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Ports and Coasts: Maritime Histories of China's Coastal Provinces

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** Liaoning: Gateways at Dalian and Lüshun
- **Chapter 2** Jilin: The Tumen River Corridor to the Sea
- **Chapter 3** Hebei: Qinhuangdao's Coal, Salt, and Sea Lanes
- **Chapter 4** Tianjin: Treaty Port to Northern Metropolis
- **Chapter 5** Shandong: Qingdao and the Jiaozhou Bay Experiment
- **Chapter 6** Shandong: Weihai, Yantai, and the Maritime Frontier
- **Chapter 7** Jiangsu: Nantong, Textiles, and the Yangtze Mouth
- **Chapter 8** Jiangsu: Lianyungang and the North Jiangsu Salt Coasts
- **Chapter 9** Shanghai: From Bund to Yangshan—A World Port
- **Chapter 10** Zhejiang: Ningbo, Zhoushan, and Archipelagic Worlds
- **Chapter 11** Zhejiang: Wenzhou Merchants and Coastal Enterprise
- **Chapter 12** Fujian: Quanzhou to Xiamen—Diaspora Gateways
- **Chapter 13** Fujian: Fuzhou, Mawei, and Min River Shipyards
- **Chapter 14** Guangdong: Guangzhou and the Canton System
- **Chapter 15** Guangdong: The Pearl River Delta's Waterborne Workshops
- **Chapter 16** Guangdong: Leizhou, Qiongzhou Strait, and South Seas Routes
- **Chapter 17** Guangxi: Beihai, Qinzhou, and the Beibu Gulf
- **Chapter 18** Hainan: Island Ports and the South China Sea
- **Chapter 19** Hong Kong: Harbor Capital of Finance and Freight
- **Chapter 20** Macao: Luso-Asian Crossroads and Fishing Grounds
- **Chapter 21** Taiwan: Tainan to Kaohsiung—Island Industry Afloat
- **Chapter 22** Taiwan: Keelung, Taipei Basins, and Northern Gateways
- **Chapter 23** Liaoning: Yingkou/Newchwang and Treaty-Era Transformations
- **Chapter 24** Hebei: Tangshan, Caofeidian, and Built Seashores
- **Chapter 25** Shanghai: Shipbuilding, Offshore Engineering, and Containerization

Introduction

China's coastline stretches across climates, languages, and lifeways, tying together archipelagos, river deltas, and headlands into a single but varied maritime world. This book approaches that seaboard not as a backdrop to inland history but as a generative frontier in its own right—a place where provincial economies were reoriented by ports, where shipyards and fishing grounds sustained communities, and where encounters with distant markets and powers left enduring marks on local societies. By following coastal provinces one by one, we trace how geography, policy, and culture converged to shape distinctive maritime histories that nonetheless interacted across a shared horizon.

The chapters are organized provincially to foreground the textures of place. A harbor silting up in northern Hebei, a clan network organizing remittances in southern Fujian, or a shipyard in Shanghai experimenting with steel hulls each speaks to broader transformations while remaining irreducibly local. This structure lets readers compare how monsoon patterns, estuarine geomorphology, and archipelagic corridors conditioned risk and opportunity from Liaoning's cold-water fisheries to Hainan's tropical sea lanes. It also highlights administrative differences—municipalities, autonomous regions, and special administrative regions included—that produced contrasting regulatory regimes for trade, migration, and maritime policing.

Across these provinces, commerce drove innovation. Coastal markets moved grain, salt, tea, seafood, ceramics, and later coal and manufactured goods through a lattice of cabotage routes and blue-water passages. Guilds and shipping partnerships financed voyages; customs stations and lighthouse services standardized circulation; and marine insurance, bills of lading, and warehousing knit local harbors into global systems. Merchant diasporas from Guangdong and Fujian carried capital and customs abroad and brought new tastes, technologies, and faiths home, making port neighborhoods microcosms of the wider oceanic world. In subsequent eras, containerization, petrochemicals, and logistics parks reconfigured waterfronts, shifting the balance from sail loft to gantry crane.

Seafaring cultures thrived in this littoral, adapting to monsoons and markets alike. Boat-dwelling communities, tidewater farmers, and island fishers cultivated practical knowledge of currents, reefs, and storms, recording them in pilot books, songs, and seasonal calendars. Pilgrimages to sea temples and rituals for safe passage bound crews and families to moral economies of trust. Yet the same waters fostered smuggling and piracy at different moments, from small-boat raiding along rocky inlets to highly organized fleets that challenged coastal defenses. Provincial authorities oscillated between restriction and accommodation—tightening maritime bans,

licensing trade, or experimenting with coastal militias—each leaving distinctive archival traces and folk memories.

Imperial rivalries and colonial encounters reshaped many of these shores. External powers sought coaling stations, consulates, and concessions; new legal geographies divided waterfronts into zones with different customs, courts, and police. Railheads met quays, and dry docks rose beside old anchorages. Some harbors—Qingdao, Dalian, Tianjin, Shanghai, Hong Kong—became laboratories for urban modernity, while others specialized in repair, bunkering, or regional cabotage. War and revolution militarized straits and islands, redirected shipping, and displaced entire waterfront communities, only for peacetime reconstruction to launch new industrial and logistic booms.

The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries brought another transformation. Special economic zones, bonded areas, and port-industrial complexes scaled up provincial ambitions: containers stacked at deep-water terminals, petrochemical crackers fed export manufacturing, and ferry routes stitched islands to mainland markets. Environmental pressures followed—coastal erosion, land reclamation, depleted fisheries—provoking new regimes of conservation, marine zoning, and disaster preparedness. Today's provinces negotiate between competitiveness and sustainability, heritage and redevelopment, local fishing rights and global supply chains.

Methodologically, this book draws on port gazetteers, customs ledgers, nautical charts, shipwreck archaeology, clan genealogies, and oral histories of fishers, dockworkers, pilots, and shipwrights. By reading these sources against provincial planning documents and contemporary logistics data, we reconstruct how policy, practice, and place intersected across the centuries. Each chapter pairs a close reading of one province's maritime past with attention to its present challenges and futures, inviting readers to compare patterns across the coast while remaining attentive to difference. Ports and coasts, we argue, are not simply edges of the land—they are engines of history, shaping the provinces that face the sea.

CHAPTER ONE: Liaoning: Gateways at Dalian and Lüshun

Liaoning's coastline, a jagged spine along the Bohai and Yellow Seas, has long been a crossroads of commerce and conflict. The province's maritime identity is etched into its ports—Dalian and Lüshun—two cities that bookend its southern shoreline yet tell intertwined tales of ambition, adaptation, and the sea's relentless tide of change. Here, the cold waters of the north meet the monsoon swells of the south, creating a littoral where natural harbors became crucibles for economic and cultural exchange.

The Liaodong Peninsula, upon which both cities sit, juts into the Bohai Strait like a thumb pressing against the map of China. Dalian, perched on the peninsula's northern edge, occupies a natural harbor that has drawn traders for millennia. Ancient texts note its use as a stopover for ships navigating the treacherous waters between the Yellow River and the Yalu. Its sheltered bay, protected by islands and reefs, offered respite from storms and a place to refit vessels. By the Qing dynasty, it had become a modest fishing port, its name—"Dalian," meaning "great lotus"—a nod to the wildflowers that once blanketed its shores.

Lüshun, at the peninsula's southern tip, commands a more militaristic legacy. Its harbor guards the entrance to the Bohai Sea, a chokepoint that has made it indispensable for naval strategy and global trade alike. The area was part of the ancient Goguryeo Kingdom, whose kings used its coasts to launch raids against Chinese dynasties. Later, it would become a flashpoint for imperial rivalries, as foreign powers coveted its deep-water anchorage and strategic position.

The late 19th century transformed both ports into theaters of great power politics. Russia, seeking a warm-water port to rival its Baltic holdings, seized Dalian in 1899 after the First Sino-Japanese War. The Russians renamed it *Dal'niy* and built a modern city around their naval base, complete with Orthodox churches and onion-domed architecture. They widened the harbor, dredged channels, and laid rail lines to connect it to the Trans-Siberian Railway. For a brief period, Dalian became a symbol of Russia's Pacific ambitions.

Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War of 1905 shifted control northward. The Treaty of Portsmouth (1905) handed Lüshun—and its military stronghold, Port Arthur—to Japan, while Dalian came under joint administration. The Japanese poured resources into both cities, constructing shipyards, factories, and fortifications. In Lüshun, they built a sprawling naval complex that would later play a pivotal role in both World Wars. The city's harbor, though beautiful, was a fortress: its cliffs were

lined with artillery, its tunnels honeycombed for submarines, and its docks bristled with destroyers.

For Chinese officials and merchants, this foreign occupation was a bitter pill. The Qing court, scrambling to assert sovereignty amid foreign encroachment, established a customs office in Dalian in 1905. Local traders, caught between empires, adapted by smuggling goods through the gaps in military patrols. Salt, silk, and seafood flowed south to Tianjin, while Russian and Japanese merchants imported textiles, machinery, and spirits. The ports became battlegrounds for economic influence, their waters patrolled by warships and their markets policed by rival consulates.

The early 20th century saw Dalian and Lüshun emerge as laboratories of modernity. Dalian's port facilities, expanded under Japanese rule, handled cargo from across the Pacific. Its harbor became a hub for shipbreaking, where aging steamships were dismantled for scrap. Workers—many of them Korean laborers brought in during Japan's colonial administration—lived in cramped tenements near the docks, their lives a study in contrasts: state-of-the-art cranes lifted cargo beside ramshackle piers where junks unloaded rice and millet.

Lüshun's military infrastructure, meanwhile, shaped its character. The city's layout was dictated by strategic needs: barracks clustered near artillery batteries, while civilian districts huddled inland. Its harbor was a staging ground for Japan's expansion into Korea and Taiwan, its ships carrying troops and supplies to Tokyo's growing empire. Yet even here, commerce thrived. A bustling black market catered to sailors and soldiers, selling everything from opium to postage stamps. Local fishermen, adept at navigating minefields and patrol boats, ferried contraband under cover of darkness.

The interwar years brought a fragile stability. Under the Republic of China, both ports were nominally returned to Chinese control, but foreign concessions lingered. Dalian's Russian quarter, with its onion domes and Cyrillic signage, remained until the 1930s. Japanese businesses, excluded from Lüshun's harbor after the Washington Naval Treaty of 1922, shifted their operations to nearby Dalian, creating a patchwork of competing commercial zones. The ports' dual nature—as gateways and frontlines—reflected China's own struggle to balance sovereignty and pragmatism.

The outbreak of World War II deepened Lüshun's militarization. The Japanese garrison there was a key node in their defensive perimeter, its submarines and destroyers patrolling the Bohai Strait. Chinese and Korean partisans, operating from the peninsula's mountains, launched raids on supply depots and communication lines. Dalian, though less fortified, served as a logistical hub for Japan's war effort in China. Its shipyards repaired vessels damaged in Pacific campaigns, while its factories produced munitions and uniforms.

Post-war reconstruction rewrote the ports' trajectories. The Soviet Union, occupying

the peninsula from 1945 to 1955, dismantled much of Lüshun's military infrastructure but retained control of Dalian's port. Chinese communist forces, arriving in 1948, inherited a landscape reshaped by conflict: crumbling fortifications, abandoned rail yards, and a population eager to rebuild. The early 1950s saw a surge in state-led development, with Dalian becoming a center for heavy industry and shipbuilding.

The 1950s and 1960s marked Dalian's industrial ascendancy. Under Soviet assistance, its shipyards constructed trawlers, cargo vessels, and eventually oil tankers. The city's population swelled as migrants arrived to work in steel mills and factories. Lüshun, though smaller, maintained its military role, hosting a submarine base and radar stations that monitored northern shipping lanes. Both cities were integrated into the socialist planned economy, their ports serving as nodes in a nascent coastal trade network.

The Reform and Opening era of the 1980s transformed Dalian into a symbol of China's maritime renaissance. Designated a Special Economic Zone in 1984, it attracted foreign investment and embraced market-oriented policies. The city's port, privatized and expanded, became a gateway for exports to South Korea, Japan, and beyond. Its shipbuilding sector evolved from state-run yards to joint ventures with international firms. Today, Dalian remains one of China's busiest ports, handling millions of tons of cargo annually.

Lüshun's modern identity is more complex. While its military heritage endures—its port still hosts a People's Liberation Army naval base—the city has pivoted toward tourism and light industry. The ruins of Port Arthur, preserved as a historical site, draw visitors from across Asia. The harbor, though overshadowed by Dalian's modern terminals, retains a rugged charm: its docks are a mix of decommissioned Soviet-era cranes and new container yards, a testament to the region's layered history.

Environmental challenges loom large over both ports. Liaoning's coast has borne the brunt of industrial pollution, with runoff from factories marring beaches and contaminating fisheries. Dalian's port expansion has encroached on wetlands, displacing migratory birds and altering tidal patterns. Yet efforts to "green" the region have taken hold: offshore wind farms now dot the Bohai Sea, while Dalian has invested in shoreline restoration projects. These initiatives reflect a growing awareness that the sea's bounty is as fragile as it is vast.

Trade has long defined the ports' rhythms. Historically, Dalian's harbor served as a transshipment point for goods moving between China's interior and the outside world. During the Qing, it shipped timber, furs, and dried seafood to Tianjin and beyond. In the 20th century, its cargoes diversified to include coal, steel, and manufactured goods. Lüshun, though smaller, played a vital role in coastal shipping, its vessels transporting grain and salt to markets in Shandong and Hebei.

Piracy, though less chronic here than in southern waters, left its mark. Qing-era records describe small-boat raiders targeting fishing fleets and merchant junks near Dalian's outlying islands. These "sea bandits," as officials termed them, were often displaced farmers or soldiers turned to crime. Lüshun's waters, meanwhile, were plagued by smugglers exploiting the chaos of wartime. Stories abound of junks loaded with contraband—opium, arms, even silk—eluding customs patrols to reach Japanese-occupied territories.

The ports' seafaring cultures are rooted in adaptation. Fishermen, shipwrights, and pilots have long navigated the Bohai Strait's unpredictable currents and sudden squalls. Their knowledge, passed down through generations, is inscribed in local lore and practical skills. Dalian's harbor pilots, licensed by the state, memorize the shifting depths and reefs of their waters, steering vessels through channels that have claimed countless ships. Lüshun's fishermen, many of them Korean or Chinese minorities, have developed unique techniques for trawling in the cold, nutrient-rich waters of the northern sea.

Religious and cultural practices reflect the ports' cosmopolitanism. Dalian's Russian Orthodox churches, though diminished today, once hosted a thriving expatriate community. Its harbor hosted Shinto shrines during the Japanese occupation, while Chinese temples honored deities of the sea. Lüshun's Buddhist monasteries, nestled in the peninsula's hills, offered prayers for safe passage—a tradition that persists among local mariners. The ports' festivals, blending Chinese, Korean, and Russian elements, celebrate the sea's bounty and the risks it poses.

Urban development has reshaped both cities. Dalian's skyline, dotted with skyscrapers and industrial chimneys, belies its colonial-era roots. The city's port district, once a maze of wooden piers and narrow alleys, now features modern terminals and automated cargo systems. Lüshun, though less dramatically transformed, has seen its military zones repurposed into residential areas and commercial hubs. The juxtaposition of old and new—Soviet-era apartment blocks beside luxury hotels—mirrors the region's hybrid identity.

The ports' role in regional geopolitics remains significant. Dalian's harbor, one of China's most modern, handles a growing share of trade with Russia and Japan. Its free-trade zone, established in 2019, aims to replicate the success of Shanghai and Shenzhen. Lüshun, meanwhile, serves as a strategic anchor in the Bohai Sea, its naval presence a reminder of China's maritime assertiveness. Both cities are key nodes in the Belt and Road Initiative, their ports linked to infrastructure projects across Eurasia.

Economic shifts have redefined the ports' functions. Once reliant on heavy industry and military production, Dalian now emphasizes high-tech sectors and services. Its shipbuilding industry, though diminished since its Soviet-aided heyday, has pivoted to

constructing specialized vessels for offshore energy. Lüshun, smaller and more specialized, has focused on niche markets: ship repair, marine engineering, and logistics. These transitions reflect broader trends in China's coastal economy, where traditional industries give way to innovation-driven growth.

Environmental initiatives underscore the ports' modern challenges. Liaoning's government has launched programs to clean up coastal pollution, restore mangrove forests, and regulate industrial runoff. Dalian has invested in renewable energy projects, including tidal power stations and offshore wind farms. Lüshun's authorities have imposed stricter controls on fishing, aiming to reverse decades of overexploitation. These efforts, while progressive, face resistance from businesses and communities dependent on traditional maritime livelihoods.

The ports' human stories are as varied as their histories. Dalian's shipyard workers, many of them second-generation employees, have seen their industry evolve from manual labor to automation. Lüshun's fishermen, though fewer in number, continue to brave the Bohai's cold waters, their boats equipped with GPS and sonar but guided by age-old instincts. In both cities, the sea is a source of livelihood and legend, a force that shapes lives even as it resists control.

Transportation networks have long connected the ports to the wider world. Dalian's port railway, built under Russian and Japanese oversight, linked it to the Trans-Siberian and Beijing-Shanghai lines. Lüshun, though lacking direct rail access, relied on coastal steamers and later highways to move goods. Today, both cities are connected by high-speed rail and expressways, their ports integrated into China's national logistics grid. Containerization has streamlined cargo handling, while digital platforms manage everything from customs clearance to ship scheduling.

The ports' architectural heritage reveals layers of foreign influence. Dalian's Russian-built government buildings, with their Byzantine domes and ornate facades, stand alongside Japanese-era structures adorned with Shinto motifs. Lüshun's military sites—including the Port Arthur fortress and its underground tunnels—are preserved as museums, their concrete bunkers and artillery emplacements relics of 20th-century conflicts. These structures, though weathered by time and salt spray, bear witness to the region's tumultuous past.

Labor movements have shaped the ports' social fabric. Dalian's shipyard strikes of the 1950s, protesting poor working conditions and pay, were among the first major labor actions in the socialist era. Lüshun's fishermen, organizing collectives to resist bureaucratic mismanagement, pushed for greater autonomy in the 1970s. These struggles, though often suppressed, laid groundwork for later reforms, where worker participation in port governance became a model for other regions.

Cultural exchanges have flowed through the ports like the tides. Dalian's Russian

community, though diminished, left lasting marks on its cuisine and architecture. Japanese occupation brought new customs, from tea ceremonies to martial arts schools. Lüshun's proximity to Korea fostered ties that persist in cuisine and kinship networks. Today, the ports host international festivals celebrating maritime traditions, drawing performers from Russia, Japan, and Southeast Asia.

Technological innovation has reshaped port operations. Dalian's automated container terminals, among China's most advanced, use AI and robotics to handle cargo. Lüshun's shipyards employ 3D printing and modular construction techniques, reducing costs and delivery times. These advances, while increasing efficiency, have also displaced workers and altered the rhythm of port life. The clang of shipyard hammers, once a constant soundtrack, is now supplemented by the hum of machinery and the glow of computer screens.

Maritime law and regulation have evolved alongside the ports. Qing-era customs offices, tasked with curbing smuggling and piracy, laid the groundwork for modern bureaucratic oversight. Japanese colonial administrators streamlined port procedures, introducing standardized tariffs and shipping practices. Today, Dalian and Lüshun operate under a complex framework of national laws and international agreements, their regulations covering everything from environmental standards to anti-piracy protocols.

The ports' economic roles extend beyond cargo handling. Dalian's free-trade zone has become a hub for cross-border e-commerce, its warehouses storing goods destined for markets across Asia. Lüshun's logistics parks serve as distribution centers for agricultural products and manufactured goods. These ancillary services, though less visible than shipbuilding or fishing, contribute significantly to the region's GDP and employment rates.

Climate change poses new threats to the ports. Rising sea levels threaten to inundate low-lying areas, while warming waters disrupt fish populations and coral reefs. Dalian's port authorities have begun reinforcing seawalls and elevating infrastructure to cope with higher tides. Lüshun has introduced early-warning systems for typhoons and storm surges. These measures, while necessary, underscore the vulnerability of coastal communities to global environmental shifts.

Educational institutions have played a key role in nurturing maritime expertise. Dalian's Maritime University, founded in 1958, trains navigators, engineers, and ship designers. Lüshun's technical colleges offer courses in marine biology and coastal engineering. These schools, funded by local governments and state agencies, ensure a steady pipeline of talent for the ports' evolving needs. Graduates often find employment in port management, shipbuilding, or environmental monitoring roles.

Tourism has emerged as an unlikely lifeline for both ports. Dalian's scenic coastline

and colonial-era architecture draw millions of visitors annually. Its beaches, once military firing ranges, now host luxury resorts and seafood restaurants. Lüshun's historical sites, including the Port Arthur fortress, attract history buffs and school groups. While tourism provides jobs and revenue, it has also sparked debates over preserving heritage versus pursuing development.

The ports' futures hinge on balancing tradition with innovation. Dalian's leaders envision a smart port city, integrating AI, green energy, and global logistics networks. Lüshun's planners aim to capitalize on its military heritage and strategic location, promoting it as a center for maritime education and research. Both cities face the challenge of maintaining their distinct identities while adapting to the demands of a global economy.

The story of Liaoning's ports is one of resilience and reinvention. From Qing fishing harbors to industrial powerhouses, they have weathered wars, foreign occupation, and economic upheaval. Their waters, once traversed by junks and sailing ships, now host supertankers and container vessels. Yet the sea's enduring rhythms—the rise and fall of tides, the migration of fish, the passage of seasons—remain constants, shaping lives as they have for millennia. In Dalian and Lüshun, the past and present converge, a testament to the coastal provinces' unending dance with the ocean.

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