

Piracy in early modern China

Theme >
South 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 they tell us anything about society, culture, and history?

Robert Antony

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 from Zhejiang province to Hainan Island. This was China's golden age of piracy. During that time there were three great pirate cycles: first, the merchant-pirates of the mid-Ming dynasty from 1520 to 1575; second, the rebel-pirates of the Ming-Qing transition between 1620 and 1684; 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 eight-

teenth 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 70,000. On the one hand, pirates brought havoc to many local communities and disrupted the economy; on the other, they contributed to the economic, social, and cultural development of early modern China.

overall income. Because tens of thousands of people on both sea and shore came to depend on piracy either directly or indirectly for their livelihoods, it became a self-sustaining enterprise and a significant feature of early modern China's history. Piracy was also important because it allowed marginalized fishermen, sailors, and petty entrepreneurs, who had otherwise been excluded, to participate in the wider commercial economy.

While piracy detracted from legitimate trade and profits, it nonetheless had important positive economic consequences. As the growth of legitimate commerce promoted the development of new ports, so too did pirates' illicit trade. Numerous ports and black markets sprung up along China's coast and on Taiwan to handle the trade in stolen

goods and to service pirate ships and crews. Black markets operated as a shadow economy alongside and in competition with legitimate trade centres. Furthermore, this illegitimate trade tended to perpetuate piracy. Once pirates generated supplies of goods for sale at discount prices, buyers were attracted to the black markets that arose to handle the trade in stolen goods. Large amounts of money and goods flowed in and out of black markets, all of which were outside the control of the state and normal trading networks. The establishment of markets to specifically handle stolen merchandise was a clear indication of weakness in the structure of normal, legal markets. Pirates therefore made important contributions to the growth of trade and the reallocation of local capital.

At the height of their power huge pirate leagues gained firm holds over many coastal villages and port towns, as well as over shipping and fishing enterprises, through the systematic use of terror, bribery, and extortion. During such times all ships operating along China's coast were liable to pirate attack unless they bought safe-conduct passes. To avoid attack, merchant and fishing junks paid protection fees to the pirates, who in turn issued passports guaranteeing impunity to the purchaser. In the early nineteenth century pirates had virtual control over the state-monopolized salt trade, and even Western merchants had to pay 'tribute' to the pirates to protect their ships. The extortion system was highly institutionalised with registration certificates, account books, full-time bookkeepers, and collection bureaus. Extortion was not only a major form of pirate income, but the basis of their regional domination. Pirates were able to penetrate the structure of local society through the establishment of protection rackets. Extortion was the most direct and effective way that pirates exercised hegemony over an area. Pirates actually constituted a level of control over maritime society that operated

Piracy and popular culture

independently of and even overshadowed that of the government and local elites. Piracy therefore became a significant and pervasive force in South China's coastal society.

Furthermore, pirates built strongholds not only on remote islands, but in and around key commercial and political hubs such as Canton, Macao, Chaozhou, Amoy, and Fuzhou. There they defiantly set up their 'tax bureaus' to collect tribute and ransom payments and to conspire with soldiers, yamen underlings, and officials on their payrolls. The close proximity of pirate lairs to economic and political centres was clear indication of just how deeply piracy had penetrated China's maritime society.

Although many scholars agree that early modern China was becoming more culturally homogeneous, this was not the case among some segments of the labouring poor, whose culture was in many respects the antithesis of Confucian orthodoxy. Pirates, and seafarers in general, existed uneasily on the fringes of respectable society. They were social and cultural transgressors, who stood in marked defiance of orthodox values and standards of behaviour. Forged out of 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 crews 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 society that was becoming increasingly polarized, restless and contentious, poor sailors and fishermen had to devise their own lifestyles, habits, and standards of

behaviour to survive. For many sailors, piracy was a normal, rational, and even legitimate means of maintaining minimal standards of living, perhaps a way out of poverty. Their socio-cultural world was significant because it challenged the mainstream Confucian model and offered a viable alternative for China's poor and discriminated.

The role of women

Among Chinese pirates, there were also significant numbers of women. Because many women made their homes aboard ship and worked alongside their menfolk, it was not unusual to find females among pirates. Many women had married into the pirate profession and will-



Small Pirate Junk with Sail and Oars. Source: *Gujin tushu jicheng* (1884)
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ingly lived and died as outlaws. Several female pirates even became powerful chieftains, such as Zheng Yi Sao and Cai Qian Ma, both of whom commanded formidable pirate fleets. These and other female pirates were able to survive in a man's world by proving themselves as capable as men in battle and in their duties as sailors. Women were not merely tolerated by their male shipmates but were actually able to exercise leadership roles aboard ships.

Female pirates represented the most radical departure from dominant society and customs, defying accepted notions of womanhood, breaking with established codes of female propriety, virtue, and passivity. Unlike their counterparts on Western ships, Chinese women pirates did not have to disguise themselves as men. They lived and worked openly as women aboard ships. From the perspective of the Chinese state, such women who behaved like

well as length of time - made it a significant factor in modern China's historical development. There were not only tens of thousands of sailors and fishermen who became pirates, but at least as many or even more people on shore who aided and supported pirates, thus affecting a large portion of the coastal population. Both directly and indirectly, piracy had a great impact on the economic development of South China in the early modern period. Pirates helped open up new trading ports and markets in areas that had previously been little touched by the prevailing marketing system, thereby boosting the local economies with goods and money.

Large-scale piracy acted as a state within the state. Pirates established their own regime of military power, tax bureaus, and bureaucracy, which existed side-by-side with, but independently of, the Chinese imperial state and local elites. Pirates and seafarers created their own underworld culture of violence, crime, and vice. It was a survival culture significant because it was distinguishable from that of the dominant Confucian culture. For men and especially for women, piracy offered an important alternative way of life. <

men perverted the social order and normal gender relationships, turning Confucian orthodoxy on its head. Indeed, they challenged the patriarchal hierarchy upon which both the state and society rested. For seafaring women, piracy presented opportunities to escape from poverty and the rigid restraints placed on females. It gave them the chance for adventure and freedom unheard of for most women on land.

To conclude, reading about pirates is simply interesting: the stories can actually inform us about popular ideas and attitudes towards crime and violence. The very scale of piracy during its golden age - both in number and scope as

pirates, and seafarers in general, existed uneasily on the fringes of respectable society

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 pirates came from the discontented underclass of labouring poor, sailors and fishermen forced into piracy by poverty. They were typically single males who lacked steady employment and 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 aboard 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

Whenever piracy flourished, so too did the clandestine economy, providing tens of thousands of additional jobs to coastal residents. Like the pirates themselves, most of the individuals who traded with them were fishermen, sailors and petty entrepreneurs who engaged in both licit and illicit enterprises for survival. In many instances extra money gained from clandestine activities provided an important, even major, part of their

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