Marine history is a rapidly developing field that has been the subject of rigorous study. Students of China's history and of international relations and geopolitics—especially those concerned with the political dimensions and implications of the history of the country's southeast coastal area—are increasingly well served by theoretically driven, richly empirical studies. This book contributes to that literature.

This book focuses on the history of the north-east area of the South China Sea, including eastern Guangdong province, the coastal area of Fujian province, Taiwan Island and Strait, and Luzon Island. Due to the separation of political entities, the close historical relationship between them has not been well understood. To fill this gap, this book illustrates the linkages, junctions, and societal changes of this area in the early modern period (sixteenth and seventeenth centuries). The discussion of the historical significance of this area from global, national, and local perspectives provides valuable insights that shed light on its complex historical origins and traditions and their long-term effects on current regional development.

The book consists of seven chapters, which can be divided into three sections—local societal order, influences of colonial powers, and dynastic transition and social restructuring. In the first section, chapter 1 describes people's lives before the formation of modern borders, especially the emergence of bandits and pirates (in Chinese: kou) and the formation of non-stateless people, and discusses their interactions with the administrative organs of the Ming empire and Spanish colonial power. Chapter 2 discusses the impact of bandits and pirates during the Ming dynasty. Using in-depth archival analysis, the author demonstrates that, despite great effort, the Ming state failed to influence the local order and extend state power to the grassroots level in this area. This is in part because local elites resisted such interference in the guise of political compliance. The center's incomplete control of territory on the administrative borders indicates that coastal societies had their own “order” that created groups that were “beyond control.” Chapter 3 uses the case of Zhangpu County to analyze the relationship between peoples and bandits/pirates with respect to the state taxation system and bandit organizations. The mobile peoples who engaged in piracy on the borders discussed in this case help illustrate the process of state formation and how the frontier area helped shape the state border.

The second section describes the expansion of colonial Spanish and Dutch powers and discusses their deep influence on this area. Chapter 4 ex-
plores the new trading route between Yuegang (Aytim) and the Philippines using rich and detailed Spanish- and Chinese-language documents. Chapter 5 discusses the development of the main port transfer during the Ming–Qing transition, reflecting on how the Dutch managed and reshaped the social order in the coastal area according to their own interests. This local historical narrative also considers the maritime expansion of colonial powers and how a traditional frontier area was forced into the global trade market.

The last section describes the rebellion of bandits and pirates and different state policies and societal restructuring due to the change in dynasty. The author discusses how the coastal evacuation policy was implemented in Zhangpu County during the Ming–Qing transition. The social landscape depicted in this case demonstrates the rise and decline of local power structures. Many influential and deep-rooted lineages were badly weakened by the time local elites returned home after the evacuation order was rescinded. The Qing state therefore began to regulate households more closely and to achieve successful expansion of state power to the local level with the co-optation of the colonial power.

The book makes an important contribution to studies on Southeast Asian history and China’s frontier history. It is the first to focus on mobile peoples (non-stateless peoples or bandits and pirates) in the northeastern South China Sea during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Thus, it reveals the origins, change, and continuity in the causes, forms, and consequences of order and border formation in this area and investigates the dynamics, strategies, and outcomes between state, society, and colonial power. For instance, the case of Zhangpu County indicates that in traditional Han areas, the empire still needed to rely on regional characteristics and historical heritage to deal with the problems of borders and social reconstruction, which are similar to those in non-Han areas. This process is actually the process of state formation.

In this sense, the case of regional history depicted first in this book provides implications for our understanding of the general historical development.

From the nation-state perspective, the book sheds light on two ways in which government can guarantee security against barbarians or marginal groups (in this case, the non-stateless people): (1) expand and rule over ungoverned spaces or (2) make a contract with a power that is strong enough to maintain stability. In this sense, the book has implications for today’s government on how to deal with the frontier issue and disputed areas. Nor is it just about Chinese history. By engaging in a historical analysis of the maritime expansion of colonial Spanish and Dutch powers, the book makes an important contribution to understanding global maritime history, the geopolitical origins of this area, and the formation and cohesion of current Southeast Asian countries. Its implications for the historical origins of this area are also strengthened by the implementation of the development strategy of the Maritime Silk Road and rising tensions in the South China Sea.

This book will serve as a useful reference not only for students of history but also for scholars of China studies and international relations, and for anyone else who is interested in using history as a tool to understand contemporary China.