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## Rupture, Evolution, and Continuity: The Shandong Peninsula in East Asian Maritime History During the Yuan-Ming Transition

By Ma Guang. Harrassowitz, 2021. 230 pages. Hardback, €68.00 USD, ISBN: 978-3-447-11700-5. Ebook, €68.00, ISBN: 978-3-447-39202-0.

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In this new book Ma Guang wants to shed new light on the historical significance of the Shandong peninsula during the critical Yuan-Ming transition (ca. 1350–1450). The author attempts to situate the region within the broader geopolitical context, challenging dominant narratives of “terra-centrism” and “Southeast China centrism,” while also redirecting our focus upon the so-called *wokou* factor in East Asian international relations in the period under consideration. In the process the book also attempts to engage with broader issues, theories, and debates in the field, addressing the Sino-centric tributary framework of international relations, the impact of climate change, and discussions of continuity or discontinuity between the Yuan and Ming dynasties. This makes for a fairly ambitious project and the end result is not nearly as revolutionary as the author tries to suggest owing to the ignorance (or deliberate exclusion) of the most important recent secondary works on the subject, many of which could have reinforced the author’s conclusions and all of which predate them, some by decades.

The book starts off on a weak note with Ma claiming there are no works on the significance of Shandong and the northeast Asian maritime realm available in English. This is surprising given that his own graduate adviser edited one work featuring such scholarship.<sup>1</sup> It also ignores scholarship in the region on the late Ming period by the likes of Christopher Agnew and myself.<sup>2</sup> As might be expected, Ma invokes Braudel in a comparative sense and then tries to make the case that the early Ming *wokou* (Japanese pirate) troubles have generally been overshadowed in favor of focusing on the more spectacular pirate raids of the sixteenth century. This assertion is not entirely incorrect, but is problematic on several levels. For one, as is the case throughout this book, the relevant recent English language scholarship is almost entirely ignored. This includes the excellent work on Japanese piracy by Peter Shapinsky, which is essential to getting the full international picture as the author

<sup>1</sup>See Angela Schottenhammer and Roderich Ptak (eds), *The Perception of Maritime Space in Traditional Chinese Sources* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2006).

<sup>2</sup>See Christopher Agnew, “Dengzhou and the Bohai Gulf in Seventeenth-century Northeast Asia,” in Kenneth R. Hall, ed., *The Growth of Non-Western Cities: Primary and Secondary Urban Networking* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2011), 171–94; and Kenneth M. Swope, *The Military Collapse of China’s Ming Dynasty, 1618–44* (London: Routledge, 2014), in addition to other works by these authors.

purports to desire.<sup>3</sup> Instead Ma relies mostly on Chinese secondary sources or Ming accounts which skews the understanding and presentation of these sea raiders who were by no means solely Japanese, nor generally affiliated with any Japanese central government.

This leads us to the next interpretive issue, or rather, grandiose claim. Ma claims to be breaking new ground in suggesting that the so-called tributary system of foreign relations was in fact grounded in issues of national security, not only for the Chinese, but from the perspectives of the other states participating in it (p. 103). This interpretation is actually correct, but I came to this conclusion over twenty years ago and a lively debate over the strategic importance and implications of the tributary system has flourished in the ensuing years.<sup>4</sup> The only recent work of relevance he cites is an article by Zhang Feng. He then ironically calls for paying attention to how states other than China viewed the tributary system while ignoring all the salient recent literature, most notably works by Kenneth Robinson and David Kang.<sup>5</sup> So while the author boldly claims to have revised the “mono-chromatic and static” tributary system model, he in fact just reveals his ignorance of the latest interpretations and how they are impacting the fields of history, political science, and international relations.

Ma ends up waffling somewhat on the issue of whether continuity or change was more significant with respect to the Yuan-Ming transition. While he correctly identifies continuities in institutions, most notably the Ming adaptation of the Yuan *weisuo* military system, he also points to major discontinuities such as the radically different approaches to international trade, which he posits are tied to security concerns. In this analysis, he also tries to link an upswing in *wokou* activity to climate change, which is plausible but not convincingly argued. Much more problematic is the exclusion of any of the works of David Robinson on the Yuan-Ming transition and its implications for the region.<sup>6</sup> Such an omission is unacceptable in a work that aspires to provide an international perspective and claims to be breaking new ground in this respect.

On a more positive note, chapter five, on the coastal defense system in Shandong, is a fairly strong overview, solidly grounded in the primary sources. It provides good detail that is unavailable elsewhere in English to my knowledge. Nonetheless, despite the emphasis upon military matters throughout the book, the author largely ignores the impressive corpus of secondary literature on the Ming military in both Chinese and English, particularly as related to the use of firearms’ development and deployment which he discusses in several places. Most notable was the exclusion of references to any recent works on the Japanese invasion of Korea in the 1590s, known to Koreans as the Imjin War. Ma references this conflict with respect to the ongoing *wokou* issues but seems utterly unaware that this has been one of the most dynamic fields of study in East Asian history over the past two decades in the West and in East Asia.

In conclusion, while there is some good empirical information in this book and while it makes a case for the significance of the Shandong peninsula in the broader maritime realm of northeast Asia, its lofty claims of breaking new ground are hardly realized. In fact, at times when reading it I felt was thrust back into the early 1990s when many of the canards engaged here were still established interpretations.

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<sup>3</sup>See Peter Shapinsky, *Lords of the Sea: Pirates, Violence, and Commerce in Late Medieval Japan* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2014).

<sup>4</sup>Kenneth M. Swope, “Deceit, Disguise, and Dependence: China, Japan, and the Future of the Tributary System, 1592–1596.” *The International History Review* 24:4 (2002), pp. 757–82. For more recent scholarship from a political science perspective, see Ji-Young Lee, *China’s Hegemony: Four Hundred Years of East Asian Domination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

<sup>5</sup>See Kenneth R. Robinson, “Centering the King of Choson: Aspects of Korean Maritime Diplomacy, 1392–1592.” *Journal of Asian Studies* 59:1 (2000), pp. 109–25; and David Kang, *East Asia before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). These are just two examples; there are many more.

<sup>6</sup>The most recent such work is David M. Robinson, *Korea and the Fall of the Mongol Empire: Alliance, Upheaval and the Rise of a New East Asian Order*, new edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022). Also see David M. Robinson, *Empire’s Twilight: Northeast Asia Under the Mongols* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).