Once the Portuguese conquered the port city of Malacca, in 1511, they immediately recognized the strategic importance of the maritime provinces of southern China from the point of view of Asian trade. The Middle Kingdom, as Portuguese observers duly noted, while being a major exporter of manufactured goods such as silk textiles, copper coins (caixas) and porcelains, was also an insatiable consumer of Southeast Asian natural commodities, namely spices and scented woods. During the 1520’s and the 1530’s, the Portuguese, acting as middlemen, reaped huge profits in their informal dealings with the Chinese, which took place either in Malacca and elsewhere in the Malay peninsula, or in deserted islands off the South China coast. The still common expression negócio da China, ‘a China deal’, meaning an extremely profitable enterprise, entered the Portuguese language in those years. Since the historic journey of Vasco da Gama in 1497–1498, the Portuguese Crown had been establishing an extensive network of fortresses and factories, centred at the Indian territory of Goa, but spreading all the way from Mozambique and the East African coast, to the Moluccas at the eastern limits of the Indonesian archipelago.¹ The first Portuguese official attempts to come to an agreement with the Ming authorities failed, however, and so, most dealings with the South China coastal regions were conducted illegally by temporary partnerships organized for a single or several expeditions, between Portuguese fidalgos and Asian merchants. As a result, trading locations moved from one coastal island to the next with the changes in regional Chinese politics.²

¹ For a synthesis of Portuguese endeavours in Asia, Subrahmanyam, The Portuguese Empire, passim; Barreto, Lavrar o Mar, 15–59.
² Portuguese relations with China throughout the sixteenth century are dealt with extensively in Loureiro, Fidalgos, Missionários e Mandarins, passim, and for the earlier period, 313–396.
Illustration 7-1  Portuguese Naus at anchor: Detail from the map of Santa Helena Island included in Jan Huygen van Linschoten’s “Itinerario” (Amsterdam, 1595)