The Decline of the Early Ming Navy

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During the first quarter of the fifteenth century when China attained shortlived prominence as a major sea power in the Orient it was the culmination of three centuries of maritime activities. The advance out to the sea began in the Southern Sung period when Chinese fleets gained control over the East China Sea, grew in the Yüan period when China achieved ascendancy over the South China Sea, and climaxed in the early Ming period when Chinese warships entered and cruised about the Indian Ocean in demonstration of China's military might, giving China, for a brief span, hegemony over a vast arc of land that extended from Japan to the east coast of Africa.

This spectacular expansion was the result of the opportune conjuncture of a number of circumstances: the momentum of the shift of economic and population centers to the southeastern coastal provinces; the intellectual and cultural flowering which stimulated the spirit of adventure and enterprise; the widening of geographical knowledge and the remarkable development in the techniques of ship-building and the art of navigation; the interest of the state in economic ventures coupled with the growth of money economy and the rise of an influential merchant group which furthered seaborne commerce; and, finally, the almost incessant wars which spurred the invention and manufacture of arms for fighting on land and on water. These conditions, which favored the movement out to sea and the building of naval forces during the Sung and Yüan periods, persisted in the first decades of the Ming period.

The first Ming emperors had a keen appreciation of naval power. Hung-wu made effective use of his fleets in his early campaigns on the Yangtze against his rivals and later utilized them to conquer the coastal provinces and to bring supplies to his armies in the north. Yung-lo, inheriting a strong navy from his father, strengthened it further and employed it as an instru-

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1 See Jung-pang Lo: The emergence of China as a sea power during the late Sung and early Yuan periods, FEQ, 14 : 4 (1955), 489—504.

Abbreviations used:

HWHTK Chi Huang, ed., Hsü Wen-hsien t'ung-k'ao (WYWK ed.)
MSL Ming shih-lu
SPTK Ssu-pu ts'ung-k'uan
TSCC Ts'ung-shu chi-ch'eng
WYWK Wan-yu wen-k'u
ment of his expansive overseas policy. Served by energetic and capable officers, these two monarchs built an efficient navy of thirty-five hundred ships for operation in the coastal waters of China. Twenty-seven hundred, half of them combat vessels and half patrol boats, were warships of the guard stations (wei and so) on the sea coast; four hundred were warships of the fleet based at Hsin-chiang-k’ou near Nanking, and four hundred were armed transports of the grain conveyance fleet.

To safeguard the seaboard region, there were annual spring and summer patrols in which the warships of the coastal guard stations, organized either in provincial squadrons of fifty to a hundred vessels or in armadas of several hundred vessels of two or three provinces, cruised far out to sea to shield the coast from enemy raids. Twice, in 1373 and 1374, Chinese warships pursued Japanese sea rovers, known as the Wo-k’ou (or Wako), to the Liu-ch’u Islands, once, in 1406, to the shores of Korea, and twice, in 1373 and 1409, they routed Annamese pirates in the Gulf of Tonkin. As word of its prowess spread abroad, the very name of the Ming navy was sufficient to inspire awe. In 1403, when the capital of Champa was besieged by an Annamese fleet

the Chams sought aid from Ming and the men of Ming came in nine warships to their relief. When the [Annamese] fleet met the Ming [warships] out at sea, the men of Ming told [the Annamese commander] Pham Nguyen-côi [Fan Yüan-kuei], “Withdraw your forces at once. Do not tarry!” Nguyen-côi left Champa.

Later, in the long campaign that followed the Chinese invasion of Annam in 1407, the Ming navy scored victory after victory in the delta of the Red

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1 There were, in early Ming, 54 wei [1], 127 ch’ien-hu-so [2] and 231 hsün-chien-ssu [3] located on the coast of the six seaboard provinces (cf. Hu Tsung-hsien, Ch’ou-hai t’u-pien [4], ch. 3—7, passim). Since, in 1370, it was decreed that each wei was to have fifty warships (HWHTK, 132: 3969 col. 1, and Pu Ta-t’ung, Pei-Wo t’u-chih [5] [Pao-yen-t’ang chi-mi-chih], 3), this would come to a total of 2,700 warships. In 1389, it was decreed that each pai-hu-so [6] and each hsün-chien-ssu were to operate two warships (MSL: Hung-wu, 201: 1). Since, on the average, there were ten pai-hu-so to a ch’ien-hu-so, this would total 2,540 ships. Add on the 462 ships for the 231 hsün-chien-ssu and the total would be 3,002 ships. Of course, not all the guard stations were at full strength and 2,700 would be a conservative figure. The warships were divided into eight classes: four classes were combat vessels and four classes were patrol boats (cf. Ku Yen-wu LPS, ts’e 12, p. 39; Li Chao-hsiang, Lung-chiang chi’uan-ch’ang chin [7] [Hsien-lan-t’ang ts’ung-shu] 2: 1; and Lu Ch’i [8], memorial in Hsi-yüan wen-chien lu [9], 57: 10; 11).

River and it was largely due to their naval successes that the Chinese were able to reconquer the province.

But the best known and most spectacular of the activities of the Ming navy was the series of voyages made by a fleet of large-size "treasure ships" (pao-ch'uan) to the East Indies, Southern India, the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea and the coast of East Africa as far south as Kenya. The strategic port of Malacca, whose sultanate was established under the aegis of Chinese naval power, served virtually as an overseas base for these expeditions which, led by the eunuch Cheng Ho and attended by numerous diplomatic missions, manifested China's wealth and power and assured China's hegemony over the Eastern World. States which declared their submission received political protection and material rewards, and representatives of more than thirty states, including seven kings, came bearing tribute to render homage to the Ming emperor. A Chinese governor ruled Palembang. The king of Ceylon and two Sumatran chieftains who had the temerity to defy and challenge Ming power were captured and brought as prisoners to China.

For about three decades, China was the paramount sea power of the Orient. Then, suddenly, China abdicated from this position of supremacy. The defeat of a Ming naval force on the Hoang-giang (Huang-chiang), one of the entrances of the Red River in 1420, was the beginning of a series of set-

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4 There has been some hesitation among scholars to accept the monstrous dimensions for the "treasure ships" given in the Ming-shih. Contemporary sources such as Ma Huan and Fei Hsin and some of the publications that appeared shortly after the conclusion of the expeditions made no mention of the size of the ships but gave figures for the number of vessels and the number of men who went on some of the voyages: 27,800 men in 62 ships in the 1403 voyage, "over 27,000 men in 48 ships" in the 1409 voyage, "over 27,000 men in more than 40 ships" in the 1413 voyage, and 27,550 men in the 1431 voyage. In other words, the average complement was about 500 men per ship.

Now, Ku Yen-wu (loc. cit.), in describing the Chekiang fleet in early Ming, stated that a 400-liao (unit) warship carried 100 men and that an eight-oared vessel (pa-lu) fifty men. Inasmuch as a Sung 800-liao warship of 1169 carried 200 men (Sung Hui-yao Kao, "shih-huo," 50 : 22 — 23), or twice the capacity of a Ming 400-liao warship, it would require a warship five times the capacity of a 400-liao ship, i.e., a 2,000-liao ship, to carry 500 men. It is not within the scope of this paper to discuss the weight of the liao, a unit of ship measurement used in the Sung, Yuan and Ming periods. According to this author's computation, it came to about three 160-pound piculs or 500 pounds.

In 1936, Cheng Ho-sheng [16] discovered a defaced stele at the Ching-hai Temple near Nanking and, in the portion of the inscription that was discernible, there were these lines: "In the third year of Yung-lo (1405), ... commanded government troops in 2,000-liao seagoing ships and eight-oared ships" and "In the seventh year of Yung-lo (1409), ... commanded government troops in 1,500-liao seagoing ships and eight-oared ships". (cited in Kuan Chin-ch'eng [17]: The ships used by Cheng Ho in his voyages to the Western Ocean [Cheng Ho hsia hsi yang ti ch'uan], Tung-fang Tsa-chih, 43 : 1 [1947], 49). Ships of this size were not unusual. Wu Tzu-mu [18], in his Meng-liang lu (1274), Marco Polo and Ibn Batuta have mentioned ships this large or larger.
backs which resulted in the evacuation of Tonkin in 1428. The termination of the naval expeditions, after the last voyage of 1431-33, was soon followed by the decline of China's prestige abroad. Fewer and fewer states sent tribute. The coastal defense fleet was so weakened that China's seaboard provinces lay exposed to the depredations of Japanese pirates. What happened? What changes took place with such repressive effects that China recoiled from her seaward expansion and her career as a naval power "fell from noon... and dropp'd from the zenith like a falling star?"

This is an intriguing mystery that has yet to be fully studied. Interest has been focused largely on one aspect of the prodigious maritime expansion of early Ming, the voyages of the "treasure ships" under Cheng Ho. Yet, when it came to the question of the abrupt termination of these voyages, the writings of scholars casually disposed of it in a few speculative and inconclusive remarks and ignored the wider implication of the decline of the entire Ming naval organization.

One conventional explanation has been that the expeditions were the work of palace attendants designed to bring back rare and precious objects to please the emperor's fancy and, as such, they were opposed by the scholarly officials. Duyvendak went so far as to suggest that it was to obtain giraffes that the Chinese established contact with East Africa. This explanation is postulated on the assumption of the emperors being despots and the eunuchs acting in a high-handed manner. Actually, despite everything that has been written about the baleful influence of the eunuchs, it is doubtful if these palace attendants could, by themselves, have launched the expeditions. Ship-building, navigation, commercial practices and knowledge of foreign lands were the legacies of past centuries and the far-ranging voyages were the expression of a popular urge to expand carried forward by the impetus of a seaward thrust that began in the Sung period or even earlier. Expeditions of the magnitude of those which sailed forth during the Yung-lo period could not have been launched without a measure of support of the officials nor in the face of determined opposition from them. After all, the dispatch of diplomatic and commercial missions abroad was an established practice and, although they were on much grander scale, the Cheng Ho expeditions were official missions no less and they did redound in glory for China. Nor were only eunuchs sent; many of the envoys were officials. Cheng Ho, though a eunuch, was chosen for his proven ability and since he and his associated were seldom in the capital there was little occasion for feuds to arise between them and the officials. On the contrary, he was friendly with many of the high officials, respected by them, and contemporary accounts generally depicted him and his overseas activities in a favorable light. True, there was ill-feeling towards eunuchs who were overbearing, but it was not until the eunuchs began to wield their power in-

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ordinately and to interfere in state affairs, to enrich themselves by extortions and to persecute their critics that the hostility of the officials towards them became bitter and implacable. This, however, was many years after the termination of the expeditions.

Another conventional reason given for the discontinuation of the expeditions was that they were costly. But, were they? Of the more than eighteen hundred sea-going ships built during the reign of Yung-lo, over seventeen hundred, including the large-size "treasure ships", were constructed in the first six years. The cost for building a large oceanic vessel has been mentioned to be as high as a thousand piculs of rice. But the revenue from the district of Soochow alone came to three million piculs and the revenue from the empire to thirty million. At this time, it was recorded, with Hsia Yüan-chi in charge of finances, despite the grants and gifts to the princes and meritorious officials, the cost of war against Annam, the expanses of government, grain transportation and the construction of ships, there was no deficit. After the transfer of the capital to Peking, the construction of palaces and other public works and the long and costly wars with the Oirats led to a sharp increase of government expenditure and, under Yung-lo's successors, the extravagance of the court and the lavish grants to princes and the emperors' favorites, spending vastly multiplied. Concurrently, due to maladministration and economic dislocation, inflation and tax evasion, corruption and misuse of funds, the revenue of the state dwindled. As famine and banditry raged in the provinces, many of the officials began to raise their voices in protest leveling their criticism, not against the naval expeditions per se, but against the graft and waste, the levies and the profiteering attendant upon all public enterprises and demanding a curtailment of expenditures.

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7 On the rise of eunuchs to power in the Cheng-t'ung period, see, for example, Chao I, Nien-erh-shih cha-chi (TSCC ed.), 35 : 741-42.
8 Cf. statement of Chou Ch'en circa 1431 (Ming-shih, 153 : 12). A thousand piculs of rice at that time would come to about 350 taels of silver. Another source stated that a 600-liao ship cost 300 taels (Hsi-yüan wen-chien lu, 70 : 2). Later, the cost rose to 500 — 600 taels (LP536 : 121-22) and to as high as 1000 taels to construction and 500 — 600 taels to repair (Chang Hsieh, Tung-hsi yang-k'ao [TSCC ed.], 9 : 113).
10 Ming-shih, 149 : 5, Also 78 : 12 and statement by Huang Fu, 154 : 8-9.
11 An expression of official criticism of graft and waste may be found as early as 1411 in a joint memorial submitted by the presidents of six boards stating, inter alia, "the procurement of materials for [the construction of] sea-going ships should be based on actual costs. The Board of Works should not purchase unnecessary materials". (T'an Hsi-ssu, Ming ta-cheng tsuan-yao [28], 13 : 7). There was a crescendo of protest against all items of government expenditure in 1421 when, following the transfer of the capital to Peking and the launching of another campaign against
Nor was tributary trade, which the naval expeditions did so much to promote, expensive. The bulk of the imports, which came as tribute and as merchandise in the train of the tributary envoys, were goods needed by China: horses, copper ores, sulfur, timber, hides, drugs, and spices, not to mention gold, silver and rice. In return for the official tribute, the Ming court gave gifts that had greater prestige than intrinsic value, such as suits of clothing, umbrellas and coverlets, embroideries and utensils, calendars and books. Even the "gold seals" of office were actually silver washed in gold. A large amount of the gifts which the Ming court donated in exchange for the tribute were articles produced or manufactured in China such as silk textiles, ceramics, tea and ironwares. The goods which were brought in by the envoys and purchased by the Ming court were paid for at arbitrarily depressed prices. Sapanwood, which cost five to ten strings a catty in the open market, was bought at half a string a catty before 1433 and at one string after 1433. The advantages of the trade were, thus, chiefly on the side of the Ming court. As for the strange animals, rare objects and frivolous items, they aroused attention but they were no more than the bonuses of the trade, not the staple.

The tributary system, in the view of some writers, was economically impracticable because of what they called the "lavish" largesse to the foreign states. Actually, while there was some silver and some copper coins, the bulk of the monetary grants was in paper money. We read of the sums of 400,000 strings and 30,000 ting of Ming notes given to Malacca in 1411.
and 1424, of 15,000 ting to Liu-ch'iu in 1415, of 10,000 ting to Sulu in 1417 and of 100,000 strings given to Cheng Ho in 1431 for distribution abroad. But, as for gold, there were only token gifts of a hundred ounces to a few favored states. On the other hand, the gold and silver received as tribute from neighboring states were considerable. We read of 1,600 ounces of gold and 10,000 ounces of silver from Korea, a thousand ounces of gold and 20,000 ounces of silver from Annam and, in 1406, when 170 Chinese sailors on “shore leave” were killed in Java, the Ming court demanded an indemnity of 60,000 ounces of gold, a case which was finally settled for 10,000 ounces. The Ming court also purchased gold from the foreign envoys, paying fifty strings of paper money for an ounce of gold and fifteen strings for an ounce of silver when the official exchange rate was 400 strings for an ounce of gold and eighty strings for an ounce of silver.

The enormous profit that accrued from the tributary system may have been a motivation for the dispatch of naval expeditions and diplomatic missions to promote trade and friendly relations with China. However, this favorable trade balance was contingent on the military power and political prestige of China and on the soundness of the Ming currency system. After the death of Yung-lo, the military strength of China suffered a marked decline and after the defeat in the Battle of T'u-mu in 1449 her weakness was manifest. By this time, too, despite coercive measures, the Ming paper notes depreciated to less than a tenth of one percent of their face value. Since, even the people of China were reluctant to accept the notes, the foreigners rejected them altogether, demanding silk, porcelain and large sums of copper coins as largesse and as payment. The Ming government was no longer able to overawe the neighboring states and the prestige goods which it donated as gifts no longer had any meaning. It could not compel the foreign envoys to sell the merchandise they imported at arbitrarily low prices but must pay the market rates. In 1453, the Ming court paid a straight price of seven len (0.07 ounce) of silver for a catty of sapanwood when the market price was five to eight len (0.05 — 0.08 ounce) of silver. Thus, as tributary trade was

14 These figures are taken from Ming-shih, ch. 320—332 passim, and, the last item, from Cheng Ho Chia-p'u (Cheng Ho’s family register), cited in Cheng Ho-sheng: Cheng Ho I-shih Hui-pien (1948), 113. Generally, a ting (ingot) was equalled to five kuan (strings). However, as the words indicate, a ting was pegged to the value of silver while a kuan was pegged to the value of copper coins. In this, the Ming system was patterned after that of the Yüan. After the distribution of these Ming paper notes, it was said that “from this time on, our paper currency (pao-ch’ao) was circulated in foreign lands.” (HWHTK 10 : 2861 col 1).

15 Ming-shih, 324 : 21 -22.

16 Sakuma, 284. For official rate, see HWHTK 10 : 2860 col 3.

17 MSL: Cheng-T'ung 236 (Ching-t'ai 54), 1. In 1453, a Japanese embassy brought in supplementary tributary goods which the Board of Rites appraised at 34,700 strings of paper notes at the Hsüan-te rate but the Japanese demanded 207,000 strings, which was the value at the current rate. Finally, after a disgraceful haggling, the board agreed to pay 44,700 strings (Ming-shih, 322 : 7). In 1464, the Board of Rites reported that the foreign envoys absolutely refused to accept the notes and suggested that they be paid in silk and textiles (HWHTK 10 : 2861 col 1).
no longer profitable and, in fact, it became a drain on the resources of an impoverished China, there was no incentive for the dispatch of naval expeditions abroad to promote it.

Since foreign commerce was, at one time, lucrative, the state, to preserve its monopoly and to bar competition, imposed bans on emigration and on private trade. Only by rigid enforcement of its monopoly and by forcing the foreigners to accept its paper currency and the low prices it set on imported goods could the Ming government make tributary trade work in its favor. But these bans were only effective against the poor classes, not the rich and powerful families. Despite the vociferous protests of the officials and the efforts of the authorities to curb them, the landed estates of the princes and eunuchs, and of the kith and kin of influential members of the court grew in size while the wealth of the local magnates and rich merchants accumulated in amount. Not only did they engage in such nefarious businesses as hoarding of goods and manipulation of currency but they also defied the law by smuggling and trafficking with foreign adventurers. With the connivance of unscrupulous officials, in many cases eunuchs who were superintendents of merchant ships (shih-po shih), they invested their capital in overseas commercial ventures and built large ships to trade abroad. The men of the coastal districts, long imbued with a maritime tradition, sailed on them as seamen and supercargoes. The conditions were generally favorable. The rich region of the lower Yangtze had grown richer still through the introduction of new techniques of cotton processing and textile manufacture and needed foreign markets. Chekiang and Fukien exported porcelain and a score of other products. The naval expeditions of Yung-lo's time had paved the way for a wave of Chinese migration to Southeast Asia. The heyday of the Arab and Persian merchants had not yet arrived, and, thus, for a century, the Chinese controlled all the commerce in the waters of the East. Private trade supplanted...
the official tributary trade which the Cheng Ho expeditions helped to bring about. As it paid off huge returns to the investors, these rich and influential individuals had to safeguard their interest. They were antagonistic to the government monopoly of foreign trade and through their connections in Peking they were able to bring their views to bear to frustrate any attempt by the government to restore the trade to official channels. It is quite conceivable that they were behind the active opposition of some of the officials to any attempt at reviving the naval expeditions.

The lack on incentive and the obstructions were but accessory conditions for the suspension of the naval expeditions. These expeditions were not accidental, isolated incidents; they were a facet of the far-flung activities of the early Ming navy. The officers, men and ships that sailed abroad in numerous voyages were drawn from the Hsin-chiang-k’ou, the coastal guard and the grain transportation fleets. The termination of the expeditions was related to the naval defeats in Annam and the weakening of the coastal defense fleets, all of which were aspects of the general decline of the Ming navy.

Symptoms of the naval decline were apparent. In foreign policy and in strategical outlook, there was a change from offensive to defensive, from advance to withdrawal. The expansive characteristic of the early Ming navy had been demonstrated forcefully by the voyages of the "treasure ships" to distant lands and the victorious campaign in Annam. It was manifested in the aggressive spirit of the coastal guard fleets which cruised far out to sea and operated on the maxims: "The Wo-K’ou come by sea and should be resisted at sea," and "To repel them at sea is easy, to check them after they are ashore is hard." To supply the fleets on patrol and to keep enemy at a respectable distance from the mainland, there were naval bases (chat) established far out at sea, some with garrisons as large as five thousand men, who maintained communication with the coastal guard stations (wei and so) by means of dispatch boats and beacon fires. Shen-chia-men off the coast of Chekiang (established in 1409 at Cheng Ho’s suggestion), as well as Feng-huo, Nan-jih and Wu-hsü off the coast of Fukien were among the island bases organized during Yung-lo’s reign. But, afterwards, the strategic

19 Suggested by Wu Han: China and the Nan-yang before the sixteenth century (Shih-liu shih-chi ch’ien chih Chung-kuo yu Nan-yang), CHHP 10 : 1 (1936), 169.
20 MSL: Hsüan-te, 64 : 16.
21 Ming-shih, 126 : 15.
22 HWHTK 132 : 3971 col 2.
no longer profitable and, in fact, it became a drain on the resources of an impoverished China, there was no incentive for the dispatch of naval expeditions abroad to promote it.

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18 "The powerful families of Fukien and Chekiang traded with the Japanese pirates", stated the Ming-shih (322: 12). "Their associates at court protected them and carried out their bidding . . . Palace attendants outfitted merchant ships and the criminal elements of the coast abetted them in making profit". One high official who tried to curb their activities and failed, called them "pirates who wear caps and gowns". (ibid., 205: 1). The case of Wei Ch‘uan [31], who served as superintendent of merchant ships at Kuang-chou (Canton), was an example of eunuchs who prospered from private trade and who utilized their official positions to undermine the tributary system. (ibid., 304: 18). Ch‘ang Hsieh (op. cit., 7: 89) stated that the rise of private trade took place during the Ch‘eng-hua (1465-87) and Hung-chih (1488-1505) periods. Among the recent studies on this topic are: Sakuma Shigeo: The historical background of the private maritime trade during the Ming period (Mindai kaigai shiböeki no rekishi halkei), Shigaku Zasshi, 62: 1 (1953), 1-25; Katayama Seijirō [32]: Clandestine maritime trade during the Ming period and the class of village magnates of the coastal region (Mindai kaijö mitsuböeki to enkai kyoshinsö), Rekishigaku Kenkyö 164 (July, 1953), 23-32; and Shang Yüeh [33]: The growth of the factors of capitalistic production in China (Chung-kuo tsu-pen chu-sheng-ch‘an yin-su ti meng-ya), Li-shih yen-chiu 1955: 3 (1955), 85-134.
the official tributary trade which the Cheng Ho expeditions helped to bring about. As it paid off huge returns to the investors, these rich and influential individuals had to safeguard their interest. They were antagonistic to the government monopoly of foreign trade and through their connections in Peking they were able to bring their views to bear to frustrate any attempt by the government to restore the trade to official channels. It is quite conceivable that they were behind the active opposition of some of the officials to any attempt at reviving the naval expeditions.

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21 MSL: Hsüan-te, 64 : 16.
22 Ming-shih, 126 : 15.
23 HWHTK 132 : 3971 col 2.

[34] 吳晗
[35] 塵
[36] 沈家門
[37] 烽火
[38] 南日
[39] 活嶼
policy changed. The advance bases in Fukien were withdrawn during the Cheng-t'ung period (1436–49) and the Shen-chia-men base, which local officials since 1425 had repeatedly requested to be removed, was withdrawn in 1452. The excuses for the withdrawal were that they were "isolated in the middle of the sea," that they imposed a heavy burden on the civilian residents who had to supply them, and that the transfer of their garrisons to the mainland would bolster the defenses in order to resist enemy invaders more effectively after they had landed. Warships, no longer sent out to sea on patrols, were anchored in ports where they rotted from neglect.

The consequence of this policy of withdrawal was the reduction of the fleets. Although the Hung-hsi Emperor, when he ascended the throne in 1425, suspended the dispatch of the naval expeditions under Cheng Ho, they went on one final voyage in 1431–33, but in 1436, when the Cheng-t'ung Emperor came to the throne, an edict was issued which not only forbade the building of ships for overseas voyages but also cut down the construction of warships and armaments. Every naval unit suffered curtailment. Of the Chekiang provincial fleet of over seven hundred ships, there was by 1440 less than half that number and of the four hundred ships of the Hsin-chiang-k'ou fleet, there were by 1474 only a hundred and forty that were seaworthy. The situation was further aggravated by the diversion of naval craft to non-military uses such as grain conveyance. The Teng-chou Wei in Shantung had a fleet of a hundred warships. In 1448, as a result of the retrenchment program, eighty-two ships were scrapped, leaving only eighteen of which four were diverted to the transportation of printed cotton cloth to Manchuria. In 1503, four more ships were scrapped, reducing the fourteen warjunks at Teng-chou to ten, but of these, four were sent to Hu-kuang province and three to Chekiang and Fukien, leaving only three. In 1509, the authorities decreed that ships damaged in storms were not to be repaired and in 1524, an imperial edict halted the construction of sea-going ships at Teng-chou in order to relieve the burden of the people.

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24 Pei-Wo t'u-chih, 1 and MSL: Hsuan-te, 4 : 1. Criticizing the withdrawal of the island bases, Ku Yen-wu wrote: "Of all who have discussed this matter there is no one who does not say that to meet the Wo-k'ou at sea is the best policy. To strike them when they first arrive is the second best policy. So, in the past, the state, cognizant of the danger of neglecting military preparations, did not skimp expenses in the care and support of the troops. As a result, Wu-sung (Woosung) had the best naval and land forces in the empire and, it is obvious, that as the walls are strong the house is secure. Since then, the authorities have been reluctant to burden the people with multifarious taxes and onerous labors in order to build up the armed forces, so the number of warships and the number of armored men have often been changed." (LPS, ts'e 6, p. 29.) Also see his remarks in ts'e 12, p. 23. of the same work.

25 Lung-chiang ch'uan-ch'ang chih, 1 : 6-7 and 2 : 25.

26 MSL: Cheng-t'ung, 1 : 9.


A similar situation prevailed in all the guard stations along the coast. "In Che [-k'iang] and in Min (Fukien)," stated the Ming-shih, "the sea defenses deteriorated to the extent that, out of ten warships and patrol boats, only one or two were left" 29. Confined to the harbors and rarely used, the ships rotted and were not replaced 30. Few new ships were built because, with the demoralization and desertion of the navy personnel, there were not enough seamen to man them 31.

Along with the reduction of the fleets there was a decline in ship-building. Contemporary records attested to the large size of some of the ships of the early Ming period, ships that were used in the conveyance of grain and ships that sailed on long-distance overseas voyages. Even the coastal guard fleets boasted of warships of 700-liao (units) capable of carrying 400 men. The first blow came when the Grand Canal was reopened in 1411 which was followed, not many years later, by the abandonment of the sea-route for grain transportation. The large-size, deep-drafted transport were gradually replaced by smaller, flat-bottom barges 32. The small number of transports built in government dockyards for maritime service were far inferior in construction to the privately-built merchant ships 33.

The change in the tactics of coastal defense also led to a change in ship design. In 1452, when the off-shore bases were withdrawn and the annual cruises discontinued, the construction of large sea-going warships was ordered to be suspended because they could not enter the narrow inlets nor maneuver in shallow water. Instead, the vessels that were designed and were favored by the military authorities were small oar-propelled boats for use in inland waters 34. The largest warship of the Ming navy in the beginning of the sixteenth century were 400-liao (units) vessels with a crew of a hundred. At the Lung-chiang Ship-yard 40 outside of Nanking, which once built the "treasure ships" for the Cheng Ho expeditions, it was said that as to "sea-going ships, the designs and dimensions could not be ascertained" 35. The ships turned out there, by this time, were crude and shoddy, their planks were thin and their nails and caulking insufficient 36. Most of them were built of timber salvaged from old ships.

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29 Ming-shih, 205 : 1.
30 LPS, ts'e 36, p. 55, and Lung-chiang ch'uan-ch'ang chih, 1 : 16.
31 Lung-chiang ch'uan-ch'ang chih, 2 : 10 and 25.
32 Ming-shih, 72 : 2.
35 Lung-chiang ch'uan-ch'ang chih, 1 : 36.
36 Ibid., 6 : 5-8, listed ten defects of the ships built in the Lung-chiang Shipyard. Not only were the ships, but also the equipment of the troops were poor in quality. Ma Wen-sheng [40], in a memorial submitted in 1494, charged that "never were our weapons in a more deplorable state than at present". (Ming ch'en tsou-i [42] [TSCC
Paralleling the physical decay of the navy was the demoralization of the personnel. During the early years, the morale of the men was high and their spirit militant. In 1417, for example, a ship with a crew of a hundred and twenty men under the command of the eunuch Chang Ch'ien successfully battled its way through a gauntlet of a Wo-k'ou fleet. In 1442, it was reported that

In recent years, instead of going out in patrols, the government troops employed for the defense against the Wo-k'ou anchored their warships in the ports. Some returned home, others engaged in commerce, trafficked in illicit salt, fished or gathered firewood so that when the Wo-k'ou suddenly attacked, they were isolated and, unsupported, they were annihilated.

Desertation was heavy. Of the garrison of 4,068 men at the Feng-huo base, 3,000 deserted; of the 4,700 men at Hsiao-ch'eng, 2,557 deserted; of the 3,424 men at Wu-hsü, 1,468 deserted; and of the 1,812 men at T'unghshan, 1,192 deserted. The situation became so bad that, by the beginning of the sixteenth century when the Japanese pirates intensified their depredations, the Ming government had to rely on merchant ships and armed civilians.

The demoralization of the Ming naval forces can be attributed directly to the abuses of the officers and men. The grain transportation fleet had been an essential unit of the Ming navy. Not only did it supply men and ships to the combat fleets but its personnel, who were regular troops (ch'i-ch'un), also fought actively against the pirates. When the Grand Canal was reopened in 1411, the maritime transportation service was abolished and the men of the grain transportation fleet, as well as many men drawn from the coastal guard fleets, were transferred to work on the canal. In 1431, a set of regulations was adopted for the employment of the men of the naval forces to transport grain on the canal. From fighting men they were reduced

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ed. 8 : 141). In the guard stations on the coast of Liao-tung, only two out of ten men possessed armor (Ming ta-cheng tsuan-yao, 19 : 18). Little advance was made in the manufacture of guns since the early Ming period. Instead, some of the largest guns used in the beginning of the Chia-ch'ing period (1522—65) were artillery pieces cast a hundred years before during the time of Yung-lo (Wang Ch'i, quoted in HWHTK 134 : 3999 col 2, and Chao Shih-chen, Shen-ch'i p'u [Hsüan-lan-t'ang ts'ung-shu], 7).

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[43] 王圻
[44] 趙士禎: 神器譜
[45] 張謙
[46] 小埡
[47] 鍾山
[48] 陳懋恆
[48a] 旗軍
to the status of stevedores, a measure which, it was said, resulted in "the exhaustion of the troops of the Southeast" 40. According to a practice first instituted by the Hung-wu Emperor, motivated by the kindly intention of sparing the men from the rigors of transportation by sea, the troops were settled on farmlands (tun-t'ien). In the guard stations of the coastal regions, seventy percent of the men were employed as farmers, some as far as a hundred li inland 41. The remaining thirty percent of the men, supposedly reserved for combat duties, were also required to build and repair ships. Initiated in the Hsüan-te period and regularized after 1449 was the practice of rotating the troops to Peking for periodic drills. Not only was the march to the capital and back fatiguing, but, while in Peking, many of the men were put to work as laborers in the construction of palaces and temples 42. Degraded and humiliated, the soldiers lost their morale and self-respect.

In the early Ming period, the men of the navy who sailed out to sea received an additional subsidy which amounted to a third of their pay 43 and those who went abroad in the naval expeditions were liberally rewarded. By the Ch'eng-hua period (1465—87), a system of rotation was introduced by which the men, whose pay was constantly in arrears, were remunerated for only six months of work and their "out-to-sea" subsidy was cancelled 44. Their duties were not military but consisted of building and repairing ships and, according a practice instituted in 1435 to encourage the men to care for the ships, they themselves were required to supply forty percent (later reduced to thirty percent) of the cost 45. It was such a heavy imposition that "the men of the guard stations had no way out except to sell their belongings and their children in order to meet expenses. This was the hardship of ship-building" 46.

The demoralization of the troops was matched by the degradation of the shipwrights at the Lung-chiang Shipyard outside of Nanking. During the time

40 HWHTK 122: 3894 col 2.
41 Ming ta-cheng tsuan-yao, 22: 24. On the tun-t'ien system, see Ming-shih, 77: 8.
42 In his memorial of 1494, Ma Wen-sheng traced the decline of Ming military power. "After the Hsüan-te period", he wrote, "more than half of the old commanders and veteran troops were retired or died. Military preparedness, in time, resembled no longer that of former days. During the Cheng-t'ung period, with the empire at peace, the people no longer followed the pursuit of arms and our military preparedness further slackened ... Recently, four or five-tenth of the troops are wasted. At the capital, the men are employed as laborers in the court and in various yamen to the number of several ten of thousand. The number of troops we now have at hand is no more than 70,000—80,000. South of the [Yangtze] River they are employed in grain transportation as well as in defense against the Wo-k'ou. In the north, they also have to transport grain as well as to march to the capital for drills". (Ming ch'en tsou-l, 8: 140). While the number of troops decreased, the number of officers multiplied. By the Ch'eng-hua period, there were four times the number in the Hung-wu period. (Ming-shih, 71: 16).
43 In early Ming, the monthly pay of a regular in the navy was 1.5 picul of rice (Ming-shih, 82: 17) plus a subsidy of 0.4 picul a month for "out-to sea" service (LPS, ts'e 36, pp. 76 and 111).
44 Pei-Wo t'u-chih, 2.
45 Lung-chiang ch'uan-ch'ang chih, 1: 13.
of Hung-wu and Yung-lo, it employed four hundred households of artisans selected from the empire. They were well-paid and they received minor official positions as encouragement for their work. But, later, they fell on evil days. Their pay lapsed and they were treated with contumely by their superiors. Many left, some to seek other means of employment and others to swell the ranks of the unemployed so that, by 1530, there were less than a hundred households of shipwrights left. When they complained of hardship, they were given land to till or told to eke out a living by other means. Ship-building as a craft was forgotten.

Behind the immediate reasons for the decline of the Ming navy lay deep-seated causes which acted to stifle the maritime expansion of the Chinese and to turn their mind to internal problems and the affairs of the Asiatic mainland. China, as a continental country, faces external danger from both the direction of the sea and the direction of the land frontier. During the early Ming period, the threat from the sea were the Wo-k'ou, but these Japanese pirates never constituted as serious a menace to the security of China as the Chin and Mongol invaders did in the Sung. Although they harried the seaboard provinces, their aim was pillage and, in contrast to the Chin and the Mongols who invaded China by land and sea, they did not attempt the destruction of China's political existence. Moreover, from 1466 to 1515, for a period of fifty years, the Japanese, involved in their own civil wars, made no raid on the coast of China. Meanwhile, the northern and northwestern borders of China were the scenes of sporadic incursions by nomadic peoples. By striking deep into the domains of the Mongol tribes, the Yung-lo Emperor had been able to hold them at bay, but, under his less energetic successors, the border peoples again became restive and they intensified their forays into China. In 1449, they defeated the Chinese in the decisive battle of T'u-mu, taking the Cheng-t'ung Emperor as prisoner and, within a decade after their occupation of the pastureland of the Yellow River Loop, intermittent fighting raged along the entire length of the Great Wall from Kansu to Liao-tung. The desire to avenge the humiliating defeats and to regain lost territory obsessed the attention of the Ming court and shaped its strategic policy. In concentrating its efforts on the north, it turned its back to the sea, lost interest in maritime matters and neglected the navy. It was during the second half of the fifteenth century, during the tumults and alarms in the north and the relative tranquility in the south and east, that the withdrawal of the off-shore bases and the decay of the entire naval establishment took place.

As Ming China turned its attention away from the sea to face the land frontier of the north and northwest, there was also a slackening of the pressure to expand out to sea. During the Sung, Yüan and early Ming epoch, there

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47 Lung-chiang ch'uan-ch'ang chih, 3:8.
48 Ibid., 5:4.
49 Ibid., 3:10 and 4:5.
50 Ibid., 6:9-10.
had been a strong drift of population from the interior provinces of the north to the region of the Lower Yangtze and, with the crowding of the southeastern provinces, the chief outlet for expansion had been out to sea. But, during the fifteenth century, the shift of population had been steadily away from the seaboard provinces. The process began as early as the reign of the first Ming emperor when he ordered the forcible transfer of residents from Kiangsu, Chekiang, Shantung and Kwangtung to Anhwei and Honan for resettlement. One such move, that of 1374, involved nearly three quarters of a million people. Large numbers moved inland to seek employment in the districts which had prospered by the reopening of the Grand Canal and others, driven by economic distress and civil commotions, migrated further into the hinterland. Whatever may have been the cause, the interior provinces of the north and — indicative of the new direction of population movements — Yünnan, grew in population during the hundred years from 1371 to 1491: Shensi from 2.3 million to four million and Hopei from two to four million, while the coastal population declined: Chekiang from 10.5 million to 5.3 million, Fukien from four to two million, and Kwangtung from three to two million. In 1391, there were three districts in the Yangtze delta with population of over a million; in 1491, there was only one, Soochow. In Chekiang, two-thirds of the residents of T'ai-chou left the district between 1426 and 1440, and in Kiangsu, the population of Sung-chiang dropped to half and that of Ch'ang-chou to a third. Thus, there was no longer a pressure of population to impel men to sail out to sea as in past centuries, although, it should be admitted, emigrants and traders did leave the provinces of Fukien and Kwangtung for Southeast Asia.

The decay of the coastal defenses and the naval establishment was also a symptom of the overall deterioration of political order, the dislocation of the economy and social unrest. Even when the Ming empire was at the height of its power during the spacious reign of Yung-lo, the cancer of corruption was beginning to eat its way into the heart of the Ming state and to sap its vitality. The malady worsened as soon as the strong hand of Yung-lo was removed and, in the complex of deleterious factors, the most malignant

51 Ming ta-cheng tsuan-yao, 4: 6.
52 According to the Ming-shih (77: 5), the population of the empire dropped drastically during the T'ien-shun (1458—65) and Cheng-te (1506—21) periods. Chou Ch'en explained this was due to the flight of people from their home districts "some to seek the protection of powerful families, some pretending to be artisans went to the two capitals, some travelled through the empire as merchants or moved their families to live on boats". (Ibid.) On the decline and shift of the coastal population, see the Che-chiang t'ung-chih (Gazetteer of Chekiang), ch. 71—74 passim; MSL: Cheng-tung, 85: 5; and such recent works as Wang Ch'ung-wu: Rise and fall of population during the Ming period (Ming-tai hu-k'ou i hsiao-chang). YCHP, 20 (1936), 331—74, and Yokota Seizō: Concerning the phenomenon of population movements during the Ming period (Mingai ni okeru kokô no idô genshô ni tsuite), TYGH, 26 : 1 (Jan. 1938), 121—64 and 2 (Feb), 116—37.
was the usurpation of the eunuchs. These palace attendants had served as the emperor's agents in the provinces and abroad, but it was not until the minority of the Cheng-t'ung emperor (1436—49) that Wang Chen⁵³⁴ the eunuch came to be the evil genius at court and the first of a succession of powerful eunuchs who dominated the political scene. They terrorized, persecuted, arrested, humiliated, tortured, executed and banished officials who criticized or opposed them; they commanded the secret police and supervised the army, and they controlled the fiscal agencies, using them as means to consolidate their power and to amass private fortunes. By the Ch'eng-hua period, it was recorded that "palace attendants were everywhere" and the demands of their procurement program were six times the amount of the previous reign.⁵⁴ They employed soldiers to build palaces, used ships of the transportation fleet to carry their pelf, embarked in private commerce and acquired huge estates. Some ministers fought back, others were cowed, and many engaged in plots and intrigues. The lower-ranking officials, idle and ill-paid, became apathetic and their incompetence, maladministration and graft became commonplace. Engrossed in their own problems, the members of the official class, the leaders of the empire, had little inclination to think of less immediate matters such as the manifestation of China's power to foreign peoples and distant lands.

The political disintegration was attended by economic disorders, natural as well as man-made. The breach of the Yellow River dikes in 1448 which resulted in widespread inundation was followed by many floods, in which millions were rendered homeless. While the latifundia of the princes, consort families and eunuchs increased in size, millions were dispossessed and reduced to begging. Taxes, already excessive, mounted but little reached the government. In Soochow, where high rents and heavy taxation drove half of the farmers away from their land, the taxes by 1430 were eight million piculs in arrears, due largely to evasion by the powerful families. The taxable acreage of the empire shrank from 8.5 million ch'ing (one ch'ing being a hundred mou) in 1398 to 4.2 million in 1502. But the expenses of the court continuously multiplied, vast amounts being wasted in unproductive and non-essential enterprises, a course of action which frustrated the many attempts at retrenchment. In 1425, the voyages of the "treasure ships" were halted to save money but, at the same time, huge amounts of funds were granted to the princes of the imperial house and, in 1436, the manufacture of arms and the construction of warships were reduced as a measure

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⁵³ Ch'ien Mu: Kuo-shih ta-kang (Outline of national history), (1947 ed.), 1: 479-87.
⁵⁴ Ming-shih, 82: 5b.
⁵⁵ Ibid., 77: 9 and 153: 10. Also HWHTK, 2: 2788 cols 2-3.
⁵⁶ Ming-shih, 77: 7.
of economy but a great sum of money was appropriated to build the mausoleum for the deceased emperor\(^57\).

The oppressive taxation, the multifarious and burdensome levies, maladministration and injustices added to the misery and privation of the people. Revolts and banditry became rife, the most serious of which were those in Chekiang and Fukien which broke out in 1448 which wrought havoc to the seaboard provinces, crippling the empire from within at a time when it was engaged in a war on the Yunnan-Burma border and facing the threat of invasion from the Oirats in the north.

In sum, decay and impoverishment afflicted the Ming empire by the middle of the fifteenth century and these conditions became progressively worse in the succeeding decades. As Ku Yen-wu showed in his massive analysis of the factors of strength and weakness of the Ming empire, the political, economic and social decline had a direct bearing on the neglect and disrepair of the entire Ming military establishment, of which the naval forces were a part\(^58\). Arnold Toynbee, in his study of the breakdown of civilizations, has also pointed out that internal deterioration invariably preceded the abandonment of techniques, a conclusion which can be applied to the decline of the Ming navy. But, underlying the physical decay of the Ming dynasty, there was a deeper change, a depression of the spirit of the people.

The increasing absorption of the scholar-officials in the internal problems of the state and the preoccupation of the people in general with their own tribulations were concomitant with the psychological introversion and intellectual stagnation of the time. In the Sung, there had been a cultural effervescence when men's mind shook itself free from the grip of tradition and displayed a keen desire to learn and interest in, among other things, commerce and technology which complemented the spirit of expansion and enterprise and advanced the movement out to sea. But, always latent in Chinese society, there were forces which ran counter to this trend and, in the middle of the Ming period, they prevailed and acted to inhibit the temper and spirit of the Chinese people. The tedious memorization of the commentaries on the classics by the members of the school of the Ch'eng brothers and Chu Hsi, published in Yung-lo's time and prescribed by the state as authoritative, engrossed the mind of men and the writing of stylized "eight-legged" essays for the civil service examinations, introduced in the Ch'eng-hua period, dulled their intellect\(^59\). Because of the trend toward pedantry and the restrictions of the fields of study for these tests, which

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\(^{57}\) Ibid., 82 : 5. Also MSL: Cheng-t'ung, 1 : 9.

\(^{58}\) Ku Yen-wu, LPS, \(t \ell 'e\) 6, 7, 8, 11, 12, 33 and 36 passim.

\(^{59}\) Ku Yen-wu has demonstrated that the writing of "eight-legged" essays began around 1487 and that the evil of this system in dulling the intellect of the Chinese was greater than the book-burning by the first Ch'in emperor. (Jih-chih-lu shih-chi 16 : 48 and 51). A prototype of these essay-forms was used in the examinations in the Hung-wu period (Ming-shih, 70 : 1).
was the royal road to official employment and social prestige, the best minds of the empire devoted themselves to literary pursuits and exegetic studies to the exclusion of subjects of more practical value to the society they lived in.

With a few known exceptions, the type of scholar who emerged and who set the intellectual tone were men mediocre in their creativity and narrow in their outlook, men whose credo was *ching* ([54]) (non-activity), whose watchword was *ching* ([55]) (serious composure), and whose goal was *han-yang* ([56]) (moral cultivation). There was Wu Yü-pi ([57]) (1392–1469), called the "precursor of the Ming thinkers", a man whose "teaching largely consisted of the cultivation of one's character, the control of one's emotions and being content with poverty". There was Hsüeh Hsüan ([58]) (1389–1464), who exhorted his followers to be grave in demeanor, to be satisfied with their station in life and to study only the "orthodox interpretation" of the classics by Chu Hsi and his school. These scholars devoted their time to discourses on mind and human nature and shrugged off as too mundane for their attention the affairs of daily life. There were, too, men like Ch'en Hsien-chang ([60]) (1428–1500) who favored *ching-tso* ([61]) (dhyāna, the Buddhist exercise of silent sitting) as a means of self-cultivation. Such metaphysical speculations, without the solid ground of practical knowledge and the study of books, it has been pointed out, merely encouraged mental indolence for men whose mind was not sufficiently disciplined.

Yet these scholars were highly respected, their way of life admired and imitated and their ideas lend easily for extension and application from the individual to the society and to the state. The blind adherence to works of the Chu Hsi School of Sung Confucianism without acquiring their master's curiosity about nature and the world outside stifled technology, interest in ship-building and armaments, and the desire to learn about distant lands and foreign peoples.

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60 Chang Hsüeh-ch'eng: Wen-shih t'ung-l ([52]) (TSCC ed.), 3 : 71-72, pointed out the study of the mind and human nature led easily to idle speculation and away from true learning. Ku Yen-wu and Yen Yüan were among the many who strongly criticized this type of scholarship. Jung Chao-tsu ([53]), in his *Ming-tai ssu-hsiang-shih* (History of Ming Thought), (1941), 7-13, pointed out the hiatus in intellectual creativity during the decades between Fang Hsiao-ju and Wang Shou-jen. During these years, he said, the intellectual leaders were unimaginative and hidebound. "The spirit of the Sung thinkers of learning widely to acquire knowledge had by now vanished. The empty discussion of returning to one's own true nature permits one to be lazy and not to seek other fields of learning".


62 In contrast to the books on geography and travel accounts of the late Sung, Yuan and early Ming times, which showed a fairly clear conception of foreign lands...
The sermons of these scholars to men to accept their destiny as decreed by Heaven, to be happy with their lot in life and to suppress desires for worldly things discouraged economic undertakings and commerce. In contrast to the state-controlled economic monopolies of the Sung, Yüan and early Ming epoch, of which naval expeditions to lands across the sea were a facet, the view that the state should not engage in economic enterprises began to prevail in the middle Ming period.

The emphasis on non-activity and on being sedate and cautious dampened men’s adventurous spirit and martial ardor and their attention to moral cultivation found expression in the oft-repeated view that China could win the fealty of neighboring states, not by force of arms but by the brilliance of cultural attainment. In the milieu of political weakness and economic distress, the opinion that China should not exhaust herself by involvement in foreign wars gained ground. A strong Taoist streak showed through in the writings of many scholars and officials of this time. Quoting directly from Lao-tzu, a minister submitted a memorial in 1426 in which he declared:

Arms are the instruments of evil which the sage does not use unless he must. The noble rulers and wise ministers of old did not dissipate the strength of the people by deeds of arm. This was a farsighted policy ... Your minister hopes that your majesty ... would not indulge in military pursuits nor glorify the sending of expeditions to distant countries. Abandon the barren lands abroad and give the people of China a respite so that they could devote themselves to husbandry and to the schools. Thus, there would be no wars and suffering on the frontier and no murmuring in the villages, the commanders would not seek fame and the soldiers would not sacrifice their lives abroad, the people from afar would voluntarily submit and distant lands would come into our fold, and our dynasty would last for ten thousand generations. These anti-militaristic and anti-expansionistic sentiments had a definite bearing on the slackening of the defenses, the suspension of the overseas expeditions and the evacuation of Annam.

The military spirit waned. In 1373, for example, Liao Yung-chung urged that, in dealing with external foes, China should build a strong military force and, he added, “The construction of sea-going ships to halt the invaders and to protect our people is a great virtue.” But, in 1428, Yang Shih-
ch'i decried against foreign wars because, echoing a statement by Wu Yü-pi that the superior man should not fight an inferior man, he said that China should not stoop to fight with wolves and pigs and that a retreat from Annam was a great virtue. In 1384, when residents of Chekiang complained about the cost of building the guard stations and fleets, T'ang Ho told them that sacrifices were necessary to insure future security. After 1426, the fleets were reduced and the off-shore bases withdrawn on the pretext of lightening the burden of the people who, by inference, could well have been the powerful commercial families of the coast.

There was, thus, a pronounced change in the character and temperament of Chinese people during the middle of the Ming period: it was a lethargy that followed intense activity when reasonableness replaced aggressiveness and pacifism succeeded militancy. The leaders of China became less vigorous in action and more literary-minded. They became more "civilized" in the definition of Giambattista Vico, and decadent, to paraphrase Oswald Spengler, when men preferred lyrics to techniques, epistemology to politics, and the paintbrush to the sea. Against a background of general deterioration and widespread distress, this was the mentality which prompted Yang Shih-ch'i to urge a retreat from Annam on the ground that it was a virtuous act, Chou Kan to advocate the withdrawal of the island naval bases to reduce the cost of maintenance, and Liu Ta-hsia to destroy the sea-charts to frustrate the dispatch of what he claimed to be costly expeditions.

The strong pull of the continent and its multitudinous affairs turned the attention of China to the land and away from the sea. The political decay, social unrest and economic dislocations so weakened China that she lay helpless in her predicament, while the spirit of the Chinese people, no longer as dynamic as before, languished. Under these conditions, the once-mighty Ming navy disintegrated. It could barely hold its own against the raids by sea-borne marauders in its home waters let alone launch expeditions to foreign lands. It took China three centuries to ascend to the position of maritime greatness but the descent was swift and easy. To be sure, the coastal residents continued to engage in seafaring and trade and the government still maintained naval forces which saw much action during the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, but Chinese sea power never regained the prominent position it occupied during the late Sung, Yuan and particularly, the early Ming periods.

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66 Ming-shih, 126:15.
67 周幹
68 呂大夏