

Transformation of Modern Chinese Maritime Strategy: A Study on Zheng Guanying's Maritime Defense Thought and Practice

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Abstract: In the mid-19th century, the Qing Dynasty faced continuous internal and external challenges, leading to a severe crisis in governance. Geographically, China is a typical “maritime-continental composite” country, and its extensive coastline poses a significant challenge to maritime security. However, after several invasions by foreign powers from the sea, the already weak late Qing maritime defense rapidly deteriorated. Numerous intellectuals dedicated themselves to the pursuit of strong maritime power and comprehensive maritime defense, among whom Zheng Guanying was prominent. As one of the pioneers of modernization reforms, Zheng Guanying had a deep understanding of the Qing court's maritime defense work. His long-term engagement in the self-strengthening movement enabled him to absorb various experiences in maritime defense from both domestic and foreign sources, thereby forming a complete and systematic maritime defense ideology through continuous practice. qq It possesses significant relevance even today.

Keywords: Zheng Guanying, maritime power, maritime defense, modernization, late Qing

1. Introduction

The control of maritime power and maritime defense has always been intertwined with the rise and fall of sovereign nations since the inception of nation-states. After the Age of Discovery, the oceans gradually became the primary arena for the comprehensive development of national power for various countries. From a geopolitical perspective, China, situated at the forefront of East Asia with its extensive coastline, inevitably sees maritime security and defense construction as decisive factors in determining its fate. In ancient China, the long-term focus of national defense layout was on preventing invasions from northern nomadic tribes, and the earliest maritime defense deployments were primarily aimed at combating pirate raids, far from the modern concept of maritime defense strategy. Since the First Opium War, the aggression of foreign powers and the dissemination of various advanced ideologies and technologies have placed China in an unprecedented period of change, marking the initial stage of the collapse of the traditional Chinese empire and the transition from traditional to modern society. The “sea oppression” by foreign powers and the repeated poor responses by the late Qing government have led to widespread discussions on maritime defense [1], signaling the awakening of Chinese maritime consciousness and maritime defense thinking among

the people. Zheng Guanying, as an important intellectual of the bourgeois reformist camp and one of the pioneers of modernization reform, spent his life navigating through the increasingly severe domestic and foreign challenges. Growing up in the traditional imperial examination system, he witnessed the Qing government's repeated setbacks due to weak maritime defense capabilities. At the same time, he cast his gaze upon the world, actively absorbing various advanced maritime defense ideologies of the time, engaging in the self-strengthening movement, exploring practices, summarizing experiences and lessons, and developing his own distinctive maritime defense theory. Among the outstanding maritime defense thinkers of the late Qing period, Zheng's brilliance remains undeniable. Studying Zheng Guanying's maritime defense ideology not only provides insights into a fragment of ancient China's modernization process but also deepens our understanding of modern Chinese maritime defense thinking. On a practical level, Zheng Guanying's proactive response to the "unprecedented changes" and his efforts towards transformation and strengthening are relevant to the challenges facing China's maritime affairs in the present era. "In the modern era, maritime defense, endowed with new connotations and extensions by the times, has once again emerged as a crucial strategic direction affecting national security and development. As a comprehensive maritime defense strategy, it becomes the commanding heights for grasping the initiative in maritime defense strategy." [2] In the transition from a maritime power to a maritime power, how to respond, how to scientifically and reasonably prioritize the maritime domain, coordinate land and sea, grasp strategic initiative, and construct a maritime defense strategy conducive to sustainable development, Zheng Guanying's ideology can provide much-needed contemporary insights.

Currently, research on Zheng Guanying's maritime defense thinking in academia is not entirely comprehensive and systematic. Many studies are embedded within broader examinations of late Qing maritime defense or the Self-Strengthening Movement, lacking specificity. [3] Notable scholar Xia Dongyuan [4] has discussed Zheng's maritime defense ideas while compiling relevant works. Li Yanhong, Zhang Baiyun, and Tan Rui have also elaborated on the formation process and connotations of Zheng's national defense ideology, touching upon maritime defense. [5] Works by Li Wenjuan and Chen Qunxiong specifically analyze Zheng Guanying's maritime defense thinking, [6] but they primarily remain at the level of exposition, leaving room for further elaboration. Building upon the existing literature and employing historical analysis methods, along with perspectives from military science, international relations, geopolitics, and the development of maritime economy, further discussions on Zheng Guanying's maritime defense thinking are still warranted.

2. Conditions and Background of the Formation of Zheng Guanying's Maritime Defense Thinking

One of the foundational concepts of ancient Chinese statecraft is the "order between the Chinese and the barbarians," which profoundly influences various aspects of national decision-making, including maritime defense strategy. Under this traditional system, the notion of a nation is not akin to modern-day sovereign states; rather, their perception of the environment is merely a conglomeration after the spread of a singular culture. Concepts such as "territory," "boundaries," "sovereignty," and "government" in the maritime era are yet to be fully formed or reshaped. China's original maritime defense capabilities had long since collapsed, as described by the saying, "China's maritime borders extend for thousands of miles, while the warships of Western countries sail freely, coming and going in succession. In times of peace, they explore our vulnerabilities; in times of conflict, they peer over our defenses. Hence, the maritime defense situation has reached an unprecedented turning point, and it is indeed urgent to organize a navy in today's world" [7]. Zheng Guanying was deeply influenced by traditional Confucian thoughts from a young age. After witnessing the reality of "might makes right" [8] and through continuous learning and practical experience, he gradually expounded his unique and profound theories.

2.1. The Illusion of Late Qing Maritime Defense

After the mid-19th century, China was reluctantly drawn into the world system, and the illusion of the “Celestial Empire” shattered. Though there were still land-based aggressions, such as Russia’s invasion of Northeast and Northwest China and Britain’s interference in Tibet, more foreign powers chose to attack China’s coastal areas. The Opium War, the Sino-French War, and the First Sino-Japanese War were all aggressions launched from coastal directions. “The coastal provinces, with Guangdong having Hong Kong under British control and Macao under Portuguese control, are already within their grasp. As for other ports, totaling three, they engage in trade with each other, yet Westerners still consider it insufficient” [7]. Unlike the raids by nomadic tribes of the past, foreign powers were more inclined toward territorial occupation and the long-term seizure of economic and political interests. In particular, the occupation and division of the Chinese market led to China’s loss of independent sovereignty, hastening its descent into a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society. Li Hongzhang once lamented, “In previous times, border defense was mostly focused on the northwest, with a balance between strength and weakness, and a clear boundary between the host and the guest. Now, the maritime borders in the southeast extend for thousands of miles, and various countries engage in trade and missionary activities without hindrance. They gather in the capital and the provinces, outwardly professing friendship while secretly plotting to swallow us. One country incites trouble, while others join in. This is truly an unprecedented crisis in thousands of years” [9]. Faced with this new type of crisis, the feudal tradition of ancestral family laws had long lost its efficacy. Zheng Guanying advocated abandoning the outdated notion of “central China” and actively integrating into the international community on equal terms. He stated, “If we, the Chinese, consider ourselves as occupying the center of the earth, then we view others as barbarians and have always been content with defending our borders without seeking further expansion. Since the advent of trade, various countries, relying on their strength and wealth, have formed alliances and pretended to negotiate peace, while secretly coveting our possessions. Hence, they did not include China in international law, indicating their intentions. However, China also disdains being treated as just one of the nations under international law, insisting on being recognized as the supreme ruler. This is what it means to be isolated and helpless, suffering alone, and it is imperative to change our approach”.

Faced with such severe maritime defense pressure, the Han Chinese Empire, still entrenched in traditional social frameworks, had few effective responses. Under the corrupt rule of the late Qing government, China’s military was weak, its defense was lax, its weapons were outdated, its military discipline was lax, and it lacked effective combat capability. It was criticized at the time, “The navy is unable to defend against enemies. Not only are our ships inferior to theirs in terms of speed and power, but even the coastal artillery is useless. The coastal defense system is disorganized and lacks cohesion” [10].

2.2. “Defending the Homeland”: Deep-rooted Traditional Defense Concepts

Ancient China was mainly supported by a small-scale agrarian economy based on the system of men farming and women weaving. Most of the Central Plain dynasties faced long-term incursions from nomadic hunting tribes in the north, and any lapse in attention could lead to dynastic changes. Thus, resolving the “border defense” issues on land was the primary task. Even though China had approximately 18,000 kilometers of coastline, and piracy had been prevalent along the coast since the Tang Dynasty, reaching its peak in the Ming Dynasty, these sporadic, loose, and short-lived disturbances along the southeastern coast did not receive as much attention from the central government’s defense department as the land-based issues concerning the Great Wall and passes.

The establishment of ancient Chinese defense policies is also related to traditional Chinese concepts of world order. It was believed that “to the east, repel the vast sea; to the west, block the

drifting sands; to the north, traverse the great desert; to the south, block the Five Ridges; this is how heaven limits the central realm, separating the inside from the outside” [11]. The various ethnic groups of Huaxia, as the center of world civilization, should indeed maintain their position in the Central Plains and adopt a policy towards other foreign ethnic groups characterized by “sending out goodwill and welcoming others, appreciating virtues while not being arrogant about one’s capabilities, thereby fostering friendly relations with distant peoples; continuing ancestral ties, reviving fallen states, managing chaos and averting crises, conducting diplomatic exchanges in a timely manner, being generous in giving and frugal in receiving, thus winning the allegiance of vassal states.” [12] Hence, there is no need for extensive exchange and learning. Under this guiding ideology, defense layouts often focused on “defending the interior while feigning weakness on the exterior” and “repelling external aggression by first ensuring internal stability.” Furthermore, the guiding ideology of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom believed that “the survival or demise of a country lies in its virtue, not in its strength” [13]. It advocated for “loyalty and trust as armor, and propriety and righteousness as weapons” [14], and proclaimed that “the benevolent are invincible” [15], while warning that “even a large country will perish if it loves war” [16].

Such a thought system could be self-fulfilling in the closed-loop development of ancient society, but from the perspective of modern national warfare, it is of little benefit. Once the initiative is relinquished and the situation becomes several times weaker than that of the enemy, self-preservation becomes almost impossible.

Faced with this situation, Zheng Guanying lamented in *Alarm in Flourishing Age*: “The ways of Yao, Shun, Yu, Tang, Wen, Wu, and Confucius are great principles that remain unchanged for eternity,” and “I hope that our teachers will adhere to these principles firmly. Our adversaries must adhere to the laws of heaven. Both parties should understand the mysteries of Yin and Yang...and put an end to territorial disputes and eternal wars.” These words express a hope for the integration of Chinese and Western cultures, but more importantly, they reflect a shift in defense concepts towards a more assertive and modernized approach.

3. Zheng Guanying’s Vision and Practice of Modern Chinese Maritime Defense Development

Zheng Guanying’s maritime defense ideology is rich in content, not derived from empty talk or speculation, but based on his own experiences in the Self-Strengthening Movement and interactions with others. His development process closely followed the changing situation of the times, reflecting a tendency to replace the traditional orders between the Han people and the barbarians with modern Western international relations norms. Drawing on advanced Western maritime defense experiences, he gradually adapted to China’s modernization process, progressing from a nascent stage to maturity, becoming one of the outstanding representatives of modernization in maritime defense in China.

3.1. Establishing a Modernized National Defense Force

Starting from the First Opium War until the decisive defeat in the Battle of the Yalu River, given the repeated defeats suffered by the Qing government, Zheng Guanying made his own assessment: “Although Chinese ironclads are larger than those of Japan, they are not as fast as Japanese ironclads and torpedo boats.” In terms of personnel, “each person has their own ideas, each camp has its own leader, and there are many government departments...with no coordination...between soldiers and officers, officers and commanders, causing disunity from top to bottom, akin to ice and fire.” Additionally, due to improper command, insufficient funds, and delayed intelligence, victories were scarce. Therefore, the urgent task was to quickly establish a modernized maritime defense force capable of shouldering great responsibilities.

Zheng Guanying recognized that Western powers' military operations unified land and sea forces, emphasizing coordinated combat. He highlighted the crucial ability of the navy to command the army while the reverse was not true. Zheng believed military command should adapt to combat needs and be flexible. Therefore, he advocated for the establishment of maritime patrols independent of naval command, leading the Three Oceans Navy. As stated in *Alarm in Flourishing Age - Maritime Defense*, "Naval forces from western countries can control land routes, but land forces cannot control naval routes. This is because the vastness of the ocean and the rapidly changing military situations are beyond the knowledge of land routes. Currently, Chinese naval commanders return to civilian control during peacetime and listen to the commands of military leaders during wartime." Zheng Guanying also proposed selecting "ambitious military personnel who have studied at foreign naval academies and observed political affairs for three to five years" to serve as commanders. "Officers of all ranks should graduate from military academies... Naval academies and training ships should be established in both northern and southern seas. Every aspect of ship deployment and formation must be as proficient as that of Western navies" to enhance the combat capabilities of the military, especially in actual combat. "Training should involve simulating enemy attacks, setting ambushes, and engaging in surprise maneuvers, mimicking actual combat scenarios, to cultivate readiness during peacetime." It is essential to maintain elite readiness at all times and reinforce strengths. He also proposed the idea of "regional defense deployment" and "exchange of defense zones," suggesting, "Once defenses are established, the Zhi, Feng, and Dong regions should be combined into one garrison, while Jiang, Zhe, and the Yangtze River region form another. Fujian and Taiwan constitute one garrison, and Guangdong Province serves as another. Each garrison should have a navy, focusing on maintaining order during peacetime and uniting against enemies during crises." Furthermore, Zheng Guanying recognized the importance of seizing the initiative in warfare. Instead of passive defense, he advocated for active offense, stating, "China's maritime borders are vast, making defense challenging. It is more advisable to seize key points for self-strengthening. Naval forces should be utilized for offensive purposes, while ground forces are for defense. What was once discussed as naval defense in previous times should now be termed naval warfare." Zheng Guanying also understood the significance of transportation and communication in naval defense construction. He believed that the development of railways, roads, telegraphs, and postal services could, to varying degrees, promote the enhancement of naval defense capabilities, thereby enriching the nation and strengthening its military. In *Yi Yan*, he wrote, "Indeed, in the event of conflicts between two nations, the transmission of military information relies on telegrams. Those who possess it often triumph, while those who lack it often fail. In commerce and trade, merchants rely on telegrams to stay informed of market prices. Those without access to this communication tool often lag behind, while those who have it frequently prosper. Thus, the foundation of strength and wealth is built upon this." Later, in *Alarm in Flourishing Age*, Zheng listed the ten major benefits of railways. Zheng Guanying, along with figures like Wang Tao and Guo Songtao, played a crucial role in promoting the construction of the Navy Telecommunications and Telegraph Bureau under Li Hongzhang's leadership.

3.2. Strengthening the "Money Bag": Combining Military and Commercial Strategies

Compared to many contemporary maritime defense ideologies, what distinguishes Zheng Guanying's ideas is that they have never been limited solely to military defense. Engaged in maritime affairs for years, he had a profound understanding of the relationship between economic resources and military strength. Therefore, his perspective has always emphasized the close connection between "enriching the country and its people" and "strengthening the military to deter humiliation," stating that "without wealth, a country cannot be strong; without strength, wealth cannot be protected. Wealth and strength are interdependent," indicating the importance of using economic resources to support maritime defense construction, which in turn can sustain broader commercial activities. In *Alarm in Flourishing*

Age - Business Warfare, Zheng Guanying suggested: “It is advisable to address both the root and the branches. If one neglects the root and only seeks the branches, if one attends only to appearances without attacking the essence, then education will not flourish, talents will not emerge, and we will see not only the failure of commerce but also the failure of scholars, farmers, and workers... Wu Xuan changed the old ways, borrowed from others, and achieved practical results to gather wealth and strength. One follows the Japanese method, revitalizing industry and commerce to pursue wealth, engaging in an invisible war. One follows the Western method, emphasizing military preparation to seek strength, engaging in a visible war.” From the perspective of resisting foreign powers, “military warfare” and “commercial warfare” are inseparable, complementary, and mutually causal conditions.

3.3. Emphasizing the Role of “People” in Building Professional Maritime Defense

Zheng Guanying’s maritime defense ideology often emphasizes the importance of the element of “people.” Based on the severe external threats, corruption within the Qing government, and the weakness of the Eight Banners, Zheng Guanying advocated for the full mobilization of the defensive capabilities of the populace, promoting military training and maritime defense education nationwide. “It is appropriate for each province to carefully select personnel knowledgeable in military affairs and establish military academies, following the Western teaching methods. Along the coastal regions and border areas, local leaders should be selected first, and training stations should be established to teach skills such as swordsmanship, spear techniques, firearms, and artillery. Once trained, they can then teach ten others under their command. Once these ten are trained, they can teach their families, ensuring that everyone knows military skills, fostering unity against enemies... establishing defense units everywhere, linking villages together, with unified voices, and shared joys and sorrows. In times of financial difficulty for the nation and logistical challenges for the military, this approach will alleviate hardships.” Zheng Guanying envisioned that naval academies should cultivate individuals who are “well-versed in both Chinese and foreign military strategies, mathematics, astronomy, geography, cartography, as well as the principles of ancient and modern battlefield victories and defeats, capable of commanding troops and determining the fate of the three armed services.” He emphasized the necessity for expertise in various maritime aspects such as “navigation, sail handling, wind and storm prevention, celestial navigation, rock exploration, and the accuracy of artillery fire, all must be thoroughly understood, meticulously practiced, so that in the future, when facing aggressive neighbors, command and control will be in line with circumstances, without squandering vast resources.” Zheng Guanying also emphasized the cultivation of military personnel’s morale. He consistently believed that it is people who wield objects, not objects that control people’s hearts. “The method of training soldiers starts with training their hearts, followed by training their bodies, and then training their morale. What is training the heart? It is teaching them to respect their superiors, be loyal to the country, and serve the people. What is training the body? It is teaching them marching, hand-to-hand combat, and all other physical skills. Once the heart is trained, the body becomes agile, but without the courage and morale to lead, once action begins, it will falter and retreat.” Through this method, talents were cultivated to meet the needs of modern national defense and military preparedness.

Zheng Guanying’s maritime defense ideology is imbued with the wisdom of ancient military strategists. In ancient Chinese warfare, mastering sufficient intelligence was emphasized, as the saying goes, “Know yourself and know your enemy, and you shall not be imperiled in a hundred battles.” A robust information network relies on the activities of military spies. Zheng Guanying was well aware of this: “Whoever effectively utilizes spies in military affairs can seize the initiative, controlling others without being controlled, thus ensuring victory. Conversely, those who lose their spies will lag behind in every aspect, and their attempts to attack the enemy will backfire, leading to trouble.” Through long-term practice and reflection, Zheng Guanying believed that “boldness,

courage, and attention to detail, combined with agility and swiftness, are the traits of those who can achieve victory.” Additionally, vigilance against foreign spies and espionage activities should be maintained at all times.

4. Conclusion

To some extent, Zheng Guanying and the ancient Chinese strategists share a similar approach to national defense, both preferring diplomatic means of resolving national security crises, as evidenced by their inclination towards the use of “military might without war.” Prior to the First Sino-Japanese War, Zheng Guanying suggested forming alliances with Britain, France, and Germany to “unite to counter the sharpness of Russia and Japan.” However, the realities of warfare shattered Zheng Guanying’s aspirations. The great powers either remained indifferent or pursued their own interests. In the absence of diplomatic support in the international arena, Zheng’s strategy of “befriending distant states while attacking nearby ones” failed to yield results. The Qing government, weakened by its declining national strength, could never truly resolve China’s maritime defense crisis through diplomacy alone, rendering even the most promising ideas mere fantasies.

Zheng Guanying’s maritime defense ideology was the product of the turbulent late Qing period, conceived by enlightened Chinese patriots seeking to save the nation. Zheng Guanying did not advocate for the isolationist approach to maritime defense. Instead, he linked maritime defense with comprehensive national strength. In his view, elements such as “wealth,” “strength,” “nation,” and “people” should all be mutually adaptive and complementary. Many of his ideas challenged the administrative traditions of feudal rule, vividly illustrating an advanced, holistic, forward-thinking, and progressive maritime defense worldview.

Firstly, his patriotism is evident throughout his writings. Born in troubled times, he remained committed to the ideals of saving the country and the people, advocating for “wealth and strength” and resisting external humiliation. His beliefs and actions far surpassed the framework of feudal loyalty and patriotism, falling within the realm of modern patriotism. Secondly, he emphasized the importance of popular forces and advocated for a people-oriented approach, promoting prosperity among the people, nurturing their awareness, and fostering national development, thereby leading the progress of the times. Furthermore, he abandoned the traditional dichotomy between “Han people” and “barbarians” and embraced a concept of international relations based on equality in diplomacy. Guided by this ideology, he studied Western practices, revitalized industry and commerce, and sought wealth and strength, breaking away from traditional Chinese defense habits. In conjunction with the rising notion of national identity, he advanced China’s modernization of national defense.

As an important Enlightenment thinker of the late Qing Dynasty and a pioneer of bourgeois reformism, Zheng Guanying made significant contributions to the evolution of modern Chinese defense concepts. From the measures adopted by the Qing government later on, it can be seen that many of Zheng Guanying’s proposals were accepted and implemented to varying degrees. Although some of his views were hindered by historical and contextual limitations, appearing insufficiently comprehensive and scientifically grounded for effective implementation, this does not diminish their positive impact on the defense construction of the Qing Dynasty and even the Republic of China era, which remains relevant to this day.

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