

The Sea and Civilization

A Maritime History of the World

BY LINCOLN PAINE

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Reviewed by James Holmes

One of the great questions preoccupying Asia watchers today is whether continental powers such as China, India, or Iran can go to sea by amassing enough overseas commerce, merchant and naval fleets, and forward outposts to support voyages spanning the seven seas. And if they can, how will they do business in great waters, and how should established maritime powers interact with the newcomers to safeguard longstanding interests?

Commerce, bases, and ships: these are the lineaments of sea power according to classic works of maritime strategy. Yet both China and India withdrew great navies from the sea many centuries ago—during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, respectively. Only today are they again casting their strategic gazes seaward. Their return to the Asian seas, and the interactions it may set in motion, is eminently worthy of teachers' and students' attention, as it will be a fixture of twenty-first-century life. Can Asians regain the stature they once commanded in earlier centuries?

Maybe not. Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840–1914), America's prophet of sea power, doubted any continental power could make itself a dominant seafaring state for very long, as the resource demands are simply too burdensome. No nation can afford to do everything. Land defense—fending off invasion—comes first for nations situated among potentially unfriendly neighbors. The exigencies of maintaining a large army, maintains Mahan, siphon off manpower and resources that might otherwise go into an oceangoing navy.

Accordingly, Mahan suggests that continental powers such as the Sun King's France are doomed to inferiority on the high seas vis-à-vis maritime nations such as Great Britain in its imperial heyday. Oceans and seas surround the British Isles with aquatic ramparts holding would-be conquerors at a distance, whereas French rulers confronted prospective threats in continental Europe to the east and on the Iberian Peninsula to the west. Geography may not be destiny, then, but it does bias maritime competition in favor of a sea power squaring off against a land power.

Now, along comes historian Lincoln Paine with a rollicking good read that will also remind students not to blithely discount the nautical prospects of China, India, or Iran. Paine's contribution to contemporary debates is indirect, to be sure, but no less valuable for all that. This is history on a grand scale. Horizontally speaking, it spans the globe; and vertically speaking, it peers into the dim recesses of time for insight into how civilizations have made use of the sea for commerce, combat, and natural resource extraction.

Paine's recounting of maritime history demonstrates that supposedly landbound civilizations were anything but. Indian Ocean trade networks, notes the author, date back at least 4,000 years. Indeed, nautical trade and commerce were facts of South, Southeastern, and East Asian life long before 1498, when Portuguese mariner Vasco da Gama dropped anchor at Cochin along the Indian subcontinent's southwestern coast. Archaeological evidence confirms that seagoing commerce connected Asian subregions centuries before Europeans' arrival.

Perceptions of Western superiority at sea, then, arise from a historical accident—namely that the age of modern historical inquiry happens to coincide with the age of European and American rule of the waves. Plying the oceans and seas is not a purely European or Western specialty, observes Paine. Western seafaring is simply more recent, better documented, and thus easier to chronicle and mine for lessons.

Paine thus supplies a corrective to the sea power canon, which relies overwhelmingly on the age of European sail for insights into maritime strategy. Mahan, in his books *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783* and *The Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution and Empire*, draws primarily on the British experience, as does his contemporary and occasional foil, Sir Julian Corbett (*Drake and the Tudor Navy; Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*).

Interestingly, as naval advocates in Asian capitals contemplate how to devise strategy and construct forces to execute it, they pore avidly over the works of Mahan and Corbett. In a sense, they are importing the Western experience as a guide to future Eastern strategy. One wonders whether there is a universal logic of sea power, or might Asians do things differently as they venture down to the sea in ships?

This is an offshoot of a long-running debate over whether there exist distinctly Eastern and Western ways of war and diplomacy or whether certain precepts—cost-benefit logic, concentration and dispersal of force, and so forth—transcend boundaries of time, space, and culture. In effect, Paine's work provides the fundamental research for a fascinating conversation about foreign policy and strategy in a more maritime and Asia-centric world.

It's a conversation with far-reaching consequences. America's most recent maritime strategy designates the Western Pacific, Indian Ocean, and Persian Gulf as the chief theaters for US naval endeavor. As sea service leaders ponder how to oversee the system of liberal trade and commerce while facing down potential rivals for maritime supremacy, they could do worse than gaze back into Asia's past. *The Sea and Civilization* offers such a glimpse within one cover.

Similar works in macrohistory of the sea include Fernand Braudel's venerable *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* and, more recently, David Abulafia's *The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean*. Even though they reach far back into recorded history, neither of these works matches Paine's in its geographic breadth.

How should teachers of world and Asian history or international affairs use *The Sea and Civilization*? The book is too rich and densely packed with historical detail for any high school classroom short of—perhaps—the AP level. High school instructors, however, should distill useful insights from its pages to enliven their classrooms. The book is suitable for university-level coursework, particularly for upperclassmen, and would make an ideal text for graduate courses relating to Asia, the sea, and salt-water interactions between East and West.

Strongly recommended. ■

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