

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Cessation of Zheng He's Voyages and the Beginning of Private Sailings: Fiscal Competition between Emperors and Bureaucrats

Yiu Siu* 

University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

*Corresponding author. Email: Yiu.siu2014@gmail.com

(Received 5 May 2022; revised 2 October 2022; accepted 19 October 2022)

Abstract

The Ming court launched its famous expeditions overseas in the early fifteenth century and suddenly terminated these voyages after 1436. This article attempts to reassess the driving force of this event and its termination in the context of the Ming's domestic financial system, revealing that both the initiation and the cessation of Zheng He's voyages could be explained by the political and fiscal tension between emperors and bureaucrats. This article will also discuss how the cessation of Zheng He's voyages contributed to the onset of private sailings after the mid-fifteenth century.

Keywords: Zheng He's voyages; fiscal competition; Ming China; maritime exclusion; maritime trade

Zheng He's voyages between 1405 and 1433 have been intensively studied in academia. Historians have engaged in heated discussions on the details of the fleets and the crews, the reasons for these voyages, their geopolitical and diplomatic importance to Ming China's foreign relations, and their role in East Asian maritime history.¹ Scholars have also shared a great interest in the sudden termination of these expeditions in the 1430s, commonly attributing this termination to the enormous cost of the voyages.² Some historians have explained Ming China's retreat from the maritime world as a result of the court's "political and ideological considerations" and its "re-emphasis

¹For relevant discussion about Zheng He's voyages, see Zheng Hesheng 鄭鶴聲 and Zheng Yijun 鄭一鈞, *Zheng He xiaxyang ziliao huibian* 鄭和下西洋資料彙編 (Jinan: Qilu shushe, 1980); Louise Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne 1405–1433* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994); Wang Gungwu, "Ming Foreign Relations: Southeast Asia," in *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 8: The Ming Dynasty, 1368–1644, Part 2*, edited by Denis Twitchett and Frederick W. Mote (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 301–32; Zheng Yongchang 鄭永常, *Haijin de zhuanzhe: Ming chu yanhai guoji xingshi yu Zheng He xia xiyang* 海禁的轉折——明初沿海國際形勢與鄭和下西洋 (Taipei: Daoxiang chubanshe, 2011); and Chao Zhongchen 晁中辰, *Mingdai haiwai maoyi yanjiu* 明代海外貿易研究 (Beijing: Gugong chubanshe, 2012).

²Wang, "Ming Foreign Relations: Southeast Asia"; Chao Zhongchen, *Mingdai haiwai maoyi yanjiu*, 120–40.

© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

toward the continental border with the Mongols in North China.”³ In this paper I reassess the driving force of this event and its termination in the context of the Ming’s domestic financial system, revealing how the political and fiscal tensions between the emperors and the bureaucrats, the central and local governments, affected the development of Ming China’s maritime trade.

The Fiscal Practice Established by the First Ming Emperor

To understand the fiscal competition between emperors and bureaucrats in the early Ming, we need first to understand its fiscal practice. The Ming’s fiscal network was composed of hundreds of storehouses distributed around the empire and the transportation lines that connected these nodes. These storehouses could be classified into three types: the “inner-office treasuries” (*neifuku* 內府庫) in the two capital cities managed by the central government, the “various outer-office treasuries” (*zaiwai zhushi ku* 在外諸司庫) administered by the local governments, and the national storehouses (*cangyu* 倉庾) at traffic hubs and strategic positions, the reserve in which were stockpiled as military provisions, relief funds, and for emergency use.⁴ Additional to what was preserved in the local governments’ treasuries and the national storehouses, tax and materials collected from all over the empire were conveyed to and stored in the inner-office treasuries. Correspondingly, the central government department, known as “the outer-court” (*waiting* 外廷) agencies, covered public expenditures with the money and materials from the inner-office treasuries.

Another portion of these treasuries went to support the daily expenditure of the royal family in the palace. The eunuchs’ offices, which were known as “the inner-court” (*neiting* 內廷) agencies, were also entitled to take money and materials from the inner-office treasuries on behalf of the emperor. Such arrangement indicates that the emperor in the palace and the bureaucrats of the central government shared the wealth in the inner-office treasuries together.⁵ In other words, there were two fiscal authorities within the court, the palace and the government.

The division of fiscal power and responsibility between these two fiscal authorities was ambiguous. Institutionally speaking, the emperor had the final say on the budget process. As Ray Huang points out, the emperor was the sole legitimate decision-maker on fiscal matters. High-ranking officials could give emperors advice, but they had no legal power in the decision-making process. The duty of the Minister of Revenue was different from a present-day finance minister, because the Ministry of Revenue never became a decision-making department in the Ming period and the minister was no more than an administrator for routine work, such as allocating money and keeping accounts.⁶

³Angela Schottenhammer, “China’s Rise and Retreat as a Maritime Power,” in *Beyond the Silk Roads* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2019), 189–212, here 204; see also Li Kangying, *The Ming Maritime Trade Policy in Transition, 1368 to 1567* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010).

⁴On the introduction of the Ming’s official treasuries, see Li Dongyang 李東陽, *Da Ming huidian* 大明會典 30.540–551. On the introduction of the national storehouses, see Li, *Da Ming huidian* 21, 22, and 23.348–395.

⁵The number of the eunuchs’ offices was fixed at twenty-four in the early fifteenth century. Generally, they were known as the “twenty-four offices” (*ershisi yamen* 二十四衙門); see Liu Ruoyu 劉若愚, *Zhuozhong zhi* 酌中志, 16.501–531. For further discussion about the fiscal authority of the eunuchs, see Ray Huang, *Taxation and Governmental Finance in Sixteenth-Century Ming China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1974), 9–13.

⁶For a discussion about the division of labor in fiscal matters in the Ming period, see Huang, *Taxation and Governmental Finance in Sixteenth-Century Ming China*, 4–20.

However, in daily practice, the emperor would consult with the bureaucrats and they would generally make decisions together. Besides, the inner-office treasuries were under the dual supervision of both the bureaucrats and the eunuchs. Specifically, the eunuchs held the keys to the gates of these treasuries, while the bureaucrats were responsible for keeping accounts.⁷ This cooperation reflects the dual authority of palace and government in fiscal affairs.

Although there was no clear line of allocation between the palace and the government, this dual leadership model functioned well during the Hongwu reign (1368–1398). This was primarily because the first Ming emperor had the same financial goal and strategy as his bureaucrats: to improve the empire's financial situation by exercising strict economy. In order to improve the empire's finances, the emperor was willing to cooperate with the bureaucrats in the budget process, and he exercised strict economy both inside and outside the palace. For instance, the emperor made efforts to reduce his personal expenditure, keep the number of civil servants and their stipends at a low level, and avoid unnecessary warfare against foreign countries. Because of this spending restraint, the court achieved fiscal discipline, and the imperial granaries always had a surplus during this reign.⁸ Even though he sometimes treated his fiscal officials harshly,⁹ the relationship between the two fiscal authorities was mostly collaborative rather than competitive as they were using the same strategy to achieve a common objective. That was why the dual leadership model could run smoothly in this imperial reign. However, things changed in the reign of the third emperor.

Emperor Yongle's Fiscal Practice and Zheng He's Voyages

During Emperor Yongle's reign (1403–1424) tension started to build between the emperor and his bureaucrats, as this emperor became more aggressive and more arbitrary in the budget process than his predecessors. This was because of the new emperor's huge demand for revenue to fulfil his political and military ambitions.

Throughout his twenty-two-year reign, Emperor Yongle vigorously promoted several grand projects that led to enormous increases in public expenditures. Under his leadership, the Ming court constructed a new capital city near its northern borderline and dug the Grand Canal, the length of which was over two thousand miles, to connect the old and new capitals. The transfer of the imperial political center had both political and military implications. Politically, Emperor Yongle was able to reduce the political influence of the civil government in the old capital and build a new political center of his own in the north. This was significant for the new emperor because the legal basis of his reign was open to question, given that he ascended the throne by rising up in revolt and overturned the rule of his nephew, whose enthronement was recognized by the founding emperor of the dynasty. Unwilling to be restrained by the existing bureaucracy in the first capital city, Emperor Yongle insisted on constructing a new capital, Beijing (the northern capital city), the feudal estate that had been conferred upon him when he was still a prince. In this new capital city, the emperor could better exert

⁷On the details about the functions and the management of these treasuries, see Li, *Da Ming huidian* 30.540–551, and Liu, *Zhuozhong zhi* 16.501–531.

⁸On Emperor Hongwu's strict economy and relevant achievements, see Ray Huang, "The Ming Fiscal Administration," in *The Cambridge History of China*, Volume 8, 107–8.

⁹On the relationship between the Ming emperors and fiscal officials, see Huang, *Taxation and Governmental Finance in Sixteenth-Century Ming China*, 13–16.

his influence and implement his decrees with less restraint from the bureaucrats and residents in the old capital city and its environs, many of whom still felt loyal to the previous emperor.

The construction of the new capital city also had great strategic significance in safeguarding the empire. In the opinion of the Ming authorities, the Mongolians on the grassland were the most dangerous security threat for the Chinese empire. As the military commander stationed in the northern frontier area for more than two decades when he was a prince, Emperor Yongle was more sensitive to the threat posed by the Mongolians and had a greater concern for inland border security issues than his nephew, who had grown up in the coastal area. Such experiences inevitably convinced the emperor that moving the political center to the north was militarily necessary. By moving the imperial political center to the northern border line, Emperor Yongle shortened the response time to enemy actions and shifted his empire's strategic focus from the southern coastal region to the northern inland frontier. Since the empire's economic center was located along the southern coast and since the new capital relied on tax resources from the south, the Great Canal had to be rebuilt.

Apart from the construction projects of the new capital and the Great Canal, Emperor Yongle also kicked off huge military exercises. Specifically, the emperor conducted five military expeditions against the Mongolians, annexed the territory of Annam in the south, and dispatched huge armed fleets to wipe out pirates in East Asian waters. These military operations not only strengthened the Ming's hegemony in East Asia but also provided China with vast buffer zones on both its inland and coastal borders. Moreover, the emperor also strengthened his personal authority over the domestic population and suppressed the question of the legitimacy of his reign with a series of military successes.¹⁰ These construction projects and military operations required enormous expenditures, and the emperor took various measures to acquire more revenue. Expanding the maritime trade was one of his plans.

The emperor benefited from trade expansion in two ways. The first was revenue growth, as imports and exports both increased.¹¹ Second, Emperor Yongle enhanced his control of the imperial treasuries and gained more money from the taxation system on the pretext of financing overseas activities. Specifically, he designated high-ranking eunuchs as supervisors of the inner-court treasuries and, meanwhile, he appointed eunuchs like Zheng He as commanders of the fleets of "pursuing treasure ships"

¹⁰For further discussion about Emperor Yongle's splendid projects and his ambitions, see Hok-Lam Chan, "The Chien-wen, Yung-lo, Hung-hsi, and Hsüan-te Reign," in *The Cambridge History of China*, Volume 7: *The Ming Dynasty*, Part 1, edited by Frederick Mote and Denis Twitchett, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 182–304; Makoto Ueda 上田信, *Umi to teikoku: Min-Shin jidai 海と帝国-明清時代* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 2005); and Danjō Hiroshi 檀上寛, *Eiraku-tei: Ka-i chitsujo no kansai 永楽帝: 華夷秩序の完成* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 2012).

¹¹It is commonly assumed that the Ming court lost money in Zheng He's voyages. See Wang, "Ming Foreign Relations: Southeast Asia" and Chao, *Mingdai haiwai maoyi yanjiu*. But the re-examination of relevant records suggests that the court could gain positive cash flow from the voyages. According to my own research, the gross profit rate of the Ming court's resale of pepper in China was about 700–1900 percent or even higher in the period when Zheng He's fleets sailed between China and overseas countries. For an analysis of Ming traders' capability to generate profit, see Yiu Siu, "Ming China's Maritime Exclusion Policy and State-dominated Maritime Trade: A Comparison of Trading Policies in Song, Yuan, and Ming" (manuscript submitted for publication, 2022).

(*qubao chuan* 取寶船) in the Western Ocean.¹² In addition, he issued the eunuch-commanders with special edicts, which allowed them to withdraw money and goods directly from the inner-office treasuries.¹³ Since these allocations were “normal expenditure” and the treasuries were now under the charge of high-ranking eunuchs, the transfer of money to the fleets always went smoothly and the bureaucrats could do nothing to stop it.

Likewise, the products brought back by these fleets from overseas were directly brought to and stored in the treasuries under the supervision of the eunuchs; and the bureaucrats’ only access to these goods through permission from the emperor or an order in the name of the emperor. This was because, constitutionally, the emperor had absolute power in diplomatic affairs,¹⁴ which naturally entitled him to full control over the goods that were imported by the diplomatic missions.¹⁵ Making use of this convention, Emperor Yongle promoted the state-sponsored maritime trade while withdrawing money from the taxation system aggressively.

In essence, by promoting the eunuch-led voyages, Emperor Yongle established an external closed circulatory system of finance that was appended to the imperial taxation system. The emperor channeled money from the taxation system to sponsor the voyages, but he did not fill the government coffers with the income generated from maritime trade. Instead, he held back all trade revenue for his spending plan. This mechanism greatly enhanced the emperor’s authority in fiscal matters, giving him more freedom to realize his ambitious projects and ensuring that he was able to get money from the system without bothering the bureaucrats and thus avoiding opposition to his plans.

In this system, Emperor Yongle’s benefits were positively correlated to the size of the vessels and the frequency of the voyages. The positive connection explains not only the dramatic expansion of the fleet and the frequent sailings during this reign. It also partly accounted for the strict implementation of a maritime exclusion policy, which strengthened the court’s monopoly position in overseas trade.

In all, Emperor Yongle not only benefited from the increasing revenue generated from the booming maritime trade, he also extended his sway over the imperial treasuries and unceasingly extracted money from the taxation system for his own use, as his fleet continually travelled on East Asian waters. In doing so, Emperor Yongle created a precedent that reshaped the relationship between the emperor and the bureaucrats

¹²On the personnel structure of the fleets to the Western Ocean in the Yongle reign, see Zheng, *Zheng He xiaxiyang ziliao huibian*.

¹³The travelling account written by Zheng He’s secretary (*zongzhi zhi mu* 總制之幕) on the fleets incorporates three of these special edicts. See Gong Zhen 鞏珍, *Xiyang fanguo zhi* 西洋番國志 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1961), 15–16.

¹⁴This was the convention established by the first Ming emperor. By executing his two prime ministers and thousands of officials in the early 1380s, Emperor Hongwu made it a political taboo in the court for the bureaucrats to intervene in the foreign policy decision-making process.

¹⁵In 1436/03, the bureaucrats requested that Wang Jinghong 王景弘, the Eunuch Grand Commandant (*shoubei taijian* 守備太監) in Nanjing, convey three million catties of pepper and sapanwood to Beijing and hand over these goods to the government. Instead of giving a direct order to the eunuch, the bureaucrats drew up an instruction in the name of the new emperor, who was only a nine-year-old boy at the time. Only in this way could the bureaucrats legally get overseas products from the eunuchs. This case exemplifies the convention that the inventory of overseas products was under the strict control of the eunuchs and the bureaucrats could only get access to these goods with the emperor’s permission. *Ming Yingzong Rui Huangdi shilu* 明英宗睿皇帝實錄, 15.13a–13b.

in the budget-making process: the emperor became the one who made a budget spending plan, while the bureaucrats struggled to meet the budget. This would completely change the fiscal practice established during the Hongwu reign, when the emperor worked together with the bureaucrats in the budget process.

Fiscal Competition Between Emperors and Bureaucrats

Emperor Yongle's expanding voyages and fiscal practice ensured him generous funds to proceed with his ambitious yet costly projects. However, from the perspective of the imperial bureaucracy, their fiscal power and financial interests were greatly hampered as the emperor aggressively strengthened his own.

Although the court, or the empire as a whole, might benefit from maritime trade, the bureaucratic government was actually buried by an enormous financial burden from this trade. The bureaucrats had to allocate public funds to finance the voyages, substantially those grand projects of the emperor, but they could hardly take receipt of the trading income to balance the government's accounts since the eunuchs had tight control of the inventory and the distribution of the gains from trade. In short, maritime trade became a money-losing business for the bureaucrats, and although they had to keep investing in it, they would never generate substantial income.

Such one-way investment imposed additional fiscal pressure on the bureaucratic government. Without new sources of revenue to cover the expenditure on the voyages, the bureaucrats had no other choice but to divert other public funds. As a result, the voyages became a project that steadily encroached on the budget of daily administrative activities and necessary public facilities, such as transporting tax grain, providing disaster relief, and building and maintaining roads and irrigation works, on which the empire and the economy were relying.

To finance these voyages and other costly projects, the bureaucrats had to mortgage the economy in ways that could be very destructive. For example, the government sped up the money-printing process to make purchases and pay off its debt, resulting in hyperinflation. Meanwhile, the court imposed heavier levies on its people by collecting additional fees or extending the length of the national service period.¹⁶ Also, the administration started buying both materials and labor from the market on credit or at a very low price or conversion rate. Moreover, the individual bureaucrats were suffering as well, given that their salaries were paid in kind at an unfavorable rate of conversion. As many scholars have pointed out, the economic burden on the society was so heavy that the economy almost collapsed by the end of the Yongle reign.¹⁷

However, what really frustrated the bureaucrats was the fact that the emperor found a loophole in the institutional structure of the fiscal mechanism to exclude the bureaucrats from the empire's budget process. As discussed above, by requesting the bureaucrats to fund the voyages and designating eunuchs to manage the trade and revenue, Emperor Yongle was able to transfer money from the taxation system to his personal

¹⁶In the Yongle reign (1402–1424), the value of paper money dropped. But, in the Xuande reign (1424–1434), the Ming court took some efforts to reverse this trend. Their plan worked, in a sense. The paper money stopped being devalued and even appreciated a bit. There was “fluctuation” in the value of paper money and not just a one-way slide. For further discussion about Ming's currency, refer to Peng Xinwei 彭信威, *Zhongguo huobi shi* 中國貨幣史 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2007).

¹⁷See Chan, “The Chien-wen, Yung-lo, Hung-hsi, and Hsüan-te Reign”; Wang, “Ming Foreign Relations: Southeast Asia,” 301–32.

account. Since the money in this account was now under the tight supervision of the eunuchs, the bureaucrats actually had no say in the spending plans of this money, even though they were obligated to raise funds for this account.

From the perspective of the bureaucrats, the emperor created a very dangerous precedent separating expenses from income and making himself the spender and the government the fundraiser. By doing so, the emperor enhanced his authority in fiscal matters at the cost of the bureaucrats' fiscal power, breaking the well-established balance between the two fiscal authorities. Although the financial allocation for the voyages was just a relatively small portion of the government's overall budget, this could be the first step toward the overall separation of expenses and income. It was highly likely that the emperor and his successors would continue to strengthen their fiscal power in the future by expanding the size of voyages or by referring to this precedent and proposing new spending projects. Ultimately, a new division of fiscal authority between the emperor and the bureaucrats could be established, according to which the bureaucrats would be completely excluded from the budget process and confined to the task of collecting taxes to meet the emperor's spending plans.

Therefore, once this precedent was created, the relationship between the two fiscal authorities was no longer collaborative, but competitive. The bureaucrats had to compete against the emperor for financial resources to run the empire, maintaining daily administrative activities and necessary public facilities. This new fiscal practice greatly weakened the fiscal power of the bureaucrats and damaged the government's fiscal capacity. But the bureaucrats were at a distinct disadvantage, as the emperor was the sole legitimate decision-maker on fiscal matters.

Moreover, this practice made it difficult for the government to restrict spending from a long-term perspective. Since the emperors were not under the direct pressure of keeping a balanced budget, they were naturally inclined to increase expenditures on their favored projects and items. This was unsustainable as the increasing expenditure exerted more and more pressure on the bureaucrats and the economy, which might finally lead to a collapse of the entire fiscal system. But it must be pointed out that we should not attribute this circumstance to the state-sponsored voyages, since they actually created positive revenue. The root of the problem was the gap between the emperors' splendid but costly ambitions and the empire's limited fiscal capacity.

As the new fiscal practice was established, the emperor and the bureaucrats became competitors for fiscal resources. Fiscal management became a zero-sum game between the two parties, and their relationship shifted from collaborative to competitive, with the bureaucrats at a disadvantage. Although they were full of good intentions to build a better empire, the empire's fiscal capability failed to satisfy the demands from both sides at the same time.

By dispatching fleets to the overseas world regularly, Emperor Yongle seemingly established a practice that would permanently weaken the fiscal power of the government. However, the bureaucrats did not resign themselves to defeat in this zero-sum game.

The Bureaucrats' Opposition and the Cessation of Zheng He's Voyages

An unexpected incident gave the bureaucrats a chance to express their resentment of Emperor Yongle's practices. In 1421/04, the Hall of Tribute to Heaven (*Fengtian dian* 奉天殿), the largest hall within the Forbidden City, which had been completed four months earlier, was destroyed together with two other new halls by fire caused

by lighting.¹⁸ Supposing that this was a warning given by Heaven, Emperor Yongle issued a decree asking for criticisms and suggestions from his officials.¹⁹ Many bureaucrats took this opportunity to remonstrate with the emperor about his policies, particularly the military expansion and the fiscal practice that drained the national treasury. However, the bureaucrats did not condemn the emperor's overall scheme of governance, at least not publicly, probably because they did not want to provoke him to anger. Instead, the state-sponsored voyages became the focal point of their criticism. The bureaucrats argued that the "tributary activities ... actually drained the Middle Kingdom,"²⁰ and they expected that the emperor would revise, if not give up, his costly plans, starting with terminating the voyages.

Under pressure from the bureaucrats, the emperor swallowed his anger and ordered a cessation of the voyages and of building new sea-going vessels.²¹ Four days after the issuance of this edict, the fire in the three palace halls went out.²² The coincidence confirmed the bureaucrats' belief that they were right. From then on, complaints and criticisms in regards to the voyages to the Western Ocean became frequent among the bureaucrats. Therefore, every time when an emperor resumed or attempted to resume launching a voyage in order to generate revenue for the "inner-court," a host of bureaucrats in the government admonished against the project or the idea.

Such disputes between the emperors and the bureaucrats erupted from time to time in the following decades. Noticeably, the balance of power between the two parties had a direct impact on the outcome of the dispute. When an emperor had strong control of the court, he and the eunuchs would try to initiate a new project. When an emperor was reliant on the bureaucrats for his rule, the project would be cancelled.

After he put those who opposed his projects in prison in 1421,²³ Emperor Yongle reinitiated Zheng He's voyage in 1424/01.²⁴ However, the voyage was terminated six months later upon the death of the emperor, in 1424/07. On Emperor Yongle's death his son ascended the throne as Emperor Hongxi, and he was heavily reliant on the bureaucrats for his enthronement.²⁵ Immediately after he ascended the throne, the new emperor made a promise to terminate the voyages in his inaugural decree.²⁶

But the reign of Emperor Hongxi did not last long. The emperor died suddenly in 1425/06, and his son ascended the throne as Emperor Xuande. In both character and leadership style this new emperor was notably like his grandfather, Emperor Yongle.

¹⁸*Ming Taizong Wen Huangdi shilu* 明太宗文皇帝實錄, 236.1a.

¹⁹*Ming Taizong Wen Huangdi shilu*, 236.1a–1b, 236.4a. See also *Ming shi*, 7.100.

²⁰*Ming Taizong Wen Huangdi shilu*, 236.1b–2b. See also *Ming shi*, 163.4421–4424.

²¹The emperor was furious at the criticisms and he sent Li Shimian 李時勉, who took the lead to criticize the emperor, to prison. See *Ming shi*, 163.4421–4424. On the decree about the termination of voyages, see *Ming Taizong Wen Huangdi shilu*, 236.2b–3b.

²²*Ming shi*, 7.100

²³Xia Yuanji and Li Shimian were the two high-ranking officials among those who were put in prison after 1421, because of their criticisms of the emperor's projects and their uncooperative attitude. See *Ming shi*, 149.4150–4155, 163.4421–4424.

²⁴*Ming Taizong Wen Huangdi shilu*, 267.3a.

²⁵The competition for the throne between Emperor Hongxi and his brother was very intense during the Yongle reign. Emperor Hongxi finally defeated his brother, who was supported by the military, and ascended the throne, because he had full support from the bureaucrats. See Chan, "The Chien-wen, Yung-lo, Hung-hsi, and Hsüan-te Reign."

²⁶*Ming Renzong Zhao Huangdi shilu*, 1.4b–11a; Chan, "The Chien-wen, Yung-lo, Hung-hsi, and Hsüan-te Reign," 278–9.

Under his leadership, the Ming court reinitiated the voyages in 1430,²⁷ immediately after the death of Xia Yuanji 夏元吉, the court minister who had managed the empire's finances for three decades and strongly opposed the voyages.²⁸ The seventh voyage led by Zheng He set sail in 1431/01.

The bureaucrats did not give up and they achieved final success after 1435 when Emperor Xuande died and his son succeeded to the throne as Emperor Zhengtong. The new emperor was only an eight-year-old boy when he ascended the throne, and the bureaucrats managed to manipulate him and hold complete power over the following decade. Seizing this opportunity, they made a massive and rapid effort to put a permanent stop to the voyages. First of all, they cancelled all further voyage plans and dismissed the imperial navy by dissolving relevant offices and demolishing the sea-going vessels. Specifically, the post of Commandant of Sea-going Vessels (*haichuan shoubei* 海船守備) was abolished as early as 1435/03 and the attached troops were dismissed in 1435/10. Under the pretext of better defense against piracy, the bureaucrats ordered the sea-going vessels to be demolished or modified to "fast boats" (*kuaichuan* 快船) that could not sail on the deep sea.²⁹ In addition, the court stopped transporting tax grain to Beijing by the sea route. Instead, it turned to and relied more and more on the Canal for tax delivery. Correspondingly, the marines were transferred to river transport work.³⁰ Meanwhile, half of the transport ships were held in Beijing.³¹ By all these means, the bureaucrats successfully weakened the power of the navy.³²

Second, the bureaucrats terminated the mass production of export products and the purchase of necessary materials. When drafting the inaugural decree for the child emperor, the bureaucrats cancelled most manufacture and official purchases of products, including silk cloth, porcelain, and iron wares. At the same time, they recalled all the eunuchs and officials who had been sent to supervise the manufactures or to make purchases.³³ The goal was to ensure that the court stop producing goods for export.

Third, the bureaucrats attempted to discourage overseas visits to Ming China by implementing complex and stringent regulations on foreign visits. Their first move was to urge foreign delegations to leave China from 1435/04.³⁴ Instead of arranging another voyage to send all those visitors back to their home countries as usual, the court sent the foreign delegations to Malacca and asked them to change ships there.³⁵ From then on, the Ming court stopped offering transport service to overseas visiting missions. In addition, the court also managed to cut down the expenditure

²⁷ *Ming Xuanzong Zhang Huangdi shilu*, 67.3b–4a. See also Louise Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas*, 167–81.

²⁸ On the biography of Xia Yuanji, see *Ming shi*, 149.4150–4155.

²⁹ Even though *shilu* only records the case in Zhejiang, this indicates the bureaucrats' efforts to dismember the imperial navy. See *Ming Yingzong Rui Huangdi shilu*, 3.2b–3a, 10.8a.

³⁰ *Ming Yingzong Rui Huangdi shilu*, 9.3b–4a, 31.5a–6b.

³¹ *Ming Yingzong Rui Huangdi shilu*, 15.8a–9a, 18.4a.

³² It is worth noting that the Ming court did not abolish all kinds of sea transport activities. For example, coastal guards were mostly reserved for sea patrol missions. For further discussion about Ming's coastal defense policy, see Ma Guang, "The Shandong Peninsula in Northeast Asian Maritime History during the Yuan-Ming Transition," in *Crossroads—Studies on the History of Exchange Relations in the East Asian World* 11 (2015), 63–83; Ma Guang, "Wokou Raiding Activities and the Coastal Defence System of Shandong in the early Ming Dynasty," in *National Maritime Research* 11 (2015), 73–108.

³³ *Ming Yingzong Rui Huangdi shilu*, 1.5a–9b.

³⁴ *Ming Yingzong Rui Huangdi shilu*, 1.9b–10a, 4.1a–3a, 7.2b–3a, 11.3b–4a.

³⁵ *Ming Yingzong Rui Huangdi shilu*, 4.1a–3a.

on overseas visitors by restricting the size of the delegation that was to visit the capital city from more than hundreds of people to less than a dozen, including only the envoy and several representatives,³⁶ and also by reducing the frequency of tributary visits from the same delegation.³⁷ Correspondingly, the court reduced the group size of the Maritime Trade Supervisorate, the office responsible for receiving overseas visitors.³⁸ Meanwhile, the bureaucrats even attempted to limit the volume of the trade by confining the tributary exchange to high-quality goods only.³⁹ By these means, the court clarified its new stand on maritime trade.

Apart from terminating the voyages, the bureaucrats also revised the fiscal practices established and passed down from Emperor Yongle's reign. They were impatient to impose restraint on the emperor's fiscal power. In the same month when they took control of the court in 1435/01, the bureaucrats carried out a comprehensive audit of the palace, the finances of which were conventionally conducted by the eunuchs. The bureaucrats requested every eunuch's office to enumerate the revenues and expenditures of the past years and their current inventory.⁴⁰ Shortly after, they took over the imperial treasuries from the eunuchs, made a comprehensive inventory of all storehouses in the two capital cities,⁴¹ and deprived the eunuchs of direct access to governmental revenue.⁴² Moreover, the bureaucrats requested the eunuchs to hand over the inventories of overseas products to the government in the name of the child emperor.⁴³ With these measures, the bureaucrats largely confined the fiscal power of the eunuchs. In essence, they confined the fiscal power of the emperor.

After discovering the palace's real financial situation, the bureaucrats decided to impose clear limitations on the emperor's fiscal power. In short, they separated the emperor's accounts from the government's treasury. In 1436/08, the court approved a proposal forwarded by Zhou Quan 周銓, Zhao Xin 趙新, and other officials, according to which 15 percent of the empire's tax grain would be converted to silver and allocated as an exclusive fund to the emperor.⁴⁴ This special fund, which later became known as "gold floral silver" (*jinhua yin* 金花銀), was transferred to and stored in one of the inner-office treasuries, *nei chengyun ku* 內承運庫. From then on, this inner-office treasury became the 'Palace Treasury' exclusively belonging to the emperor.⁴⁵ In this way, the bureaucrats confined the emperor's expenditure to a fixed amount of money and separated it from the public funds. In 1442, the court founded a principal treasury, the National Silver Vault (*taicang ku* 太倉庫), to handle most kinds of revenue collected from all over the empire. This treasury was under the direct charge of a

³⁶Ming Yingzong Rui Huangdi shilu, 3.1b.

³⁷In 1437/06, the court imposed constraints on Champa missions, requesting them to visit China every three years rather than annually. Ming Yingzong Rui Huangdi shilu, 31:7b–8b. The court imposed similar constraints on Java in 1443/07. Ming Yingzong Rui Huangdi shilu, 106.8a–8b.

³⁸Ming Yingzong Rui Huangdi shilu, 21.7b, 27.5a.

³⁹Ming Yingzong Rui Huangdi shilu, 31.1b–2b.

⁴⁰Ming Yingzong Rui Huangdi shilu, 1.16a.

⁴¹Ming Yingzong Rui Huangdi shilu, 15.1a–2a.

⁴²Ming Yingzong Rui Huangdi shilu, 3.6a–6b.

⁴³Ming Yingzong Rui Huangdi shilu, 15.13a–13b.

⁴⁴Ming Yingzong Rui Huangdi shilu, 21.6b–7b.

⁴⁵This was also a measure to reduce tax on the people. For further discussion of this fund, see Huang, *Taxation and Governmental Finance in Sixteenth-Century Ming China*, 10, 52–53. On the function of the *nei chengyun ku* and the National Silver Vault, see *Da Ming huidian*, 30.540–551; Liu, *Zhuozhong zhi*, 16.501–531; and *Ming shi*, 78.1901–1902.

bureaucratic department, the Ministry of Revenue. From that point, a tacit but clear line between the imperial treasury and the emperor's storehouse was drawn. In a sense, by separating the emperor's treasury from the nation's coffers, the bureaucrats built a fire-wall to protect their financial authority against intervention from the emperor.

In this way, the bureaucrats dissolved Emperor Yongle's fiscal practices and established a new financial relationship with the emperor. By designating a treasury as a personal coffer of the emperor and allocating a certain sum of money to this coffer, the bureaucrats prevented the emperor from encroaching on government revenue without constitutional restraints. By defining the voyages as a waste of both labor and money, they stopped later emperors from arbitrarily extending their financial authority again through state-sponsored voyages. In short, at the time when the emperor was too young to fight for his interests, the bureaucrats seized fiscal power by abolishing many old practices and policies that favored the emperor.

The written records imply that Emperor Zhengtong intended to initiate the voyages again when he grew up and started exerting influence on court affairs. In 1439/04, three years before he officially assumed power, the emperor specially ordered a new sea-going vessel for the Bangladesh mission upon the request of one of the Bengal envoys, who was Chinese, because "the emperor thought that the [overseas] Chinese could solicit [visits from] foreign states."⁴⁶ Three months later, in 1439/07, the emperor gave the Ryūkyū envoys a new vessel as well, disregarding the opposition from the bureaucrats.⁴⁷ In 1442, Emperor Zhengtong assumed the reins of government upon coming of age. The frequency of visits from other overseas states, such as Siam and Java, increased as well (Table 2). Even the envoys of an Indian Ocean state, Sri Lanka, visited Ming China again ten years after their last visit in 1436.⁴⁸ Meanwhile, the Ming court again dispatched missions to overseas states including Champa⁴⁹ and Sumatra.⁵⁰ These events suggest a reversal of maritime trade policy in this period. They also indicate Emperor Zhengtong's increasing influence in the court and his positive and encouraging attitude towards maritime trade. In 1446/04, the emperor even planned to punish a high-ranking official for delaying the delivery of a sea-going vessel for the Ryūkyū envoys.⁵¹ Such a punishment had been an impossible move just a few years earlier, when the bureaucrats dominated the court.⁵²

However, the emperor's efforts in promoting a pro-trade policy came to an abrupt end when he was captured by the Mongolians in a military and political disaster in

⁴⁶*Ming Yingzong Rui Huangdi shilu*, 54.7a–7b.

⁴⁷But, in this case, the emperor made a compromise. Instead of building a new vessel for the Ryūkyūese, the court gave the Ryūkyū mission one of the three existing vessels belonging to the Fujian government. *Ming Yingzong Rui Huangdi shilu*, 57.10b–11a. Probably as a countermeasure against the emperor's pro-trade tendency, in the next month, the Fujian government complained about the overspending on receiving the Ryūkyū missions and requested to reduce the reception fee for foreign envoys. *Ming Yingzong Rui Huangdi shilu*, 58.5a–6b.

⁴⁸*Ming Yingzong Rui Huangdi shilu*, 141.5a–6a.

⁴⁹The Ming court sent missions to Champa in 1443/05. *Ming Yingzong Rui Huangdi shilu*, 104.3b–4a.

⁵⁰In 1446/05, the court dispatched a mission to Sumatra on the pretext of sending back the refugees who arrived in China in 1436. *Ming Yingzong Rui Huangdi shilu*, 141.1a–1b.

⁵¹*Ming Yingzong Rui Huangdi shilu*, 140.4b–5b.

⁵²Refer to the above footnote about the case in 1439/07, when the emperor intended to build a vessel for the Ryūkyūese. Again in 1447/08, another vessel was built for the Javanese envoys. *Ming Yingzong Rui Huangdi shilu*, 157.2a–2b.

Table 1. The Dates, Vessels, and Crew of Zheng He's Voyages

Sequence of voyages	Time (Year: month)		Number of vessels	Number of crew
	Departure	Return		
1	1405:7	1407:10		27,800
2	1407	1409		27,000
3	1409:10	1411:7	48	27,000+
4	1413:11	1415:8	40	27,670
5	1417:6	1419:8		
6	1421:3	1422:9		
7	1431:1	1433:7		27,550

Source: Zheng, Hesheng 鄭鶴聲, and Zheng Yijun 鄭一鈞. *Zheng He xiaxiyang ziliao huibian* 鄭和下西洋資料彙編. Jinan: Qilu shushe 齊魯書社, 1980.

1449.⁵³ Immediately after the enthronement of the new emperor, the bureaucrats imposed constraints on maritime trade again.⁵⁴ From then on, the empire had to shift its major concern to inland border security issues, which gave the bureaucrats a better pretext not to invest money in foreign voyages. Although some later emperors and eunuchs attempted to initiate voyages again, none of them succeeded, since the bureaucrats took strict precautions against the resurgence of such projects.⁵⁵

From then, the Ming court never again arranged any large-scale voyages to the overseas world. Trade between the court and overseas states was conducted only when a foreign mission visited China, known as “tributary trade.” As the court no longer implemented any preferential policies to encourage foreign visits, the trading volume was not comparable with what it had been before 1435.

The Beginning of Private Sailings: Disputes between the Court and Coastal Administrations

The written records suggest that some bureaucrats, particularly those serving in the coastal administrations, had attempted to lift the maritime exclusion policy by weakening the enforcement of the ban. As early as 1431/09, the administration of Zhejiang Province proposed to loosen the sailing ban and allow coastal residents to catch fish in coastal waters, however, Emperor Xuande, who was planning a new expedition to the Western Ocean, rejected this proposal.⁵⁶ In 1437/07, two years after the enthronement of the child-emperor, the same proposal submitted from South Zhili was approved by the court.⁵⁷

⁵³This crisis was known as the Tumubao Crisis (Tumubao zhibian 土木堡之變). On this event, see Denis Twitchett and Tilmann Grimm, “The Cheng-t’ung, Ching-t’ai, and T’ien-shun reigns,” in *The Cambridge History of China*, Volume 7, 305–38.

⁵⁴*Ming Yingzong Rui Huangdi shilu*, 185.7b–8a [Zhengtong.14:11:yiyou].

⁵⁵For example, to dissuade the emperor from dispatching new fleets, some high-ranking bureaucrats ordered the destruction of the government archives of Zheng He’s voyages, when Emperor Chenghua (r. 1465–1487) called for consultation. See Yan Congjian 嚴從簡, *Shuyu Zhouzi lu* 殊域周咨錄 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1993), 307–8.

⁵⁶*Ming Xuanzong Zhang Huangdi shilu*, 83.3b–4a.

⁵⁷In fact, as early as 1431, officials from Zhejiang Province had proposed to lift the ban on catching fish, but Emperor Xuande rejected this proposal. See *Ming Xuanzong Zhang Huangdi shilu*, 83.3b–4a. Not until

Table 2. Contacts between Ming China and the Overseas World in the Zhengtong Reign (1435–1449)

	Japan	Ryūkyū	Champa	Siam	Chenla	Java	Malacca	Sumatra	Mengel	Sri Lanka	Cochin	Kuli	Tianfang (Saudi Arabia)
1435	1	2	1		1		1,*	1				1	
1436	1	5		1	1	3		1		1	1		1
1437		1	1	1		2							
1438		2	1	3		1			1				
1439		3	1				1		1				
1440		1	1			1							
1441		1	1										
1442		1	2			1							
1443			1										
1444		3	1	1			1						
1445		2	1	1			1			1			
1446		1	2	2		3		1		1			
1447		1,*	1,*	1		1							
1448		1	1										
1449		2	1										

Source: Fu Sinian 傅斯年, Wang Chongwu 王崇武, and Huang Zhangjian 黃彰健 (eds), *Ming shilu* 明實錄. Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo 中央研究院歷史語言研究所, 1930–1961.

Note: * represents a delegation that was dispatched by the Ming court to an overseas state.

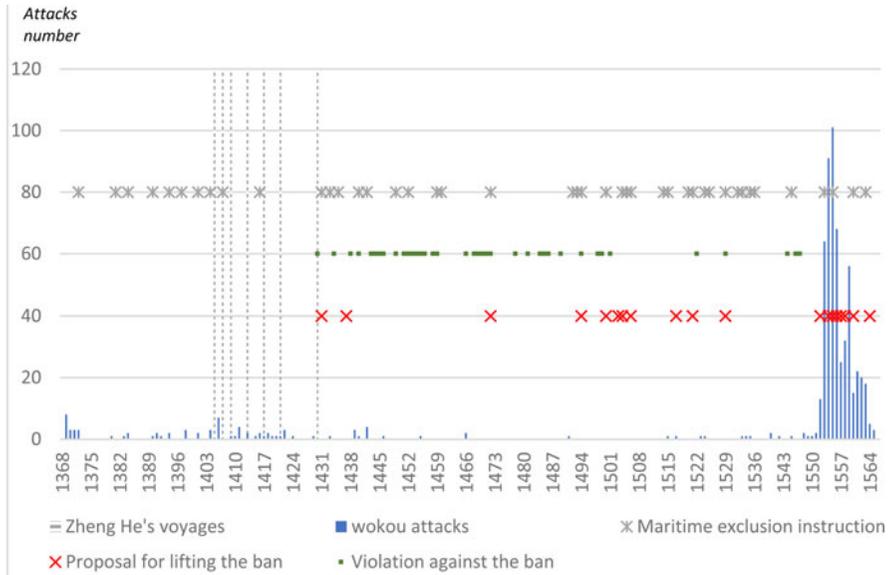


Chart 1. Maritime exclusion instructions, violations against the ban, proposals for lifting the ban, *wokou* attacks, and Zheng He's voyages in the Ming period (1368–1566)

Source: Fu Sinian 傅斯年, Wang Chongwu 王崇武, and Huang Zhangjian 黄彰健 (eds), *Ming shilu* 明實錄. Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo 中央研究院歷史語言研究所, 1930–1961; The data of the *wokou* attacks is derived from Tanaka Takeo 田中健夫, *Wakō: Umi no rekishi* 倭寇: 海の歴史 (Tokyo: Kodansha, 2012), 162–67.

Apparently, as the bureaucrats came to power and terminated the state-sponsored voyages, it was no longer necessary for the court to enforce the strict prohibition on private sailing. Instead, the local administrations had a strong motive to boost the local economy by opening the coastal border. By lifting the ban on private sailing and fishery, local governments created a grey area between legal (catching fish) and illegal (colluding with overseas people) activities to encourage private overseas trade.

Chart 1 locates the maritime exclusion instructions, the proposals for lifting the ban, smuggling cases, *wokou* attacks, and Zheng He's voyages on a timeline. It shows that local bureaucrats began to propose lifting the ban on private sailing and catching fish when the court was about to terminate Zheng He's voyages in the 1430s. Interestingly, it was in this period that the court started uncovering gangs of smugglers. The sudden rise in smuggling activities suggest that the abolishment of the ban on catching fish did indeed encourage the private sector to fill the gap in the market left by the state-sponsored fleets.

The local governments not only encouraged private maritime trade by proposing a pro-trade policy. Many of them also participated directly in the trade. Table 3 identifies the smugglers who were caught and punished by the government in the period from 1368 to 1529, revealing that most smuggling cases involved local bureaucrats and military officers.⁵⁸ Moreover, according to a travel account written by Ch'oe Pu 崔溥, a

1437 did the court approve the proposal from South Zhili to lift the ban on catching fish. See *Ming Yingzong Rui Huangdi shilu*, 32.1a–1b.

⁵⁸Michael Szonyi provides a specific example in the early sixteenth century of how a military family took advantage of their special position in the military system to engage in smuggling and gain advantage in

Table 3 Records of the punishments against interdict violators.

Date (Year/Reign title.year:month:date)	Violators			Origin	
	Resident	Military officer	Official	Province (County/guard)	Destination
1430/ <i>XuXuande.5:7:guisi</i>	○	○		Fujian (Zhangzhou, Longxi)	Ryukyu
<i>Xuande.5:12:dinghai</i>	○			Zhejiang (Linhai)	
1434/ <i>Xuande.9:3:xinmao</i>		○	○	Fujian (Zhangzhou)	
1438/ <i>Zhengtong.3:10:renzi</i>	○			Fujian (Longxi)	Ryukyu
<i>Zhengtong.3:11:jihai</i>		○		Zhejiang	
1440/ <i>Zhengtong.5:3:renxu</i>		○		Zhejiang (Yongjia, Shayuan)	
1443/ <i>Zhengtong.8:8:renyin</i>			○		Champa
1444/ <i>Zhengtong.9:2:jiha</i>	○			Guangdong (Chaozhou)	Java
1445/ <i>Zhengtong.10:2:xinhai</i>		○		Southern Zhili (Coastal guards)	
<i>Zhengtong.10:3:yiwei</i>	○		○	Fujian	Java
<i>Zhengtong.10:9:wuxu</i>	○			Fujian (Fuzhou)	
1446/ <i>Zhengtong.11:4:dingmao</i>	○			Fujian	
<i>Zhengtong.11:9:xinmao</i>		○		Zhejiang	
1449/ <i>Zhengtong.14:7:jichou</i>	○			Fujian (Zhangzhou)	
1451/ <i>Jingtai.2:9:jiayin</i>	○	○		Zhejiang	
1452/ <i>Jingtai.3:4:guiwei</i>	○	○		Zhejiang	
<i>Jingtai.3:9:guisi</i>		○		Fujian	
1453/ <i>Jingtai.4:7:guiwei</i>		○	○		Champa

(Continued)

Table 3 (Continued.)

Date (Year/Reign title.year:month:date)	Violators			Origin	Destination
	Resident	Military officer	Official	Province (County/guard)	
1454/ <i>Jingtai.5:8:dingyou</i>			○	Guangdong (Guangzhou)	
1455/ <i>Jingtai.6:10:dingmao</i>	○			Fujian	
1456/ <i>Jingtai.7:6:guimao</i>		○		Guangdong	
1458/ <i>Tianshun.2:7:jiayin</i>			○	Zhejiang (Jiajing)	
1459/ <i>Tianshun.3:11:renyin</i>		○		Zhejiang (Changzhou)	
1465/ <i>Chenghua.1:7:wushen</i>	○	○		Guangdong (Guanghai, Chaozhou)	Java missions
		○		Zhejiang (Shayuan)	
1468/ <i>Chenghua.1:7:guiyou</i>	○			Nanjing	
1469/ <i>Chenghua.5:9:guimao</i>		○		Zhejiang (Haimen)	
<i>Chenghua.5:9:yisi</i>		○		Fujian	
1470/ <i>Chenghua.6:2:xinwe</i>		○		Fujian Fuzhou)	Ryukyu mission
1471/ <i>Chenghua.7:6:gengxu</i>	○			Guangdong (Lianzhou, Qiongzhou, Leizhou)	Annam
<i>Chenghua.7:10:yiyou</i>	○		○	Fujian (Longxi)	Malacca and Siam
1472/ <i>Chenghua.8:4:guiyou</i>	○			Fujian (Longxi)	A foreign vessel
<i>Chenghua.10:12:yiwei</i>			○		Champa, Malacca
1481/ <i>Chenghua.17:10:bingchen</i>			○		Champa, Malacca
1484/ <i>Chenghua.20:12:xinwei</i>	○			Guangdong (Chaozhou)	
1485/ <i>Chenghua.21:11:xinyou</i>			○	Guangdong (Guangzhou)	
1486/ <i>Chenghua.22:9:wushen</i>			○	Guangdong (Panyu)	

1489/ <i>Hongzhi.2:10:dingyou, Hongzhi.4:8:wuwu, Hongzhi.12:7:bingxu</i>	○	Guangdong	
1494/ <i>Hongzhi.7:7:renzi</i>			○ Annam missions
1498/ <i>Hongzhi.11:10:dinghai</i>	○	Guangdong	
1499/ <i>Hongzhi.12:12:yimao</i>	○	Fujian	Chosŏn
1501/ <i>Hongzhi.14:3:renzi</i>	○	Fujian, Guangdong (Dianbai, Guangzhou)	Java
1522/ <i>Jiajing.1:7:dingsi</i>	○	Guangdong	
1529/ <i>Jiajing.8:12:wuyin</i>	○ ○	Zhejiang (Panshi)	

Source: Fu Sinian 傅斯年, Wang Chongwu 王崇武, and Huang Zhangjian 黃彰健 (eds), *Ming shilu* 明實錄. Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo 中央研究院歷史語言研究所, 1930–1961.

Korean shipwreck victim, it was an open secret in the south-eastern coastal cities in the second half of the fifteenth century that private merchants constantly commuted to overseas states and publicly sold foreign products in China.⁵⁹ The records of the smugglers and Ch'oe's narrative indicate that local bureaucrats in the coastal region tacitly consented to, and perhaps encouraged, the private maritime trade at the time.

However, the process of re-opening the coast did not proceed smoothly. While the local administrations consciously loosened their control over the coastal border, they failed to formulate new rules to regulate private involvement in the sea-borne business. In this context, private maritime trade was booming from the late 1430s in the form of smuggling, accompanied by piracy. Naturally, gangs of pirates emerged, and their power and influence expanded dramatically in the coastal provinces and on the seas. From 1447, piracy caused rebellions, and chaos reached its peak in 1449 and 1450.⁶⁰ Among those rebel forces, the one under the leadership of Huang Xiaoyang 黃蕭養 played an extremely destructive role in coastal areas. In late 1449, Huang mobilized massive armies of pirates, with more than three hundred on sea-going ships to attack the seashore, and for months they laid siege to Guangzhou 廣州, the most significant city in the southeast region.⁶¹ Although Huang was executed in the mid-1450,⁶² his confederates continued to cause trouble in the following years.

This incident urged the court to issue sailing bans again in 1449/06,⁶³ 1459/07, and 1460/07.⁶⁴ As the editor of the *shilu* noted, it was the turbulence caused by Huang that pushed the court to strengthen government control of the coastal border.⁶⁵ From the perspective of the central government, the decision to reimplement the maritime exclusion policy was unquestionably reasonable, given that the empire was still in a military confrontation with the Mongolians on the northern inland border and it needed a stable backyard in the south.

This move, however, reversed the local administrations' efforts to reboot the coastal economy. From then on, the two sides of the dispute over the maritime exclusion policy shifted from the emperor and the bureaucrats in the court to the central government and the coastal administrations. With the tacit consent of the local authorities, private overseas trade grew rapidly in the second half of the fifteenth century, regardless of the court's strict orders.⁶⁶ In the following century, the coastal administrations made continuous efforts to legitimize the private trade. Thanks to their efforts, coastal shipping became legal in Fujian Province after 1452/01 and in Zhejiang after 1472.⁶⁷ In the

illicit commerce. See Michael Szonyi, *The Art of Being Governed: Everyday Politics in Late Imperial China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 83–108.

⁵⁹John Meskill, *Ch'oe Pu's Diary: A Record of Drifting across the Sea* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1965), 82–83, 88.

⁶⁰On the chaos in the coastal region, see *Ming Yingzong Rui Huangdi shilu*, 170–79, 181–95; also see Denis Twitchett and Tilemann Grimm, “The Cheng-t'ung, Ching-t'ai, and T'ien-shun reigns,” 303–7, 328–29.

⁶¹On the experience of Huang Xiaoyang, see *Ming Yingzong Rui Huangdi shilu*, 183–93.

⁶²*Ming Yingzong Rui Huangdi shilu*, 193.4b–5b.

⁶³*Ming Yingzong Rui Huangdi shilu*, 179.12b–13a.

⁶⁴*Ming Yingzong Rui Huangdi shilu*, 217.5a–5b, 305.1a–1b, 317.4b–5a.

⁶⁵*Ming Yingzong Rui Huangdi shilu*, 217.5a–5b.

⁶⁶A travel account written by a Korean shipwreck victim in 1488, Ch'oe Pu, recorded the economic prosperity promoted by maritime trade in China's southern coastal regions. See Meskill, *Ch'oe Pu's Diary*, 82–83, 88–94.

⁶⁷*Ming Yingzong Rui Huangdi shilu*, 212.2a–2b, *Ming Xianzong Chun Huangdi shilu*, 108.5a–6b. This regulation was reaffirmed by the court repeatedly thereafter. See *Da Ming huidian*, 132.20a–23b; *Ming*

period from the 1490s to the 1510s, the local bureaucrats even successfully convinced the court to permit foreign merchants to visit and trade in Guangdong Province.⁶⁸

These new regulations left loopholes in the maritime exclusion policy. Making use of these loopholes, the private sector rapidly filled the business vacuum left by the official trading missions in the second half of the fifteenth century. Given that the court did not lift the ban on private sailing until the late 1560s, the business conducted by the private sector was still defined as “smuggling” at the time.

Historians like Lin Renchuan argue that the rise of private maritime trade in the Ming period was a response to the strict implementation of the maritime exclusion policy.⁶⁹ This would be inaccurate based on the re-examination of relevant records, as they strongly and clearly suggest that the trade boom was caused by the cessation of the state-sponsored voyages in the 1440s, which was a product of the cut-throat financial competition between the emperor and the bureaucrats, and by the appearance of competition over border governance between the central and local governments.

Conclusion

The sudden cessation of Zheng He’s voyages in the mid-fifteenth century was primarily a consequence of the fiscal competition between emperors and bureaucrats that had begun during the Yongle reign. By pressing the bureaucrats to raise funds for his expanding voyages and excluding them from sharing the trade income, Emperor Yongle not only monopolized the trading profits but also constantly extracted money from the national treasuries to pay for his engineering projects and military operations. This arrangement established a new fiscal practice, separating expenses and income. In this way, the emperor was able to focus on proceeding with his costly plans, while the heavy burden of raising money was placed on the bureaucrats. This new fiscal practice replaced the previous one that was developed by the first Ming emperor, who was willing to collaborate with the bureaucrats in maintaining a balanced budget for the empire.

From where the bureaucrats stood, such fiscal practice was unsustainable and would lead to the inevitable collapse of the entire fiscal system, since the emperors could easily increase expenditures and exert excessive pressure on the tax system and the economy. With unremitting efforts, the bureaucrats made Emperor Yongle agree with a cessation of the voyages, let Emperor Hongxi promise to terminate the voyages in his inaugural decree, and, manipulated the child-emperor, Zhengtong, into aborting the state-sponsored voyages permanently.⁷⁰ Although some later emperors, like Emperor

Xiaozong Jing Huangdi shilu, 206.1a–1b; *Ming Wuzong Yi Huangdi shilu*, 17.8a–8b. See also *Ming Xiaozong Jing Huangdi shilu*, 209.5b–8a.

⁶⁸*Ming Xiaozong Jing Huangdi shilu*, 92.6a–6b. *Ming Wuzong shilu*, 149.8b–9b. See also *Ming Shizong Su Huangdi shilu*, 4.27a–28a.

⁶⁹Lin Renchuan 林仁川, *Private Overseas Trade in the Late Ming and Early Qing Dynasties* 明末清初私人海上貿易 (Shanghai: Huadong shifan daxue chubanshe, 1987); Lin, “Fukien’s Private Sea Trade in the 16th and 17th Centuries,” in *Development and Decline of the Fukian Province in the 17th and 18th Centuries*, edited by E.B. Vermeer (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 163–215; Lin, “Wokou and Private Overseas Merchants in Ming Dynasty” 明代私人海商貿易商人與倭寇, *Zhongguoshiyanjiu* 4 (1990), 30–38.

⁷⁰It is worth pointing out that many other factors also contributed to Ming China’s retreat from the maritime world. For example, this policy change might also be explained by the pacification of piracy on East Asian waters after the 1420s, the mounting tension between the Ming and the Mongolians in the 1440s, the economic pressure the Ming court faced after the Yongle reign, and other internal political and ideological considerations. For further discussion about the impact of these factors on Ming China’s maritime policy,

Chenghua, intended to relaunch voyages, the bureaucrats took an uncompromising stand. Besides, they also confined the emperor's fiscal power by establishing a special account for the emperor and separating it from the imperial treasuries. By these means, the bureaucrats prevented emperors from launching another large-scale voyage and encroaching on their fiscal power.

As the court withdrew from maritime trade, coastal administrations and the private sector tried to fill the gap. While the court still had concerns about the piracy problem and reaffirmed the maritime exclusion policy from time to time, it no longer intended to prohibit private sailings for the sake of the state monopoly on maritime trade. As local governments started proposing lifting the ban on private sailings from the 1430s, residents in several coastal provinces, including South Zhili, Zhejiang, Fujian, and Guangdong, gained the right to catch fish at sea, which was largely a cover for private overseas trade. In this context, private trade was booming and finally in 1567 the court formally permitted its people to carry out maritime trade.

see Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas*; Wang, "Ming Foreign Relations: Southeast Asia," 301–332; Li, *The Ming Maritime Trade Policy in Transition, 1368 to 1567*; Zheng, *Haijin de zhuanzhe*; Chao, *Mingdai haiwai maoyi yanjiu*; and Schottenhammer, "China's Rise and Retreat as a Maritime Power," 189–212.

Cite this article: Siu Yiu, (2024). The Cessation of Zheng He's Voyages and the Beginning of Private Sailings: Fiscal Competition between Emperors and Bureaucrats. *Journal of Chinese History* 8, 95–114. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jch.2022.45>