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The “China Seas” in world history: A general outline of the role of Chinese and East Asian maritime space from its origins to c. 1800 [☆]

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Abstract Through the East Asian waters its neighbouring countries have since early times on maintained networks of trade and exchange relations. Historically, these waters constituted not only a kind of border or natural barrier but from very early times on also a medium facilitating all kinds of exchanges and human activities, a medium through which in particular private merchants but also governments and official institutions established contacts with the world beyond their borders. The seas were sometimes considered a barrier but above all a contact zone, a medium that despite its dangers and difficulties enabled people to establish and maintain manifold exchange relations.

This article intends to provide a general outline of the historical role and significance of East Asian maritime space from its origins to approximately 1800, including the East China Sea, the Bohai Sea, the Yellow Sea (Huanghai), the southern section of the Japanese Sea, and parts of the South China Sea (now usually called Nanhai). It focuses especially, although not exclusively, on China's traditional treatment of and reference to this maritime realm. Also in order to maintain the spatial concept operable, we have decided to call this maritime space the “China Seas”.

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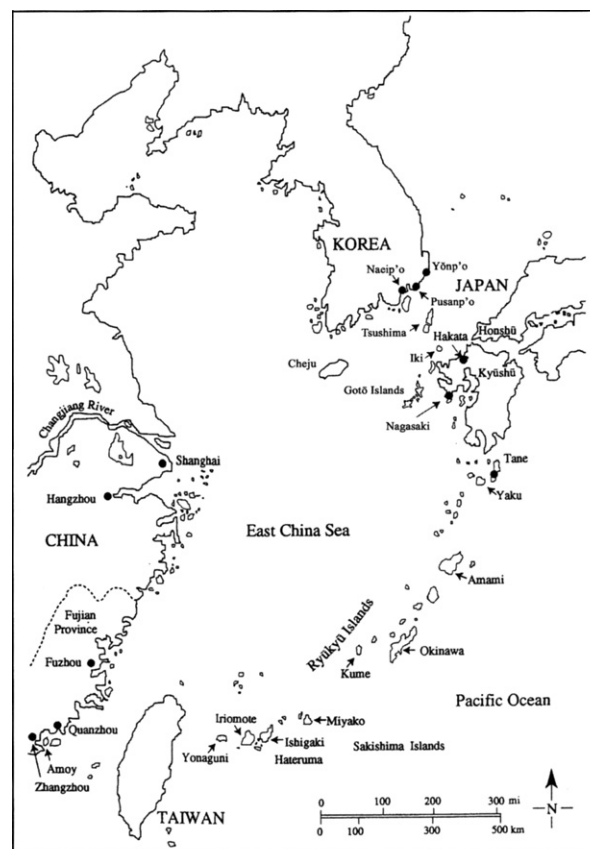


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Introduction

East Asia is a region that has recently gained increasing geopolitical importance and in the course of globalization may well become the new world-centre in the future.¹ Through the East Asian waters its neighbouring countries maintain today a global network of trade and exchange relations. But integration into local and supra-regional networks is not only a modern phenomenon. Historically, these waters constituted not only a kind of border or natural barrier but from very early times on also a medium facilitating all kinds of exchanges and human activities, a medium through which in particular private merchants but also governments and official institutions established contacts with the world beyond their borders. Generally speaking, East Asian maritime space was used by fishermen, private and official traders, governments (nations) and government institutions, pirates, and travellers for both commercial, military, diplomatic and private purposes, such as migration or voyages. The seas were sometimes considered a barrier but above all a contact zone, a medium that despite its dangers and difficulties enabled people to establish and maintain manifold exchange relations.² This article intends to provide a general outline of the historical role and significance of East Asian maritime space that includes the East China Sea, the Bohai 渤海 Sea, the Yellow Sea (Huanghai 黃海), the southern section of the Japanese Sea, and parts of the South China Sea (now usually called Nanhai 南海), focussing especially, although not exclusively, on China's traditional treatment of and reference to this maritime realm. Also in order to maintain the spatial concept operable, we have decided to call this maritime space the "China Seas", a term that may not be misunderstood in the sense that this East Asian body of water as a whole or all of the sections that we address in this paper at any time belonged to China or were part of Chinese sovereignty.³ Notwithstanding the fact that the focus of this article lies in the importance and role of maritime space for and in China's history, we will now and again also discuss developments that took place in Japanese or Korean coastal waters.

At the same time, it may at least not be neglected that during probably most of the time periods from antiquity through the middle to the early modern period it was in fact China that was the, if not always political, but at least economic and cultural centre of the macro-region, which – although it was undoubtedly primarily a continental power – was also quite active in maritime space.



East China Sea Region

First being a regional "Mediterranean",⁴ the China Seas soon developed as a spring-board and starting-point for long-distance trade, and by Song times at the latest were firmly integrated into the world-wide exchange system as it existed at that time, an "international" exchange system that admittedly was not yet a global one but that was "substantially more complex in organization, greater in volume, and more sophisticated in execution, than anything the world had previously known".⁵ Regional seas grew more and more together and were gradually integrated into global structures – with interruptions and setbacks of course.

This brings us to the question of sea routes, which can unfortunately not be discussed in more detail within the scope of this article. Basically we can discern northern, eastern, southern and western routes, which can generally be summarized as follows:

1 The "northern routes" (*beihang lu* 北航路)

- 1a From Fujian 福建, Zhejiang 浙江 and Jiangsu 江蘇, or from Shandong 山東, to the eastern and southern coasts of Korea and further to Japan (Hakata 博多, Nagasaki 長崎)

¹ This is also reflected by discussions about an East Asian integration, beginning with a uniform market and gradually developing into a closer political and military cooperation, similar to the European Union. Even ideas like an East Asian currency (similar to the Euro) have been raised.

² See Angela Schottenhammer, Roderich Ptak (Eds.), *Maritime Space in Traditional Chinese Sources*, in: *East Asian Maritime History*. (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 2006), vol. 2.

³ We are well aware of the fact that the spatial concept of East Asia itself is a highly complex and not unproblematic one.

⁴ When we speak of an East Asian "Mediterranean", a term borrowed from the French historian Fernand Braudel that connected the neighbouring countries in the macro-region, the term is used only as a methodological tool to emphasize the broad variety of multi-layered exchange relations. Fernand Braudel (1902–1985), *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*. (Paris: 1949; Paris, Armand Colin, Le Livre de poche, 1990, rééd.), vol. 3.

⁵ Abu-Lughod, Janet, *Before European Hegemony. The World System A.D. 1250–1350*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 353.

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