Outlaws of the Sea

Maritime Piracy in Modern China

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For Lanshin

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Preface

This book brings together my past forty years of research on piracy along the southern coast of China and in the South China Sea between the 1630s and 1940s. These three centuries were marked by a series of catastrophic wars, rebellions, and revolutions as China struggled to transform itself from an ancient monarchy into a modern republic. In the wake of these upheavals China also witnessed the rise and fall of the greatest and most intense surges in piracy in world history. Although often dismissed by scholars as unimportant, as the following chapters collectively demonstrate, piracy was inextricably linked to developments in modern China and, in particular, played a significant role in shaping Asian maritime history.[1]

Over the years my research has taken me to numerous libraries around the world and to the major archives in Taiwan, China, Hong Kong, Macau, and Great Britain. More recently, while working in China between 2007 and 2019, my students and I also conducted extensive ethnographic fieldwork in coastal Guangdong and Guangxi, interviewing villagers, fishers, and sailors, and transcribing hundreds of stone inscriptions dating back to the early fifteenth century. Because Chinese pirates have left us virtually no records written in their own hands, it is important that we use as many different types of sources and in as many different languages as possible. Only in this way will we be able to obtain a better and fuller understanding of piracy in its manifold dimensions.

Pirates were the archetypal outlaws, freely roaming the boundless seas, operating beyond the law, and holding allegiance to no state but their own. In China such outlaws were often characterized with the suffix *fei*, an absolute negative that denied individuals their humanity and consequently their right to exist. The label *fei* went well beyond the original meaning of the English word outlaw, as someone declared existing outside the protection of the law so that anyone was legally permitted to capture or kill

1. For an overview of the significance of piracy in China's maritime history, see Robert Antony, *The Golden Age of Piracy in China*, 45–51.

them. Although today movies like *Pirates of the Caribbean* tend to romanticize pirates as freedom-loving heroes, it is important that we do not lose sight of the fact that real pirates often were vicious cold-blooded villains. The history of piracy is complex and multidimensional. What I try to do in this book is to present a more balanced discussion of piracy, looking not only at the perspectives of officials and victims but also of the pirates themselves. In this way we can get a more nuanced understanding of the nature and history of piracy in East Asian seas.

In this volume, nine of the eleven chapters have been previously published. All of them have been amended and updated to reflect new ideas and sources. Although the chapters can be read as independent case studies, by reading the book in its entirety one can obtain a better picture of the nature, scope, and intensity of piracy over a three-hundred-year period and clearer insights into the important role that piracy has played in modern Chinese and world history. This book is my effort to bring to light an understudied topic that deserves the serious attention of scholars.

Regarding conventions, I use both *pinyin* and Cantonese romanizations for Chinese names and terms. In those cases where the Chinese characters are unknown, I follow the romanization given in the original text. I have also retained the well-known English renderings for Canton (Guangzhou), Hong Kong (Xianggang), Macau (Aomen), and Amoy (Xiamen). In English language sources Macau is often spelled as Macao. When Chinese sources mention a person's age it is calculated in *sui*, the age a person will attain in the current year and not the actual number of months that have elapsed since birth. For example, in general a person who is twenty *sui* is only nineteen years old by Western reckoning. Unless otherwise indicated, mention of dollars in the text refers to Spanish silver dollars (*yuan*), except in Chapters 8 and 9, in which dollars refers to Hong Kong dollars. All dates for archival materials cited in the notes are rendered in accordance with the Chinese lunar calendar: QL for the Qianlong reign (1736–1795), JQ for the Jiaqing reign (1796–1820), and DG for the Daoguang reign (1820–1850), followed by reign year, month, and day (the letter "r" indicates an intercalary month).

1

Introduction

The Pirate and the Historian

How should I start this story? It has no beginning or end, so let me simply begin like this: Once upon a time there was a pirate and a historian. They did not get along. They were constantly battling one another, not with swords or guns, but with words. What they fought over was truth.

Like a veiled specter truth has always haunted the historian. We now live in what some pundits call the "post-truth era," whereby academics and ordinary people disagree about what constitutes reliable sources of truth or facts. Some forty years ago Hannah Arendt coined the term "defactualization" to explain the inability to discern fact from fiction. The problem, she said, is that "factual truths are never compellingly true."[1] In writing about pirates and the underside of Chinese history, the historian has had to contend with missing data, disinformation, half-truths, and alternative facts, making research difficult and tedious. This is the sort of history that few historians care to engage in. Because reliable documents are limited, we must fall back on novel methodologies, intuition, and imagination. The historian, like the pirate, therefore occupies a liminal space across time. Their words, and with their words the truth, are in perpetual motion.

Let the Pirates Speak

What would it be like to be a pirate, to metaphorically step into his or her shoes (though Chinese pirates would more likely be barefoot)? If they could speak, what tales would the likes of the great pirates Zhang Baozai or Zheng Yi Sao tell us?

Perhaps they would tell me, and other historians, that we got it all wrong. We have only presented one side of the story, namely the story told

1. See Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, 1–48, quote on page 6.

by their enemies: officials and learned elites. They even got their names wrong: "Zhang Baozai" and "Zheng Yi Sao" are the names given in the official parlance of "mandarin" Chinese, a language the pirates did not speak and likely did not even understand. The language of the pirates, and indeed the language of the sea in south China, was a variant of Cantonese spoken among the boat people who are called Dan (or more derogatorily, Tanka, which literally means "egg families" because it was generally believed that they were hatched from eggs like reptiles). For them mandarin must have seemed like a foreign language.[2] In their own tongue Zhang Baozai was Cheung Po Tsai, while Zheng Yi Sao should be rendered as Cheng Yat Sou, or perhaps she should be called by her birth name, Shek Yeung (Shi Yang in mandarin). Most pirates, nonetheless, went by nicknames, such as "Apootsae," the familiar name that most people likely knew Cheung Po Tsai.[3] Few people, they might say, have listened to them, or have tried to uncover the truths buried in hidden facts, or have searched for extenuating circumstances that explain why they acted in the ways that they did. What historians have written, they would quip, are the words of their adversaries and should not be trusted as absolute truths or facts. Historians are guilty of perpetuating their lies. They are the complicit accomplices of the ruling class.

If pirates could speak, what would they say?

> Cheung Po Tsai: *I am Cheung Po Tsai and I serve my Emperor as a colonel in the imperial navy. I am thirty-seven years old. Earlier in life my enemies called me a pirate. The fact is that when I was fifteen years old, while out fishing on my family's boat, I was abducted by pirates who sailed under the notorious pirate boss named Cheng Yat (Zheng Yi in mandarin) and forced against my will to join them. Being so young and with no other options, I became a fast learner and soon excelled in seamanship and bravery. Afterward I came to the attention of Cheng Yat, who gave me command of my own ship. I swiftly made it up the ranks so that when he suddenly died in a storm at sea in the twelfth year of our reigning Emperor (1807), I was able to assume command of the largest and most powerful Red Banner fleet, consisting of more than 20,000 pirates and several hundreds of war junks. I was invincible.*

2. In his well-researched historical novel, *The Flower Boat Girl*, which is about the early life of Cheng Yat Sou (Zheng Yi Sao), Larry Feign points out in his Author's Note the ahistorical problems of using names and terms in mandarin (*putonghua*) to discuss Cantonese pirates.
3. Zhang Baozai (Cheung Po Tsai) was also known as Zhang Bao (Cheung Po); and Zheng Yi Sao (Cheng Yat Sou) as Ching Shih and Shih Ying. In English there also are other renderings of their names. Because most scholarship in English uses the mandarin spellings for these and other pirates, in this book I will continue to follow this convention to avoid any confusion.

As for the label pirate, I prefer to think of myself as being like one of the great martial heroes of the past, like Guan Yu or Ma Yuan.[4] *Although they were violent men, they served the country honorably and benevolently and became pillars of the state. If I were a pirate, then it was as a righteous pirate. I never once personally killed anyone. I only robbed the rich and helped the poor. Among my fleet I issued laws that severely punished any of my subordinates who robbed innocent merchants, farmers, and fishers, or who abducted and raped virtuous wives and young girls. Because of the inability of the imperial navy to protect vessels at sea, I filled the void by providing them protection from pirates through a system of safe conduct passes, which could be purchased at reasonable prices. People who bought the passes thought of them as a form of insurance. Even foreign merchants in Canton bought my passes. I never heard anyone complain.*

Following a series of severe typhoons and famines, and sympathizing with the harsh conditions, poverty, and hunger of my multitude of subordinates, I took responsibility for their lives and petitioned the honorable Governor-General Bai Ling to allow us to surrender. After a series of tough negotiations I was able to secure imperial pardons for my men and their families, who were then repatriated back into mainstream society either as farmers or soldiers. That was in the fifteenth year of our reigning Emperor (1810). As for myself, because of my military abilities and valor, the Emperor awarded me with a military commission with orders to subdue the remaining pirates in the southwestern corner of Guangdong province. Later I was promoted to colonel in the Penghu battalion off the coast of Taiwan. I continue to serve my Emperor to diligently protect the China seas from the scourge of piracy.

Cheng Yat Sou: *I'm the wife of a high-ranking military officer named Cheung Po Tsai. He was not my first husband. Previously, I was married to the most powerful pirate chieftain in Guangdong province, Cheng Yat, and because of this I became widely known as Cheng Yat Sou, the Wife of Cheng Yat. Of course, this is not my real name. I was born on the river near Canton into a poor boat family of the Shik (Stone) surname and my given name is Yeung, a strong masculine name because my parents wanted a boy. But because I was a pretty child I had the milk name Heung Koo (Xianggu in mandarin, meaning Fragrant Lass), and that's what everyone called me. I don't know my age or exactly when I was born, because being a girl child in a poor family, birthdays are never important and never recorded. But according to my mama's recollection, she told me I was born in the* jyut mei *year (1775).*

Because my family was so poor, when I was still a child before I reached puberty, my papa sold me to a keeper of a floating brothel in Canton, where I continued to use the name Heung Koo. Some years later, the pirate Cheng Yat bought or stole me, I am not sure which, and made me his mistress and wife. When he suddenly died at sea a few years later, I maneuvered to take charge of his mighty Red Banner fleet,

4. Guan Yu or Guan Di was a famous third-century military hero, later deified as the god of war and wealth, immortalized in the popular novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo yanyi*), and Ma Yuan was the heroic general of the Later Han dynasty (25–220), who reconquered southern China and northern Vietnam. Most Chinese, including Cheung Po Tsai, would have known about their exploits from storytellers and operas.

> *with the help of Cheung Po Tsai and my deceased husband's kin. No one could believe that a woman, once a prostitute, could command the most powerful pirate fleet in Guangdong. But it is true; even Cheung Po Tsai did not act without first consulting me.*
>
> *For about four years my fleet had complete control of the seas. The imperial navy was impotent and could do nothing to stop us. Even when the foreign devils, Portugal and Britain, came to their aid, we remained unbeaten. We sold protection to fishing and merchant boats, to the government monopolized salt junks, to villages and markets, and also to foreign merchants in Canton. Many officials, their underlings, and soldiers were on our payroll. We had, in fact, become so powerful that the lofty provincial officials in Canton had to approach us to sweet-talk us into surrendering with promises of amnesties, money, and official appointments. On my own initiative, in the third lunar month of the* gang ng *year (April 1810) I led other pirate wives and our children to Canton to negotiate directly with Governor-General Bai Ling, who granted us pardons and allowed Cheung Po Tsai to retain a substantial flotilla with an official position in the imperial navy. Afterward I married him and gave birth to a son and daughter.*

These two testimonies are not pure fantasies. They are based on a variety of primary sources, but have been presented as an alternative narrative, as I imagined how they would have been interpreted by the pirates themselves.[5] Nonetheless, we may wonder how reliable or truthful are their words? Are they any more reliable than those of officials and literate elites who have left us written accounts? Are not the words of these pirates, like their foes, full of boasts and exaggerations? Surely in telling their side of the story pirates would have wanted to present themselves in the best light and to downplay the negative representations of dishonesty, greed, brutality, and meanness.

Of course, dead pirates cannot come back to life to tell us their sides of the story, or can they? Buried in the archival case records there are numerous pirate confessions given before magistrates in courts of law. Because confessions often were obtained under torture, however, their truthfulness and reliability have been questioned. Victims of torture often merely said what they thought their inquisitors wanted to hear. Nonetheless, when used in conjunction with other documents, confessions provide important information on the social, economic, personal, and family backgrounds of persons convicted of piracy. They can also reveal how and why gangs were formed and organized, as well as tell us about their activities and distribution of loot. Though transcribed by yamen clerks, confessions are the closest

5. For a selection of documents in English on Zhang Baozai (Cheung Po Tsai), Zheng Yi Sao (Cheng Yat Sou) and other pirates between 1775 and 1810, see Robert Antony, *The Golden Age of Piracy in China*, 103–137.

thing we have to the pirate's own words. They often reveal hidden truths not found in any other sources, as the following two cases demonstrate.

In the first example, in a routine memorial the governor of Guangdong province, Debao, reported to the Qianlong emperor a case of piracy along the Sino-Vietnamese border in 1782. The victim was a merchant named Tong Shengru, who had gone to trade in the black market town of Giang Binh (or Jiangping in mandarin), perhaps somewhat clandestinely. On route home, he was robbed by a gang of pirates.[6] We can deduce from the record that the band of pirates was a small ad hoc gang composed of poor fishermen and sailors who regularly alternated between legitimate work and crime in earning their livings. This case epitomized the unstable, yet vibrant, conditions on the Sino-Vietnamese frontier at the end of the eighteenth century. What follows are excerpts from the deposition of a reluctant pirate named Wang Yade.

> Wang Yade: *I, your humble subject, come from Hepu county (in Guangdong on the Gulf of Tonkin). I am twenty-one years old. I make my living as a sailor. I know Li Xing very well. This year [1782], early in the sixth lunar month, the cost of rice was extremely high, and so I went to Giang Binh to look for some work. On the tenth day of that month I ran into Li Xing and he took me to meet He Xing who was looking to hire sailors on his boat. He agreed to pay me 150 coppers (*wen*) each month in wages. Aboard He's boat there were three other sailors and a helmsman, so that the total, including the skipper, Li Xing, and me, was seven men. On the afternoon of the thirteenth, He Xing went to the market to find us a job, but he returned to tell us that there was no work anywhere in that port. What is more we were out of rice to eat. He told us that while at the market he overheard that Weng Panda's boat had on board a passenger surnamed Tong who had money and goods and was about to return to his store in Hengye village (in Jiaying subprefecture in northeastern Guangdong). He said why don't we go out to meet them on route at sea and rob them of their money and goods? How's that for a bit of work! Li Xing and the others all agreed, but [I], your humble subject, was afraid to join with them. He Xing cursed at me and said he would throw me overboard right then if I didn't agree. I didn't dare refuse and so went along with them.*
>
> *Tong set off and that evening we awaited our prey at a place offshore near Lizhu harbor. Around midnight Tong arrived and his boat anchored for the night. He Xing, Li Xing, and the others pulled our boat up to his. But when they jumped aboard to rob Tong's boat, I hid myself in the stern afraid to come out. Afterward He Xing and the others grabbed money and goods and brought them aboard our boat and we sailed off to a secluded spot in barbarian [that is, Vietnamese] waters to split up the booty. I didn't dare take a share, but He Xing told me that since I went along with them and knew about the heist, if ever a word leaked out to anyone he would kill me. He then gave me 2,000 coppers. I was afraid of him so I didn't refuse. On the*

6. On Giang Binh, see Chapter 4.

twentieth we anchored at Zhangshan mart. He Xing and three others went ashore to buy food and provisions. Li Xing, Ge'er, and I remained on board to watch things. We didn't know that the victim had already discovered our whereabouts and was on his way with the market head to arrest us. As soon as Ge'er saw them coming he jumped ashore and ran away. The victim and the others came aboard and nabbed Li Xing and me.[7]

In the second case, among the archival records in Macau there is the confession of a man who was arrested for piracy in 1830. His story vividly describes the nature, organization, and social backgrounds of the sorts of multi-national pirate gangs that operated in the South China Sea at that time.[8] Here is what he told the court:

Zhang Runsheng: *I am thirty-four years old, a native of Guishan county (in south central Guangdong). Both of my parents are dead and I have no brothers. I'm married to a woman named Zeng. Normally I'm a hired worker on a boat, but last year (1829) in the seventh lunar month I came to Macau, and am now out of work. On the sixteenth day of this month (first lunar month, 1830), an acquaintance named Dou Pi Guang, whose surname I don't know, met me in Xinwei (near Macau). He told me how we can get rich [and] I agreed. We [afterward] ran into Ya Hei Zai and Liu Yahai, who had a small boat; on board were seven sailors: Moluo, Yazhang, Yaliu, and five others [I] don't know the names of, and three Western devils and one black devil. We had a total of fifteen men. On board the boat were rattan shields, knives, and other weapons.*

On the sixteenth we set off in the boat and arrived at Shizimen (Crossgate), where we spotted a foreign sampan [in the distance] along the shoals, transporting goods. We began to follow it. Then on the nineteenth or twentieth, I don't remember, we arrived in open waters eastward of Lintin Island. We [now] drew in close. That Dou Pi Guang, Liu Yahai, and Ya Hei Zai grabbed rattan shields; I picked up a knife and that black devil, Moluo, and the other sailors also grabbed knives and weapons, and we boarded the [victim's] boat. There were six foreigners and one Chinese aboard the sampan. After killing them [we] threw their bodies into the sea. In the sampan's hold were two small cannons, but we didn't remove them.

We [then] sailed our small boat back to Nanwan (outside Macau) where we anchored. The three foreign devils on board our boat got seven boxes of opium [from the loot]. I and the other eleven Chinese also got seven boxes of opium. We divided our seven boxes into eighteen shares; each share weighed forty jin of opium. I got one share of forty jin. I gave Dou Pi Guang and Zui You twenty jin to sell for me and gave them the other twenty jin as payment for their service. That Ya Hei Zai and Dou Pi Guang kept six [boxes?] of opium at Zui You's place. That Zui You had a small opium den in Xinweiwei. That Dou Pi Guang is a Tanka from Macau; he's about thirty years old. Liu Yahai, I don't know where he's from, is about thirty.

7. *Xingke tiben*, QL 48.11.10.
8. On piracy in the post–Opium War period, see Chapter 9.

> *Ya Hei Zai is a Tanka from Macau and is in his twenties. Moluo is in his forties. Yazhang is in his twenties. Yaliu is also in his twenties and is pockmarked. They are all Tanka.*[9]

Their testimonies, which are simple and straightforward, for the most part ring true. I'll let them speak for themselves. In both cases, unlike the cases involving "great bandits" (*juzei*), such as Zhang Baozai and Zheng Yi Sao, these pirates were mainly amateurs and part-time criminals. They were actually emblematic of the sorts of pirates operating in Chinese waters between the eighteenth and early twentieth centuries. From what we can tell from their confessions, they were little different from other seafaring commoners, but in their cases, they ended up on the wrong side of the law. They were mostly young male adults in their twenties and thirties, who claimed that they turned to crime after being unable to find any honest work. Typically too they were all Dan (Tanka) boat people, an underclass of Chinese discriminated against by the rest of society. It was taken for granted by most people on land that the Dan were all pirates or at least conspired with pirates. If we had photos of Wang Yade, Zhang Runsheng, and the others arrested in the above two cases, they would have looked no different than the alleged pirates in Figure 1.1, seamen who were arrested by the British Royal Navy off the coast of Hong Kong around 1930. Judging by their demeanor and the way they were dressed, they could easily pass as ordinary sailors, fishers, or peasant farmers. There was nothing that made them appear as pirates.

Figure 1.1. Manacled Pirates under Armed Guard on Board a British Warship, c. 1930. Source: Bok, *Vampires of the China Coast*, 1932.

9. Liu Fang and Zhang Wenqin, *Qingdai Aomen Zhongwen dang'an huibian*, 1:344.

The Historian's Retort

In my own defense, and the defense of other historians, I would like to point out that few, if any, Chinese pirates of the past have left us records written in their own hands. Judicial case records, confessions, depositions, and the memoirs and scattered jottings of Chinese officials, literati, and foreign visitors are just about all we have to go on. Sadly, we historians must depend on such written accounts that are inevitably half-truths and certainly unsympathetic and partial. Just because the pirates themselves have left us few records and the official written sources are fragmentary, however, it does not mean that the lives of inarticulate pirates are unimportant and should be ignored. Their lives and histories are as valuable for understanding Chinese culture and society as are those of China's political, social, and cultural elites. Piracy, in fact, was an important aspect of modern society. On the one hand, piracy has always been closely linked to issues of social and economic dislocation, maritime security, and political sovereignty, and on the other hand, it has also fostered an extensive shadow economy and a vibrant subculture. The revelations of the underclass of pirates help to put everything else in proper perspective.

History involves a dialogue between the past and the present—between the pirate and the historian. The past is messy not only for those who have lived it, but also for those who write about it. Perhaps, as the Haitian scholar Michel-Rolph Trouillot has posited, "the production of historical narratives involves the uneven contribution of competing groups and individuals who have unequal access to the means for such production."[10] There is an inherent tension, a power struggle to determine who defines, shapes, and creates reality. If dead pirates can tell no tales, it is up to the historian to interpret their past and to speak for them. But how do we decide what events, truths, and facts to include and exclude? Historical production is all about making choices. It is all about power and silences, and it is in the silent spaces of history that we can imagine and discover the pirate.

If we are to fill in the silent spaces and speak the truth about pirates, we need to look at many different sources and in many different languages. And when we do, what do we discover? Not all pirates were decent and honorable, or romantic swashbuckling heroes as depicted in novels and movies. Many pirates, indeed, were rough and cruel robbers, kidnappers, rapists, and murderers. Even those who stumbled into piracy and were amateur part-timers, often succumbed to violent predation. They committed vicious crimes to earn their keep. Despite their codes of conduct, there

10. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, xix.

is much documentary evidence indicating that pirates not only wantonly abducted and raped women, but also sodomized young male captives. Zhang Baozai may not have personally killed anyone (though that may be hard to believe), yet he had no qualms about his subordinates murdering victims. As noted in Zhang Runsheng's confession, to make sure there were no witnesses, he nonchalantly admitted that his gang murdered everyone aboard the boat they robbed. As for female pirates, such as Zheng Yi Sao, they were no less callous than their male counterparts. To stay alive and keep their positions of power they needed to be both cunning and ruthless. Zheng Yi Sao oversaw an extensive extortion racket based on violence or threats of violence. Anyone who did not pay her tribute was liable to be kidnapped or killed. The fact is piracy was a brutal, unforgiving profession. It was not a benign practice.

This book is about recovering the silences and seeking the truths about piracy. In the chapters that follow, I put pirates at center stage. They deal with various aspects of piracy in modern China, roughly from the 1630s to 1940s. My focus is on piracy as historical, political, social, and cultural phenomena. During these three centuries piracy persistently ebbed and flowed between sporadic, small-scale activities with limited impact on local arenas and well-organized, large-scale ventures that seriously threatened the wellbeing and security of large parts of China and at times even dragged foreign states into the fray. In its many forms Chinese piracy involved a multitude of men and women from many walks of life and from many areas of the world. In China (as elsewhere) it was a multi-linguistic and multi-ethnic enterprise. At the same time, back on shore, officials, gentry, merchants, and peasants also needed to come to terms with pirates—to deal with them by extermination, appeasement, and/or collaboration. In this book my main aim is to explore the world of Chinese pirates and to explicate the integral role they played in shaping China's maritime society in the modern age.

What Is Piracy?

Before proceeding, I would like to say a few things about the meanings of piracy, not only in China but also elsewhere in the world. While everyone may agree on the existence of maritime piracy, its definition has always been hotly debated by politicians, historians, anthropologists, criminologists, and jurists. Although throughout history piracy has been a worldwide phenomenon, the term piracy is controversial and continues to evolve according to time, place, and circumstance. Whenever dealing with pirates and piracy we must keep in mind the context and multiple meanings that

11

Conclusion

Piracy in China and the World

In *The City of God* the fifth-century theologian Augustine of Hippo retold the story of a brief exchange between a pirate and Alexander the Great, who angrily questioned his prisoner about what he meant by "keeping hostile possession of the sea." The man boldly retorted: "What thou meanest by seizing the whole earth? But because I do it with a petty ship, I am called a robber, whilst thou who dost it with a great fleet art styled emperor." Augustine mentioned this anecdote to make the point that emperors, and governments more generally, could commit crimes with impunity, while later writers have repeated the story in order to justify the sea robber, whose action they considered a legitimate attack against imperial tyranny and his effort to obtain a fair share of trade.[1] Piracy or maritime raiding was more complex than Augustine's famous quote suggests, but it does point to a fundamental question that scholars have been debating ever since: what is piracy's relationship to state and society? By way of conclusion, I will briefly address this and other issues with some comparisons of piracy in China and other areas of the world.

Wherever there are bodies of water—oceans, seas, gulfs, estuaries—there were sure to be pirates. The scope and intensity of piracy, like its meanings, has constantly shifted over time and space. Some scholars claim that the world experienced the "most intense outbreak of sea robbery ever recorded" during the golden age of piracy in the West between 1695 and 1725, without ever considering the historical records that clearly show that during that same period and for nearly another hundred years piracy was even more extensive and violent in Asian waters.[2] If Western piracy swiftly

1. Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, 148. See also Patricia Risso, "Cross-Cultural Perceptions of Piracy," 297; and Sonja Schillings, *Enemies of All Humankind*, 28–34.
2. Quote from Arne Bialuschewski, "Between Newfoundland and the Malacca Strait," 167; for other recent studies, see David Head, *The Golden Age of Piracy*; and Mark Shirk, "The Golden Age of Piracy and the Creation of an Atlantic World."

decreased over the eighteenth century, in Asia from the Malabar coast to the Malay archipelago to the South China Sea it reached unprecedented heights over the following century. Most pirates after the sixteenth century, in fact, were non-Europeans. Whereas during the heyday of piracy in the West the total number of pirates never exceeded 6,000 individuals, in Chinese waters between 1520 and 1810 there were no less than 60,000 individuals engaged in piracy at any given time. Even in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it was common to find thousands of pirates along the southern coast of China. There were equally as many "sea raiders" operating in the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asian waters during the same period. Furthermore, unlike Western pirates who operated over long distances to plunder remote areas of the globe, most Asian pirates remained closer to home, seldom venturing out into the high seas or crossing oceans.[3]

Despite the differences in scope, intensity, and meanings of piracy across time, space, and cultures, nonetheless it is useful to discuss certain salient features conducive to comparison. We can start with the concept of privateering. Simply put, this was a Western legal concept whereby governments during wartime issued commissions or licenses (such as letters of marque) to private vessels allowing them to attack and plunder enemy shipping in return for a share of the spoils. Some scholars describe privateering as legalized piracy. The term privateering is troublesome because the fine legal distinctions that Westerners made between privateering and piracy would not have been apparent to most Asians, though they likely would have been familiar with the idea of state sponsored maritime raiding. It was common practice for Southeast Asian polities to support sea-raiding against rival ships and towns. Raiding, in fact, was an important tool that rulers routinely used in both warfare and statecraft. However, because European statesmen did not consider Southeast Asian polities to be legitimate or civilized states, their maritime conflicts were inevitably labeled as piracy and as such had to be eliminated. Their actions, nonetheless, were little different from European attacks on the shipping of rival nations or native vessels, but which they regarded as legitimate privateering. Put simply, the Western nation-state became the only suitable source of legitimate political authority.[4] Such hypocrisy must have been obvious to most Asians.

During the same period as the so-called golden age of piracy in the West (1690s–1720s), in the western Indian Ocean the Maratha state made an alliance with a freelance mariner named Kanhoji Angre, who commanded a private armed fleet. At this time the Marathas and other small

3. Gwyn Campbell, "Piracy in the Indian Ocean World," 786–787.
4. Anthony Reid, "Violence at Sea," 19–20. Sebastian Prange ("A Trade of No Dishonour," 1271) makes a similar case for maritime raiding in the Indian Ocean.

states were embroiled in a conflict with the Mughal Empire (1526–1857), in which Europeans also became entangled. In order to help defray the costs of the military campaigns, the Maratha rulers commissioned Kanhoji as an admiral and paid him for his services, much like a privateer's share of prizes in exchange for military assistance to a European monarch. Although Kanhoji at times acted independently, he carried out sporadic attacks on native and European shipping, actions that the latter labeled piracy. While Kanhoji has since been resurrected by some historians as a champion of Indian resistance to European imperialism, we might better think of him simply as "a man who was looking out for his own best interests."[5]

Chinese imperial regimes, however, looked upon privateering or state sponsored sea-raiding as a form of piracy. During the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War (1780–1784), when the British "privateer" John McClary plundered the trading junk belonging to the Hong merchant Chowqua on the pretense that he was transporting Dutch goods, the victim was outraged and considered the attack an act of piracy. When Tay Son rebels in Vietnam sponsored Chinese seafarers with official ranks and seals of office to conduct raids along the south China coast at the end of the eighteenth century, the Qing government regarded the raiders as pirates and traitors. Whenever captured they were severely punished, often with summary execution. No Chinese ruler officially sponsored maritime raiding. Instead of privateering, Chinese governments adopted the policy of "pacification," whereby pirates who surrendered were pardoned and allowed to join the imperial navy to fight against their former comrades. Pirate leaders, such as Shi Lang, Zhang Bao, and Guo Podai, were even given high-ranking military commissions. But unlike privateering, such commissions did not authorize them to plunder shipping.

According to Western officials, anyone who operated outside the colonial trading system or who opposed them were liable to be labeled as pirates. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, the Portuguese, Dutch, and British, in their attempts to monopolize maritime trade, considered it their right and duty to suppress both indigenous and foreign interlopers. The Portuguese, for instance, established the *cartaz* system in Asian waters, which was nothing more than an officially sponsored protection racket. Accordingly, all Asian ships trading in the Indian Ocean were required to purchase a license and pay "customs dues" to the Portuguese, otherwise their ships would be confiscated or destroyed.[6] It seems that the *cartaz* system was much the same as what Chinese pirates, such as Zheng Yi

5. Risso, "Cross-Cultural Perceptions of Piracy," 302–305, 309, quote on page 305. For a detailed account of Kanhoji Angre, see Derek Elliott, "Pirates, Polities and Companies."
6. Ruby Maloni, "Control of the Seas"; and Chapter 10 in this book.

Sao and Zhang Bao, were doing in the South China Sea in the early nineteenth century when they obliged fishing, salt, and merchant junks, and coastal towns and markets to buy "safe-conduct passes" for protection from pirate attacks. The difference, of course, was that the Portuguese operated under the auspices of the king, while Zhang Bao and his comrades were merely outlaws. It is not difficult to imagine why many Asians deemed the Portuguese (and other Europeans) to be no better than pirates.

In the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf, even before the sixteenth century, local rulers had instituted a protection racket quite similar to the *cartaz* system, but of course on a smaller scale. In fact, the term *cartaz* was likely a loanword from the Arabic *qirtās*, meaning "paper" or "document," as would have been used in official credentials. The Hindu ruler of Barkur, for instance, had a naval force of thirty warships commanded by a Muslim, and likely former slave, named Lula, who was accused of plundering sea merchants who refused to pay him tribute. Like the *cartaz*, ships were forced to call at specific ports to pay taxes, or otherwise be attacked. This system was called the "right of the harbor" (*haqq al-bandar*). Kanhoji Angre also required sea merchants to purchase passes (*dastak*), thereby creating a system similar to the Portuguese *cartaz*. In fact, by the early eighteenth century prudent Asian merchants bought both the *dastak* and *cartaz* passes to avoid trouble. Maritime raiding was both an important revenue and military source for local rulers, and as such was an integral part of native polities and society.[7]

Whenever Chinese seafarers fled to foreign countries officials commonly categorized them as pirates and traitors. Official documents often used the unflattering term *liumin* to describe these sorts of people; they were rootless defectors, vagabonds, refugees, and renegades. During the Ming-Qing dynastic wars when many Chinese fled to Vietnam and later when Chinese seafarers joined the Tay Son rebels, in the eyes of Qing rulers they automatically became traitors and rebels. They had voluntarily moved to frontier towns like Giang Binh, areas that existed beyond the pale of civilization, where they abandoned their motherland to degenerate into barbarism, adopting the foreign tongue, hair styles, dress, names, and mannerisms. The Chinese pirates who operated out of Vietnam were despicable characters for forsaking their own advanced culture in favor of backwardness and depravity among the Vietnamese barbarians.[8] This was the Chinese equivalent of "turning Turk," referring to European apostates who in the seventeenth century joined the Barbary corsairs and discarded

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7. Prange, "A Trade of No Dishonour," 1276–1278; and Elliott, "Pirates, Polities and Companies," 9–10.
8. Suzuki Chusei, "Re Cho koko no sin tono kankei," 457–459.

their Christian faith to become Muslims. Apostatized pirates not only posed physical harm to people and shipping, but also were thought to be a threat to traditional values and the sanctity of Christian states.[9]

Pirates were quintessential outlaws—living outside the law and having no allegiance to any nation. They lived by no rules but their own. On offshore islands—such as Tortuga, Madagascar, Weizhou, and the Ladrones—they established their own self-governing "escape societies," which challenged the legitimacy of established states.[10] In both the East and West pirate communities created their own codes of conduct to regulate otherwise unruly gangs. According to some scholars, Western pirates created a much more democratic and egalitarian social order than the one they left behind. As Robert Ritchie explains, pirates crafted "a democratic system that gave men a voice in their affairs."[11] They made "social compacts" through written articles agreed upon by the entire crew, which defined gangs as cohesive self-regulating bodies that detailed the allocation of authority, enforcement of discipline, and distribution of booty. Crews held property in common, each man taking a fair and equitable share in the profits. Funds were also set aside for injured sailors.[12] Chinese pirates likewise lived by their own rules or pacts (*yue*). While small ad hoc gangs allocated loot into shares in a relatively equitable fashion, larger more permanent gangs usually pooled large portions of the loot into a common chest, which was used to purchase provisions and defray the medical expenses of injured comrades, among other things. Their rules were designed to maximize group cohesion as a fighting unit, to curb wayward activities, to regulate raiding practices, and to guarantee business interests by protecting merchants who purchased their safe-conduct passes.[13]

Chinese pirates, however, did not exhibit the same democratic ideals found among their Western counterparts. Authority was not placed in the collective hands of the crew, nor did they democratically elect officers. Among the large pirate fleets, such as those of Zheng Zhilong, Zhang Bao, Zheng Yi Sao, and Cai Qian, chieftains personally chose their own subordinate commanders on the basis of ability, loyalty, and kinship. Among the smaller gangs, normally boat owners assumed leadership roles. Pirate captains were literally bosses (*laoban*), who exercised absolute power over

9. For a useful essay on "turning Turks," see N. I. Matar, "The Renegade in English Seventeenth-Century Imagination."
10. See the insightful article by Joseph MacKay, "Pirate Nations: Maritime Pirates as Escape Societies in Late Imperial China."
11. Robert Ritchie, *Captain Kidd and the War against the Pirates*, 270.
12. Besides Robert Ritchie mentioned above, see Marcus Rediker, *Villains of All Nations*, especially Chapter 4.
13. For English translations of Chinese pirate pacts, see Robert Antony, *The Golden Age of Piracy in China*, 110–113, 135–136.

life and death. They made all the rules and decisions aboard ship. They composed pirate codes not to guarantee the liberty of gang members but to maintain order and discipline. Pirate bosses relied on traditional hierarchical methods of authority rooted in seniority, filial obedience, and loyalty to ensure cohesion within gangs.[14]

In both the East and West, pirates seldom did the heavy work of sailing their vessels—that was done by slaves and captives. Although it has been said that among Western pirates, at least before piracy waned in the 1720s, no unwilling persons were compelled to join gangs,[15] aboard nearly every pirate ship there were uncompensated forced laborers. Not everyone aboard the pirate ship was equal. Slaves, of course, had no vote or say in the operation of the ship. The pirate-privateer William Dampier frequently mentioned how pirates used slaves to do most of the dirty, wearying work of sailing their ships. Slaves, who had often been abducted and forced to work for their pirate captors, did all the pulling, hauling, cooking, cleaning, and other unpleasant chores aboard ship. Female slaves also provided a large variety of services, not the least of which was sex. The prevalent view that African slaves were uncivilized savages justified their brutal treatment. Besides providing crucial labor, slaves were valuable commodities that could be sold on the open market at good prices.[16]

In China people were also routinely abducted and forced to join gangs. According to the information in Table 7.3, between 1796 and 1810, during the upsurge in piracy along the south China coast, there were actually more kidnapped victims who were forced into service (by doing menial chores or helping to handle the booty) than actual hard-core pirates. Not only were ransom payments for kidnapped victims important sources of revenue, but equally important, captives were also essential sources of labor, indeed exploited forced labor, that pirates needed for operating their ships. Captives, who did most of the demanding work of sailing the ships, received no share of the spoils and were no better off than slaves. We might think of this as an uncompensated form of impressment, a legal mode of kidnapping common in European navies at the time. In fact, large-scale piracy in early modern China depended on the procurement of ever increasing numbers of captives. Slave labor was a foundational feature of Chinese piracy, particularly large-scale piracy.[17]

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14. Robert Antony, *Like Froth Floating on the Sea*, 169–170.
15. Rediker, *Villains of All Nations*, 47–49.
16. Robert Ritchie, *Pirates: Myths and Realities*, 8; and Mark Hanna, "Well-Behaved Pirates Seldom Make History,"146, 154–155. See also Arne Bialuschewski, "Black People under the Black Flag."
17. Antony, *Like Froth Floating on the Sea*, 99–100. On impressment, see Denver Brunsman, *The Evil Necessity*.

Similarly, in Southeast Asia maritime raiding was a way of life closely tied to war, slavery, and trade. Maritime marauding was one of the key strategies used by political leaders to expand their prestige, wealth, and power. The seizure of scarce and valuable resources, particularly slaves, was a major motive for wars, and the accumulation of slaves, not territorial aggrandizement, was the basis of political power and wealth. Captives were chattel, treated like any other commodity, to be traded or to be put into service. With the burgeoning China trade in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, there was a high demand for Southeast Asian products. To fill the demands for laborers to procure those products, slave raiding became a big business.[18] Slaves also were used as oarsmen aboard raiding vessels, and were little different from the galley slaves of the Barbary corsairs. Since warrior-raiders played no part in sailing their vessels they needed a steady supply of captives to do the rowing and sailing. In 1798, for example, among a fleet of twenty-five ships there were roughly 500 warrior-raiders and 800 slave-rowers, as well as another 450 captives who were to be sold into slavery.[19] As in China, slave labor was an essential component of Southeast Asian maritime raiding.

In the Indian Ocean there always existed a close connection between piracy and slaving. Madagascar was a major hub of the slave trade in that region. Because of the many conflicts in the area the selling of war prisoners as slaves was a lucrative business. Slaves were both a source of revenue and labor. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Malagasy seaborne warriors, who operated outside the European colonial system and were considered piratical savages, routinely organized raiding expeditions to obtain slaves all along the east coast of Africa. They had fleets of large canoes numbering as many as 500, with as many as 18,000 fighters. Many of the captured slaves were kept as oarsmen or sold as laborers in the French colonies in the Indian Ocean. In 1818, in an effort to curb slave raiding, Britain declared slave trading a form of piracy, whereby both activities were deemed crimes against humanity.[20]

No matter in the East or West, all pirates depended on people on shore to survive. Without their support piracy could not exist. Besides, as Mark Hanna aptly states: “Looting only makes sense if you have a place to spend your gains.”[21] Friendly ports, like Port Royal, Cape Town, Hirado, and Macau, provided pirates with safe havens where they could relax, sell their booty, refit their ships, recruit gang members, and make plans for new

18. Andaya, “The Dark Passage,” 21–26.
19. Robert Antony, “Turbulent Waters,” 32–34.
20. Risso, “Cross-Cultural Perceptions of Piracy,” 315; Lauren Benton and Lisa Ford, *Rage for Order*, 127; and Edward Alpers, “Piracy and Indian Ocean Africa,” 23–24.
21. Hanna, “Well-Behaved Pirates Seldom Make History,” 136.

ventures. Michael Laver describes these port towns as "spaces between," virtual no-man's land or zones of international contact that governments tolerated and allowed to flourish for a share of the spoils. They were places of opportunity for anyone willing to take risks outside the law. Their dockside inns, taverns, brothels, and gambling houses were the meeting places where pirates conducted business with merchants and colluded with officials, their underlings, and soldiers. They also were decidedly rough places—both Port Royal and Macau had reputations as being the wickedest cities in the world—known for debauchery and drunkenness. Friendly ports, which were key nodes in a series of refreshment posts and black markets, were places where the underworld interconnected with mainstream society and culture. They were important zones of contact linking land and sea.[22]

When it comes to issues of gender there are stark differences between piracy in the East and West. In the latter case, piracy was fundamentally a male profession. Certainly there were female pirates, but they were few in number, and when they did appear in the records they were normally disguised as men and used male names. According to one estimate, there were likely no more than fifty to a few hundred female pirates, perhaps only half of one percent of all Western pirates in the early eighteenth century.[23] Anne Bonny and Mary Read remain the only known female pirates from this period because their identity can be verified by their trial records. Because there was a long held tradition that women brought bad luck, several pirate codes prohibited having women or boys (for the same reason) aboard ships. Not only did they bring bad luck, women also disturbed the social order of shipboard life and threatened to diminish the pirate's masculinity. The wooden world of Western pirates was a decidedly homosocial space.[24]

Unlike in the West, women have always played integral roles in seafaring in China. In fact, in many ways the waters along the south China coast were a highly feminized space. The vast majority of Dan boat people—who made up the largest number of pirates—lived and worked their whole lives aboard their vessels. The boat was home to the entire family, including fathers, mothers, children, and hired hands. For many Dan women, therefore, pirating came naturally and was simply a part of their everyday life. They did not have to disguise themselves as men. Also contrary to Western practices, it was not unusual to find women commanding gangs of pirates, and in some cases—Zheng Yi Sao, Cai Qian Ma, and Lai Choi San—even commanding huge pirate fleets. When Zheng Yi Sao and Zhang

22. Michael Laver, "Neither Here nor There"; see also Kerry Ward, "Tavern of the Seas"; and Nuala Zahedieh, "The Wickedest City in the World."

23. Joe Stanley, *Bold in Her Breeches*, 39.

24. See, for example, Rediker, *Villains of All Nations*, Chapter 6. It was said that Anne Bonny and Mary Read dressed as men during combat, but at other times dressed as women aboard ship.

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“Maritime Violence and State Formation in Vietnam: Piracy and the Tay Son Rebellion, 1771–1802.” In *Persistent Piracy: Maritime Violence and State-Formation in Global Historical Perspective*, edited by Stefan Amirell and Leos Muller, 113–130. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137352866_6.

“Piracy and the Shadow Economy in the South China Sea, 1780–1810.” In *Elusive Pirates, Pervasive Smugglers: Violence and Clandestine Trade in the Greater China Seas*, edited by Robert Antony, 99–114. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010. https://doi.org/10.5790/hongkong/9789888028115.003.0008.

“Defending Canton: Chinese Pirates, British Traders, and Hong Merchants, 1780–1810.” *Review of Culture* (International Edition) 66 (2021): 70–95.

“Pacification of the Seas: Qing Anti-Piracy Policies in Guangdong, 1794–1810.” *Journal of Oriental Studies* 32, no. 1 (1994): 16–35.

“Bloodthirsty Pirates? Violence and Terror on the South China Sea in Early Modern Times.” *Journal of Early Modern History* 16, no. 6 (2012): 481–501. https://doi.org/10.1163/15700658-12342337.

“Pirates, Dragon Ladies, and Steamships: On the Changing Forms of Modern China’s Piracy.” In *Beyond the Silk Roads: New Discourses on China’s Role in East Asian Maritime History*, edited by Robert Antony and Angela Schottenhammer, 165–187. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2017. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvckq3m6.1.

“‘We Are Not Pirates’: Portugal, China, and the Pirates of Coloane (Macao), 1910.” *Journal of World History* 28, no. 2 (2017): 250–277. https://doi.org/10.1353/jwh.2017.0020.