Cheng Wei-chung’s *War, Trade, and Piracy in the China Seas* constitutes the first serious book-length treatment of the Zheng family, a mercantile dynasty whose ships dominated trade in southeastern China and maritime East Asia during the seventeenth century. In the Confucian-inspired Chinese historiography, the Zhengs are remembered as loyalists to the embattled Ming Dynasty (1368-1662) in its doomed struggle against the Manchu Qing (1636-1912). Historians in the West have largely adopted this perspective albeit with modifications. Indeed, all four generations of the family received ranks and titles from the exiled Ming courts and fought against the Manchus in major engagements. However, through meticulous research into Dutch-language archives in conjunction with Chinese primary sources, Cheng Wei-chung convincingly challenges this assessment. He argues that Ming loyalism served as a convenient cover for the Zhengs’ real purpose: the continued survival and profitability of their enterprise within the context of an independent kingdom.

As Cheng shows, on one level, the Zheng leaders followed in the footsteps of the many warlords who thrived during a period of chaos and disorder in Chinese history. Still, they had distinct characteristics because of their reliance upon the seas, and, in particular, the lucrative luxury trade involving Chinese silk, Japanese silver, and Southeast Asian spices and natural resources. The family profited immensely as middlemen able to monopolize the supply of Mainland goods otherwise made inaccessible because of piracy, civil war, and maritime restrictions from the Ming and Qing courts. At the same time, it benefited from European and Japanese maritime expansion, which opened up new markets in the region. In this sense, the Zheng enterprise bore striking similarities to a “Malay port principality” (251-52).

Cheng reinforces this main argument throughout his book. He sets the stage by providing fascinating new evidence for a poorly understood period in maritime East Asian history: from the relaxation of the Ming maritime ban and opening of the port of Haicheng, in southern Fujian province, for licensed private trade in 1567 to the emergence of Zheng Zhilong in the 1620s. Cheng shows how Sino-Japanese smuggling and piracy, and the entry of the Portuguese, Spanish, and Dutch into the East Asian sea lanes prompted a declining Ming to form a semiofficial mercenary force to bolster coastal security. Zheng Zhilong rose to power by collaborating with the foreign mercantile networks as a pirate and translator. In 1628, he surrendered to the Ming court and used his new
position of privilege to take over and privatize the mercenary units and control China's outbound trade from bases in coastal Fujian. It was the desire to preserve his lucrative trading connections with Japan and Southeast Asia, and his immense personal wealth, that motivated him to abandon the Ming cause and seek an accommodation with the Qing in 1646. This explanation certainly provides a more nuanced perspective compared to traditional representations of Zhilong as a vile opportunist who betrayed his ruler.

By adopting a mercantile approach, the actions of Zhilong's son, Zheng Chenggong, better known as Koxinga, also make more sense. Although his professed loyalty to the Ming cause appeared to contradict his father, his behavior, if analyzed carefully, proved equally opportunistic. During the first half of the 1650s, he put on a show of fighting for the Ming but, in reality, expanded his own sphere of influence in Fujian, even as he negotiated with the Qing court. A noncommittal position gave him maximum strategic flexibility, allowing him to access product sources in the Qing-controlled Yangzi River Delta and creating the framework for a quasi-state entity—what Cheng calls “Fujian exceptionalism” —that enjoyed de facto independence (164). Only toward the end of the decade, when the Ming loyalist cause stood on the verge of collapse and the Qing turned its entire attention toward his eradication did he lead a northern invasion in a failed effort to secure his supply lines.

Cheng further offers a fresh interpretation of Koxinga's seizure of the Dutch colony of Taiwan in 1661. He challenges the conventional narrative, which claims that Koxinga, under strong military pressure from the Qing, withdrew to the island to forge a base for a future counterattack on the Mainland. Instead, as Cheng shows, Taiwan held intrinsic value on account of its strategic location at the crossroads of maritime East Asia. Previously, it had served as an entrepôt where Koxinga could sell Chinese gold to the Dutch East India Company for Indian products. Once the scope for this cooperation declined, he took the island for himself to directly compete with the Dutch for new markets in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean.

Compared to the extensive treatment accorded to Zheng Zhilong and Koxinga, Cheng devotes fewer pages to their descendants, Zheng Jing and Keshuang. However, this is precisely the period where he presents his most fascinating archival discoveries. Under Zheng Jing, the fortunes of the familial enterprise reached their height. Over the 1660s, through skillful commercial and diplomatic acumen, Jing managed to control a larger share of maritime East Asian trade than at any other time in his organization's history, including the rule of his two illustrious predecessors. Meanwhile, he completed the transformation of Fujian exceptionalism into a full-fledged Taiwan-based kingdom. Even more fascinating is the increased ability of the Zhengs to project