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Historical logic and maritime cultural foundation of China's initiative of building a maritime community with a shared future

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Building a "Maritime Community with a Shared Future" (MCSF) is a maritime development concept with Chinese characteristics proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2019. It is based on the rich cultural tradition and unique historical value of China's maritime civilization. It aims to solve real ocean problems and has outlined the future direction of human ocean development from the perspective of China. The essence of the MCSF is an issue of both ocean cultural and development concepts. It is a conceptual issue that transcends specific national boundaries and regions and is based on how all of humankind, with common interests and common values, can develop in harmony with the oceans. It is not a covert discourse strategy adopted by China in order to realize its "maritime power" ambition, as occasionally described by some Western countries. Starting with an analysis of the essential nature and implications of maritime culture by Chinese researchers, this article clarifies and summarizes the interaction, exchange, and integration of Chinese maritime culture in East Asia from a historical perspective, and extracts the unique characteristics and values of Chinese maritime culture. From the perspective of human-sea interactions, the three historical stages, as well as the existing problems of transforming and upgrading human-ocean culture, are analyzed. The article also contrasts Chinese and Western maritime cultures and proposes to absorb the outstanding achievements of both Chinese and Western maritime civilizations into a common framework in order to fundamentally reverse the antagonistic human-sea relationship that has existed historically. Finally, we propose giving full play to the fundamental role of marine cultural exchange and integration and, through international cooperation on specific issues in the field of global ocean international relations, propose specific and feasible practical pathways to promoting the realization of the MCSF.

KEYWORDS

maritime community with a shared future, global ocean governance, cross-sea communication, ocean culture, Chinese culture

1 Introduction

The natural fluidity of and cross-sea communications enabled by the world's oceans have promoted the transformation of world history from a state of fragmentation to one of integration. In modern times, exchanges and interactions through ocean trade networks have given rise to and promoted globalization, and the world's oceans have become a focus of attention of most countries. At present, global ocean competition is becoming increasingly fierce, global ocean governance is in question, human–ocean relations are fraught, and the lag in ocean development and governance methods has been exposed. It is urgent that we overcome opposition and diversify thinking in order to establish a concept of development in which humans and the oceans share a common future. On April 23, 2019, on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy, President Xi Jinping proposed the initiative of “Building a Maritime Community with a Shared Future” (MCSF). This initiative is a solution imbued with traditional Chinese values, and was proposed with the aim of solving the increasingly serious problems faced by human society in regard to development of the oceans and establishing a viable system of global ocean governance. It is a legacy of the rich history of the Chinese maritime civilization and an important innovative contribution. Since the MCSF was proposed, Chinese academic circles have provided in-depth explanations in relation to the following four main aspects:

- (1) *Essential nature and value of the MCSF.* In terms of its essential nature, researchers believe that the MCSF is an extension and innovation of the “Community with a Shared Future for Mankind” (CSFM) initiative to the oceans, and has five main aspects: lasting political peace, general environmental security, common economic prosperity, cultural openness and inclusiveness, and ecological health and beauty (Jin, 2021; Wang, 2022; Dai, 2023). In terms of practical value, scholars believe that the MCSF is the latest achievement in terms of the sinicization of Marx's community theory and has important contemporary, theoretical, practical, and global value (Tang, 2022). In addition, some researchers have pointed out that building a maritime power lays the foundation and that building the MCSF is the ultimate goal, both of which guide China's maritime actions and practices (Cheng and Yuan, 2023).
- (2) *Relationship between the MCSF and global ocean governance.* Zhu (2021) pointed out that the MCSF is closely connected with the idea of the CSFM. It embodies both the historical and theoretical diplomatic insights of Xi Jinping as China promotes global governance and inclusive multilateral cooperation on the basis of equity and mutual benefit. Lu (2022) and Wei (2022) both believe that the MCSF is an important theoretical concept to enable China to participate in global ocean governance and promote the formation of a more just, reasonable, and equitable governance system. Yao (2019) discussed how the MCSF can promote global ocean governance toward a fairer and more reasonable future from the perspective of international maritime law.
- (3) *Practical pathways toward building the MCSF.* Feng (2020) believes that the current incarnation of the MCSF focuses

mostly on the interpretation of concepts and implications, and there is an urgent need to supplement the MCSF with substantive content, including international common goals, international moral obligations, and international responsibilities. Ma (2020) proposed that building the MCSF requires the establishment of an open and inclusive international maritime order, the implementation of an environmental governance regime in which people and the oceans coexist harmoniously, and the development of “Blue partnerships” to break through barriers for global economic development. Xue (2023) pointed out that building the MCSF requires transforming consensus discourse into institutional arrangements and explored the path toward this using the negotiation of the 2023 Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ Agreement) as a specific case. Chen (2019) discussed the specific pathways for promoting the MCSF in the waters of both Northeast and Southeast Asia from the perspective of history and current reality.

- (4) *Promotion of the international dissemination and acceptance of the MCSF.* Chinese researchers have discussed comprehensively how to improve the international dissemination and acceptance of the MCSF. A proper channel for discourse is a prerequisite for effective communication. Lyu (2023) proposed that the MCSF provide a value system that is in line with the common maritime interests of humanity, such as maintaining maritime security, promoting maritime economic prosperity, and protecting the marine ecological environment. The discourse channel for building the MCSF can be promoted in six different ways: through community economic cooperation, international legal documents, domestic legal perfection, maritime policy systematization, international think tank construction, and international communication. Chen (2020) proposed that China's maritime diplomatic policy should have the mission of promoting the spread of the MCSF; specific tasks should include explaining China's maritime strategy, building a Blue partnership, spreading maritime culture, and shaping a good national image.

Since the MCSF was first proposed in 2019, it has become a “hot topic” of discussion and study in academic circles in China, and researchers have explored the subject from multiple specific angles. However, it is worth noting that, so far, there is still a lack of studies of this concept by foreign researchers, governments, think tanks, and other institutions. There are two main reasons for this: (1) most studies by Chinese scholars are published in Chinese domestic academic journals, and the results are insufficiently promoted throughout the international academic community; and (2) in the process of academic interpretation, research on international relations tends to focus on the study of “hard power,” topics such as politics, science and technology, military affairs, and the economy. Although there is emphasis on the importance of constructing a suitable discourse channel and international dissemination, the interpretation of the principal

marine cultural concepts of the MCSF has been somewhat neglected. This has led to a lack of understanding in some Western countries of the rich connotations of the MCSF concept, and even to misunderstandings. Because of this research dilemma, this article conducts a comprehensive study of the important implications and practical pathways afforded by the MCSF from the perspective of marine culture, which reflects the most basic interactive relationship between humans and the oceans. The article systematically analyzes this issue from four main aspects: (1) the essence and unique value of China's maritime civilization, extending from the unique value of maritime culture to the important implications of the MCSF; (2) the taking of East Asian waters as an example in order to analyze the historical picture of interregional maritime cultural exchanges, interaction, and integration through the maritime humanities network in China's history and to absorb historical experience; (3) analysis of the three transformations and upgrades of human maritime civilizations from the perspective of human-sea interactions, as well as a comparison of the different development models of Chinese and Western maritime civilizations, combine the best of both, and form a new view of maritime civilizations; and (4) proposals for specific practical pathways for promoting the realization of the MCSF, giving full play to the basic role of marine cultural exchange and integration, using existing marine governance frameworks and rules to achieve cooperation in ocean governance in specific areas.

2 Essential nature and unique value of China's maritime culture

China is a large country with a long coastline. China's maritime culture, which is significantly different from that of the West, has profoundly affected the development of Chinese civilization. It is the material, spiritual, institutional, and social essence of civilized life of the Chinese nation originating from interaction with and use of the sea and its resources (Qu, 2014a). The natural attributes of the ocean are a prerequisite for the emergence of marine culture, without which there would be none. The cultural attributes of marine culture are the cognition, aesthetics, communication, etc. formed out of human marine-related practical activities, without which the oceans remain in their natural form, and ocean culture would not have developed. China, through the practical activities of its people in relation to the sea, has formed a spiritual and conscious cognition of the value, aesthetics, and social life that the oceans afford, specifically related to people's awareness of marine resources, territory, environment, aesthetics, safety, and development. This recognition is not only the concrete embodiment of the implications of marine consciousness but also the basis for the formation and shaping of China's set of values in relation to maritime affairs.

2.1 China's maritime commercial culture

China's maritime commercial culture is best reflected in "the benefits of fishing and salt, and the convenience of boats." The utilization of fishery and salt resources by coastal people in food production and for daily consumption, as well as the gradual development of commercial

and trade activities, are the highest embodiment of marine commercial and material culture. The long-term prosperity and development of fisheries, the salt industry, production of abundant fishery commodities, and advanced navigation technology, have led to a significant development of China's maritime trade with the rest of the world. This has not only enriched the daily diet of the people living in coastal and inland areas but also to the formation of a "Maritime Silk Road" that has flourished for more than 2,000 years through commodity exchange and transportation by land and sea to inland areas. At the same time as promoting the development of world maritime trade, this Maritime Silk Road has significantly promoted cultural exchanges between countries and regions.

2.2 China's maritime social culture

China's maritime social culture is reflected in the large number of communities engaged in maritime-related activities in coastal areas such as fishing, salt production, and maritime trade, forming corresponding "fishery societies," "salt societies," "maritime societies," and "port societies," among others. These industrial maritime societies constitute the main body of maritime civil society and are the most direct creators and inheritors of maritime culture.

2.3 China's maritime spiritual culture

China's maritime spiritual culture is reflected in its people's spiritual beliefs of "revering the ocean" and "being grateful to the ocean" formed by thousands of years of their interaction with the sea. In maritime activities, people have over the centuries gained a clearer understanding of the way in which monsoons, ocean currents, tides, and fish schools are regulated. They know how to respect nature, be grateful to nature, and make use of natural laws, so that people can live in harmony with the sea. Historically, China has never emphasized the conquest and domination of nature, but has instead adapted to and rationally utilized it. Human maritime-related activities have given birth to a wealth of beliefs, from worshiping the natural phenomena, totems, and gods of the ocean to the personification, secularization, and socialization of gods in cultural beliefs, which shows the evolution of belief patterns in the historical process of human interactions with the sea. Ocean god culture, represented by both the Mazu and Guanyin beliefs and customs are widespread throughout the Maritime Silk Road region. These spiritual beliefs, originating as folklore, have become the spiritual pillar and sustenance of sailors through the spread of navigation and sea transportation, and play a guiding role in people's lives.

2.4 China's maritime institutional (political) culture

China's maritime institutional (political) culture comprises the pursuit of the good wishes and maritime practices of "one world, one family," and "sharing the blessings of peace." "One" does not imply the occupation and subjugation of the whole world, but an attempt to give the world universal and well-defined principles of order.

Traditional China uses “Tianxia” and “Great Harmony” to describe the common picture of the world it perceives (Huang and Wang, 2017). This emphasizes benevolence, harmony, etiquette, and pursues regional peace and stability. These have gradually become common themes among countries in the Chinese cultural circle (Qu, 2014b). “Harmonious world” is the highest principle of diplomacy pursued by former Chinese rulers in international relations (Zhou, 2012). The maritime policies of China’s past dynasties are reflected internally in the government’s political focus on maritime harmony and externally in the political endeavors implemented to maintain regional peace and stability. Building a maritime cultural community is an important way for successive Chinese governments to take the lead in building a harmonious maritime order around China. This is also the most concentrated expression of China’s maritime political and peace cultures. While the dominant cultures of this “cultural community” are mainly “Confucian culture” and “Han culture,” it also includes the rich and splendid marine folk, social, and business cultures, etc. created by various coastal ethnic groups and regions.

Marine culture arose out of the sea-related activities and lives of coastal peoples and resulted in a series of beliefs, customs, and business activities that these people espoused. While constituting a primitive and direct part of marine culture it is insufficient, however, to limit marine culture to the above aspects, which of themselves, would lead to a short-sighted interpretation of overall marine culture and fail to fully appreciate its rich essence. In the long-term practice of human-maritime interactions, the cultural connotations of material, spiritual, society, and systems in relation to the oceans have been formed. The rich connotations of China’s maritime culture makes it highly inclusive, integrating politics, economy, and culture, emphasizing the value of “moderation.” This developmental model of maritime civilization has realized a concordant vision of political, economic, and cultural exchanges and interactions among East Asian countries through the maintenance of a maritime humanities network in East Asian waters.

3 The networked exchange of marine culture and the cultural exchange landscape of the Han Cultural Circle (sinosphere)

3.1 Maritime exchanges and the formation of the “East Asian Mediterranean” maritime cultural circle

Judging from the history of cross-cultural exchanges, human civilizational exchanges initially began in a relatively small region. Economic complementarity and cultural interactions within the region formed a relatively closed and stable “Mediterranean” civilizational structure. Surrounding the eastern coast of China, the Korean Peninsula, the Japanese Islands, and other places, the “East Asian Mediterranean” is formed from a relatively closed natural geographical and cultural environment of its own (Zhu, 2020). There are natural harbors and islands in this sea area, and monsoon currents and coastal ocean currents are formed on the sea surface, providing excellent conditions for cross-sea navigation in the era of sailing ships.

The Pacific Ocean has become the main stage for political, economic, and cultural exchanges between countries and ethnic groups in this region. Sea routes connect different countries together, weaving a stable and lasting maritime cultural network.

For a long time, countries and nationalities in this region have made full use of the natural mobility and cross-sea communication possibilities afforded by the ocean to achieve cross-sea personnel, political, economic, and cultural exchanges. In their long-term interactions, an inseparable “community,” also known as the Han Cultural Circle (Sinosphere), has gradually been formed. The essence of this community is a “cultural community” formed through cross-sea connections, with rich social, economic, spiritual, and political cultural characteristics.

3.2 The role of the “Maritime Silk Road” trade network

China’s Silk Roads include the Overland Silk Road and the Maritime Silk Road, and the Maritime Silk Road was established around 200 BCE (Gong, 2014). Since its beginnings during the time of the Han Dynasty, the Maritime Silk Road has gone through various forms of development during the Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, becoming the most convenient and important route for exchanges between East and West. This situation lasted until the period of the First Opium War between 1840 and 1842. China’s Maritime Silk Road is in sharp contrast to Western expansion in the Age of Exploration (15th–17th centuries). Zheng He’s seven expeditionary voyages to Southeast Asia, South Asia, West Asia, and East Africa between 1405 and 1433 were particularly successful in spreading Chinese civilization overseas (Fu and Wang, 2022).

The purpose of navigation is to carry people and cargo, which not only realizes the commercial trade of goods but also promotes exchanges between different cultures. The Maritime Silk Road has woven a wide network for political, economic, and cultural exchanges among maritime nations, which has lasted for more than two thousand years. It has not only facilitated Chinese and foreign personnel exchanges and economic and trade interconnections but has also enabled extensive interchange of Chinese and foreign customs, which have had far-reaching and lasting impacts. From primitive coastal navigation in the pre-Qin period, to the further development of navigation and maritime trade during the Qin, Han, Sui, and Tang dynasties, to the unprecedented prosperity of maritime political and economic activities during the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, East Asian waters have always been busy trade routes. Tea, porcelain, and silk produced in China have become bulk commodities on global markets, driving the historical process of globalization.

3.3 Cultural exchange as an important element of the early “Han Cultural Circle”

In the historical exchanges between maritime scholars from different nations, many famous figures have emerged. For example, Cui Zhiyuan of the Korean Peninsula and Abe Nakamaro of Japan traveled to China and studied sinology, these scholars had extensive

contacts with those of the Tang Dynasty and made great contributions to the dissemination and development of Chinese culture in their own countries upon returning home. There was also a group of monks who “sacrifice themselves to seek the Dharma,” including Fa Xian in China’s Eastern Jin Dynasty, Jianzhen in the Tang Dynasty, and Ennin in Japan. Sea voyages were very dangerous at that time, yet they ignored these perils and traveled far and wide in order to spread their culture. Jianzhen made the journey eastward seven times before finally succeeding, and Ennin also experienced hardships when crossing the sea and only narrowly escaped death. In response, various countries in East Asia stepped up their efforts to rescue the victims of shipwrecks and established a relatively complete shipwreck rescue system. Fearlessness and the offering of mutual help are important components of the traditional maritime humanistic spirit, which enabled the early exchanges of maritime literati to bear fruit and successfully promote cultural exchanges, mutual learning, and development in various countries. During the Tang and Song dynasties, a large number of overseas students and learned monks came to China, and a large number of Chinese monks, literati, and scholars traveled to Japan and the Korean Peninsula, which greatly promoted the spread and development of religion, literature, and art in East Asia. China’s classical literature, legal, and political systems, and the imperial examination system have had a profound impact on those of neighboring countries.

The historical development of China’s maritime culture has conveyed the cultural concepts of “peaceful ocean,” “harmonious ocean,” and “love and respect the ocean,” which are of significant historical reference in the context of the current situation where maritime culture has undergone many transformations and upgrades, and humans urgently need to improve human–ocean relations and promote sustainable development of the oceans.

4 The transformation and upgrading of modern maritime civilizations and the practical need to build the MCSF

4.1 Three historical stages in the development of human maritime civilizations

The oceans have played an important role in the birth and development of human civilization. Human maritime civilizations are subject to change due to regional and historical factors. From the time of their birth to the present day, human maritime civilizations have undergone three major transformations, which have resulted in major changes in people’s understanding of the relationship between humans and the sea.

4.1.1 Maritime agricultural civilization

Ever since people began fishing offshore and sailing out to sea, humanity’s development and utilization of the ocean was limited to “the benefits of fishing and salt” and “the convenience of boats,” forming the maritime cultural spirit of “utilizing the sea to eat” and

“respecting and being grateful to the ocean.” During this time, the relationship between people and the oceans was simple and harmonious, and humans were unable to interfere detrimentally with the ocean in any way.

4.1.2 Maritime industrial civilization

The Age of Exploration that began in Europe in the 15th century promoted the historical process of global integration. Western maritime civilization “rushed out” of the Mediterranean and began the historical process of global expansion. This marked the entry into the era of “maritime industrial civilization,” which formed the second stage in the development of human maritime civilization. Following the Industrial Revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries, the value of the ocean as a channel for gaining wealth globally was heavily exploited by Western countries. Descriptions of the acquisition of maritime spheres of influence, overseas wealth, colonies, raw materials, and markets are common (Zhu, 2016). A group of European jurists proposed a series of new doctrines from the perspective of international law to provide legitimacy for the expansion of maritime interests, and its most representative view appeared in the Dutch jurist and philosopher Hugo Grotius’s *Mare Liberum* (lit. “The Free Sea”) published in 1609. The core proposition of this theory was freedom of navigation and trade, aiming to break the monopoly of Portugal and Spain’s control of the ocean at the time (Bai, 2017). In 1635, the publication of Englishman John Selden’s *Mare Clausum* (lit. “The Closed Sea”) advocated that the ocean has boundaries, that parts of the ocean can be the private property of a country, and that the coastline and islands can become the basis for ocean delimitation (Clingan, 1994). Whether advocating freedom of the sea or supporting ocean closure, the essence of these writings is still the carving up of ocean interests and the exploitation of ocean resources.

Following the Industrial Revolution in Europe, a series of new technologies were applied to the field of ocean development, and human utilization of ocean resources continued to be expanded and upgraded. Expansion and colonization became the themes of maritime activities, and maritime powers competed with each other to seize overseas colonies and divide spheres of influence, which has distorted the relationship between people and the sea and led to confrontation at the time.

4.1.3 Global ocean governance and sustainable development of the sea

The problems brought about by globalization have gradually extended to the oceans of the world, which has also promoted the emergence of the concept of global ocean governance. Rational utilization of marine resources, fair distribution of marine interests, and maintenance of a just and sustainable marine order have become the main goals of global ocean governance. During this time, the legal system for global ocean governance began to be established, the most representative and comprehensive of which was UNCLOS, signed in 1982 (effective from 1994). Major ocean-related institutions for global ocean governance have also gradually been established, such as the International Maritime Organization, the United Nations Environment Program, the Intergovernmental

Oceanographic Society, etc. These institutions play an important functional role in the governance of global maritime shipping, marine fisheries, marine science, marine environment, and other issues. However, it is undeniable that global ocean governance still suffers from multiple defects, such as ambiguous governance concepts and imperfect governance systems (Jin and Cui, 2023).

At the same time, with the continual evolution of industrial society, a series of environmental problems have arisen. Western societies have gradually realized the importance of environmental protection and sustainable development, which also means that human maritime civilization has ushered in the third upgrade. China is a consistent supporter, promoter, and practitioner of marine ecological protection, and is the first country in the world to propose the building of an ecological maritime civilization, whose construction has become an important part of China's historical process of realizing modernization, and places the maintenance of a harmonious relationship between people and the oceans at the forefront of the urgent tasks needing to be completed. From the early days when human beings lived in harmony with the sea, to the conquest and exploitation of ocean resources in the modern era of industrialization, to the current response to the global ocean crisis, people have realized that the existing model of ocean development needs to change. To protect the oceans, the common resource of humankind, and achieve a harmonious development of people and the sea, a sense of "community" between humans and the oceans must be established.

4.2 The influence of Western maritime civilization on that of China in modern times

Beginning in the mid-19th century, areas surrounding Chinese waters were incorporated as part of a colonial system. The ancient civilizations in East Asia and their "Han cultural circle" were consequently strongly impacted. The "cultural community," with Confucian culture as its core, that formed in the areas surrounding China's maritime areas has gradually become fragmented. Under the impact of modern maritime hegemony, East Asian countries have begun the process of reflecting on their own culture and history. They have come to believe that Western culture is civilized, open, and advanced, while their own maritime cultures are backward, feudal, and conservative, and have thus lost confidence in their own cultural identity. This has been detrimental to traditional Eastern cultures.

Following the Age of Exploration, the ocean became a place for competitive national self-interest. Colonialists looted marine resources and maritime spheres of influence by force. This gradually resulted in the loss of traditional shared cultural genes and the humanistic maritime spirit. Following World War II, the rise of national liberation movements changed international relations and reversed the unjust maritime order to some extent. With the rise of the concept of global ocean governance, a series of laws, regulations, systems, and international organizations were successively established, gradually forming the governance system that currently dominates global ocean development, allowing

certain global ocean issues to be solved under specific frameworks and systems. Respecting rules and emphasizing the use of legal systems to solve global ocean disputes have been the most distinctive features of Western maritime culture since the 20th century. However, it is undeniable that human beings are developing and utilizing the oceans at an increasingly accelerated pace and that various sea-related disputes arising therefrom are becoming increasingly complex. The struggle for power over the oceans has become an important goal of sovereign states. As the level of technology and scientific innovation improves, damage to the oceans has become ever more serious. Large numbers and different kinds of marine resources have been exploited, sometimes beyond sustainable levels.

The essence of China's maritime culture lies in its pursuit of a harmonious relationship between humans and nature and harmony among peoples. Therefore, in the face of various problems that are currently emerging in global ocean governance, it is necessary not only to pay attention to the formulation of rules and laws but also to reexamine the relationship between humans and the sea. Shaping a correct view of ocean culture, breaking down separation and opposition, and establishing a sense of an MCSF for humanity and the oceans are the key pathways to achieving sustainable development of the oceans in the 21st century.

5 The fundamental role of marine culture in building the MCSF

China's initiative of building a "Maritime Community with a Shared Future" (MCSF) is not just a temporary measure to deal with the current crisis in ocean governance, but rather a future vision of harmonious coexistence between humans and the oceans for the benefit of the whole world. It is based on the unique historical value of China's maritime civilization and fully absorbs the historical experience of the development of human maritime civilization. Its goal is to realize a harmonious, peaceful, and healthy ocean and to build the oceans into a common resource for humankind. Based on this understanding, the MCSF can be further understood as the purpose, goal, and process for humanity to jointly promote the healthy development of the oceans, ensure their environmental health and security, and realize their sustainable development (Xu, 2021). The basic tenet of the MCSF is that human beings are no longer the masters and conquerors of the oceans and that all ocean creatures and their surrounding environments share a common destiny with humanity.

5.1 The goal and direction of building the MCSF

China, as a rising maritime power, has the responsibility to not only tread its own path with respect to ocean development but also to play a useful role in helping to shape a more sustainable development model. Under China's guidance in its pursuit of a peaceful ocean world order, the ultimate goals of building the MCSF could be enumerated as follows:

- (1) *A harmonious ocean.* A harmonious ocean is the fundamental goal of human–ocean relationships and the general principle of human ocean-related activities. The relationship between the two should nourish humans, encourage humans protect the ocean, and achieve a truly harmonious symbiosis of the two (Zhu, 2019). Both excessive exploitation of marine resources and extreme protectionism need to be opposed. It is crucial to maintain the balance of development and protection in order to achieve harmony in ocean affairs.
- (2) *A peaceful ocean.* World peace is humanity’s eternal pursuit. The situation with regard to both traditional and nontraditional maritime security is still grim. Nations should jointly safeguard lasting peace and security in the oceans, refrain from seeking hegemony, and build a peaceful ocean environment based on the principles of equity, mutual benefit, cooperation, and mutual trust.
- (3) *A healthy ocean.* The ocean has become an important field of human activity and a resource for humanity’s sustainable development in the future. We must promote a maritime cultural outlook of tolerance, mutual learning, and harmony between people and the oceans, thereby building a sustainable marine ecology. The ocean should no longer be just a treasure house of resources for humans to exploit, but rather a habitat for humans to explore and marvel at, for which the safeguarding of a healthy ocean environment should be realized.

5.2 Implementation pathways for building the MCSF

5.2.1 Reversal of the distorted human–sea relationship with a high degree of cultural awareness and preeminent maritime cultural concepts

In the long history of the development of human civilization, marine culture has been an important driving force. Responding creatively to the increasingly prominent global ocean issues requires a high degree of awareness of ocean culture. Establishing a correct view of ocean development and rooting governance concepts and pathways in preeminent ocean cultural traditions are prerequisites. Since the two Industrial Revolutions (of 1765 and 1870), humanity’s ability to develop and utilize marine resources has been greatly enhanced, and the relationship between humans and the sea has become ever more tense. The governance of the marine environment and the reconstruction of the ocean order are ultimately about reestablishing a maritime cultural outlook that reverses the distorted relationship between humans and the sea.

5.2.2 Promoting international cooperation in the maritime field based on the principles of peace, justice, harmony, and sharing

In the face of common maritime problems, no country can stand alone. The basis of cooperation lies in cultural consensus. When planning the future direction of human civilization and the

oceans, we must abandon the idea of opposition and decentralization and embrace once again the idea of integration. Although there are huge differences in the ideologies and cultural values of maritime countries, the pursuit of peace, justice, and equity transcends national boundaries. We should not focus solely on the individual interests of certain nations while ignoring the overall interests of regional and global environmental systems. We should strive to form a responsible national strategy that takes into account national, regional, and global interests, as well as human needs and ecosystem balance (Bao, 2008).

In terms of global ocean governance, China should adhere to the basic theoretical principles of international law and offer to help integrate the MCSF into any formulation of a global ocean governance framework. Regarding the exploitation of mineral resources in the international seabed, China firmly opposes the monopoly of marine resources by few maritime powers and advocates balancing the legitimate rights and interests of developed and developing countries over the oceans and establishing a fair and just international system for seabed development. In international negotiations on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdictions, China has outlined and coordinated the differences in positions taken by different countries based on the MCSF through advocating the common interests of humankind and sustainable ocean development, and has helped to reconstruct a fair and reasonable legal basis for global ocean governance. In relation to marine environmental protection, China has always adhered to the path of green and sustainable development and combined the ecosystem approach with the MCSF, which requires cooperation on global marine environmental governance with an overarching and holistic view (He and Geng, 2022). In short, for important and emerging areas of global ocean governance, such as global climate warming, ocean disaster prevention and reduction, settlement of ocean disputes, and sustainable development and utilization of ocean resources, China should actively participate and advocate promoting the resolution of relevant issues based on the principles of peace, justice, harmony, and sharing.

5.2.3 Marine environmental management as the main area for cooperation to achieve “harmony between people and the sea”

Faced with ongoing and historical disputes over maritime rights and interests, joint governance and cooperation in relation to the global marine environment is the easiest breakthrough point in order to reach consensus. In the context of increasingly prominent problems affecting the marine environment and resources, human society has gradually become aware of the unsustainability of the original marine development model, and therefore it is hoped that the marine ecological culture of “harmony between people and the sea” will return. This shift will not only be fundamentally conducive to the restoration and protection of the marine ecological environment but will also promote changes in the relationship between humans and the sea. The trend of human conquest of the oceans, which formed since the time of the Industrial Revolution, has gradually transformed into a more balanced trend in which the

Oceans nourish humans and humans protect the oceans. The Chinese government's proposal to build the MCSF is aimed at breaking the current status quo of global division and opposition and promoting the development and protection of the oceans from a global and holistic perspective for all of humanity. Its core values are to shape a view of the oceans that is harmonious and unified and to relegate the private interests of individuals, nations, and regions as secondary to the common interests of humanity as a whole.

5.2.4 Promoting the exchange of and mutual learning from global marine culture

The future of human civilization lies in integration and interoperability rather than through conflict. The sustainable development of marine culture also needs to break through self-interest to allow for mutual exchange. The theory of the clash of civilizations should be abandoned. Exchange, mutual learning, and harmonious symbiosis between different civilizations are the key to the practical implementation of the MCSF. Following modernization, the role of traditional marine spiritual culture in regulating and restricting human behavior has been greatly weakened, but it has not completely disappeared. The international community should attach greater importance to the protection, inheritance, and development of traditional marine folk resources and give full play to marine cultural heritage in connecting historical with contemporary times, thereby promoting understanding, cultural exchange, and interpersonal bonds.

6 Conclusion

This article conducts an in-depth multifaceted exploration of President Xi Jinping's 2019 initiative for building a "Maritime Community with a Shared Future". Different from existing studies that focus mainly on the MCSF from the perspectives of global ocean governance, marine economic cooperation, and protection of maritime rights and interests, this article explores the essential nature and implications of, as well as the practical pathways needed to progress, the development of the MCSF from the perspective of maritime history and culture. We propose that:

- (1) the essence of the MCSF is a conceptual issue about how humans and the oceans must coexist and develop sustainably alongside each other, rather than an issue of mere maritime strategy and logistics. Our article delineates the essence of marine culture in four dimensions: material culture, institutional culture, spiritual culture, and social culture, illustrates the rich implications of the MCSF, and clearly signals that we should not see the MCSF solely from the perspective of global ocean governance and ocean rule-making.
- (2) the MCSF creatively applies the essence of the Chinese nation's maritime culture to ocean development at the philosophical and cultural levels. Only by realizing that humans and the oceans are complementary to each other and that the oceans are no longer a territory to be conquered and plundered by humans can sustainable common development of the two be achieved.

- (3) specific pathways for applying the MCSF in practice are needed. In the current context of constant global ocean disputes, serious marine environmental problems, and increasingly depleted marine resources, promoting the sustainable co-development of humans and the oceans requires both good ideas, namely, consensus on cultural concepts, and good systems. We propose that nations achieve all-round cooperation within the existing global ocean governance framework in the fields of ocean security, ocean economy, and marine ecological protection.

The initiative of building the MCSF not only embodies the essential traditional culture of the Chinese people but is also consistent with the concept of peaceful co-development advocated by all nations (Zhang, 2019). For the MCSF to become a practical reality requires not only extensive cooperation in the political and economic spheres to resolve differences but also requires a cultural consensus. We wish to point out, however, that this cultural consensus is not about ideology, but rather a consensus on human maritime civilization and marine culture, that is, a comprehensive overview and understanding of the complex web of relationships that exist between humans and the sea.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary Material. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

XZ: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft. ZM: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. JQ: Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing. ZZ: Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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