

The Chinese Connection

I'm in the middle of reading a fascinating book about Chinese voyages of discovery in the early 15th century¹. The author claims to have evidence that, among other things, the Chinese landed and established colonies in the Americas about 80 years before Columbus "discovered" the New World. I haven't gotten far enough in yet to comment on that, but the first part of the book lays the groundwork by discussing medieval Chinese history and culture and explaining how China spread its influence and came to dominate foreign trade in Asia and Africa at the time.

Despite having the world's largest army and navy, and having already invented gunpowder and developed firearms, this book's author says it wasn't China's style to simply invade a place and take it over. Rather, the Chinese sent treasure ships full of the finest goods, not only to trade but to bestow as gifts on local rulers. Once trading relationships were established, these rulers were given every imaginable luxury and invited to major events in China—with the Chinese providing transportation and picking up the tab for everything.

Of course, all this came at a price. If the foreign rulers wanted to continue to benefit from China's largesse, and if they wanted their highly profitable trade with China to continue and grow, then they had to pay tribute to China, both financially and by swearing allegiance to the Chinese emperor. The Chinese came to dominate the region, generally without firing a shot (even though they were the only ones at the time with guns). It would do us well here in the west to study more Chinese history.

I bring this up because, as many of you are aware, the past year has seen the introduction to the U.S. market of ham gear from China. The two major brands we have seen so far are Wouxon (pronounced OH-shin) and TYT (Quanzhou TYT Electronic Co.). The prices are very low and from all reports we've heard, the radios work well, too. At Ham-Com in Texas this past June, one dealer selling these new rigs wanted to be sure everyone in the hall knew how well they were doing, so the booth staff banged a big gong every time a ham bought one. Following a commercial tradition that is at least 700 years old, the Chinese are establishing themselves in the ham radio marketplace with quality goods at low prices that significantly undercut their competition.

Of course, their competition is acutely aware of this, especially the Japanese manufacturers who know from their own experience how effective this strategy can be. After all, it's been just over 40 years since the first ad for a Japanese radio appeared in U.S. ham magazines. The Japanese manufacturers used a similar approach, offering quality goods at low prices that significantly undercut their competition, starting with low-cost VHF-FM gear and then moving into higher-priced HF equipment as well.

Most of the "long-established" U.S. manufacturers (I put that in quotes because many of them had only been in business for about 40 years themselves at that point!) could not or would not respond effectively and eventually dropped out of the amateur market, giving the Japanese manufacturers market dominance for the past three decades. Now, the Chinese manufacturers appear to be adopting similar tactics, and the question becomes whether the Japanese manufacturers will learn from their own success and how (or if) they will adapt to meet this new challenge.

Ultimately, it will be up to you, the consumer, to decide which radios from which manufacturers give you the greatest value for your dollar. Other issues that may

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merit consideration by consumers include possible Chinese government subsidies to hold down prices on exported goods, and questions about working conditions and worker pay at Chinese factories (we know nothing about these specific companies, only that this is an issue in the broader topic of U.S.-China trade). And, of course, we the consumers should not forget that the U.S. amateur radio manufacturing industry has rebounded, with newer companies taking leadership positions in several areas of the ham marketplace. One thing is certain: radios from China will be a part of the ham radio landscape for many years to come, and the presence of these new "players" in the market will continue to be seen in magazines, on dealers' shelves and at hamfests around America.

Dayton and Dallas

Speaking of hamfests, both Dayton and Dallas (Ham-Com) seemed to be down a little in attendance this year, but most dealers reported strong sales nonetheless. Getting to and from Dayton proved to be challenging this year—it took me 13 hours to get there from New Jersey, which wouldn't have been too terrible if I was driving ... but I was flying! And after the show, both Ad Manager Chip Margelli, K7JA, and *Popular Communications* and *WorldRadio Online* Editor Richard Fisher, K16SN, got stranded overnight at different airports while trying to get home to California.

Ignoring all that, actually being at Dayton was its usual incredible experience. Yes, there was the sewer backup that shut down nearly all of the restrooms on Saturday afternoon and sent sewage seeping across parts of the flea market. But on the other hand, there was the unplanned and unannounced visit on Saturday morning by FCC Chairman Julius Genachowski and the usual controlled chaos at the CQ booth.

Working a booth at Dayton is a lot like running a pile-up on a DXpedition. There's a constant line of people waiting to "work" you; you can only "work" one at a time, and you have to hope all the others behave until you get to them (99% of the time, they do). But the people you get to meet are the best part. Attendees at Dayton truly cover the full spectrum of the ham radio hobby. All, of course, are just-plain-hams, having fun and chatting on a first-name basis ... even though among those just plain hams were at least one Nobel laureate, two retired admirals, a former ambassador and at least one astronaut. It sure is a good thing we don't have to QSL all those "eyeball" QSOs at the booth!

A couple of issue notes: Our coverage of ham radio's response to the wicked spring weather across the U.S. continues this month with a detailed look at how SATERN (Salvation Army Team Emergency Radio Network) volunteers helped out in Joplin, Missouri after a massive tornado struck that city (p. 13); and Youth Editor Brittany Decker, KB1OGL, shares her experience with—and lessons learned from—a too-close-for-comfort encounter with lightning at her home in New Hampshire ("A Striking Story," p. 38). Plus, of course, we have the SSB results of last year's CQ World Wide DX Contest. Once again, this truly worldwide contest made its own propagation—nearly two dozen new records were set - and we received over 6500 logs, showing operation from 232 countries ... including China.

73, W2VU

Note:

1. Menzies, Gavin, *1421: The Year China Discovered America*, HarperCollins, New York, 2004.