

**Peripheral No More:
Western Historiography of the *Jiajing Wokou* Crisis, 1975-Present**

A senior paper submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts in History

Kalib Correa
University of Washington Tacoma

March 2026

Advisor: Dr. Sundermann
Second Reader: James Hannes

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank, first and foremost, my advisor, Doctor Libi Sundermann. Without her invaluable assistance and patience during this project, I doubt I would've been able to complete it. I am thankful for the valuable feedback from James Hannes, who aided in my confidence when writing this paper, and helped me create something I can be truly proud of. I am indebted to many, including one of my closest friends, Tyler, who read my sections and final draft on numerous occasions. And, of course, I am thankful to my peers who helped guide my writing and strengthen my sections. I could not have asked for a better time to write such a project; each and every one of you helped me in ways I cannot describe.

Abstract

This paper examines the Western historiography of the *Jiajing wokou* crisis (1540s-1567 CE), and what this means for the broader Western discussion of non-Western histories. I argue that, through the Western discussions of the crisis, there is a clear trend with modern, 2005-onwards, discussion: scholars are beginning to de-colonize and de-imperialize the narratives of old. My analysis of the historiography of three key factors of the crisis—identity, causation, and reasons for decline—showcases a growing push away from Eurocentrism. The findings reveal that Western scholars have begun to reanalyze previously held notions of Eastern history, in this case Chinese maritime history, and debate whether scholars can analyze complex Eastern history under a “Western gaze”; and, if possible, how this can be done. The analysis of recent scholarship shows that efforts to remove Eurocentric vocabulary—“piracy”—is a step in the right direction, as it removes the assumptions that come along with such diction.

Introduction

Chinese maritime history has served as a vastly underdeveloped field of study among Western scholarship. This unfortunate reality has come to pass due to many scholars labeling this aspect of Chinese history as “peripheral” or a “minor tradition.”¹ For most of the Western historiographical discussion, Eurocentrism served to plague the discourse, leading many to either ignore this facet of Chinese history, or attempt to analyze such moments through a “Western gaze”. Paradoxically, Western scholarship is at the same time chained to the discussions and discourses of the East; early Western scholars may have looked towards this aspect of Chinese history, attempting to define and challenge notions within their biased—European—knowledge, but they cannot attempt this without the foundations of Eastern scholarship. This is notable particularly with the *Jiajing wokou* crisis; scholarship has “misunderstood or mistreated” the crisis, regarding both the wokou themselves, and the inner workings of the crisis.²

While the Western historiography of the *Jiajing wokou* crisis is plagued with Eurocentrism, there is a shift towards the de-colonization, or de-imperialization, of these discourses.³ While de-imperialization is noted among Eastern scholarship, particularly after the People’s Republic of China began to re-examine their history, Western scholarship is beginning to see unique discussions: de-colonization. Scholars, such as Michael Szonyi, examine newer arguments that contradict previous scholarship and discussion, begging the question: how can we examine the wokou through a Western gaze? While this remains a particularly new aspect of

¹Ivy Maria Lim, “From Haijin to Kaihai: The Jiajing Court’s Search for a Modus Operandi along the South-eastern Coast (1522-1567),” *Journal of the British Association for Chinese Studies* 2 (July 2013): 2.

²Kwan-wai So, *Japanese Piracy in Ming China During the 16th Century* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1975), 1; wokou is sometimes referred to as “Wo-k’ou” under older scholarship.

³Sometimes referred to as “Chia-ching” under older scholarship.

Western discourse, it is still notable, even when looking outside of this crisis, as some scholars, such as Andre Gunder Frank, have attempted to re-examine the West's stance on Asian history, and argue against notions steeped in Eurocentrism. Scholars such as Ivy Maria Lim, Szonyi, and Boyi Chen have attempted to re-examine the wokou crisis in much the same light; these scholars have looked at the shifts in Eastern discourses and concluded that the historiography of the West has been insufficient. This has enabled them to, like Frank, argue against Eurocentric notions, and instead promote the idea of the wokou as a unique and complex part in Chinese history, one that cannot be studied from an exclusive Western gaze.

The crisis itself, regardless of Eurocentrism and a gap in scholarship (1980-2005), has come into discussion once more. Many Western scholars are beginning to question the conclusions of their predecessors and attempting to expand upon them. While some ideas have not seen large discussion in recent years, many aspects of the crisis are being called into question. Western historians' interpretations of the causes, and significance, of this crisis forms the subject of this study. I will also examine discussions of de-colonization and de-imperialization, and how this not only explains the gap in Western discussion but also accounts for the resurgence of Chinese maritime history in Western scholarship.

The two major facets of the Western historiography of the Jiajing wokou crisis—Eurocentrism and dismissal of Chinese maritime history—was shaped by, as Szonyi and Lim examine, nationalist and imperialist frameworks.⁴ This had resulted in a field of study that was foundational, but tentative, in the mid-1970s. Said field fell silent between 1980 and 2005, and emerged once more only once the Western and Eastern discussion began to break away from the boundaries of these ideas of nationalism and imperialism. This paper argues that the evolution of

⁴Lim, "From Haijin to Kaihai," 2.

the Western historiography of the Jiajing wokou crisis reflects discussions of de-colonization and de-imperialization that have formed across discourses, and explain the gap in Western discussion, while also explaining the modern resurgence of Chinese maritime history in Western scholarship. This is noted from two aspects of the historiography of this topic: Eastern scholarship's post-1980s shift away from Sino-Japanese political history, instead favoring Chinese societal history and the socioeconomic analysis that gradually followed, of which the West did not ignore. Western scholars followed, as they have in the past, these developments intimately; a deeper understanding was inevitable, one that destabilized the vocabulary—scholarship attempted to “subsume a broad continuum of terms in Chinese”—forcing Westernized labels, such as “piracy”, onto a crisis that had no need for them.⁵ Western historians' interpretations of the causes, and significance, of this crisis form the subject of this study.

While tracking this discussion through the themes of wokou identity, the causes of the crisis, and reasons for its decline, this paper will examine discussions of de-colonization and de-imperialization within the context of the Jiajing wokou raids. Furthermore, this demonstrates that Western scholarship has long moved away from hypotheses reliant on Eastern foundations, instead becoming a more independent entity that is increasingly more critical of its predecessors' conclusions. This illuminates not only a deeper understanding of Chinese maritime history, enabled by Eastern scholarship, but also how Western scholarship is beginning to re-assert itself through the challenging of previous scholarship and Eurocentrism, the very same Eurocentrism that enabled prior conclusions.

⁵Michael Szonyi, “An Officer in Cahoots with Pirates: Coastal Garrisons and Maritime Smuggling.” In *The Art of Being Governed, Everyday Politics in Late Imperial China* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 92.

Historical Context

The Jiaping wokou crisis began in the 1540s and ended in 1567 CE. The crisis was rooted in the Ming dynasty's strict maritime trade bans, enacted in response to Japanese rivalries that had spilled onto Chinese shores.⁶ Kwan-wai So is notable in his early examination of the myriad causes of the wokou, and his 1975 study outlines the various historical events leading up to the eventual crisis. The wokou were not new to China—numerous records document their activity during the reign of Emperor T'ai-tsu (1368–1398 CE)—but their assaults on the Ming reached what So calls their "zenith" during the *Jiaping* period.⁷ A massive increase in raids expanded wokou activity as far as Anhwei province in the Eastern interior of China, threatening the capital of Nanking itself.⁸ The wokou operated largely along the Yangtze delta, with initial raids striking from the Yellow Sea to the East China Sea and shifting southward as the crisis continued. They used the Yangtze River to penetrate deep into Ming territory, enabling them to besiege cities such as Chiang-ning.⁹ (Figure 1).

⁶So, *Japanese Piracy in Ming China*, 4.

⁷So, *Japanese Piracy in Ming China*, 2; Jiaping refers to the reign name of Zhu Houcong (1507-1567).

⁸So, *Japanese Piracy in Ming China*, 6; Anhwei is modernly known as Anhui.

⁹So, *Japanese Piracy in Ming China*, 9.

JAPANESE PIRACY IN MING CHINA

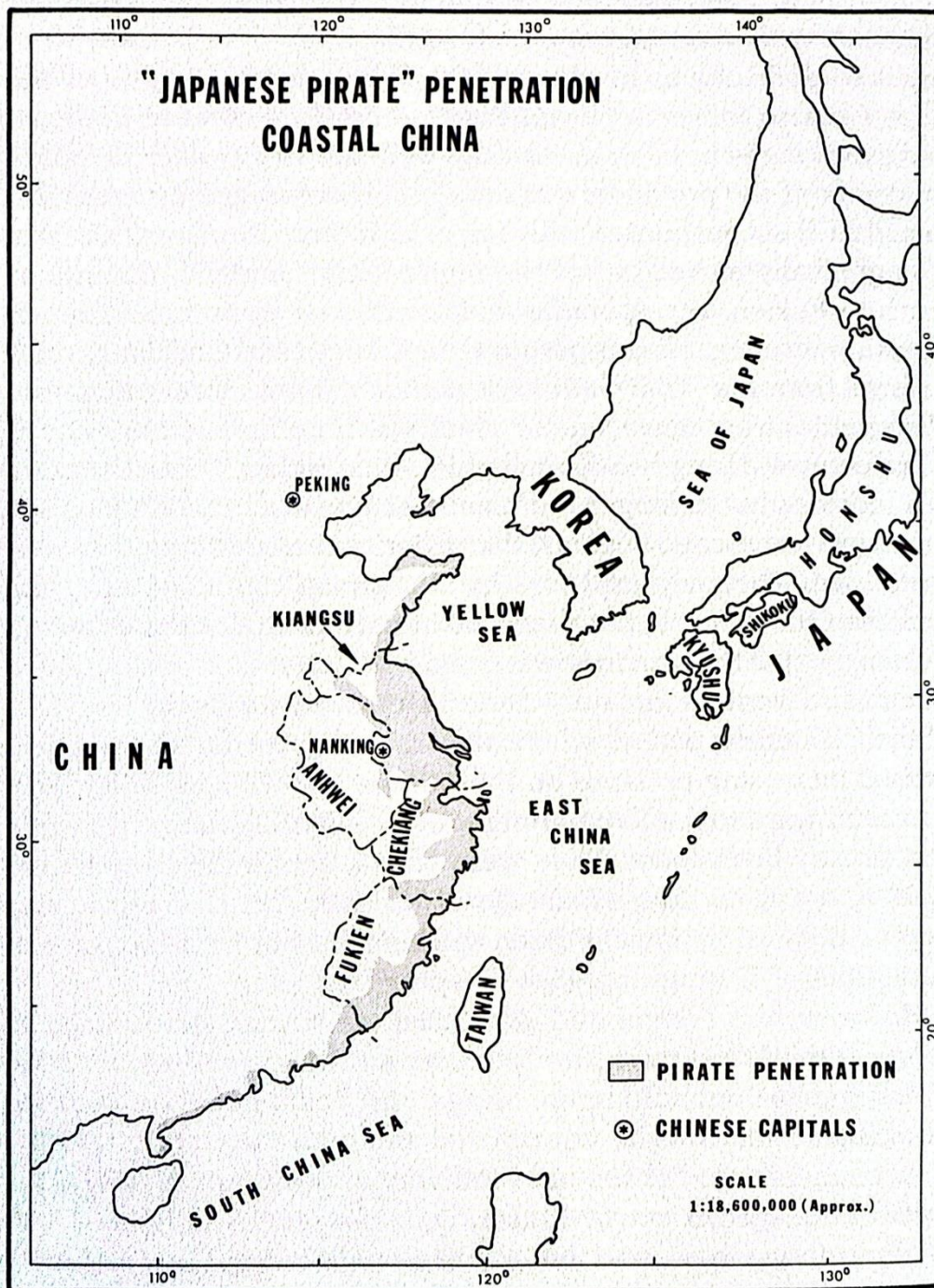


Figure 1 (So, *Japanese Piracy in Ming China During the 16th Century*, 8)

Within the context of the Jiaping era, the Ming presented a clear market to this crisis, that being the *haijin*, or sea ban. Two figures play a central role in the enactment of the *haijin*, Shuetsu Gendo and So Sokyō; these two officials, from the Ouchi and Hosokawa clans respectively, went to China in the hopes of winning trading rights between the Ming and their clans. As explained by So, these rival clans came into contact at the Ming docks; Gendo arrived ahead of Sokyō; however, due to Sokyō's connections with the Ming, he was given priority over Gendo. This resulted in Gendo ordering his troops to set fire to Sokyō's ships and killing his troops. After this, Gendo and his men raided and pillaged the Ming coast during their return to Ningpo. Under the recommendations of Supervising Secretary Hsia Yen, in response to these incidents, the Ming decided to cease foreign trade in the Ningpo region¹⁰. The Ming, however, had no strong way to uphold these policies, as the *weisuo* (self-governing) garrison system was proving largely inefficient, and they had long ended naval patrols in the region.¹¹ Garrisons were also poorly manned and, in some cases, not even provided for, be it resources such as food or even being given their wages.¹²

The crisis saw a very swift end upon two factors: newer tactics employed by "competent generals" and the adoption of the *kaihai*.¹³ The *kaihai* (open seas) policy opened maritime trade, no longer labeling those who engaged with it as "smugglers," or *wokou*. Regardless, some known as *wokou* were still put to the sword and exterminated over time. These were largely the *wokou* that strayed too close to the inland, and encountered Ming armies. However, most of the *wokou* were smugglers and merchants attempting to make profits. Thus, adoption of the *kaihai*

¹⁰So, *Japanese Piracy in Ming China*, 5.

¹¹Lim, "From Haijin to Kaihai," 6.

¹²Lim, "From Haijin to Kaihai," 6; Szonyi, "An Officer in Cahoots with Pirates," 83.

¹³Szonyi, "An Officer in Cahoots with Pirates," 91.

resulted in a swift end to the conflict, as Chinese merchants were permitted to travel into Southeast Asian oceans and trade with foreigners.¹⁴

The use of the wokou to label some merchants, but not others, reveals a point of contention, as the national identity of these individuals remained a source of nationalism and propaganda for centuries. From the Ming records until the 1950s, the wokou were given the blanket term “Japanese pirate”. However, other scholars, such as So and Lim, point out the nuance of this topic. So states that, while many Japanese scholars agree the Ouchi family backed the wokou, they could not have reached their zenith from strictly one nation. This idea is perpetuated by Chinese scholars during So’s time—1975—as they would even claim the Chinese played the greatest role in the crisis.¹⁵ Lim also states that, while the wokou have been analyzed through the lens of “Japanese invaders,” many of these bandits were Chinese, within the Jiajing era.¹⁶

Foundational Work (1975-1980)

Kwan-wai So’s work (1975) remains the most foundational writing for this period, at least among Western scholars. While claiming limited knowledge in his writings, his 1975 *Japanese Piracy in Ming China* revealed what is essentially a series of hypotheses as to why the crisis started.¹⁷ So largely draws from Eastern scholars, primarily from China and Japan, which leads to various conclusions, especially him theorizing the surge in wokou activity coming from the warring-states period in Japan.¹⁸ This reliance on Eastern scholarship would shape his conclusions, and gaps later scholars would need to fill. Using these accounts, he also argues that

¹⁴Lim, “From Haijin to Kaihai,” 22; Szonyi, “An Officer in Cahoots with Pirates,” 91.

¹⁵So, *Japanese Piracy in Ming China*, 17.

¹⁶Lim, “From Haijin to Kaihai,” 3.

¹⁷So, *Japanese Piracy in Ming China*, Preface.

¹⁸So, *Japanese Piracy in Ming China*, 4.

Sino-Japanese relations being sour, during the Jiajing reign, resulted in both misunderstandings about the situations, both with cause and identity of the wokou, and a lack of cooperation between these nations.¹⁹ So also spends much time on the *haijin*²⁰, stressing the primary, immediate, cause of these wokou raids. However, So also lists out his series of hypotheses to varying degrees, and varying evidence. He suggests that urbanization and lack of state support led many youths to smuggling, but arguments are limited, as Lim acknowledges, as the evidence to support these claims are not as concrete, limiting further scholarship by Western scholars.²¹

Roland L. Higgins' "Gentry Law-Breaking" (1975) examines the investigation conducted by the civil official, Zhu Wan, and his findings along the Ming coastal territories, exploring the topics of the true nature of the piracy problem during this period. His paper provides a great deal of background information for the Ming Dynasty, particularly why the Ming both struggled to contain the wokou problem, and why they bothered to send Zhu Wan in the first place. Higgins argues this is due to their historic drive to defend their Northern territories, and their desire to reassert dynastic control over the coastal territories, of which they were experiencing waning power.²² Beyond the why, Higgins primarily explores Zhu Wan's descriptions of his travel along the coast. According to Higgins, Zhu Wan's reports not only sparked massive controversy within the Ming courts; the writings also went "unheeded".²³ While later scholarship has picked up on some of his ideas, it has been less pivotal compared to So. Higgins' lack of influence on Western discussion reveals an over-reliance on Eastern scholarship in discourse, as he does not engage with much beyond Zhu Wan's writings. This is primarily due to a seeming lack of connection

¹⁹So, *Japanese Piracy in Ming China*, 12.

²⁰Chinese term for "maritime prohibitions;" effectively ended foreign maritime trade.

²¹So, *Japanese Piracy in Ming China*, 123; Lim, "From Haijin to Kaihai," 3.

²²Roland L. Higgins, "Pirates in Gowns and Caps: Gentry Law-Breaking in the Mid-Ming," in *Ming Studies* ed. Ihor Pidhainy (Geneva, NY: Hobart and William Smith Colleges, 1975), 30.

²³Higgins, "Gentry Law-Breaking," 33.

between So and Higgins, suggesting Western scholarship of the wokou was isolated and reliant on Eastern Scholarship. Western scholarship of the Jiajing wokou crisis has intimately followed that of the Eastern discussion, both past and present. This is displayed extensively when engaging with thematic analysis of the scholarship: identity of the wokou, causes of the crisis, and decline of the wokou.

The Gap in Western Scholarship (1980-2005)

Western scholarship fell silent between 1980 and 2005. This gap requires an explanation. While unable to completely answer the question of why Western scholarship fell silent during this period, we can note several contributing factors. Firstly, Western scholarship had begun to dismiss Chinese maritime history, as pointed out by Lim with John E. Wills Jr. and John King Fairbanks' comments on the "peripheral" or "minor tradition" aspects of said history.²⁴ Other explanations may include xenophobic ideologies and a Eurocentric view of history; the wokou barely affected the rest of the world outside of a minor inconvenience to the Portuguese, so to older Western scholars, this field had no real benefits to its study.

Andre Gunder Frank explains why. He argues that the West has long viewed the "rest of the world under the title of "Oriental", an attempt by the Western scholars to separate themselves from the remainder of the world and assert European dominance and "exceptionalism".²⁵ This was not a relic of an earlier era; he examines writings during his own time (1998) that actively engage with this Eurocentrism, arguing that Europe did not forge opportunity but rather took advantage of nations, especially in regards to Asia.²⁶ This suggests that the wokou disappeared

²⁴Lim, "From Haijin to Kaihai," 2; John E. Wills Jr. (1936-2017) was an American scholar and trailblazer for Chinese studies. John King Fairbank (1907-1991) was an American scholar focusing on Chinese-American relations. He is often credited as a pioneer for Chinese studies in America.

²⁵Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 8.

²⁶Frank, *ReOrient*, 26.

from Western discussion, simply due to their “lack of merit” in the eyes of Eurocentrism. These smugglers did little in regard to harming Europeans, instead being a distinctly unique problem for the Ming. This analysis is perpetuated by scholars like Lim, who outline that Chinese maritime history was often sidelined by major Western historians.²⁷

No longer was the wokou crisis analyzed as Sino-Japanese political history, but rather Chinese societal history. This shift was not only a breakthrough for the Eastern discussion of this crisis, but also the West. It revealed the flaws with previous scholarship, and thus the shortcomings of previous scholars; as the People’s Republic of China looked towards the Ming and sought to de-imperialize the narrative for this section in history, the West looked towards Eurocentrism, hoping to de-colonize their understandings of the wokou.

The Resurgence (2006-Present)

During this period, there has been a large boom in interest, both for Chinese maritime history, and the wokou crisis. Beginning in the early twenty-first century, we begin to see a large surge in Western scholarly discussion for the wokou, both the crisis and their identity.

Christopher Sharman argues that contemporary Chinese naval expansion and territorial claims, led by chairman Jinping Xi’s vision of China as a strong naval power, currently and historically, and his desires to overtake America’s naval dominance in the world, is one of the major reasons for the surge.²⁸

Lim serves as the precursor for this renewed interest in the wokou, as she not only challenges So's conclusions, seeing some as "less satisfactory," but uses her work to expand upon these discussions. Lim’s paper analyzes the reasons the Ming dynasty adopted the kaihui, both

²⁷Lim, “From Haijin to Kaihai,” 2.

²⁸Christopher H. Sharman and Andrew S. Erickson, “China’s Future World-Class Navy: Ends, Ways, Means.” In *The PLA’s Long March towards a World-Class Military: Progress, Ambitions, and Obstacles* (Seattle, WA: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2025), 198-200.

examining what factors—wokou and economy—led to a more lenient stance on maritime trade, and attempting to argue against So’s conclusions about the kaihai’s adoption.²⁹ While her paper does not primarily discuss the wokou causes in depth, it highlights multiple aspects about the scholarly discussion: the East kept the discussion going, and made breakthroughs in the 1980s, and Western scholarship had proven insufficient, leaving more questions than answers, or writing off Chinese maritime history.³⁰

This renewed interest in the wokou also led scholars right back to So, as noted with James Kai-Sing Kung and Chicheng Ma, who both analyze the economic factors, particularly the haijin and how this resulted in the wokou surge. Within their paper, “Autarky and the Rise and Fall of Piracy in Ming China,” they rely on So's findings for the foundation and eventually expand upon what he found forty years prior. Kung and Ma expand the factor of the haijin beautifully, by taking what So and other scholars, primarily Wills Jr., stated years prior, accepting this as a foundation, and then launching their own expansion. In this study, these scholars analyze the actual Chinese products being made at ports subsequently being hit by raids and ask if the increase in piracy was also due to silk production, and the changing world around the Chinese, as local autarky was becoming less appealing, especially in the wake of the Europeans' trade endeavors into China.³¹

This chronological study demonstrates the evolution of the preceding scholar’s works, and the fraught but crucial connections between Western and Eastern scholarship. The heart of this paper will examine the historiography of selected and significant aspects of wokou studies, specifically identity, causation, and decline and gaps that remain.

²⁹Lim, “From Haijin to Kaihai,” 3.

³⁰Lim, “From Haijin to Kaihai,” 2-3.

³¹James Kai-sing Kung and Chicheng Ma, “Autarky and the Rise and Fall of Piracy in Ming China,” *The Journal of Economic History* 74, no. 2 (2014): 3-18.

The Identity of the Wokou

Understanding the origins and identity of the wokou was often not a primary concern of many early scholars, especially that of Western scholars. Instead, much of early scholarship adhered to Ming conclusions; the wokou were deemed “Japanese pirates”, and little was examined beyond this. Modern scholarship, thanks to the research and analysis done by So, had adopted a new wave of thinking about the identity of the wokou. In this regard, the West has long since been under the impression that the wokou were Chinese in nature, and very few were Japanese. The East, of course, was entertaining this idea at the time So wrote his paper (1975) and later expanded this in the following decades. The West largely credits So for his groundbreaking work in decoding the true nature of the wokou, and this has resulted in his findings becoming fact within Western discussion.

So examined this initial gap in research, stating that wokou as a topic had been "misunderstood or mistreated by most historians," both during his time and prior. He begs the question as to whether these pirates were Japanese entirely, or if these bandits were products of Ming policies and society during the sixteenth century, later concluding that one must focus on the Jiajing reign for the best understanding of the wokou's true nature.³² Their nature was also called into question by other Western scholars, as noted in Higgins' work, who observes that the pirates had become "predominately Chinese" during the reign of the Jiajing. Higgins examines the role Ming officials play in this terminology, and the lack of Zhu Wan's usage of the term wokou, to hypothesize a few ideas: the Ming purposefully obfuscated the issue, attempting to blame outside forces. It was an act of "cultural blindness," or it was simply a "force of habit" among Ming officials. While Higgins clearly states Zhu Wan was, potentially, purposeful in his

³²So, *Japanese Piracy in Ming China*, 1-2.

writings, actively avoiding usage of the term wokou, he does not investigate this closely, instead choosing to focus his writings on what Zhu Wan had found during his stay along the Ming coast.³³ The contrast between So and Higgins' approach to the identity of the wokou reveals how little development this had seen within the Western sphere, at least until Eastern scholarship had already made great strides. This suggests that many Western scholars, such as Higgins, chose to follow Eastern scholarship's advancements rather than making developments. This is further highlighted with So's engagement in the identity of the wokou, as he makes no claims of his own; instead, he chooses to build from Eastern scholars.

To circle back to So, we can note his methodology relies on accessible discourse around the topic, as he examines a great deal of contemporary and Ming, or Eastern, scholarship around the identity of the wokou. Ironically, he does reveal evidence of the controversy over national origin from Chinese—Ming—scholars Hu Tsung-hien and Cheng Shun-kung, writing *Ch'ou-hai t'u-pien* (An Illustrated Discourse on Maritime Defense) and *Jih-pen i-chen* (An Account of Japan) respectively.³⁴ As So summarizes, these scholars identified that the Japanese played a largely "secondary" role; this is largely highlighted with Hu naming the wokou ringleaders, and not a single Japanese name coming to light, and Cheng arguing powerful Chinese people were responsible for pushing the Japanese to active piracy along the coast of the Ming.³⁵ However, while So does highlight the discourse, he simply accepts Cheng's writings, and does not seem to argue for or against him, simply stating his writings are factual, and not the least bit under a critical eye. So, unfortunately, relies on assumptions a lot in this regard, quite literally stating

³³Higgins, "Gentry Law-Breaking," 31

³⁴Hu Tsung-Hien was a contemporary Chinese scholar, Cheng Shun-Kung was a Ming official sent to Japan, ordered to gain Japanese cooperation in suppression of the wokou, and understanding the causes of these pirate raids.

³⁵So, *Japanese Piracy in Ming China*, 19-22.

"assuming that this memorial was only fairly accurate...", showing us that, during So's era, the identity of the wokou, as scholarly discussion, was largely underdeveloped in the West, as he clearly seems bound to any source he can muster from Eastern scholarship.³⁶ However, what So does for Western scholarship at the time is something we cannot ignore. Before So, there were relatively no major Western advancements, or even acknowledgements, of the wokou. So was able to synthesize the existing—largely Asian—scholarship into an accessible book for Western scholars.

Ivy Maria Lim presents us with the identity of the wokou from the eyes of Eastern scholarship, as well; however, she makes special notes of how these interpretations have changed, or at least how said change was enabled by shifts in discourse. She examines both Chinese and Japanese scholarship of the wokou, leading her towards two conclusions: the Chinese were still held back by "nationalist patriotism of the Ming anti-wokou campaigns," and the Japanese focused on the Ming's "failed" tributary system.³⁷ She leaves the identity of the wokou to older scholarship, stating that "the true identity of the wokou was taken up by So," and instead focusing her effort on the shifts in discourse. She specifically dates the shift in Eastern—Chinese—scholarship in the 1980s, with scholars Dai Yixuan, Fan Shuzhi, Lin Renchuan, and Chen Kangsheng representing a "New wokou thesis," which, as Lim claims, follows Japanese discussion of the wokou, stating that the Jiajing wokou crisis was a Chinese response to the haijin policies enacted by the Ming.³⁸ This shift in Eastern scholarship is crucial, as we can note one major theme in Western scholarship of the wokou: it relies on Chinese and Japanese

³⁶So, *Japanese Piracy in Ming China*, 23.

³⁷Lim, "From Haijin to Kaihai," 2-3; The Chinese dynasties relied on tributary relations with their neighbors to harbor a "soft power." This is why nations like Korea were so reliant on China, as they were viewed as the "center of the universe," and many weaker nations felt they owed the "celestial throne" (Chinese emperor) tribute.

³⁸Lim, "From Haijin to Kaihai," 3.

discussion. Most Eastern scholarship is beyond the scope of this paper, and I am reliant on what scholars, such as Lim, report about said discussion. However, the choice to limit the scope of this paper to Western scholarship helps reveal greater patterns within said discourse, including that the early Western scholarship lagged behind and followed the East's discussion and advancements.

Michael Szonyi goes into a bit more detail about the circumstances surrounding the Chinese scholarship of the wokou, particularly why it took a turn away from being interpreted as Japanese aggression. He states that the People's Republic of China (PRC) wanted to turn the narrative of previous scholarship towards class warfare, reflecting their current struggles and period. This class warfare is the primary focus of what Szonyi latches onto for Chinese scholarship, as he claims the ethnicity of the wokou is of no major concern, and the larger issue lies in their behavioral patterns: smuggling, raiding, and killing. The identity of the wokou is spoken of briefly, but he does mention the idea of the Ming long knowing the wokou were not Japanese during the Jiajing. Estimates during the time led officials to record numbers between ten and twenty percent of the pirates hailing from Okinawa.³⁹ Overall, Szonyi spends almost no time on the identity of the wokou, only noting that older scholarship, and Ming documents, refer to them as "Japanese bandits," but this is far from the truth.

The identity of the wokou was, at one point, a pivotal point of discourse among scholars, both in the West and the East. There was a changing attitude towards these identities as time passed. Initially, So's paper spent a great deal on the identity of these bandits, as he highlighted contemporary Chinese scholars. However, we can also see scholarship treat this in passing, as noted with Higgins, who spends no more than a few sentences saying the

³⁹Szonyi, "An Officer in Cahoots with Pirates," 91-92.

identity of the wokou is contested.⁴⁰ Modern scholarship has taken a turn towards this discourse becoming fact; Lim and Szonyi, while acknowledging the identity of the wokou being contested in Ming documents and older scholarship, easily surmise that these pirates were Chinese in origin.

Causes of the Crisis

The causes of the Jiaping crisis are myriad; this much is known at a glance from initial scholarship in the West. However, there is little in regards to early scholarship beyond a series of hypotheses, by So, and the analysis of Zhu Wan's writings from Higgins. The evolution of Western historiography, when dealing with causation for the wokou, does little beyond this until the resurgence. Now, modern scholars are not only beginning to challenge and contest previously held notions of causation, but they are also seeking to expand our understanding of what caused such a crisis. By deepening their understanding of the causation, scholars are also showcasing an increasing desire to distance themselves from Eurocentrism, and vocabulary that undermines the unique and complex nature of the wokou.

When examining the various causes of the *Jiaping* wokou crisis, scholars have taken a variety of approaches. The initial Western scholarship of the causes comes again in the form of a series of hypotheses, synthesized by So. In his writing, he outlines a variety of reasons that may have caused what he calls the "flowering of the wokou."⁴¹ He spends a great deal of his writing on the haijin and what this meant for the Chinese, and local maritime trade. So's methodology comes in the form of analysis of trends in the region, both related to trade and emigration from China to Japan; this comes from a lack of source material, as So states there is simply no

⁴⁰Higgins, "Gentry Law-Breaking," 31.

⁴¹So, *Japanese Piracy in Ming China*, 122.

documentation of "illicit trade" prior to the sixteenth century.⁴² So combines these greater trends with immediate causes, such as the Japanese clans fighting in Ming territory, to conclude that the smuggling in the Chekiang and Fukien waters was rapidly increasing, in both scale and intensity.⁴³ He notes that these conditions were not the only factors in the "flowering," and this is where the series of hypotheses begin. So provides us with a great deal of evidence towards why the haijin was always going to cause the rise in smuggling, but there are a great deal of other factors that may have also contributed to such a crisis.

So immediately follows his analysis of illicit trade with contemplating whether environmental factors could have played a major part. He shows documents from Chu Che (1486–1552 CE), who not only discusses how "barbarians" are inflicting pain and suffering across the Fukien region, but also briefly mentions a famine.⁴⁴ So simply assumes that this would lead many, especially those affected by famine, to turn towards smuggling, and primarily piracy. He does not spend much time on the idea of environmental factors leading to the wokou's rising tempo; instead he begins to focus his efforts on the same topic as Higgins, that of Zhu Wan.⁴⁵ So's primary focus, however, is what Zhu's writings tell us of the wokou during his time as Grand Coordinator.⁴⁶ He contemplates the idea of the relaxed nature of Ming coastal defenses being a primary cause for not only smuggling, during the time of Zhu's inspections, but later for piracy in the region.⁴⁷ So also notes that Zhu reveals that Ming society was changing very rapidly during this time, and there were growing divides among not only the commoners and traders, but also the high-ranking government officials; he states that these documents show how

⁴²So, *Japanese Piracy in Ming China*, 42-43.

⁴³So, *Japanese Piracy in Ming China*, 44.

⁴⁴So, *Japanese Piracy in Ming China*, 49; Chu Che was native to P'u-tien, spending most of his life in the Fukien region.

⁴⁵Scholars use Chu Wan and Zhu Wan interchangeably.

⁴⁶High-ranking Ming official responsible for civil and military affairs in provinces.

⁴⁷So, *Japanese Piracy in Ming China*, 62.

much Zhu realized society was changing, and viewed it with great disdain, wanting to crack down on any illegal activities in the region, even against the will of the coastal peoples.⁴⁸

This development is noted by So, later in his writings, as perhaps a reflection of population growth and urbanization, followed by a lack of government support for any of these facilities during a time of rapid change. His methods for this analysis come from contemporary writings, but he still uses population records from the *Ming Shih* to highlight massive population spikes from 1491–1552 CE.⁴⁹ While this study of urbanization never comes up again in Western scholarship, So still very much stresses this as a hypothesized cause. He goes into detail about not only the official taxation records of the time, but also how a variety of contemporary scholars point towards a shift from rural to urban migrations along the Ming coast. These methods do not prove entirely fruitful, and, once more, serve to hypothesize a reason for many, especially youths, to turn to piracy and smuggling. So states, "one can arrive at a hasty conclusion," and "if his observation is reliable," which goes back to what he opened the study with: he is hoping it serves as a new direction for the understanding of Ming history.⁵⁰ So cannot conclude without a doubt that these causes are concrete, nor is he going to masquerade that idea. Instead, his study is a foundational synthesis of existing Eastern scholarship and a call for other scholars to continue this work.

Higgins' scholarship relies very deeply on that of Zhu Wan's writings, just as So observed; however, these two differ in their approach to his documents. While So used these writings to confirm the issues, and causes, of the wokou during Zhu's trip to the Ming coast, asserting smuggling had always been a problem, and it simply paved the way for piracy, Higgins

⁴⁸So, *Japanese Piracy in Ming China*, 63-64.

⁴⁹“Veritable Records of the Ming Dynasty,” a historical document depicting the aspects of the Ming Dynasty from 1368-1644 CE.

⁵⁰So, *Japanese Piracy in Ming China*, 122-124; So, *Japanese Piracy in Ming China*, Preface.

looks more towards how the Ming enabled the piracy problem.⁵¹ Namely, Higgins highlights the idea of court intrigue, officials lining their pockets, and corruption within the Ming. He goes as far as to state, "This political in-fighting and factionalism was one of the fundamental characteristics of the *Jiajing* reign period which ran all the way from court deep down to the lower reaches of society and formed an underlying current in all matters of decision-making."⁵² Higgins' methodology revolves around not only reading and analyzing Zhu Wan's documents but also comparing this to the general state of the Ming and how their historical policies inadvertently caused the flowering of the wokou. For example, he goes into detail about the Ming, and previous dynasties, focusing their defenses on their Northern provinces, as they came to fear the Mongol tribes. This was paired with lackluster coastal defenses, and the Ming forces simply not being trained in nautical warfare or movement.⁵³ This proves beneficial for Higgins' limited scope; he is not seeking to explain every cause of the wokou's rise, but to examine how Zhu's writings may reveal various aspects about the piracy problem.⁵⁴ This is the largest shift we will see come from Western scholarship towards the wokou crisis; no one will ever again take up So's approach of a series of hypotheses, and instead scholars tend to focus on one or two aspects of these issues.

This is especially notable with Lim, as she even calls this out, stating that So's conclusions, especially about the kaihai, were "less satisfactory," and his attempts to list many variables for the crisis needed review.⁵⁵ This serves as the backbone of modern Western scholarship towards the Jiajing wokou crisis; not only are older conclusions and evidence called

⁵¹So, *Japanese Piracy in Ming China*, 62.

⁵²Higgins, "Gentry Law-Breaking," 33; Scholarship uses *Jiajing* and *Ziajing* interchangeably.

⁵³Higgins, "Gentry Law-Breaking," 31.

⁵⁴Higgins, "Gentry Law-Breaking," 30.

⁵⁵Lim, "From Haijin to Kaihai," 3.

into question, but "gaps" in evidence are noted, with scholars mentioning new facets that may lead to new conclusions. Lim claims the crisis was viewed as a struggle between the "core and littoral" but thinks it might be more beneficial to examine this crisis as a dual issue of society and state.⁵⁶ Her methodology reflects previous scholarship, utilizing a variety of said discussions, from the East, to evaluate the causes of the crisis. One of the more interesting notes about her work is that there is less reliance on primary sources, instead leaning more towards how modern scholarship (1980s–present) depicts the crisis, and the analysis of these scholars. This proves very fruitful, as she is given a great deal of evidence to support her idea of the "dual issue." Scholarship was now beginning to examine the ideas of So in greater detail; Lim's sources show analysis of increasing commercial networks, and the idea of the merchants receiving terrible returns due to the haijin, while Ming officials sought to line their pockets.⁵⁷ She also primarily noted the "abuse" of the term wokou, and claims the Ming simply used this term to hide the true problem: a "brewing feudal-capitalist class struggle along the coast." This is especially notable, as she cites this interpretation as Dai Yixuan's who, as previously mentioned, was a foundational member of the "new wokou thesis."⁵⁸

The haijin being the primary cause of the wokou's rise during this period is not new to scholarship; So and even older Eastern scholarship maintain this idea. However, this does not mean the concept was free from review. Kung and Ma take a unique method to analyze a region's trade, and thus raid potential, by looking towards its silk production. These scholars look towards the strict nature of the haijin, opposed to just its adoption, as many merchants were executed, and their ships destroyed, compelling many would-be merchants to become full-on pirates.⁵⁹ Kung

⁵⁶Lim, "From Haijin to Kaihai," 4.

⁵⁷Lim, "From Haijin to Kaihai," 3-5.

⁵⁸Lim, "From Haijin to Kaihai," 3-9.

⁵⁹James Kai-sing Kung and Chicheng Ma, "Autarky and the Rise and Fall of Piracy in Ming

and Ma provide mathematical analysis and review of trends, along with historical context, to prove the hajjin was indeed a primary cause of the crisis. This shows that, even when ideas are not contested, scholarship has continued to review and expand ideas long accepted.

The idea of "class struggle" being the new narrative of the wokou scholarship is also noted by Szonyi. This was discussed in length previously, as the PRC saw a new desire to shift scholarship away from nationalistic, imperial ideals and instead focus more on the historic class struggles of the Chinese people. Szonyi argues that casting this entire crisis as simply "class warfare" is not very convincing; however, he also states that no major consensus has "replaced them." He does note the fact that there is a growing interest in global history, at the time of his writing (2018), and that these modern scholars argued that the presence of Europeans, with their "superior firearms," led to a destabilization of the local commercial ecosystem.⁶⁰ While entertained, he does not go into major detail about this idea, instead shifting his focus back towards the idea of the Ming societies and politics leading to the wokou's flowering. One thing to note is that Szonyi differentiates between smuggling and pirates, stating that, "The wokou are often called pirates, but their primary activity was never raids on legitimate shipping as the English word 'pirate' implies."⁶¹ This is interesting for two reasons: it challenges So's claim that smuggling led to piracy, and it calls into question what makes something "piracy." This is important for the causes, as if one defines smuggling as firmly "not piracy," then most of the wokou were not actually involved, and you would instead focus on the raids along the Yangtze delta. It is also, as Szonyi points out, a European-centered word, a product of these nations' experiences from the Mediterranean to Caribbean. He claims that scholarship attempted to

China." *The Journal of Economic History* 74, no. 2 (2014): 2.

⁶⁰Szonyi, "An Officer in Cahoots with Pirates," 91-92.

⁶¹Szonyi, "An Officer in Cahoots with Pirates," 92.

"subsume a broad continuum of terms in Chinese."⁶² Smuggling, as shown by Szonyi, was a core aspect of the crisis and wokou behavior; this is a belief held by previous scholarship as well. However, while previous scholarship may have argued smuggling enabled piracy, Szonyi questions the idea of that, arguing that instead of smuggling leading to piracy, the very term has no place in this discussion, and the wokou are too complex to label with Westernized terms.

Chen corroborates this idea of a complex wokou issue but brings forth a new challenge: the haijin was not the cause of the smuggling. He analyzes the writings of Spaniards to Ming officials, ranging from 1499–1581, and discovers one major feature of these writings: the Spanish write of armed illicit trading—what the Europeans would consider piracy—and actively seek Ming assistance in their removal.⁶³ This reveals that the kaihai did not stop the piracy issue along the Ming coast, and therefore Chen argues the haijin could not have caused the flowering, as its removal failed to stop it. Chen goes on to review Ming documents, from Tu Zhonglü and Zheng Xiao, revealing that these scholars viewed the crisis as being both Chinese in origin, and a product of high taxation in a region that was beyond Ming administrative control.⁶⁴ Chen builds upon the ideas Szonyi brings up in passing: the Europeans' arrival. He looks once more towards the Spanish, and claims they were also dealing with major immigration and even promoted the "smuggling" business, as it aided in their colony's—Manila's—growth.⁶⁵ While scholarship previously was aware of Europe's presence in the region, it relied on the Portuguese, as seen with So, and how their writings reveal they had almost nothing to do with the wokou. Chen reveals a

⁶²Szonyi, "An Officer in Cahoots with Pirates," 92.

⁶³Boyi Chen, "Borders and Beyond: Contested Power and Discourse around Southeast Coastal China in the Sixteenth Centuries", *International Journal of Asian Studies* 15, no. 1 (2018): 92.

⁶⁴Chen, "Borders and Beyond," 94.

⁶⁵Chen, "Borders and Beyond," 96-97.

deeper insight into this matter, and highlights new breakthroughs being made with the modern scholarship of the Jiajing crisis.

It is clear the Western discourse around the causes of the wokou crisis has evolved drastically over the course of nearly fifty years. What started as a “call-to-action” from So, with his hypotheses approach, has developed into not only an expansion of previously held notions, as seen with Lim, but also a contention of them, as noted with Chen. Beyond this, the very categorization of this crisis as “piracy” is called into question, as Szonyi discusses, showing an ever-fluid Western discussion. Not only this, but the notion Szonyi additionally brings up is, while closely related to the PRC’s de-imperialization, unique to that of the West.⁶⁶ Therefore, while Western scholarship follows an extremely close relationship to Eastern discourses, it is not bound to it completely.

Reasons for Decline

Scholarship for why the crisis ended remains a source of contention. Many scholars have listed the kaihai as the primary reason the wokou went into decline in 1567 CE. Szonyi claims that, in addition to maritime trade re-opening, the pirates were simply killed off by the main Ming military, as more competent generals and mercenaries began to see development.⁶⁷ He does not challenge previous notions for the decline of the wokou and instead accepts this as fact. However, scholars such as Lim and Chen seek to expand our understanding of the kaihai, or even challenge the notion of its importance, as seen with Chen. Lim challenges previous scholarship's interpretations of the kaihai, as she states older scholarship labeled it either an "inevitable outcome" or one of many "factors contributing to the subsidence of the wokou."⁶⁸ Among all

⁶⁶Szonyi, “An Officer in Cahoots with Pirates,” 92.

⁶⁷Szonyi, “An Officer in Cahoots with Pirates,” 91.

⁶⁸Lim, “From Haijin to Kaihai,” 2.

scholarship, however, Chen is the only one to entirely call the kaihai into question, stating that armed smuggling remained a constant threat towards both the Chinese and Spanish well after its adoption in 1567 CE.⁶⁹ This proves that scholarship has not only evolved regarding the causes of the crisis, but scholars are also beginning to call previous "foundational knowledge" into question.

While Western discussion has displayed an evolving narrative with the identity of the wokou, and causes of the crisis, this aspect is not shared with reasons for the decline of these bandits. So highlights claims from Eastern scholarship, arguing the kaihai and strengthening of military forces in the region led to the decline.⁷⁰ This has gone largely uncontested, until the analysis from Chen, where he finds that, while the kaihai was indeed a factor, it did not end armed smuggling in the region.⁷¹ However, beyond this analysis, most Western scholars agree that the kaihai and military crack-down served as the primary drivers for the decline of the wokou during the Jiajing period. This highlights a limitation of Western discussion, as this has been woefully underdeveloped, only seeing minor engagement within recent years.

Conclusion

What becomes apparent about Western discussion, is that many scholars were simply following the narrative changes of the People's Republic of China, and de-imperializing the Ming's conclusions about the wokou. Scholars are beginning to question what "piracy" even means, and whether it remains fair to categorize the wokou as pirates, just as scholarship initially questioned whether they were Japanese at all. Beyond this, an expansion and contention of previously held notions is noted, especially among recent scholarship. These two notions go

⁶⁹Chen, "Borders and Beyond": 92.

⁷⁰So, *Japanese Piracy in Ming China*, 145-146.

⁷¹Chen, "Borders and Beyond": 92.

together, as scholarship is being enabled to make greater strides, coming to more unique conclusions, due to scholars re-examining the crisis from a new lens, one that is not framed within Eurocentrism.

Imperialized narratives are common throughout history; it is the entire story we have been told repeatedly. Chen shows these narratives are utilized to control groups of people, especially those with no firm identity within the broader empire. However, with the rise of the PRC, a shift has occurred that the West is following closely. Szonyi pays special attention to this, noting that not only did the PRC re-examine much of this crisis, but that Western scholars are beginning to do the same, largely due to an increasing interest in global history.⁷² These developments and a greater interest in global history, due to China's growing importance as a global power, have enabled scholars to examine Ming records critically. This has also created interactions where scholars are actively contesting previous notions, and seeking to expand their knowledge of the topic, even if not entirely looking to contest ideas. Historians have begun to label the wokou as a complex issue and long abandon the notion of them being simply pirates. These shifts highlight the importance of de-imperializing and abandoning the notions of Westernized labels, as scholars oft adopt hasty conclusions when emboldened by them. This was examined and argued by Frank, who explains how deeply rooted Eurocentrism has become in Western scholarship, particularly when discussing the histories of Asia. More scholars have made note of this, and are beginning to re-examine Chinese maritime history, not as an aspect of Western history, but instead its own unique history.

⁷²Szonyi, "An Officer in Cahoots with Pirates," 92.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Chen, Boyi. "Borders and Beyond: Contested Power and Discourse around Southeast Coastal China in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries". *International Journal of Asian Studies* 15, no. 1 (2018): 85-116.

Higgins, Roland L. "Pirates in Gowns and Caps: Gentry Law-Breaking in the Mid-Ming." In *Ming Studies*, edited by Ihor Pidhainy, 30-37. Geneva, NY: Hobart and William Smith Colleges, 1975.

Kung, James Kai-sing, and Chicheng Ma. "Autarky and the Rise and Fall of Piracy in Ming China." *The Journal of Economic History* 74, no. 2 (2014): 509–34.

Lim, Ivy Maria. "From Haijin to Kaihai: The Jiajing Court's Search for a Modus Operandi along the South-eastern Coast (1522-1567)". *Journal of the British Association for Chinese Studies* vol.2. (July, 2013): 2-26.

So, Kwan-wai. *Japanese Piracy in Ming China During the 16th Century*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1975.

Szonyi, Michael. "An Officer in Cahoots with Pirates: Coastal Garrisons and Maritime Smuggling." In *The Art of Being Governed, Everyday Politics in Late Imperial China*, 83-108. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017.

Secondary Sources

Antony, Robert J. "Merchants, Smugglers, and Pirates: Multinational Clandestine Trade on the South China Coast, 1520-1550". In *Elusive Pirates, Persuasive Smugglers: Violence and Clandestine Trade in the Greater China Seas*, edited by Robert J. Antony, 43-58. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010.

Cole, Bernard D. "The Evolution of China's Naval Strategy." Interview by Nai-Yu Chen and Jeremy Rausch. *National Board of Review*, March 26, 2024.
<https://strategicspace.nbr.org/the-evolution-of-chinas-naval-strategy/>

Finlay, Robert. "The Voyages of Zheng He: Ideology, State Power, and Maritime Trade in Ming China." *Journal of the Historical Society* 8, no. 3 (2008): 327-347.

Frank, Andre Gunder. "Introduction to Real World History vs. Eurocentric Social Theory." In *ReORIENT: Global Economy in the Asian Age*, 1-51. Berkely, CA: University of California Press, 1998.

Guang, Ma. "Re-evaluating the Wokou Problem in East Asia During the 1220s and 1390s from the Perspective of Environmental History." *Journal of Asian History* 54, no. 2 (2020): 261.

Guang, Ma. *Rupture, Evolution, and Continuity, The Shandong Peninsula in East Asia Maritime History during the Yuan-Ming Transition*. N.p: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2021.

Sharman, Christopher H. and Andrew S. Erickson. “China’s Future World-Class Navy: Ends, Ways, Means.” In *The PLA’s Long March towards a World-Class Military: Progress, Ambitions, and Obstacles*, edited by Benjamin Frohman and Jeremy Rausch, 196-218. Seattle, WA: National Bureau of Asian Research. 2025.

Shi, Zhihong. “China’s Overseas Trade Policy and its Historical Results: 1522-1840.” In *Intra-Asian Trade and the World Market*, edited by A.J.H Latham and Heita Kawakatsu, 1-23. Oxford: Taylor and Francis, 2006.

Zurndorfer, Harriet. “Human Trafficking and Piracy in Early Modern East Asia: Maritime Challenges to the Ming Dynasty Economy, 1370–1565”. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 65, no. 4 (2023): 908–931.