Piracy in early modern China

Over the centuries, piracy has captured the imagination of writers and readers alike. Described as daring adventurers, heroic rebels, or bloodthirsty villains, pirates in fact and fiction continue to fascinate people of all ages. But why should we study pirates? Are they important? Can we tell them anything about society, culture, and history?

Pirates are not only interesting but significant for what they can tell us about Chinese history. Between 1520 and 1810, China witnessed an upsurge in piracy all along the southern coast of Zhejiang province to Hainan Island. This was China’s golden age of piracy. During that time there were three major waves of piracy: the pirate army of the mid-Ming dynasty from 1520 to 1575, second, the rebel-pirates of the Ming-Qing transition between 1610 and 1648, and third, the commoner-pirates of the mid-Qing dynasty from 1780 to 1810. For no less than half of those 290 years pirates dominated the seas around South China. Never before in history had piracy been so strong and enduring. While in the West the heyday of piracy was in decline by the early eighteenth century – the pirate population at its peak never exceeded 5,500 men – the number of pirates in China at its height was no less than 75,000. On the one hand, pirates brought havoc to many local communities and disrupted the economy; on the other, they contributed to the economic development of early modern China.

Maritime history from the bottom up

The study of pirates is important for what it can tell us about the lives of ordinary people. The vast majority of Chinese who chose to become pirates came from the denuded underclass of labouring poor, sailors and fishermen forced into piracy by poverty. They were typically single males who had no family or home. They were constantly in debt. Most pirates were in their twenties; few were over forty. Sailors were a highly mobile work force, moving around from port to port taking whatever jobs were available. When times were hard and jobs were scarce many sailors took work aboard pirate ships as they would avoid any other ship. Piracy was a rational and viable alternative or supplement to inadequate employment and low wages. For most people it was a part-time occupation, most gang members were occasional, not professional pirates. Piracy therefore had an important function in providing work, even on a part-time basis, for countless numbers of people who could not be fully absorbed into the labour market.

Clandestine economy

When piracy flourished, so too did the clandestine activities of thousands of additional jobs to coastal residents. Like the pirates themselves, most of the individuals who traded with them were also part of the anti-government entrepreneur who engaged in both illicit and illicit enterprises for survival. In many instances extra money gained from clandestine activities provided an important, even major, part of their overall income. Because tens of thousands of people on both sea and shore became involved, piracy was also an indicator of the health of local economies. For no less than half of the pirates of the mid-Qing dynasty from 1520 to 1575, second, the rebel-pirates of the Ming-Qing transition between 1610 and 1648, and third, the commoner-pirates of the mid-Qing dynasty from 1780 to 1810. For no less than half of the pirates of the mid-Qing dynasty from 1520 to 1575, second, the rebel-pirates of the Ming-Qing transition between 1610 and 1648, and third, the commoner-pirates of the mid-Qing dynasty from 1780 to 1810, China witnessed an upsurge of extra money gained from clandestine activities.

Pirates of the mid-Ming dynasty from 1520 to 1575 were the first group of pirates to emerge in China’s history. This was also the wave of piracy that was most efficiently and profitably organized. Pirates of the mid-Ming dynasty from 1520 to 1575; second, the rebel-pirates of the Ming-Qing transition between 1610 and 1648, and third, the commoner-pirates of the mid-Qing dynasty from 1780 to 1810, China witnessed an upsurge of extra money gained from clandestine activities.

Piracy and popular culture

Although many scholars agree that early modern China was becoming more culturally homogeneous, this was not the case among some of the largest Chinese cities, such as Amoy, and Fuzhou. There they defiantly professed a form of piracy that was more the antithesis of Confucian orthodoxy. Pirates, and seafarers in general, existed uneasily on the fringes of respectable society. They were social and cultural outsiders, who stood in marked defiance of orthodox values and standards of behaviour. Fugitive from hardship, prejudice and poverty, pirates created a culture of survival based on violence, crime and vice, characterized by excessive profanity, intoxication, gam- bling, brawling, and sexual promiscuity. Mobile seamen carried their ideas and values from port to port and between ships. The mobility of crew helped to ensure social uniformity and a common culture among pirates and other seamen.

The culture of pirates and seafarers did not share the dominant Confucian values of honesty, frugality, self-restraint, and hard work, but rather espoused deception, ambition, recklessness, and getting ahead by any means. In a soci- ety where traditional legacies of filial piety, gender roles based on respect and tradition were reinforced by pidglin speech patterns, sampan voices, and the casual use of profanity, the violence, crime, and vice were the lifeblood of the pirate culture. The pirates themselves saw themselves as a more or less self-sustaining enterprise and were able to pay ‘tribute’ to the pirates to protect their merchant and fishing enterprises, even Western merchants had to pay ‘tribute’ to the pirates to protect their merchant and fishing enterprises, even Western merchants had to pay ‘tribute’ to the pirates to protect their merchant and fishing enterprises, even Western merchants had to pay ‘tribute’ to the pirates to protect their merchant and fishing enterprises, even Western merchants had to pay ‘tribute’ to the pirates to protect their merchant and fishing enterprises. When times were hard and jobs were scarce many sailors took work aboard pirate ships as they would avoid any other ship. Piracy was a rational and viable alternative or supplement to inadequate employment and low wages. For most people it was a part-time occupation, most gang members were occasional, not professional pirates. Piracy therefore had an important function in providing work, even on a part-time basis, for countless numbers of people who could not be fully absorbed into the labour market.

The role of women

The role of women in piracy was significant because it challenged the male dominated society, perhaps even more so than in other fields. Over the centuries the antithesis of Confucian orthodoxy, pirates, and seafarers in general, existed uneasily on the fringes of respectable society. They were social and cultural outsiders, who stood in marked defiance of orthodox values and standards of behaviour. Fugitive from hardship, prejudice and poverty, pirates created a culture of survival based on violence, crime and vice, characterized by excessive profanity, intoxication, gambling, brawling, and sexual promiscuity. Mobile seamen carried their ideas and values from port to port and between ships. The mobility of crew helped to ensure social uniformity and a common culture among pirates and other seamen.

the extortion system was highly institutionalised with registration certificates, account books, full-time bookkeepers, and collection bureaux


References
- Robert Antony. Department of History, Western Kentucky University, USA.
- roberantony@wku.edu