

A History of the Modern Chinese Navy, 1840-2020 (Routledge Studies in the Modern History of Asia)

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Bruce A. Elleman is the William V. Pratt Professor of International History at the US Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island and has a long and distinguished track record of publication on Chinese naval history. This is then a very timely book given the current prominence of China in international affairs. It gives a solid historical account of Chinese naval history, setting it in a strategic context and then considers how that history informs current Chinese foreign policy and what other countries can learn from this. It even includes a reference to the impact of Covid-19!

A brief but well-judged introduction covers the two thousand years of naval history leading up to 1840, showing the influence of geography and commerce on what was to become China. The text is then divided into four parts, each of three chapters. These four parts cover the nineteenth century including the opium wars and the Sino-Japanese war of 1894-5. Secondly, the twentieth century and the development of the Nationalist navy and the post world war 2 civil war between nationalists and communists. Part Three looks at the founding of the People's Republic of China and at the growth of its navy during the Sino-Soviet Alliance, dependent on Soviet technology and training. The final section then covers naval modernisation, westernization and geographic imperatives, concluding with a review of possible western responses to the current Chinese government. A very interesting appendix also offers a timeline of the South China Sea dispute from the 2nd century BC to February 2021.

The historical accounts are very strong. They manage both to give well articulated and clear factual accounts, particularly of the Opium Wars and the Sino-Japanese War, but also to set this in the context of how a continental power focuses on coastal and riverine defence rather than blue water expansion and demonstrates clearly how the multitude of islands – including Taiwan – are seen as part of that continental self-defence. There is also a fascinatingly detailed study of the growth of the post World War II Nationalist navy, including ships transferred from the Royal Navy.

One of the great strengths of the book is that it demonstrates how history has guided and continues to guide naval policy. China is a continental power with over 20,000 km of land borders and twenty neighbouring countries on its land and sea borders – more than any other major country - and it has some seventeen ongoing territorial disputes, some of which have lasted for generations. As a result, naval forces have never been the major factor in armed forces development. China has never really aimed to have a blue water navy as the underlying strategic imperative has always been the defence of China's coasts and major rivers. Naval mutinies were a key factor in the overthrow of the Qing and the Nationalist regimes and as a result, successive Chinese governments, aware of that threat, have restricted the growth, independence, and capabilities of the navy, typically dividing it into three fleets based in the North South and Centre of the country under the command of generals or political commissars rather than admirals and incapable of operating together. Overall, the book provides - at a time when many people in the West view China and its navy as a threat - a rich, detailed, and realistic assessment of the true nature of the Chinese navy and the contemporary factors that affect its development.

The author has an interesting style. The twelve chapters read rather like independent essays. As a result there is a great deal of repetition of both facts and statements, often within a page or two of each other. However this proves a boon in a topic replete with unfamiliar names and terminology. Thus to be reminded say, that Annam is the old name for Vietnam a dozen times proves helpful rather than irritating

The book itself is well produced, with only the very smallest number of proofreading errors. More seriously – at least for a British audience – the book covers several millennia of history yet treats England, Great Britain and the United Kingdom as synonyms used apparently randomly in the text. The Lay-Osborn flotilla of the 1860's has an egregious “e” added to become the Lay-Osborne flotilla. But these are very small nits to pick in a work which very persuasively demonstrates how Chinese naval history should inform current policy and thinking on the nature and role of Chinese foreign policy in the contested waters around its coast.

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