade; that it set strict limits on the interactions between the Chinese and the outside world because of ideological and political concerns; and that the Qing customs system was weakened by corruption and extortion.63

Such arguments are not convincing. First of all, as I show in some detail, from 1685 to 1820 it was Chinese private traders rather than Western merchants who linked China and the outside world, maintaining a maritime Asian trade network. Thus, it is mainly through the imperial policies directed at Chinese private traders that we can understand the interplay between China and the outside world. As to the Canton system, it assumed its peculiar form because of the complicated interplay between the provincial governments and the central government—xenophobia played only a small part. We now know that the Qianlong emperor, who established the Canton system at the behest of local authorities in Guangdong, nonetheless supported Chinese maritime private traders sailing from the coastal provinces to maritime Asia. If the existence of the Canton system casts doubt on the openness of Qing trade policy, it is a matter of degree and little else. Also, harping on the system’s corrupt officials does not do justice to the Qing court. Corruption can be found everywhere: in the Qing, in the Song and Yuan, in present-day China. If it has not been used to disprove the alleged
openness of trade policy during those periods, why should it be applied to the Qing?

If we wish to determine whether the Qing court made more progress than the Song, Yuan, or Ming in terms of developing overseas trade, one index might be the number of ports opened for overseas trade. The discussion in chapter 6 demonstrates that imperial Qing trade policy was the most open in Chinese history in terms of encouraging private traders and opening ports. Thus, it is no exaggeration to portray Qing maritime policy as open.