

Research Article

Between China and Spain: The *Soberana* Compensation Case: The Prelude of Treaty on Chinese Laborers in Cuba

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Abstract

A Spanish three-masted sailing vessel, *Soberana*, encountered a typhoon and ran aground off the coast of northern Taiwan in December 1863, local armed militias looted its cargo, and the remaining crew members were sent by the British consulate to Xia Men. Carlos Antonio submitted compensation requests to the Qing's Zong Li Ya Men in 1867 and 1874, but neither received a reply. In 1876, when Zong Li Ya Men engaged in intensive contacts and discussions regarding the Chinese laborers in Cuba, the *Soberana* and its compensation were placed on the agenda as a precondition for signing the *Treaty of the Chinese Laborers in Cuba*. After weighing the pros and cons, Guang Xu Emperor resolved the compensation issue by agreeing to pay 18,000 silver taels and the treaty was subsequently signed. This was the important thing between China and Spain in the 1870s, through which the Qing central government sought to protect the rights and interests of Chinese people in Cuba, this article draws on materials from the *History of the Qing* and the *Compilation of Historical Archives on Relations between Qing China and Southeast Asian Countries*, featuring Guang Xu Emperor, Carlos Antonio, Li Hongzhang, and Ding Richang as the actors, analyzes the relationship between the *Soberana* compensation case and the treaty. The author's reflection focuses on the Qing dynasty's coastal defense system and naval construction. After more than thirty years of flourishing under the Westernization Movement, China's coastal defense capabilities remained weak in the near-modern historical period: a lack of sustained financial support, a shortage of professional naval personnel, and a defensive strategic posture were evident not only in this compensation case but also in the subsequent Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895.

Keywords

Guang Xu, *Soberana* Compensation Case, Hearsay, Chinese Laborers, Qing Coastal Defence

1. Introduction

In 1521, Ferdinand Magellan, the seafaring adventurer harbouring grand dreams of Spanish colonial expansion, led his fleet like a sudden storm, forcefully entering the waters of the Philippines. The island's indigenous people witnessed for the first time these “fair-skinned, strangely dressed outsiders”,

“their eyes revealed a mixture of curiosity and wariness” [14]. In 1564, Spanish Basque explorer *Miguel López de Legazpi*, under the direction of *Luis de Velasco y Castilla*, Governor-General of New Spain, embarked on a journey to Asia to expand colonial territories. Leading five ships, he set sail from

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Acapulco, the coast of Mexico, crossed the Pacific Ocean, and arrived at Cebu in April 1565, establishing the first Spanish colony. Legazpi travelled north, capturing Manila, the Philippines became the Spanish most distant overseas colony, and Legazpi became its first Governor-General (1565–1572).

During the more than 330 years of colonial rule, a Spanish merchant ship (SMS), the *Soberana*, ran aground off the coast of northern Taiwan on December 31, 1863—coinciding with the reign of the *Tong Zhi* Emperor of the Qing Dynasty. Although SMS had raised the issue of compensation multiple times, due to Taiwan's geographical distance from Beijing, the *Soberana* merchant compensation case (SMCC) did not receive the attention of the Qing's central government, there were no personnel to investigate and collect evidence, nor were there any detailed records or archives to verify SMS's loss [26].

According to the records of the First Archives of China, the reason why the case was shelved was likely because the *Tong Zhi* was too young and “did not have the ability to handle complex political affairs” [17], he was placed on the throne at 6 years, began to personally handle state affairs at the age of 18, and died at 19 years. In 1875, the *Guang Xu* Emperor began to rule, SMCC was stuck in the transitional phase between two emperors.

In 1876, *Shen Bao* suddenly reported on the SMCC again [9], which attracted a lot attention from the Qing's *Zong Li Ya Men* (Foreign Ministry, ZLYM), Qing officials who had embraced advanced ideas during the Westernization Movement (WM) believed that this would be related to the negotiations between the Qing Dynasty, Spain, and Cuba regarding Chinese labourers' and their treaties [2]. However, in the view of Spanish Minister, Carlos Antonio, SMCC might become a prerequisite for whether to sign a treaty and whether to improve the living conditions of Chinese labourers in Cuba [6].

This paper utilizes vol. II, *Diplomatic Historical Materials of the Late Qing Dynasty* and *Collection of Archival Historical Materials on Relations between China and Southeast Asian Countries in the Qing Dynasty*, his aims to describe the considerations and power shifts of Spanish Ambassador of China, *Carlos Antonio*, Qing Dynasty ministers, *Li Hongzhang* and *Ding Richang*, meanwhile, it focuses on the reflections on the Qing's coastal defence brought about by the WM and SMCC.

2. SMCC in Taiwan in 1863

Before the Spanish opened new sea routes to Asia, Lu Zon, one of the Philippine archipelagoes, had already become a hub for Chinese Fu Jian merchants, these merchants not only traded frequently with the indigenous people but also maintained a military presence [14]. When the Spanish expeditionary force arrived in the Philippine archipelago and established colonial rule, it seemed inevitable that the trade interests and military deployments of pirates and merchants from Fu Jian, Taiwan, the South China Sea, the East China Sea, and their

numerous islands would clash [20]. Among them, the famous and frequently recorded in Spanish historical archives, was Lin Feng, a notorious pirate (merchant) from the late Ming Dynasty, known in Spanish documents as *Limahong* [20], he was sometimes based on Taiwan, sometimes frequently active in the South China Sea, and sometimes appeared in Manila Bay. When the Spanish forces gained the upper hand, *Limahong* retreated to Taiwan, after resting and resupplying, he and his military forces attacked Manila, and the two sides fought for many years. The last recorded instance was in 1574, when he launched a surprise attack on Manila and subsequently established a base in Turtle Bay, 220 kilometers from Manila. Two years later, he was defeated by the Spanish colonists and this legendary historical figure escaped and disappeared without a trace [28].

One undeniable fact is that during the long and protracted war, the Spanish colonial authorities and the distant Spanish royal family became aware of Taiwan, this place was mentioned in the documents of several Philippine governors and was also repeatedly mentioned by the Portuguese.

Towards the end of the Wan Li Emperor's reign in the Ming Dynasty, the situation in northern China was precarious, the regime in Liao Dong posed the greatest threat to the Ming's power (the origin of the Qing Dynasty), elite troops previously stationed in southeastern China were increasingly and frequently mobilized to the north to address the northern wars, leaving Taiwan's military defenses vulnerable. The Spanish governor centered on Manila Bay, frequently engaged in trade with Taiwan. In 1626, the Spanish attacked Taiwan, first landing at Kee Lung and establishing a foothold, three years later, they occupied Ho Be. However, this period was short-lived, in 1642, after more than a decade of struggle with the Dutch, the Dutch occupied Kee Lung Bay, expelling the Spanish from Taiwan, this shift was undoubtedly related to the weakening of Spain's global colonial influence [8]. The change on the Taiwan's island seemed to have been a major reason why the SMS was not dealt with in a timely manner, nor did it receive any attention from the Qing's central government thousands of miles away.

On December 31, 1863, the Spanish three-masted sailing ship, the *Soberana*, ran aground in a strong wind northeast of Bai Sha Cape in northern Taiwan. According to the Taiwan Maritime Museum, SMS attempted to land by throwing a mooring line, where it was boarded and robbed by an unknown local force, over 2,000 people were waiting on shore. Due to the overwhelming numerical advantage of the locals, SMS was completely looted, and all its goods and personnel were detained [26]. A few of the survivors were relocated to Xia Men by ship arranged by the British consulate, the cargo and its inventory on board were not recorded, making it impossible to verify the value of the goods. The Spanish royal, through the Governors-General of the Philippines, submitted three requests for compensation in 1867, 1874, and 1876 [9], the former two requests were ignored by the Qing's ZLYM, and were not recorded in the Qing Dynasty historical materials

of the First Archives of China. SMCC once again came to the forefront in 1876, attracting the attention of ministers in charge of foreign affairs and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, during negotiations involving Cuban Chinese laborers and the need to sign a treaty, Qing officials were also concerned. Simultaneously, Carlos Antonio, the envoy in China, raised the SMCC's issue, demanded 80,000 silvers in compensation, if the Qing government refused to pay, Spain threatened to send three warships from the Philippines to China [1].

3. Hearsay During the Guang Xu Emperor

During the WM, *Shang Hai News: Shen Bao* reported in October 1876: "it was heard that Spain has increased its naval vessels and stationed them in the Philippine Islands... They have received orders from the Spanish king to prepare for a journey to mainland China" [22]. "This was because the Spanish minister to China, in Beijing, had been seeking compensation from the central government, but there had been no progress for a long time, and SMS had remained unresolved for years" [19]. "Carlos Antonio requested authorization from the Spanish King to dispatch warships to China, placing them under the command of the Spanish minister in China" [19]. In November 1876, this hearsay once again emerged in the *China Mail* and *Manila Gazette*, regarding Spain dispatching warships toward China, drawing the attention of *Robert Hart*, the Inspector General of the Chinese Maritime Customs, he informed ZLYM: "I had recently seen in foreign newspapers that the Japanese minister has requested the dispatch of three naval vessels to China... I fear they may emulate Japan's military actions in Taiwan from the previous year, so precautions must be taken..... would be gathered and strict defenses be implemented" [9].

The combined effect and Robert Hart's advice led ZLYM to pay close attention to the matter, indeed, this was directly linked to a shipwreck that occurred in northern Taiwan in 1863: SMS had encountered a typhoon off northern Taiwan, struck a reef, and ran aground, after which local residents looted the cargo and crew. Over the following decade, the Qing, the Governors-General of the Philippines, and Spain, failed to give sufficient attention to the case, resulting in the SMCC remaining unresolved [18].

After the *Shen Bao* amplified the issue, ZLYM ordered Ding Richang, the governor of Fu Jian, to reopen the case and conduct a detailed investigation, "so as to address the diplomatic accountability of the Spanish minister in China" [15]. This order overlooked the distant reality of Taiwan, which was in a state of turmoil at the time, and the old case surrounding the SMS, which had occurred in late 1863, involved goods, personnel, records, and archives that were now difficult to investigate thoroughly, moreover, Taiwan in the 1860s lacked comprehensive archival records or historical documentation. ZLYM summoned the then Spanish minister to China, Carlos

Antonio, to inquire whether such matters were true and what information he possessed.

Carlos Antonio adopted a firm stance, "this is not an old case; it is a case that has remained unresolved" [18], "we had submitted compensation requests three times" [18], yet received no response. "Now our nation had dispatched military forces to China, and they would arrive in a dozen or so days when the warships reach seaport" [19]. This firm stance was not solely due to SMCC; his focus was on the ongoing investigation into the treatment of Chinese laborers in Cuba and the related treaty negotiations. Due to the abuse suffered by Chinese laborers in Cuba, the Qing central government repeatedly met with foreign ministers in China to negotiate the protection of Chinese laborers and hoped to halt the recruitment of laborers in Cuba. However, Spain and its embassy in Qing, especially in Macau, Fu Jian, and Taiwan—had become the largest European nation involved in recruiting Chinese laborers, and "it seemed to enjoy the patronage of Britain and the United States" [15]. Carlos Antonio encountered setbacks in the negotiations process, with no resolution or a deadlock, SMCC case became a lever and a media, which he hoped to use to break the stalemate. When ZLYM summoned Carlos Antonio, he leveraged the *Shen Bao' News* report on the matter, "using this hearsay" [26], and claimed that Spain had over twenty warships and more than 30,000 naval personnel in Southeast Asia. If the Qing government failed to properly handle SMCC, these military forces would launch an attack on the Qing. Whether Carlos Antonio's claims reflected his own views, those of the Governor-General of the Philippines, or the stance of the Spanish king remains unverified by any existing archival evidence [24].

Based on *Compilation of Historical Archives on Relations between Qing China and Southeast Asian Countries*, vol. 2, the Philippines, the Qing's central government had no diplomatic legations or agencies in Southeast Asia during the 1860s [14], as a result, *Ding Richang*, the Governor of Fu Jian, had no direct access to detailed intelligence regarding the deployment and combat strength of Spanish forces. He could only gather information through merchants and ships that frequently operated in the South China Sea and the East Sea, so, such secondhand information was likely to be distorted [10]. When the SMS's investigation report and information on Spanish military deployments were submitted to ZLYM, the question of how much of the written information could be trusted is an issue that warrants careful consideration in the study of this historical period.

The author can be substantiated by the reactions of several officials. *Ding Richang* was on the front line, *Li Hongzhang* had appointed him to reopen the investigation into the SMS that occurred in Taiwan in 1863. Given the chaotic situation in Taiwan and the coastal defense concerns of Fu Jian, Ding's writings reflected the following view: this European nation, Spain, which had long been stationed in the Philippine Islands, possessed a powerful navy and numerous warships, and harbored a persistent desire to occupy Taiwan [11]. He argued

that ZLYM should continuously increase financial support and always provide military resources [13]. For a frontline military commander, such a mindset was normal and understandable, as preventing risks was his duty. Compared with dereliction of duty, keeping on the side of caution was preferable, as it would not invite censure from the central government. Moreover, emphasizing the severity of the situation could help secure additional funding for Fu Jian's coastal defense, which would benefit local military capabilities [13].

In contrast, ZLYM dispatched General *Wen Yu*, Min-Zhe Governor *He Jing*, and Governor *Liu Kunyi* to assist Ding. The attitudes of these three officials were markedly different: this nation, which had maintained a presence in the Philippine Islands, had once possessed strong military power during the Ming dynasty, but its strength was now waning. “[Spain] was concentrated only on the small island of Lu Zon” [27], “..... occasionally appearing in the Peng Hu region” [28], and “had yet to commit any act of aggression against China” [20]. They described the matter as “nothing more than baseless rumors” [26], there was no need for such a massive mobilization. *Wen Yu* and *He Jing* believed that, during the WM, numerous arsenals had already been established in southern China, the Qing military was steadily growing stronger. They emphasized the importance of “some confidence in our own military strength” [22] and insisted that the Qing should “no longer be intimidated or threatened by European nations” [29].

What is worth reflecting on is that whether the news was merely a hearsay was no longer the core. Rather, it was the fact that the Qing bureaucratic system housed officials with divergent views. Even core officials at the central and local levels, such as the four individuals mentioned above, held differing perspectives, this raises a deeper question: how could a unified fighting force be formed in the future in the event of an actual war? From the mid-to-late 19th century, the Qing military was larger and backward, if the commanding generals could not unify their strategies and the central and local governments held conflicting views, how could victory be achieved on the battlefield? History had indeed proven this axiom: it is difficult to find a war fought before the fall of the Qing dynasty that ended in victory.

4. SMCC and Treaty in 1877

The Qing's ZLYM was divided on how to handle the SMCC: those ministers who were personally involved in the WM insisted that there was no need to pay too much attention to or fear the SMS. Their stance was supported by the following three considerations.

Firstly, from the perspective of the Qing dynasty's own military strength, the military capabilities of the 1870s had significantly improved, markedly different from the situation before the Opium Wars. This confidence, derived from the improvement in military conditions, led them to believe that they could “counterbalance the pressure generated by the Spanish garrison stationed in the Philippine Islands.” [3].

Secondly, after assessing and comparing the international situation at the time, ZLYM concluded that Spain's power in Asia was weakening. The global trade routes represented by the Manila Galleons were no longer as prosperous as they had been in the 17th and 18th centuries. Spain's traditional colonial presence in the Philippine Islands had ended in 1815, as “they had lost their only colony in Asia” [6]. “Although the Spanish garrison and fleet still existed in Manila Bay” [4], ZLYM's officials believed that Spanish Minister *Carlos Antonio*'s reassertion of the SMCC was merely a threat.

Thirdly, following the two Opium Wars, ZLYM and its ministers had acquired a certain understanding of international public law as it existed in the mid-to-late 19th century. They gradually moved away from certain inappropriate approaches to handling shipwreck cases rooted in the traditional Chinese legal system. The concept of “using the equal sovereignty of contemporary nations” [7] to address bilateral issues provided a valuable intellectual resource and practical experience for Qing ministers in handling diplomatic affairs. SMCC fell within the realm of private international law, and they believed that reconciliation could be achieved through private legal means and negotiations. Resolving a private legal dispute through military force was legally unjustifiable. Negotiation, not threats, was the proper channel.

The above analysis was substantiated by the fact that on April 16, in the third year of the *Guang Xu* reign, ZLYM dispatched *Tang Tingshu* to negotiate the SMCC with the Spanish consul in *Xia Men*. *Tang* proposed that the *Xia Men* consulate would be given full authority to handle the case through private legal means. On April 22, *Tong* again met with the *Xia Men* consul, expressing his hope to settle the SMCC by offering compensation payments [16].

Contrary to the above analysis, the officials who held differing opinions were primarily concentrated among local authorities and regional military commanders, with *Ding Richang*, serving as a representative. Being on the front line of defense, any military governor responsible for China's coastal defense had the duty to resist and guard against any foreign fleet approaching Chinese waters, and to report the situation to the Forbidden City as quickly as possible. If the perspective of academic research shifts from the officials in the Forbidden City to the military commanders at the forefront, an obvious principle emerges, to prevent the occurrence of war risks is one of their responsibilities. However, would war be prevented?

Given that written reports were the only channel for describing wartime situations, and that such reports were highly susceptible to delays, the best approach was to depict threats as realistic possibilities and exaggerate them. Such a utilitarian approach not only provided local officials with justification and a means to secure greater financial support from the central government but also helped them mitigate many professional risks, moreover, individual officials might even use the resolution of such incidents as an opportunity or pretext

for promotion. From the perspective of local officials and military commanders, “the reports produced by those sitting in the Forbidden City were nothing more than empty talk” [16].

The above views, after being continuously categorized and synthesized by *Li Hongzhang*, were submitted to the *Guang Xu* Emperor. One could thus envision a scene that seemed plausible: on the emperor’s desk, one report presented the SMCC and its possible solutions, while another detailed the abused suffered by Chinese laborers in Cuba, including lists of the deceased. In the emperor’s mind, he believed that Carlos Antonio’s revival of SMCC at this moment, using it as a threat, was ultimately aimed at securing more favorable terms for Spain in the negotiations surrounding the treaty on Chinese laborers in Cuba, SMCC was not the core issue, rather, the continuous flow of Chinese labor to Latin America via the Spanish legation or consulates represented the greater interest at stake, SMCC was merely a threat or a pretext. Thus, “if SMCC was not concluded, it was feared that Chinese laborers might ultimately remain unprotected” [23], “...pressing Spain to sign the treaty”, “the Cuba clauses are of great importance; this case should be settled so that the negotiations on the Cuban issue may proceed with fewer concerns” [21]. Consequently, it was decided that “Fu Jian shall pay 18,000 Mexican silvers to conclude this SMCC” [16].

The final SMCC’s resolution removed the pretext for the Spanish Minister to delay signing the Cuban Chinese Laborers’ Treaty [25]. Therefore, ZLYM demanded that the Spanish Minister firstly signed the treaty, before the delivery of 18,000 silvers. Through the efforts of many parties, ZLYM not only ended the SMCC but also finally completed the signing in the late 1870s, *Guang Xu* emperor and the Qing government hoped to legally protect the personal safety and other rights of the Chinese laborers in Cuba [6].

5. Reflections: From Hearsay to Qing’s Coastal Defence System

After Robert Hart, the Inspector General of the Chinese Maritime Customs, reported his thoughts on this hearsay to ZLYM, his plan was to avoid war between China and Spain and to resolve the SMCC through negotiations and agreements. The Qing central government appointed *Tong Tingshu* to meet with the Spanish consulate in Xia Men to negotiate regarding the SMS of 1863, expressing a willingness to offer compensation. At the same time, ZLYM continued to press the Spanish legation and Minister *Carlos Antonio* on the issue of Chinese laborers in Cuba, hoping that Spain would sign a treaty with China as soon as possible. Having witnessed the Qing central government’s compromise, Carlos Antonio could no longer use SMCC to delay negotiations on the Cuban laborer issue. Moreover, ZLYM demanded that Spain sign an agreement on the laborer issue before receiving compensation for the SMCC. Consequently, Carlos Antonio decided to sign the Treaty of

Chinese Laborers in Cuba with the Qing government, conceding on certain clauses [2]. Thus, after years of negotiations, ZLYM finally succeeded in abolishing Spain’s previous arbitrary and baseless system of recruiting Chinese laborers through a legal agreement, thereby providing legal protections for the rights of Chinese laborers, with both issues resolved, the hearsay naturally dissipated. For the Qing central government, the resolution of these rumors not only successfully averted a potential war but also smoothly resolved the issue of Chinese laborers. Furthermore, precisely due to his concerns over the SMCC, the Qing central government, through a series of coastal defense preparations, identified deficiencies in the coastal defense systems and layouts of Fu Jian, Guang Dong, and Shan Dong. Building on the WM’s achievements, the Qing government intended to “integrate the northern and southern coastal defenses, increase interaction between them, and strive to unify China’s eastern coastline so that it could collectively resist foreign invasion” [5].

Focusing on the SMCC of the 1870s and its resolution by ZLYM, an in-depth examination of China’s coastal defense system in the WM wake should become a key priority. After the hearsay was published in *Shen Bao*, ZLYM ordered officials in Fu Jian, Guang Dong, and Shan Dong to further investigate enemy movements, strictly fortify defenses, and ensure coastal security [12]. *Li Hongzhang* dispatched ships to patrol China’s coastline and ordered the reinforcement of military deployments at various northern ports. Given that the SMS had occurred in Taiwan—an island situated far offshore and at the very forefront of China’s southeastern coastal defense—it was in urgent need of military assistance from the mainland. *Ding Richang*, requested the central government to “raise provisions and dispatch troops from Fu Jian and Guang Dong, along with naval vessels from the northern and southern fleets, to deploy in Taiwan to bolster its defensive posture” [17]. He further urged “the secret issuance of orders to the ministers of the northern and southern seas, along with the generals and governors of Fu Jian, to quickly raise funds for logistical support” [5]. He recommended, from a long-term perspective, the accumulation of supplies, the recruitment of skilled personnel, and the prioritization of coastal defense construction [7]. In March 1877, the Qing government appointed *Liu Kunyi*, *Li Hongzhang*, and *Shen Baozhen* to dispatch troops and weapons to aid Taiwan, and “appointed *Wen Yu*, *He Jing*, and *Wu Zancheng* to oversee the overall situation, temporarily redirecting funds from other allocations to address urgent needs, thereby facilitating the procurement of necessary supplies” [15].

From a positive perspective, the Qing government’s response to the hearsay of a Spanish invasion can be regarded as a typical case in the development of near-modern coastal defense. Although the hearsay did not ultimately lead to war, they nevertheless drew the attention of the Qing government. The coastal defense awareness of both the central government and the coastal governors and governors-general gradually strengthened, leading to decisions on military mobilization

that included coastal early warning and coordinated defense. Specifically, firstly, the Qing government closely monitored maritime military movements around China through multiple channels. Secondly, its wartime preparedness strategy shifted from the previous approach of “temporary, localized defense in times of war” [4] to a pre-war strategy of coordinated defense between the northern and southern fleets and focused defense of Taiwan. After ZLYM learned from newspapers, Inspector General Robert Hart, and other sources of the hearsay that Spain would send troops to China, it instructed the coastal provinces to take early precautions and verify the truth of the information. As the hearsay escalated, ZLYM and the coastal governors and governors-general, through meetings with Carlos Antonio and by dispatching personnel to gather military intelligence, assessed the connection between the Spanish hearsay and the signing of the Cuban laborer treaty. All these actions reflected a proactive response on the part of the Qing government.

Some historical details cannot be overlooked: after the central government’s orders reached the local level, the responses of different military and administrative officials varied significantly, which was likely related to their respective military strengths and their individual assessments of the situation. Shen closely monitored the coastal defense situation and, to prevent a potential Spanish incursion into Taiwan, dispatched the *Deng Ying Zhou* warship along with artillery shells to aid Taiwan’s defense [1]. Li ordered Wu Zancheng to deploy the *Yang Wu*, *Long Xiang*, and *Hu Wei* warships to patrol Taiwan and instructed Ding Richang to focus on gathering intelligence on enemy movements [8]. In contrast, Wen Yu, the General of Fu Zhou, although ordering *Sun Kaihua*, the military commander of Fu Jian, to assist Taiwan, was not proactive in raising military funds and adopted a wait-and-see attitude [8]. He Jing, the Governor-General of Fu Jian and Zhe Jiang, citing the weakness of Fujian’s defenses, requested the central government to redeploy other troops into Fu Jian [17]. Liu Kunyi, the Governor-General of Guang Dong and Guang Xi, refused to assist in Taiwan’s defense on the grounds that the situation was not yet sufficiently tense and that the defenses of Chao Zhou were inadequate [26].

The reactions of these local officials reflected the fragmented nature of coastal defense, exposing the challenges the Qing central government would face in effectively directing local forces in the event of an enemy attack, as well as determining where to concentrate defenses. Their differing positions and responsibilities led to significant disagreements over how to build coastal defenses. Meanwhile, this phenomenon revealed the lack of long-term planning on the part of the Qing government regarding the allocation of funds for coastal defense construction in Taiwan, Fu Jian, Guang Dong, Shan Dong, and other regions. Indeed, as history would show, after the 1870s, China’s naval investment and military capabilities remained uneven and inconsistent.

More regrettably, after the signing of the *Treaty of Chinese Laborers in Cuba* and the payment of 18,000 silver dollars to

Spain, the hearsay dissipated, and the coastal defense issues that had been discussed and debated during the process suddenly became unimportant. The Qing’s considerations regarding the preservation, development, and planning of its navy and coastal defense capabilities were relegated to the sidelines [1].

History is always a continuous narrative, it must be said that at that moment, China’s coastal defense and naval forces—stretching from north to south—remained unimproved, this laid the groundwork for the impending Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895, the answer to the question of why China’s seemingly powerful navy was completely defeated in the Sino-Japanese War should be sought in the 1877’s event.

To this day, the author thinks three further issues warrant discussion: firstly, the challenge of managing coastal defense resources. During the period when the SMCC was prominent, although the Qing central government ordered the provinces of the northern and southern seas to jointly defend and assist Taiwan, it did not designate a specialized agency to assume unified command and coordination. As a result, local actions remained constrained by the traditional model of defense organized by individual areas. Li Hongzhang, Shen Baozhen, He Jing, Liu Kunyi, and other governors-general often made decisions based on their own province’s defense needs, their personal assessments of the situation, and even the relationships between the officials they dispatched. They chose between aiding Taiwan and conserving their own military forces. As Wen Yu, the General of Fu Zhou, lamented regarding the difficulty of coordinated defense between Fu Jian and Taiwan: “the province and the island are separated by vast oceans. Attempting to attend to both will inevitably lead to the neglect of both” [7], if the interdependent defense of Fu Jian and Taiwan could not be achieved in peacetime, it would be even more difficult under wartime conditions [24].

Secondly, the financial dilemma of coastal defense construction. Following the two Opium Wars, the Qing dynasty signed treaties, and the massive indemnities imposed by these treaties drained the imperial treasury, the Qing government did not provide institutional guarantees for coastal defense funding [4]. However, coastal defense, naval forces, personnel, and equipment represented a domain in which traditional Chinese dynasties had consistently failed to invest. The Qing dynasty’s focus on naval power stemmed from two practical reasons: first, both Opium Wars had come from the sea, and the Qing’s traditional military forces had proven almost entirely incapable of resisting; second, the unique geographical position of Taiwan had intensified the desire of many western powers to seize the island, creating real pressure. Near modern China’s coastal defense and navy developed under duress and necessity, and this development coincided with a period of severe fiscal difficulty for the Qing dynasty. Given the strained financial situation, describing the Qing navy and coastal defense as impressive only in appearance [29] would not be an overstatement. Moreover, on February 24, the third year of the Guangxu reign, ZLYM decided to encroach portion of the coastal defense funds allocated to the

southern seas to support Taiwan—but those funds were ultimately diverted for other purposes.

Thirdly, since the beginning of the first globalization, an invisible thread and maritime route have quietly revealed an enduring truth in the river of history: he who controls the sea controls the world; he who controls the sea possesses the advantage for development. The Manila galleon route of the first globalization generated immense profits that propelled Spain to become a powerful global empire, each voyage of the Manila galleon was escorted by the Spanish fleet. Later, the Netherlands—referred to in Chinese historical records as the coachman of the seas—established multiple colonies in Asia. The naval power of the British Empire, on which the sun never set, dominated for two centuries. In contrast, the military power of traditional Chinese dynasties, almost entirely composed of land-based armies, gradually lost its former glory. When external armed threats almost came from the sea, China's coastal defense was incapable of generating effective combat power. The navy and warships became the most urgent and critical issues in the realm of military development during WM.

6. Conclusion

Standing at the end of the 19th century and adopting an academic perspective that spans from the 16th century to the present, a historical thread comes into view: beginning with the Age of Discovery, Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, and UK, successively built formidable naval powers, these nations drove the entire process of globalization—from early globalization to the second wave of globalization, and even to the third wave represented by the WTO, over more than 500 years of history, the sea, maritime power, merchant fleets, and naval strength have been the prominent features. Unlike the traditional land-based warfare and territorial expansion of the past, controlling the sea has meant achieving development and attaining power.

In the face of this silent historical law, Ming Dynasty of China, a traditional East Asian empire, responded to early globalization by implementing strict maritime bans, thereby artificially and willfully squandering the historic opportunity for a flourishing Chinese maritime commercial civilization. When powerful European nations began their global expansion, the Manchus from the northern grasslands established the Qing Dynasty, China's last feudal dynasty. Its “innate fear of the sea” [8] naturally perpetuated the maritime ban policy. It was only after the two Opium Wars ended in total defeat—and the lesson that “nearly all fatal blows came from the sea and maritime powers” [1] pounded the Qing central government time and again—that the emperors and their clans realized the importance of the sea.

With the onset of the fourth wave of globalization, driven by artificial intelligence, the Maritime Silk Road has become a focus of contemporary China's development, maritime commerce and maritime power have emerged as key concepts—

not only because of practical economic and political needs, but also because they represent a conclusion drawn from more than 500 years of historical experience.

Abbreviations

SMS	<i>Soberana</i> Merchant Ship
SMCC	<i>Soberana</i> Merchant Compensation Case
WM	Westernization Movement
ZLYM	Zong Li Ya Men

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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