3. An engraving of the Mekong Exploration Commission at Angkor Wat in 1866, during its attempt to chart a viable commercial trade route from Saigon to southern China. Although the expedition failed in its aim, it helped extend French control over Indochina and foreshadowed China's current economic integration with the Mekong region. The mission's commander, Ernest Doudart de Lagrée, is at far right.

4. The Mekong River at Pakbeng, Laos. In recent years, Beijing has shaped the great river to serve its economy, damming its upper reaches and opening the waterway to large-scale cargo transport. China's control of the headwaters of the Mekong gives it increasing strategic leverage over the smaller nations downstream.

5. Ornamental gate at the Chinese-run Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone, a palm-fringed gambling enclave on the Mekong River in northwestern Laos. The zone and its crown-topped casino are among the most ostentatious signs of China's rising influence along Southeast Asia's great river.

6. Chinese police escort Naw Kham, an ethnic Shan bandit and drug-runner, to his execution in Kunming on March 1, 2013. Accused of masterminding the murder of 13 Chinese sailors in 2011, the hunt for Naw Kham marked a dramatic increase in Beijing's security presence in mainland Southeast Asia.

7. Zhao Wei, chairman of the Kings Romans Group, pictured in a promotional brochure produced by his company. Zhao's gambling operation in the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone is believed to be deeply immersed in the region's illicit trades.

8. A Vietnamese infantryman beats back invading Chinese troops on a mural at a military cemetery outside the town of Sapa in northern Vietnam in March 2003. A 1979 border war with China cost tens of thousands of lives, but in the interest of good relations with Beijing is seldom mentioned by Vietnam's communist government.

9. Patriotic demonstrators take part in an unauthorized march in Hanoi on March 14, 2016, marking the anniversary of a 1988 naval clash with China in the Spratly Islands, in which Chinese sailors gunned down 64 Vietnamese personnel. Nurtured by centuries of tense relations, anti-Chinese sentiment cuts across every social divide in contemporary Vietnam.

10. Prime Minister Hun Sen of Cambodia attends a state funeral in the capital Phnom Penh in June 2015. During his 35 years in power, Hun Sen has gone from being one of China's harshest critics to its closest friend and client in Southeast Asia.

11. A Chinese-run casino in Sihanoukville, on the Cambodian coast. Since 2015, a wave of Chinese money has transformed this small port city, once popular with Western backpackers, into a tourism and gambling hub: a down-market Macao on the Gulf of Thailand.

12. A Chinese railway bridge under construction in the hills of China's Yunnan province, en route to the Lao border town of Boten and the capital Vientiane. The Laos–China railway, which will tunnel its way through 414 kilometers of rugged terrain, is a striking example of Chinese engineering prowess—but questions linger over its utility.

13. Chinese shops at the Sanjiang Market in Vientiane, Laos. Since the 1990s, Laos and other mainland Southeast Asian nations have become a magnet for traders and businesspeople from China. This wave of "new migrants" has transformed parts of Vientiane and northern Laos into facsimiles of urban China, right down to the dangling red plastic lanterns.

14. Thailand's Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha attends a birthday ceremony for Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn in Bangkok in April 2015. When Western powers criticized the coup d'état that brought him to power in May 2014, Prayuth steered his nation into a closer partnership with China.

15. Yaowarat Road, the main thoroughfare in Bangkok's Chinatown, the largest in Southeast Asia. As elsewhere in Southeast Asia, ethnic Chinese predominate at the upper echelons of Thai politics and business, facilitating economic linkages with China and softening apprehensions of its waxing power.

16. Aung San Suu Kyi, Burma's de facto leader, speaks at an election campaign rally in Shan State on September 6, 2015. As the one-time human rights icon came under fierce Western criticism following the military's ethnic cleansing of Rohingya Muslims in late 2017, her government was pushed into an uneasy reliance on China.

17. A vista of Mong La, the capital of Special Region No. 4, a militia-run enclave perched on the border between Burma's Shan State and China's Yunnan province. An effective annex of southern China, the small settlement testifies to Beijing's strong presence in the ethnic rebel zones abutting its sensitive southwestern frontier.

18. A statue of Admiral Zheng He, who led the great Ming dynasty ocean voyages in the early fifteenth century, at the Tay Kak Sie Temple in Semarang, Indonesia. As China builds up its naval capacity, Zheng has been used to bolster Beijing's claim that its rise will be uniquely peaceful and beneficent.

19. Xi Jinping, then China's vice president (left), and Singapore's minister mentor Lee Kuan Yew unveil a commemorative bust of Deng Xiaoping in Singapore on November 14, 2010. Deng's visit to Singapore in 1978 laid the foundation for a special relationship between the two nations—one that is now coming under increased strain.

20. The showroom of Forest City, a major Chinese property development, in Johor Bahru, on the tip of peninsular Malaysia. Concern about China's expanding influence during the administration of Prime Minister Najib Razak played a significant role in the historic defeat of Najib's Barisan Nasional coalition at national elections in May 2018.

21. A cartoon published in May 2017 by the Malaysian cartoonist Zunar, accusing Najib of selling out Malaysia in exchange for Chinese largesse. Under political fire for receiving hundreds of millions in pilfered funds from the sovereign wealth fund 1MDB, Najib allegedly approved a raft of overpriced Chinese infrastructure deals.

22. The aftermath of riots in the Indonesian capital Jakarta on May 14, 1998, which ended Suharto's 31-year rule and saw violent pogroms against Chinese-Indonesians. Indonesia's relationship with China is impossible to detach from popular prejudices toward the country's small but economically dominant ethnic Chinese minority.

23. Kopi Es Tak Kie (est. 1927), the oldest café in Glodok, Jakarta's Chinatown. While Indonesia's Chinese community has come a long way since the fall of Suharto, it finds itself caught between China's increasing power and a rising tide of religious populism that casts ethnic Chinese as alien to Indonesian society.

24. Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte (holding sniper rifle) with outgoing national police chief Ronald "Bato" dela Rosa during a handover ceremony in Manila on April 19, 2018. After his shock election victory in May 2016, Duterte wrenched the Philippines' foreign policy away from the United States, its traditional ally, and embraced China.

25. An aerial view of Thitu Island—known as Pag-asa, or "hope" in Tagalog—taken on November 26, 2005. This isolated Filipino outpost in the Spratly Islands supports a population of 120 civilians, who dwell in the shadow of the imposing Chinese military installations on nearby Subi Reef.

east coast of Africa, the eunuch admiral is most closely associated with Malacca. He visited the entrepôt at least five times, during which he built godowns and stockades for use on subsequent voyages. His journeys also sealed Malacca's tributary relationship with the Ming: its first three leaders traveled to China for formal investiture by the emperor, and the sultanate dispatched regular missions of tribute.[4] In exchange, the Ming navy offered protection from Siam and the powerful kingdom of Majapahit on the island of Java, security that was pivotal to Malacca's commercial flowering.

Six centuries on, Zheng is once again a dominant presence in Malacca. A street, a gallery, and several hotels are named after Cheng Ho, as his name is rendered in Malaysia. He is commemorated by a statue and a plaque on the Malacca River that records where he first touched Malaccan soil in 1405. The most elaborate monument to Zheng's legacy is the Cheng Ho Cultural Museum, a narrow two-story building not far from the old Dutch square. Officially opened in 2005, on the 600th anniversary of his first voyage, the museum offers a detailed telling of Zheng's life and times, from his birth to a prominent Muslim family in Yunnan to his capture by an invading Ming army at the age of 13, when he was castrated to serve as a palace eunuch. It also describes the pioneering voyages that earned him his place in history.

For the museum's founder Tan Ta Sen, a Malaysian-born scholar and entrepreneur from Singapore who heads the International Zheng He Society, the famous voyager deserves credit for securing Malacca's independence, and bringing peace and prosperity to the region as a whole. "Zheng He is important history, not only to Malacca and Southeast Asia, but for the spirit itself," Tan, a salt-haired man in his seventies, said when we met in Singapore in late 2017. "When the Portuguese came, they slaughtered 15,000 people, but Zheng never killed anybody, never took one inch of territory."

For Tan, the Cheng Ho Cultural Museum is the culmination of a lifetime's fascination with Zheng and his voyages. A decade ago, he relinquished day-to-day control of Utraco, his successful construction firm, and returned to the scholarly career that he abandoned in the late 1970s to go into business. He has since written numerous books and monographs about the Ming dynasty and its ties to Malacca, and amassed an extensive private collection of Chinese antiquities, including Ming cannons and ceramics dating as far back as the Tang dynasty. Those not on display at the museum he stores on the second floor of his office, a boxy steel building in the Jurong industrial district of

Singapore. During the construction of the museum in Malacca, workers found five ancient wells, and unearthed numerous fragments of Ming porcelain: proof, Tan said, of his theory that it occupies the site of a former warehouse complex built by Zheng six centuries ago. "It took many years. It's a passion," he said of the museum.

The museum's displays reflect Tan's view that the Ming ventured abroad to trade, but never to conquer. Captions describe Zheng as "a big-hearted peace ambassador" who exported "peace and fortune" to the world, teaching Vietnamese to make tofu and Africans to plant cotton. In a darkened room, a video shows CGI renditions of the Ming fleets and effuses on their contributions to culture and diplomacy. "Cheng Ho helped to acquaint the world with China," a stentorian voiceover intones, "and China with the world."

In the West, Zheng and his legacy have long been the subject of debate, especially since the publication in 2002 of *1421: The Year China Discovered the World*, by the former British submarine officer Gavin Menzies. In the book, Menzies asserted that Zheng's fleets rounded the Cape of Good Hope and visited South America, decades ahead of Columbus. The hypothesis is mostly dismissed by historians; one international group of experts called the book "a work of sheer fiction presented as revisionist history."[5]

Yet even by the light of the available evidence, the Zheng He voyages were remarkable endeavors. His "treasure ships" (*baochuan*) were some of the largest wooden vessels to take to the seas, each weighing 1,500 tons, five times the size of the battered caravel that the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama would coax around the Cape and on toward India at the end of the fifteenth century. Their hulls painted with dragons, their rigging snapping with pennants of colored silk, the treasure ships were imposing manifestations of the majesty of the Ming at the apogee of its power. Zheng's fleet is believed to have contained 250–300 *baochuan* accompanied by a flotilla of supply ships, warships, and patrol boats. In total they carried around 27,000 men, most of them soldiers. In its prime, Joseph Needham writes, "the Ming navy probably outclassed that of any other Asian nation at any time in history, and would have been more than a match for that of any contemporary European State or even a combination of them."[6]

Then, just as their naval power reached its height, the Ming rulers initiated a sudden inward turn. This followed the death in 1424 of Yongle, the first great emperor of the Ming, who had ordered Zheng's expeditions. His successors

decreed a ban on all seafaring activities, dismantled Nanjing's mighty shipyards, and shrank the imperial navy down to a small coastal defense force. China's maritime power rapidly declined, never fully to recover. Thus ensued one of the great contingencies of global history. The Ming withdrawal from the oceans halted the momentum of China's maritime development just as the Europeans were beginning to take to the seas. In 1498, Vasco da Gama dropped anchor on the Indian subcontinent, initiating an era of Western exploration and conquest. Deprived of Chinese naval protection, Malacca fell to the Portuguese in 1511, and the sultanate went into decline. For the Chinese empire, the ramifications of this retreat from the sea were less immediate, but ultimately sped it on a downward trajectory that led to the Opium Wars, the treaty ports, and its "century of humiliation" at the hands of the Western imperial powers and Japan—all of which fell upon China from the seas.

Historians have offered several theories as to why the Ming abandoned the ocean. One theory is that Yongle's successors saw the "treasure fleets" as a costly extravagance that they were unwilling to sustain. Another is that the renovation of the ancient Grand Canal in the early 1400s reduced China's need for an ocean-going fleet. Whatever the exact cause, the inward turn was consistent with the Chinese state's historically disdainful attitude toward the maritime world. Across the vast sweep of its history, the greatest threats to imperial China's survival had come not from the sea, but from the barren steppes to the north, home to nomadic "barbarian" warrior peoples like the Mongols and the Manchus. This continental focus, the historian Wensheng Wang writes, "pushed the seafaring world to the margins of the Chinese cognitive frame as though it stood outside and beyond history." Wild and incomprehensibly vast, the seas were viewed as an untamable realm, "a terror-filled world of disorder and unknown possibilities."[7] The concrete manifestation of this earthbound mentality was not the imperial armada, restlessly seeking out distant markets and colonies, but the Great Wall, a physical barrier against the barbarian realm.

To be sure, the oceans were hardly terra incognita to the Chinese. Dating back to the time of the Roman Empire, coastal peoples like the Hokkien had sailed widely through the south seas, and maintained enduring commercial connections across the waters. By the time of Zheng's voyages, southern Chinese had been dominant in the South China Sea trade for half a millennium, dealing in everything from silk and porcelain to sea cucumbers and

edible birds' nests. Over time, the historian Wang Gungwu writes, the maritime expanses of the Nanyang "became to the southern Chinese what the land outside the Jade Gate was to the northern Chinese. Its waters and its island straits were the sands and the mountain passes of Central Asia; its ports were like the caravanserais."[8] Later, they emigrated in large numbers into the Nanyang, often in defiance of official bans: in fact, the Chinese state's turn from the seas in the fifteenth century coincided with the first significant movement of Chinese into Siam, Vietnam, and the Malay archipelago.

Despite the connection of China's coastal peoples with the sea, Zheng He's titanic "treasure fleet" was an exception to the continental rule: an ocean-going feat never matched by any Chinese state, before or since. Nearly 600 years on, however, China is embarking upon the most determined maritime push since the heyday of the Ming dynasty. As the country's economy has grown, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has engineered a "great leap outward" into the seas, building up a "blue-water" navy capable of projecting power deep into the Pacific and Indian oceans, and claiming sovereignty over vast swathes of ocean once traversed by Zheng's armadas.[9] For the first time in six centuries, Chinese officials are speaking of their country's destiny in explicitly maritime terms.

The hard edge of China's maritime leap is a military modernization drive that has focused on the navy and supporting air power and reconnaissance capabilities—all instruments of maritime power projection. Under Xi, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has expanded rapidly in size and capability. Between 2014 and 2018, China launched more submarines, warships, amphibious vessels, and auxiliaries than the number of ships currently serving in the navies of Germany, India, Spain, and the United Kingdom, combined.[10] Many were new advanced classes of frigates, destroyers, and nuclear-powered submarines that have quickly closed the operational gap between the PLAN and the US and Japanese navies. In 2012, the Chinese navy commissioned its first aircraft carrier, the *Liaoning*, purchased from Ukraine in 1998 at a knock-down price and subsequently refitted in China. Two more domestically produced carriers—known as Type 001A and Type 002—are currently in production.

President Xi has also been more willing than his predecessors to deploy naval force in support of Chinese objectives, especially in the South China Sea. In late 2013, Chinese dredgers began creating facts on the ground in the disputed Spratly Islands, transforming reefs and barren maritime features into

fortified islands complete with radar installations and airfields. These islands have provided refueling and resupply bases for the navy and coastguard vessels that China has used to extend its control over the critical waterway.

China's immediate goal is to protect the shipping lanes upon which its economy is heavily dependent. In practice, this means gaining unfettered control of the waters lying within what Chinese strategists refer to as the "first island chain," which traces an arc south from the Japanese archipelago to Taiwan, the Philippines, and the northern coast of Borneo. Unable for now to match the US Navy in a head-to-head confrontation, the Chinese have instead invested in what security boffins term "anti-access and area denial": an asymmetric strategy designed to incrementally raise the costs to American vessels of entering its desired zone of influence, with the eventual aim of evicting them from the area altogether. Ahead of his appointment as commander of the US Indo-Pacific Command in 2018, Admiral Philip Davidson told a congressional committee that China was now capable of controlling the South China Sea in all scenarios "short of war with the United States."[11] This strategy is informed by Beijing's ardent desire to reattach the island of Taiwan to the mainland, but also extends beyond it. As the naval scholar Toshi Yoshihara argues, Taiwan's totemic status for the CCP is matched by its importance as a potential springboard into the Pacific. He quotes a Chinese military strategist who describes the island as "a lock around the neck of a great dragon."[12]

Like his dynastic progenitors, Mao Zedong disdained the seas, opting for a small navy capable of controlling the waters immediately touching China's shores. Like much else in China, this emphasis began to shift under Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s. Just as some Chinese strategists were pushing for the creation of an overland corridor through mainland Southeast Asia to the Indian Ocean, others were directing their gaze offshore. Many absorbed the writings of Alfred Thayer Mahan, the nineteenth-century American evangelist of sea-power, who argued that control of the "wide common" of the ocean was the key to national survival and economic development. Mahan's greatest work, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*, published in 1890, underpinned the American republic's colonial push into the Pacific, its seizure of Hawaii and the Philippines, and its development of a world-class navy. Now his teachings were helping China in its own maritime push.

The most prominent Chinese booster of Mahanian strategy was Admiral Liu Huaqing, a storied People's Liberation Army (PLA) veteran who had

endured the Long March and fought in the war against the Nationalists. As PLAN commander from 1982 to 1987, Liu argued that as China became more reliant on trade and investment to modernize, it needed to strengthen its control over the seas. Wielding Mahan's writings against his bureaucratic opponents, he called for the nation to develop a "blue-water" capability that would secure the sea-lanes lying within the first island chain. "Without an aircraft carrier, I will die with my eyelids open," Liu told an interviewer in 1987.[13] Early the following year, the Chinese navy seized Johnson South Reef in the Spratly Islands, establishing its first beachhead in the archipelago. By the end of the year, China had occupied six reefs and atolls in the Spratlys. It was a dramatic display of Liu's doctrine in action.

Liu's naval advocacy took place around the same time that other Chinese intellectuals were scrutinizing the conservative, land-bound values of traditional Chinese civilization. One notable example was *River Elegy*, a six-part documentary series directed by the scholar and filmmaker Wang Luxiang, which was televised in June 1988, at the height of the pre-Tiananmen political ferment. The series depicted China's backwardness as an outgrowth of fundamental flaws in Chinese culture, arguing that the nation's revival would come not from the Yellow River—Wang's symbol for the ossified conservativism of old China—but from the oceans, which he used to embody the more open, explorative cultures of Europe, America, and Japan.[14]

Shortly after airing, *River Elegy* was banned by the CCP for its implied advocacy of political reform. Nevertheless, there was much in Deng's reforms that evinced its more open approach to the outside world. His decision to start by developing China's coastal provinces built on their long connections with the oceans, transforming the sites of the humiliating "unequal treaties" into engines of economic rejuvenation. He also negotiated the return of the former colonies of Hong Kong and Macao from Britain and Portugal: emblems of China's subjugation by the maritime empires of the West. In a final gesture before he died, Deng requested that his ashes be scattered over the seas.[15]

The oceans have since become central to China's re-emergence as a global power. Coastal provinces and cities account for a small fraction of its landmass, but more than half of its GDP.[16] Between 1980 and 2000, China built more than 184 new ports to support its rapidly expanding economy, and the country today boasts seven of the world's ten busiest container ports.[17] By 2018, Chinese companies had helped build or expand 42 ports in 34 countries, many under

the aegis of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).[18] China's growing dependence on foreign supplies of oil, natural gas, and other commodities—transported predominantly by oil tanker and container ship—has made control of these routes vital to its continued growth. In 2015, a Chinese defense white paper urged that the "traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned, and great importance has to be attached to managing the seas and oceans and protecting maritime rights and interests."[19]

The Chinese government's new seafaring focus is profoundly informed by the disasters of the past. During the giant naval regatta marking the 70th anniversary of the PLAN's founding in April 2019, state media commentaries were rich with references to old humiliations. "A strong navy is essential for a country to safeguard its national security," one Xinhua report declared. "From 1840 to 1949, China was invaded by foreign powers more than 470 times from the sea, which brought untold suffering to its people."[20] Like the British before them, and the Americans today, China aims to "rule the waves and waive the rules"—first in its backyard, and then beyond.

Unsurprisingly, China's oceanic push has created considerable friction with the five nations of maritime Southeast Asia, a dispersed island region that runs in a crescent from the balcony of Aceh at the tip of western Sumatra to the Banda Islands in the east of the Indonesian archipelago to Luzon island in the northern Philippines. To soothe the region's anxieties, Chinese leaders have reached back to the nation's last great era of sea-going endeavor: the "treasure fleet" voyages of the early fifteenth century. In recent years scholars and officials have repeatedly referenced Admiral Zheng He as an envoy of trade, brotherhood, and cultural exchange—a figure who, as a leading Chinese scholar of Southeast Asia has put it, made "outstanding contributions to global navigation and to the friendship between China and other countries."[21] Like the Cheng Ho Cultural Museum in Malacca, this view emphasizes the supposedly peaceful intent of Zheng's voyages, projecting them onto present maritime ambitions. Effectively, Zheng has been enlisted as the official mascot of China's new march to the sea.

For several centuries after his death, Admiral Zheng was all but forgotten in his homeland, even as memories endured in the Malay archipelago, where he passed into local folklore as the quasi-spiritual deity San Pao Kung, the "lord of three treasures," worshipped at mosques and temples throughout the islands.[22] It was only in the late nineteenth century that Zheng resurfaced in Chinese

discourse, resurrected by reformers eager to stiffen an enfeebled China with a new sense of national pride. As Howard French relates, the story of China's pioneering admiral was quickly used to anchor a narrative of Chinese exceptionalism, which contrasted the peaceable Ming voyages with the aggression of the Western empires. The Chinese scholar-reformer Liang Qichao frequently invoked Zheng's exploits—in 1905, he published an essay titled "Zheng He: A great navigator of our homeland"—as did the republican leader Sun Yat-sen. Both looked to Zheng as a reminder of the grandeur of the past, and as "proof that China was different by nature and, by clear inference, morally superior to the West."[23]

Today, Chinese officials wield this exceptionalist narrative to buttress China's claim that its rise will be different—more peaceful, more "win–win"—to that of the great powers of the past. Among the most active retailers of the Zheng myth in the current Chinese administration is Premier Li Keqiang, who has referenced the famous admiral on state visits to the Philippines, Indonesia, and Singapore. During an official visit to Malaysia in late 2015, Li gave several speeches hailing Zheng as an example of the "invaluable bond of peace and friendship" between China and the maritime nations of Southeast Asia. "Instead of blood and fire, plundering and colonialism," Li told delegates to the 18th China–ASEAN Summit, "he brought with him Chinese porcelain, silk, and tea as well as friendship and goodwill from the Chinese people."[24] The following day, Li traveled to Malacca and visited the Cheng Ho Cultural Museum, where Tan Ta Sen gave him a private tour. (Photos from the visit are on display in the museum's lobby.)

Zheng's legacy also offers historical ballast for the softer edge of China's naval modernization drive: the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR), a scheme of port-building and ocean connectivity that forms the "road" component of the BRI. Xi launched the initiative in October 2013 in a speech to the Indonesian parliament rich with references to the "shared destiny" of China and maritime Southeast Asia. He included a customary mention of Zheng He, who, in Xi's words, "left nice stories of friendly exchanges between the Chinese and Indonesian peoples."[25] The MSR shows a keen awareness of historical precedents: maps of these maritime "roads" resemble closely the routes traveled by Zheng's fleets in the fifteenth century.

The problem is that Zheng He's voyages were never as peaceful or "win–win" as Chinese officials like to claim. The "treasure fleets" were one part of a

policy of aggressive southern expansion undertaken by the Yongle Emperor in the early fifteenth century. During Yongle's 1402–24 reign, Chinese armies invaded and briefly annexed northern Vietnam, and undertook a concerted program of settler colonialism in recently conquered Yunnan. The historian Geoff Wade, a specialist on relations between Southeast Asia and the Ming, has argued that Zheng essentially carried this expansionist spirit to the seas: his fleets included large contingents of troops, and intervened openly in the disputes of the region. In what is now Sri Lanka, he even toppled a local ruler, Alaskawera, and hauled him back to the Ming court in Nanjing. The aim of Zheng's voyages, Wade writes, was "to achieve the recognition of Ming dominance of (or perhaps suzerainty over) all the polities of the known maritime world. To achieve this they used force, or the threat thereof."[26] As with Gavin Menzies's claim that the Chinese admiral voyaged to the Americas, the official narrative of Zheng's voyages does not stand up to close scrutiny.

That's not to say that this message will fail to resonate in maritime Southeast Asia, which, like China, experienced the contusions of Western and Japanese imperialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. When I interviewed him in October 2017, Malaysia's two-time prime minister Mahathir Mohamad said that for all his concerns about Chinese power, "Malaysia has been dealing with China for 2,000 years. Somehow or other they have never conquered us." The problem is that Beijing's actions are increasingly undercutting its self-image as a fellow Asian victim of Western bullying. Three of the region's states—Malaysia, Brunei, and the Philippines—directly contest China's "nine-dash line" claim in the South China Sea, while the remaining two—Singapore and Indonesia—have spoken out strongly against it. This is not simply a question of dueling nationalistic traditions. At stake also is access to a share of the region's bountiful maritime resources, including large undersea deposits of oil and gas. In the sea-girt regions of Southeast Asia, including Vietnam, I have also heard concerns about the strain on vital fishery resources, and the adverse environmental impacts of Chinese land reclamation efforts.

As these sovereign clashes suggest, maritime Southeast Asia presents a much more formidable barrier to the extension of Chinese influence than the five mainland nations contiguous with China. Despite trading for centuries with China and absorbing huge numbers of its sons and daughters, the

island region has had only glancing contact with the Chinese state. As Philip Bowring writes in his book *Empire of the Winds*, maritime Southeast Asia has historically been the domain of Austronesian peoples—the Malays—who share a common cultural, linguistic, and seafaring heritage. This unity has led Bowring to term the region "Nusantaria"—a derivation of *nusantara*, a Malay word meaning "island realm."

Contrary to Beijing's historical claims to most of the South China Sea, the Chinese state came late to "Nusantaria," just one in a succession of outside influences—Indian culture, Islamic religion, Western civilization—that washed through the region.[27] While the Malay peoples traded with and occasionally paid tribute to the Chinese empire, as in the case of the Malacca Sultanate, C.P. Fitzgerald writes that the archipelago was "only marginally concerned with China and only very occasionally affected by her power."[28]

Until the twentieth century, the region's main contact with China came via the peoples that flowed from China's shores, first as sailors and merchants, then as immigrants seeking refuge and prosperity across the warm, fertile arc of the Nanyang. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these immigrants set forth from the port cities of Fujian and Guangdong, boarding leaky steamships that bore them into new lives of toil on Javanese sugar plantations, in the tin mines of Malaya, and on the docks of Singapore. Here they joined an earlier wave of Chinese transplants—the Peranakans, or Straits Chinese—whose presence dated back to the time of the Zheng He voyages and earlier, and who had since intermarried with Malays and assimilated deeply into the local cultures.

While large-scale Chinese emigration to Southeast Asia was not the result of a conscious state policy—indeed, the inward-looking Chinese state frequently disdained those who left—these ethnic Chinese communities have had profound impacts on the ethnic composition and political life of maritime Southeast Asia. Today, three out of every four Singaporeans is of Chinese descent, and ethnic Chinese make up around a quarter of Malaysia's population. They also constitute smaller yet disproportionately wealthy and influential slices of the population in Indonesia and the Philippines.

The presence of these ethnic Chinese populations adds a further complicating layer to Beijing's bid for influence in maritime Southeast Asia. Anxieties about Chinese immigrants, long present across the region, have been especially acute in maritime Southeast Asia, where they have tended to fit most awkwardly

into the prevailing national, ethnic, and religious categories. As mentioned in Chapter 1, these frictions originated in the late nineteenth century, when Chinese nationalism led to an awakening of Chinese identities across Southeast Asia, tainting overseas ethnic Chinese with the perception of divided loyalties. These worries intensified after 1949, when the People's Republic of China (PRC) began exporting revolution to the region, leading colonial governments and independent states to impose various discriminatory measures against those of Chinese extraction.

The "Chinese question" has been a constant thread in the modern history of maritime Southeast Asia. The question of racial parity determined the territorial shape of the Malaysian Federation established in 1963, and contributed in some measure to Chinese-majority Singapore's expulsion from it two years later. Anti-Chinese politics has left an especially toxic legacy in Indonesia, where a small, economically dominant Chinese minority, still somehow associated with the specter of a long-vanished communism, has frequently been subjected to violent pogroms—most recently in May 1998, during the upheavals that accompanied the fall of President Suharto. The situation is less serious in the Philippines, where ethnic Chinese have been deeply assimilated into the nation's polyglot mix, but even there, questions of dual loyalties have arisen over the recent discord in the South China Sea. For the nations of maritime Southeast Asia, perceptions of China's rising power are inextricably bound up with their own internal ethnic politics, and the fear, only partly assuaged by Beijing's rhetoric of "non-interference," that China might one day call upon the loyalty of the ethnic Chinese abroad.

On this count, there are legitimate causes for concern. In 1980, China renounced the principle of dual nationality in an attempt to reassure Southeast Asian nations that it drew a firm distinction between Chinese ethnicity and Chinese citizenship. Now, two forces are conspiring to muddy the distinction once again. From one side, an emboldened and confident China under Xi Jinping has cast off its old policy of restraint, ratcheting up its cultural and political outreach to the ethnic Chinese abroad, hailing them as "members of the Chinese family" and employing a more assertive rhetoric about the welfare of its "compatriots" abroad. From the other side, nationalist and religious firebrands in maritime Southeast Asia, especially in Muslim-majority Malaysia and Indonesia, are again playing on fears of the ethnic

Chinese for domestic political gain, bringing anxieties about a resurgent China, and dormant resentments of its prosperous offspring, back into worrying alignment.

All the factors that make China's power an issue of great apprehension in maritime Southeast Asia converge on the tiny island-nation of Singapore. Like the Malacca Sultanate that rose to short prominence six centuries ago, modern Singapore is an offspring of globalization, skimming prosperity from the trade that courses through the Malacca Straits. First founded as a modern seaport by Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles in 1819, on an island at the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula, it quickly grew into a thriving cosmopolitan settlement, and an important node of British imperial power. Accounting for the success of his new emporium, Raffles ascribed credit to "the simple but almost magic result of that perfect freedom of Trade which it has been my good fortune to establish."[29]

Swap out British sea-power for American, and much the same is true of Singapore today. Under the rule of the leonine Lee Kuan Yew and his People's Action Party (PAP), which has ruled Singapore since its accidental independence in 1965, the straits entrepôt has grown into the most economically advanced nation in Southeast Asia. What old Malacca was to the age of wind, Singapore is to the age of diesel and microchips: a critical seat of the global economy, boasting the world's second-largest container port after Shanghai. Its pearly skyscrapers house the regional headquarters of multinational corporations and a concentration of legal and financial services without peer in Southeast Asia. Singapore is also the region's premier offshore banking hub, and the preferred place for Burmese and Cambodian kleptocrats to stash their money. In 2018, Singapore's GDP was $364 billion, around the same as neighboring Malaysia, a nation with a population six times the size.[30]

As a wealthy island-nation reliant on a protective shade of Western power—first, the imperial *Pax Britannica*, now the regional security order undergirded by the US Navy—Singapore stands in unique relation to China's rising power. The city-state's pragmatic leaders see China as vital to their country's economic future, but their reliance on maritime trade has made them outspoken on the need for a stabilizing American military presence in the region. Singapore's position is complicated further by another artefact of British rule: its status as an ethnic Chinese-majority state.

The first Chinese arrivals to Singapore were Straits Chinese, who trickled down the peninsula from Malacca and Penang; later, they came directly from China itself. Within a few decades of its founding, Singapore had replaced Bangkok as the leading center for Chinese shipping in Asia, linked by a regular steamship service to the ports of Xiamen and Quanzhou in Fujian province.[31] "In going through one part of the town, during business hours, one feels himself to be in a Chinese city," one Western traveler wrote in 1837. "Almost every respectable native he sees is Chinese; almost every shop, ware-room, and trade, is carried on by the Chinese; the hucksters, coolies, traveling cooks, and cries common in a great city, are Chinese."[32] Today, ethnic Chinese make up nearly 75 percent of Singapore's population of 5.6 million—most of them descendants of Hokkien-speaking immigrants who came to work on the British docks.

If the ethnic Chinese have been seen at times as "the Jews of the East," as Thailand's King Vajiravudh infamously referred to them, Singapore has been viewed as something like the "Jew among nations" in Southeast Asia, its Chinese-majority status a persistent complication in its relations with its larger Malay neighbors. The city's ejection from Malaysia in 1965 was a direct result of bitter disputes over the preservation of rights for ethnic Chinese in the new Malay-dominated federation. Shot into an independence that few had anticipated or planned for, Singapore suddenly found itself sandwiched between two mostly Islamic Malay-speaking nations, which were inclined to view their small neighbor much as they viewed their own Chinese minorities: as a potential Chinese "fifth column."

In Singapore's case, the accusation never made much sense; Lee was always a strident anti-communist, as he had shown in February 1963, when he launched Operation Cold Store, a sweep of arrests that crippled Singapore's communist underground. The PAP nonetheless found it prudent to downplay their new nation's Chineseness in favor of a hybrid Singaporean identity based on multiracialism and meritocracy. It adopted a Malay national anthem and later made English—the language of Singapore's elite since 1819—the country's official working language. To avoid discord between Singapore's three main ethnic groups—Chinese, Malays, and Indians—the PAP evolved an intricately engineered policy of multiracialism that held the various groups in steady proportion. To assuage its neighbors' fears that it was subordinate to China, Singapore also made it a point to refuse formal diplomatic relations with the PRC until 1990, after both Malaysia and Indonesia had done so.

The "Chinese question," along with Singapore's diminutive size and exposed strategic position, has contributed to the keen sense of insecurity that has accompanied, and in some senses driven, the nation's much-lionized journey "from third world to first."[33] While Singapore was far from a fishing village at independence, its survival in 1965 was no foregone conclusion. Severed from a Malayan mainland of which it had once formed an integral part, it faced a range of daunting challenges, from housing shortages to high unemployment. It had very few natural resources, aside from its magnificent deep-water port and serendipitous geographic location. In this vacuum, the PAP faced the challenge of creating a new Singaporean nation—and identity—from scratch. In light of its various handicaps, Sir Peter Hall, the British urbanist, described Singapore's success as "perhaps the most extraordinary case of economic development in the history of the world."[34]

Yet despite its almost miraculous thriving, Singaporean leaders have always been at pains to emphasize that their country is small and its future uncertain. In 2007, Lee told an interviewer that Singapore's modern urban superstructure rested on "a narrow base" that could easily disintegrate: "Can we survive? The question is still unanswered. We have survived so far, 42 years. Will we survive for another 42? It depends upon world conditions. It doesn't depend on us alone."[35] In 2015, the former Singaporean diplomat Kishore Mahbubani published a book entitled *Can Singapore Survive?*, in which he aired his worry that the country might one day go the way of Kodak: a once-successful company brought low by short-sightedness and complacency.

This sense of vulnerability has shaped Singapore's trajectory through the past half-century. It explained the PAP's decision to eschew the messiness of democratic politics for a sort of technocratic vanguardism led by a meticulously groomed meritocratic elite. It provided the rationale for its leashing of trade unions and the press. It inculcated an almost Darwinian focus on extending Singapore's extraordinary record of economic success. The city-state's guardians have striven tirelessly to develop new industries, from petrochemicals to advanced information and medical technologies. In 2013, tropical Singapore even became an observer on the Arctic Council, so that it might anticipate changes in global trade flows wrought by the melting of the polar icecaps.

Singapore's insecurity has also nurtured a ruthlessly practical and unsentimental approach to foreign relations. This amounts to something like the