

Seaborne Polity and Wartime State Formation in Seventeenth-Century Northeast Asia

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Since the nineteenth century, dominant social science narratives have located the origins of modern state formation and institutional rationalization in early modern Europe. Processes such as bureaucratic centralization, military coordination, and the consolidation of territorial sovereignty have often been treated as uniquely European developments that later diffused outward through imperial expansion and global integration. Over the past three decades, however, historians and historical sociologists have increasingly challenged this framework by highlighting parallel trajectories of political and economic transformation across the post-Mongol world. Building on this scholarship, this paper examines the maritime military regime established by Mao Wenlong (d. 1629) in order to contribute to ongoing efforts to decenter early modernity through a focused case study of wartime governance in seventeenth-century Northeast Asia.

Operating across the fluid maritime frontier of the Bohai Rim and the northern Yellow Sea, Mao Wenlong's organization emerged within a complex geopolitical environment shaped by the declining authority of the Ming state, the consolidation of Manchu power, and the strategic concerns of Chosŏn Korea. Rather than exercising authority through stable territorial institutions, Mao's regime functioned as a seaborne polity structured by mobility, logistical coordination, and negotiated legitimacy. Its influence extended across islands, coastal settlements, and commercial nodes that were connected through maritime routes rather than continuous land administration. This spatial configuration enabled the regime to mobilize heterogeneous populations—including

soldiers, merchants, refugees, fishermen, and local brokers—whose participation was secured through patronage networks, coercion, and the distribution of material resources.

The paper argues that the institutional practices developed within this wartime maritime environment complicate linear narratives of early modern state formation. Mao Wenlong's organization established mechanisms of taxation, provisioning, intelligence gathering, and population management that allowed it to sustain prolonged military resistance despite limited formal recognition from the Ming court. These practices reveal forms of administrative rationalization and military coordination that were adaptive rather than standardized, networked rather than territorially bounded, and contingent upon shifting alliances among regional actors. At the same time, the regime operated within broader transformations characteristic of the early modern Eurasian world, including intensifying commercial integration, demographic displacement caused by warfare, and the growing scale of organized violence. By situating Mao's polity within these transregional dynamics, the paper highlights both convergence and divergence in the institutional responses of early modern polities confronting similar structural pressures.

Methodologically, the study combines close reading of Ming memorials and local gazetteers with Korean and Manchu archival materials to reconstruct the everyday functioning of maritime governance. Particular attention is given to logistical records, correspondence, and legal disputes that illuminate how authority was exercised and contested in practice. This approach foregrounds the agency of non-elite actors—such as coastal intermediaries and displaced communities—whose participation was essential to sustaining the regime's operations. In doing so, the paper also contributes to broader debates on the relationship between wartime mobilization and institutional innovation, suggesting that conflict zones served as laboratories for political experimentation rather than merely sites of breakdown.

By conceptualizing Mao Wenlong's organization as a seaborne polity, this paper proposes an alternative analytical lens for understanding early modern political development beyond the territorial state model that has long dominated comparative historiography. The case demonstrates that processes associated with modernity—such as the expansion of administrative capacity, the strategic management of populations, and the integration of economic and military networks—could emerge from highly mobile and decentralized formations shaped by maritime environments. These findings underscore the importance of transregional interaction, negotiation, and hybridization in shaping the trajectories of early modern institutions across Eurasia.

Ultimately, the study contributes to contemporary efforts to rethink the global history of modernity by emphasizing the plurality of pathways through which political authority was organized and contested. By recovering the historical significance of seaborne regimes in Northeast Asia, it offers a perspective that not only challenges Eurocentric assumptions about the origins of modern governance but also resonates with ongoing shifts in the spatial organization of political and economic power in the present global order.