

Ching Shih and the Pirates of the South China Coast: Shifting Alliances, Strategy, and Reputational Racketeering at the Start of the 19th Century

Introduction

At the end of the 18th century, China's coastal Kwangtung Province was a pirate's dream. Colonial cargo ships sailed along Kwangtung's coastline transporting increasingly valuable goods ripe for liberation. Among the countless waterways that drained into the South China Sea, fugitives could easily find shelter, and bandits could easily prepare an ambush. Chinese authorities found the surrounding archipelago of roughly 700 islands impossible to explore, providing the pirates further cover. Locals described this maze of canals, rivers, estuaries, and deltas that connected with the ocean, the 'inner sea'. Outsiders often ran aground while pursuing or fleeing the pirates, who had grown up plying its labyrinthine waters. Looking further inland, a mountain range separated Kwangtung geographically and economically from the rest of China, acting as a buffer against easy intervention by the Chinese Emperor. As a last resort, the pirates could also quickly flee west across the national border into Vietnam.



Despite Kwangtung's many attributes, however, the acts of piracy that took place along the South China Coast at the end of the 18th century were incidental, sporadic, and generally unthreatening. The vast majority of the region's pirates belonged to small, ad hoc crews of fishermen and ferrymen seeking easy money during their off seasons.

Though a nuisance, most pirates were amateurs, and the idea that they posed any real threat to national security seemed absurd. Indeed, in 1793, the Qianlong Emperor confidently declared that his Imperial Navy had 'searched out and arrested any pirates...not a trace of them remains.'¹ In fact, a trace did still

remain, and that small number grew rapidly. Within ten years of the Emperor's assertion, Kwangtung's pirates had formed an enormous, organised coalition. At their peak, the pirates were 70,000 strong, outnumbered the Imperial Navy by three to one, and held almost total control of the province.

The bandits' alliance rose to power under the leadership of a retired sex worker turned pirate queen, and they enjoyed a reign of swashbuckling terror that lasted for a decade, upending the status quo before vanishing almost as quickly as it had first appeared. In 1800, the alliance was in its infancy; by 1805, it ran Kwangtung Province; and by 1810, it had shattered.

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In spite of its short lifespan, the alliance enjoyed extraordinary success: within nine years, the pirates seized control of a vital stretch of coastline, repeatedly faced down the Imperial government in battle, took tens of thousands of lives, and played a significant role in defining China's shifting global standing.

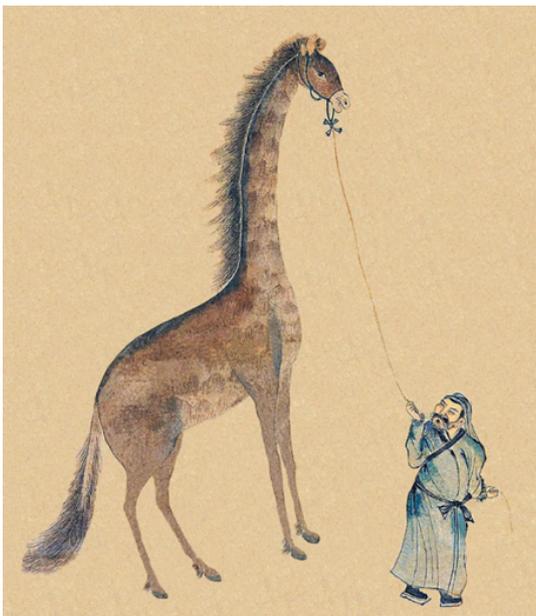
This is the story of how a group of displaced fishermen came to rule Kwangtung Province at the start of the 19th century; how they quickly developed such a fearsome reputation that they could tax global trade, and how they eventually replaced the Chinese Imperial Navy. And, most of all, this is a story about their remarkable leader, Ching Shih.

China at sea

The Chinese Imperial government neglected both its navy and its coastline for centuries, but it was a neglect borne of strategic decisions. In 1405 the state navy, commanded by Admiral Zheng He, was by far the most powerful in the world. Known as the 'Treasure Fleet', it made seven voyages in the course of 25 years, each one with larger ships and more sailors than any Western power would be able to match for centuries. Indeed, Zeng He's fleet, comprised of 300 ships with 28,000 sailors, dwarfed Christopher Columbus's three ships with 270 sailors more than 60 years later. This made Ming China the world's greatest naval power – far stronger than any of its European counterparts, which were still in the first stages of their own eventual imperialism.

In 1430, however, the Wanli Emperor ordered that these great voyages cease and that the entire Treasure Fleet be burned. Although academics disagree as to why – some suggest that the Fleet's enormous expeditions cost more than the value of the 'treasure' that they acquired – the consensus is that the destruction was not an economic decision but the result of political in-fighting, and an attempt to reduce the power of the eunuch bureaucrats within the Imperial court. Nobel Prize-winning economist Angus Deaton offers an alternative view, arguing that China was simply myopic, unable or unwilling to recognise the longer-term advantages that might have arisen from global relationships.² Or, to put it another way, China saw nothing outside its national boundaries that rivalled what the Chinese state had achieved on its own.

Whatever the reason, the Emperor made a conscious decision not to pursue international trade, but instead to focus on the expansion of China's territorial borders and the consolidation of the regions within them. As the country's principal challengers came from the plains, it was a policy that made sense; and for the next four centuries, China looked inward to the land, not outward to the sea. Unfortunately for the empire, a spate of Mongol attacks on China's northern border in the early 1800s drew the Emperor's attention away from the South China Sea just as the number of co-ordinated attacks by pirates began to increase.³



A Giraffe Brought to China by Admiral Zheng He's Treasure Fleet in the 15th Century

The Qing Dynasty was at the height of its geographic power by the time the self-appointed pirate queen Ching Shih ascended to her metaphorical throne, and managing such a large, diverse territory was both difficult and costly. Between 1796 and 1804, the White Lotus Rebellion occupied Imperial attention in China's central mountainous regions and drained the state's coffers. In an effort to balance its budget, China increased its already high duties on imports, pushing much of the cost of quashing the rebellion onto the merchants of Kwangtung and their foreign traders.

Although the Emperor eventually consolidated his country's territory on land, he had incurred ruinous costs and neglected China's international relations. The major European powers had long looked west, racing to exploit the opportunities provided by the so-called New World, but during the 18th century, as the Americas embraced self-determination, Europe's foothold in the west weakened. Europe's leaders instead looked east to rebuild their imperial ambitions.

Europeans had made forays east during the 17th century, under the flag of the Dutch East India Company (VoC) -- to this day the largest corporation that has ever existed -- and at a time when Kwangtung was still struggling with an earlier pirate horde. Deeply frustrated by China's closed economy, the VoC had decided that the

pirates could ‘amply show us how and in what manner the empire of China can be pressured.’⁴ Dutch attempts to encourage piracy as a means of weakening the Chinese state, and to take advantage of that to impose free trade, would subsequently be revisited by a new generation of European traders in the 19th century.

Europeans prized China’s remarkable porcelains, teas, and silks, but the English East India Company, like its Dutch competitor, struggled to trade with China. China’s high import taxes and almost impermeable borders duties frustrated the European chartered trading companies. Furthermore, Chinese merchants wanted only silver in exchange for their goods, but Europeans sourced most of their silver from the Americas and, worse, the price of silver spiked following Mexico’s declaration of independence.

In pursuit of profit but without silver to offer, Westerners (most notoriously the British) found alternative means to trade, some of which involved circumventing Chinese law, most infamously by supplying opium, and by negotiating with Ching Shih’s pirates. Qing China strictly forbade the trading of opium, but the British shipped opium from India and then sold it to smugglers who, the East India Company officials knew, would smuggle it into China on the company’s behalf.

The preference for domestic harmony over globalization that drove China’s seclusion eventually left the Chinese state ill-prepared to battle the rising the rising empires that targeted it. Like the Dutch East India Company before them, the British encouraged the coastal pirates to undermine the Qing state in order to advance their own financial agenda.

Pirates of the South China Coast

Several geo-political factors converged to fuel the rapid expansion of piracy on the South China Coast at the start of the 19th century. Of course, piracy tends to emerge when there is both extreme inequality and substantial ocean commerce. But piracy generally only becomes dominant following the breakdown of the state. The fact that the Qianlong Emperor was blissfully unaware of the pirates was a significant factor in the latter’s ascent.



The Dutch East India Company Emblem

More than half of the men who became pirates in this region between 1794 and 1803 were local sailors or fishermen who had turned to piracy out of financial desperation. It was, for them, a logical career choice: it complemented their seasonal income, made use of their existing skills and equipment, and relied upon a tight-knit community within a weak state. The Cantonese ‘water people’ had high rates of poverty and illiteracy and were underrepresented in government. As a community without gentry, the pirates lacked the elite connections that could have made them part of the national or provincial administrative structure.⁵

Their lack of representation separated them culturally from the dominant power structures. Indeed, the Chinese government rarely tried to collect taxes from a population that they considered itinerant and isolated.⁶

In short, Kwangtung was hungry both literally and figuratively. Yet, ironically, despite the scarcity of resources and poverty, the region’s oceanic trade ballooned. In 1756 the Emperor designated Canton as the exclusive harbour for international commerce in southern China, in order to contain and minimise foreign influence on its population – a threat to unity that might threaten the Emperor’s focus on consolidation. Though the state limited foreign access, Canton still served as a foot in the door for European powers.

According to a shipping captain, Alexander Hamilton (no relation to the then American Secretary of the Treasury), Canton was a ‘frenetic port where on any given day no fewer than 5,000 junks could be seen lying at anchor awaiting service.’⁷ By 1800, between 60 and 80 foreign ships passed through Kwangtung’s waters every year, each carrying a valuable cargo.⁸ Enormous corporate and international wealth sailed through the poor province every year, with no dividends paid to its residents.

The Emperor may have been complacent but a population of hungry fishermen, deprived of state support and relegated to watching foreign cargo float by, chose to take the state’s redistributive function into their own hands.

Where the state did intervene, its regulations often encouraged the growth of the black market. An impenetrable Imperial bureaucracy stifled legitimate trade across the border between China and Vietnam, where many of the pirate's bases lay. This encouraged smuggling, conducted by Chinese sailors and tacitly endorsed by the Vietnamese state, which relied on the illicit border trade for access to goods.

The growth of smuggling taught a generation of fishermen that their income could be supplemented by brief, non-committal forays into illicit marketplaces. In practice, smuggling was an entry-level job that organically led to piracy. It also encouraged the growth of the black market in coastal border towns where smugglers could offload their cargoes. These towns later became pirate strongholds, having already developed the social and physical networks that pirates relied upon to sell their booty.

Vietnam not only provided refuge, but it also offered the pirates legitimacy. It is an ironic truism of piracy that outlaws flourish with state support precisely because the state is so weak. Letters of marque and privateer associations made pirates powerful in Europe and the Americas, and the same was true in Kwangtung. The Tay Son rebellion (1771–1802) in Vietnam relied on pirates. The subsequent Tay Son dynasty, which unified Vietnam in 1778, repaid the pirates in kind, allowing them to operate as privateers and protecting them from the Chinese authorities.

The numbers of Chinese pirates in Vietnamese waters, often making forays to their home coast for raids, steadily expanded. By 1790, the economy of the Vietnamese border town of Giang Bing was more reliant on illegal piracy than on legitimate fishing.⁹ As control of Vietnam changed hands, so did the country's relationship with China – and Chinese pirates. Kwangtung's bandits repeatedly demonstrated their skill in navigating the shifting diplomatic tides, moving between their work as smugglers, privateers, and bandits, depending on where the safest profits lay.

Against this backdrop of convoluted waterways, state neglect, and cross-border politics, a successful and ambitious local pirate named Ching I visited one of western Kwangtung's floating brothels, where he met a sex worker named Shih Yang. When they married, she adopted his name, becoming Ching Shih (Cantonese for Wife of Ching, according to local custom). Their union would ultimately threaten global trade.

Ching Shih (sometimes translated as Cheng I Sao) soon became the commander-in-chief of the most formidable pirate fleet in history and, arguably, the most powerful woman in all of China.

The honeymoon period

When Ching I and Ching Shih wed, the Tay Son dynasty still stood and business still boomed (for the pirates, if not their prey) in Vietnam. Piracy was a growth industry: a few bandits were beginning to organise themselves, a state of play that went against the norm. Until then, Kwangtung's pirates had acted as small, individual units of ships that relied on family ties or deep, long-standing connections to hold them together. In Vietnam, where they were able to work openly as privateers, freed from their fugitive status, a few crews had merged to form larger units numbering several hundred members aboard several dozen junks.¹⁰ Had the Chinese government watched more closely, it could have seen the origins of the pirate fleet that would soon follow.

In late 1801, when Ching I and Ching Shih tied the knot, there were a dozen potential leaders in contention for the post. However, as Professor Dian Murray (whose research and translations are fundamental to this case study) describes, 'within a very few months, Ching I and his wife found themselves at the forefront' of the group.¹¹ Although the couple had not yet formed any significant pirate alliance, they were hotly tipped as the pair to watch.

A year later, the tide had turned. The Tay Son dynasty fell, and the new Vietnamese regime viewed the pirates as troops of the Tay Son. The previously tolerated bandits suddenly found themselves on the losing side as the Nguyen dynasty began to exterminate and imprison their rivals, including the pirates.¹² By the end of 1802, those bandits who had survived the purge fled to Kwangtung to lick their wounds and patch their sails. Ching I and Ching Shih led many of them across the border. Murray posits that Ching I was the 'unifier and patriarch' while Ching Shih was the 'consolidator and organiser'. It was a division of labour that resulted in their 'major achievement...the unification of small gangs into a formidable confederation that by 1804 included 400 junks and 70,000 men.'¹³ The Vietnamese massacre had catalysed a grand alliance of Chinese pirates.¹⁴

The pirates drew up, by outlaw standards, an impressively formal constitution. Ching I and Ching Shih organised their confederacy into six squadrons, each named for the colour of the flags that they flew: Red, Black, White, Blue, Green, and Yellow. The Chings commanded the Red Flag while a semi-autonomous commander led each of the other naval divisions that owed their loyalty to the Ching family through ‘a complex series of personal and familial obligations.’¹⁵ No longer haphazard, the pirates followed a formal charter.

The document that the pirate leaders signed stipulated responsibility for medical care and a pension, should a pirate be injured in the line of duty. It also codified the distribution of booty, laid out negotiation procedures (which western pirates called ‘parley’) and registration numbers for pirate ships. Perhaps most interestingly, it curtailed the pirates’ use of violence against those that collaborated with the state. Should the local residents of Canton tell the government or the military of the pirates’ plans, ‘we must restrain our anger and overlook their actions even though we may not be pleased. We must not use our power as a pretext to seize or persecute them,’ the pirates agreed.¹⁶

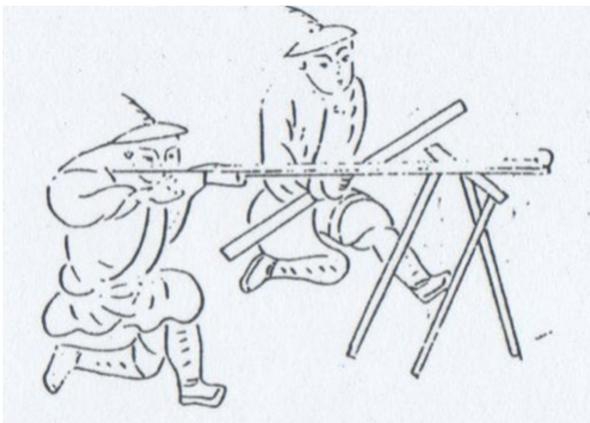
This new form of cooperation succeeded. By the end of 1805, the pirate confederacy was a force to be reckoned with: its fleet outnumbered the Imperial Navy by three to one, and it was prominent not only on the national stage but had also become a concern for other national powers – especially European ones – through its control of local shipping routes.¹⁷

Unification also transformed the pirates’ tactics. Previously, they only attacked vessels that were either smaller or equal in size to their own ships, and even then only when victory was almost a foregone conclusion. Part-time crews of off-season fishermen had limited access to large vessels and sophisticated weaponry which, by extension, limited the type of targets they could pursue. The economy of scale that confederation created enabled pirates to command increasingly larger ships with ever bolder tactics, and their ability to control bigger territories made it feasible for them to ransom ships and captives. These new-style pirates were not without a degree of honour: as long as they received their ransom, the bandits always released their victims – though the intermediary stages often involved the removal of a finger or two, amid general piratical unpleasantness.

Part-timers no more, this new generation of pirates became hardened career criminals with a hard-won and well-deserved reputation for ferocity.

To proactively cultivate a violent mystique, the pirates would drink an explosive combination of wine and gunpowder before sailing into battle. When boarding vessels they employed not just grappling hooks but also disguises, spies, and bribes. If a ship’s sides were too high to board, the pirates would swim over to it and climb up on deck instead. Their defensive instincts were less honed: their only protection was hand-woven rattan shields. In their case, a strong offence was their only real defence.

When the pirates captured naval vessels, they would execute even those who had surrendered – apparently by chopping them into small pieces, which would then be thrown overboard. On occasion, they would preface this by nailing their victims’ feet to the decks of their ship. Unsurprisingly, the pirates’ vicious reputation preceded them across the South China Coast.



A Chinese ‘Jingal’ Musket in Action

The confederacy’s weaponry was rudimentary, but it was sufficient to inspire terror in its opponents and the local population. As they drew alongside a ship, the pirates would brandish bamboo poles tipped with machete-like blades – their pikes were usually around 15 feet in length, but sometimes as long as 30. Another weapon the pirates favoured was the ‘jingal’, an eight-foot-long musket-like contraption that required two comrades to fire the gun while resting it on the shoulder of a third. The pirates loaded their jingals with scrap iron or metal balls that weighed slightly less than a pound. As a nod to their previous lives, the pirates also carried a variety of bladed weapons that they had used as fishermen.

The bandits also had a strong predilection for fire. They habitually filled older boats with dry straw and then set them alight before directing them towards their enemies whom they wished to scatter – a combat strategy that was also popular in Ancient Greece. At closer range, the pirates deployed crude grenades: they filled an earthenware pot with gunpowder and gin, alongside a smouldering piece of charcoal behind a dividing wall which would shatter on impact.

The alliance also armed themselves with more conventional forms of firepower, which they obtained from the unwitting national government. As part of its response to piracy, the Chinese state had armed local landowners with cannons so that the elites could protect the coastal villages under their control. The pirates' solution was creatively simple: they disguised themselves as gentry and, posing as protectors, put in requests for additional cannons – which the state provided for free. In another instance, using a commandeered military vessel and stolen uniforms, pirates claimed to be troops on official business and liberated muskets from a naval armoury.

When their ingenuity failed them, the pirates mounted direct attacks on naval bases, stealing ships and weaponry, and slaughtering the garrison's troops. As their confidence grew on the sea, their foothold grew on land. Diversifying their holdings, the pirates invested their takings in brothels, gambling houses, and taverns that became their primary sites to exchange information and stolen goods.

Slowly but surely, the pirates turned from a menace at sea to invaders of the land.

Reputation and racketeering

A good pirate has a fearsome reputation; a great pirate has so fearsome reputation that they no longer need to actually engage in piracy. So it was with the South China Seas confederacy, which moved towards racketeering as it grew in scale.

They began with the local salterns. Perhaps tired of shaking down the same salt-carrying junks on a weekly basis, the alliance approached the region's salt companies and (presumably very politely) suggested that to avoid any altercation during their cargo runs, the salt merchants might pay a reasonable sum in advance of sailing. Both sides knew that the pirates would take their cut, whatever happened; they also recognised that if the merchants paid in advance it would save everyone rather a lot of trouble. Thus, the passport system was born.



East India Company Emblem

Before setting sail, the pirate confederacy strongly recommended that merchants purchase a private 'passport', or protection slip, which was readily available from local agents based along the region's shoreline; it could also be openly purchased from the pirates' new headquarters, which they had established in Macao (already a well-known centre for gambling) to manage the distribution of information, weapons, and cash. Almost all of the traders quickly complied. Besides the guarantee of safety, the merchants realized that for book-keeping and risk management, a passport was a convenient way to calculate the transaction costs from piracy before the voyage was even underway.

The system worked well, in part because pirates now had the time and resources to focus all of their energies on those few ships unwise enough to take a chance without proper paperwork. It appears that even the East India Company paid the pirates their expected fees – although, to preserve the Company's own corporate reputation, it did so in secret.

Local pirates had long raided the Company's opium ships but reports of these ceased almost entirely in 1803, soon after the pirates devised the passport system. Interestingly, although many of the pirate leaders were habitual opium users, they chose to tax the distributors and buy the opium rather than raid the ships that carried the illegal shipments. This incongruous absence of violence suggests that the pirates had reached an agreement with the smugglers – impressive, considering that the East India Company's private army was larger than that of Britain itself.¹⁸ Already pressed by China's high import duties, however, the British were surely frustrated by what was in effect double taxation – and a fluid one at that.

Considering the circumstantial (but, nonetheless, strong) evidence that the East India Company did business with the pirates, it is reasonable to suspect that they may have leveraged this relationship further. It's likely

that they paid extra to encourage the pirates to discourage the competition. The possibility of broader collusion aside, the passport system almost certainly hampered the abilities of smaller shippers to compete against larger outfits since they possessed the economies of scale necessary to pay extra dues, where smaller shippers most likely did not.

Unlike its organisational code, the pirates' taxation process was often impenetrably bureaucratic and its pricing opaque, since the cost was at the discretion of the pirates from whom the shippers purchased their passport and tied to the likeability and local standing of the merchants. Although the confederacy generally expected merchants to renew their passports annually, shippers could also purchase single-use papers for specific voyages, a type of 'pay as you sail' arrangement. The pirates set the price based on both the carrier and the value of the cargo. The wealthy paid huge sums and the pirates relentlessly gouged foreigners, while the locals and friends of the pirate confederacy got a good deal.

The pirate confederacy actively protected those who had purchased passports. Any pirates foolish enough to raid a vessel that had previously purchased protection from the confederacy would, at the very least, find themselves having to pay a hefty compensation to their victims. In one such case, the confederacy forced a squadron that had seized a local fishing boat not only to return the boat but to repay the owner 500 Spanish dollars – a sum that would seem amazing to the local fisherman.¹⁹

Of course, the locals did not always pay up willingly. The Black Fleet killed 10,000 villagers on a single excursion up the Pearl River, both as retribution and intimidation. When a village declined to pay their dues during a different foray, the pirates slaughtered every man present and suspended their severed heads from the banyan trees that lined the riverbank. The bandits locked the village's women and children inside the temple, where first responders found them traumatised but physically unharmed. The violent reputation of the alliance grew accordingly.



The passport system not only raised revenues for the alliance, but also left greater numbers of pirates with more time to target the (few) ships owned by people who had chosen not to pay for protection. By 1808, very few vessels, foreign or domestic, would set sail without first paying their dues to the pirates, and this pressure that grew greater each season.

Indeed, by this point, the pirates were more than just pirates; they had become a risk syndicate. The confederacy was no longer merely opportunistic; their structures and systems guaranteed a steady income, without any shots fired or swords brandished. No longer furtive outlaws, they were instead the dominant military force in the region, one that controlled the Broadway – the stretch of river between Macao and Canton – and by definition, the most important cities in the province.

The confederacy's fortune was made in Kwangtung's borderlands. They existed in liminal spaces, moving fluidly between Vietnam and China, between fisherman and pirate, and between shoreline and sea. The pirates did not seem to be very much at home on land: even their inland excursions were dependent on their passage up snaking waterways.

One of the pirates' most astonishing successes was their ability to disrupt China's political and economic infrastructure while seemingly never conducting any operation out of sight of a body of water. In divvying up of power and territory, Kwangtung's 'water people' were left only the water – yet they managed to leverage this territorial hinterland into a nationally (and if one were to ask the East India Company, globally) disruptive asset.

Under the joint leadership of Ching I and Ching Shih, the pirates had risen to an extraordinary level of success. The confederacy's ascension would continue – but under a single leader.

The widow of Ching I

In 1807, Ching I died. According to one account, high winds whisked him from the deck of his ship into rough waters; another version describes how he took a direct hit from a cannonball during battle.²⁰

Ching Shih's position as her husband's successor was never guaranteed. Contemporary gender roles cast her as Ching I's accessory rather than his business partner, a demotion that overlooked her own tactical genius, ruthlessness, and ambition. Critics tended to view their marriage as the precursor to Shih's ambition, but those critics may have inverted the true causal link. Securing upward mobility through marriage was one of the few avenues open to Chinese women seeking access to power and legitimacy and Shih's marriage to Ching I is likely to have been a deliberate attempt to exercise agency, rather than an extension of her status as a second-class citizen.

Following her husband's death, Ching Shih moved decisively to protect her position as the head of the pirate fleet. She began by consolidating her personal relationships within the confederation, legitimising her leadership by leveraging loyalties still owed to her late husband. The familial bonds within the confederation were strong – the South China Seas pirates had originally operated as small family businesses – and securing the allegiance of the commanders of the other fleets may have been eased by the fact that many of them were her late husband's extended family. Next, through skilful diplomacy – presumably a combination of stick and carrot, both of which she wielded with aplomb – Ching Shih individually guaranteed the loyalty of the other major pirate powerbrokers on the South China Coast.

Once she had placed herself at the head of the confederacy itself, Shih needed to fill Ching I's post at the helm of the Red Flag Squadron. As the most powerful squadron in the fleet, a strong Red Flag leader was a prerequisite for control of the entire confederacy, which meant she needed to make her choice carefully. Any replacement would need to be a capable and committed pirate who was accepted and respected by the rest of the fleet, and who possessed a clear talent for leadership. Equally important, though, was that the candidate would need to be absolutely loyal to Ching Shih. The head of the Red Flag Squadron would be powerful, and whoever she anointed could pose a threat to her in the future.

So began the most remarkable chapter of Shih's leadership, for the pirate who most clearly possessed all of these criteria was her own adopted son. A fisherman's son who had been captured by the confederation as a teenager, Chang Pao had been inducted into the Red Flag Squadron by the late Ching I himself, by means of a sexual relationship (a common means of initiation amongst both western and Chinese pirate crews). Ching I had entrusted Pao with his own ship and crew and his wife and he had raised him as a son. The young man had since become a widely respected pirate.

Since he had joined as an outsider, Pao had no strong connections with any other leaders within the confederation, but he did have a (quite complex) familial loyalty to the Chings. While Incest was as taboo then as it is now, Ching Shih's disregard for taboo by installing Pao at the helm of the Red Flag squadron, became an asset for the pirate leader. If anything, breaking social norms served as evidence of the total determination that Shih would show as leader of the confederation.

A tight ship

With full control established, Ching Shih imposed a new code of conduct – an impressively and anachronistically formal document that would keep her motley crew in line. She built upon the quasi-constitutional agreement that had been signed by the leaders when they first founded the confederation, but with substantial additions.

Previously, discipline had been set at the discretion of individual squadron leaders; Shih centralised authority instead, reducing each captain's autonomy and creating uniform oversight of the pirates' behaviour. The new code redistributed the pre-existing patterns of loyalty within the confederation. The alliance no longer maintained order through complex webs of personal and familial allegiances by meting out punishments and rewards according to specific relationships and circumstances. Instead, the pirates now pledged their loyalty to the codified rule of law, rather than to a specific captain. In practice, this meant that every pirate pledged their loyalty directly to Ching Shih. The pirate queen had become an absolute monarch.

The new directive also clearly spelled out the incentives and disciplinary measures to be followed. Shih's first priority was the chain of command: 'Anyone caught giving commands on his own or disobeying those of a superior was to be immediately decapitated.' Shih also clearly specified systems for seizing and distributing booty, also backed by the threat of capital punishment (a recurring theme). Theft from the common pirate treasury and looting from any village that supplied pirates – understood to be vital allies against the Chinese state – were both punishable by death.



Ching Shih, the Pirate Queen, in Action

Likewise, pirates could not 'retain any goods taken as booty without first producing them for group inspection.' The purser logged the booty while the squadron leader distributed it. Ching Shih's new regulations granted twenty per cent of any haul to the pirates responsible for its capture. The rest went into the common funds, held in the pirates' shoreline storehouses. Confederacy administrators earmarked some goods for re-supply and fleet maintenance, while other shares went to allied pirate vessels that had been unsuccessful in their own missions. Interestingly, the top ranks of the organisation took a relatively small share.²¹

Ching Shih also curtailed the confederation's propensity for sexual violence, making it punishable by death for a pirate to sexually assault a captive. If the encounter was consensual, then Shih expected the pirate and the captive

to either marry or be executed – a shotgun wedding if there ever was one. Pirates could request to take captive women as their wives, but they were expected to remain faithful to them.

In contrast, the pirates did not consider same-sex sexual activity as either infidelity or as a distinct sexual orientation. Instead, the pirates viewed these relationships as something more akin to "team-building exercises," to the great shock of their Western captives. Indeed, Richard Glasspoole, a British hostage whom the pirates kept to instruct their crews in the use of firearms (a new-fangled invention as far as the pirates were concerned), was more appalled by their same-sex 'crimes against nature' than by any of the extortion or violence he witnessed while in their midst.²²

Not surprisingly, the confederation's management structure had more in common with a military unit than a corporate entity. There is an obvious similarity: the pirates' raids involved combat and a significant risk of bodily harm or death, and so their need for motivation and discipline were no different than that of the Chinese imperial navy. As with any military organisation, Shih guaranteed the harmony of the fleet not just by financial remuneration, but also via a deeper motivation – an adherence to the life-or-death mission. Operating within an anti-state, revolutionary context, the pirates' common purpose was vital to overall discipline: they were not simply self-interested bandits, but a force with a shared ideology that guided their purpose, goals and values.²³ Their military rather than corporate structure meant that Ching Shih acted as a commander-in-chief rather than a CEO. She held maximum authority and minimal accountability relative to others in the chain of command – and, crucially, Shih positioned herself as a figurehead not just a manager.

As bureaucracy replaced adhocery within the alliance, and the Pirate Queen challenged the Chinese Emperor, the pirate confederation increasingly came to resemble its greatest opponent – the Chinese Imperial Navy.

Beyond chain of command, Ching Shih's canny manipulation of contemporary religion helped to further reinforce the pirate hierarchy. Chang Pao had proved to be a capable captain, respected by his fellow pirates and utterly loyal to Shih, but his self-anointment as the pirates' religious leader was perhaps his masterstroke. Locals considered it to be very poor form in Kwangtung to set sail without first consulting the gods, who would then speak in a variety of ways through the priests. Pao maintained a strong relationship with the priests, often visiting them, donating to temples, and holding them under his personal protection.

In return, the oracles rarely contradicted him. As Dian Murray writes: 'Miraculously enough, whenever

Chang Pao conferred with his priests beforehand, as he often did, the oracles always seconded his desires.²⁴ Pao's approach achieved his desired effect. Knowing the gods were on their side not only increased the pirates' enthusiasm for entering into battle, but also conferred a status of religious authority upon Pao. One legend tells of a temple often visited by the pirates, that contained the image of a deity that was important to them. One day, the pirates agreed with the priests that the deity might be removed and carried to their ship, so that the luck it conferred could remain close. However, 'despite the most strenuous efforts, no one could budge it from its pedestal – no one, that is, but Chang Pao. As soon as he touched it, the image rose easily from its stand and accompanied the pirates to their junks'.²⁵ There could be no greater ally in their fight against the Chinese empire than the gods themselves.

Pao's reputation was also bolstered by his gung-ho fighting style and undeniable good luck. In one battle with the Imperial Navy, Pao led the pirates from the bow of his ship. When a cannonball was fired directly at him, he fell to the deck. Both the pirates and the Navy assumed he was dead but when the smoke cleared, he was standing in his original position, unfazed. It was only a graze.

Piracy as governance

The professionalisation of piracy along the South China Coast transformed Kwangtung's political and economic landscape. Instead of a supplementary, off-season labour, it had become the bedrock of Kwangtung's economy. Pirates were far less likely to be fishermen making ends meet during a fallow period; instead, by 1807, the confederacy demanded a minimum commitment of eight months to the cause.²⁶ Piracy had become a vocation in its own right.

The development of the profession was driven by and reflected in its changing payment structure. Under the confederacy, every ship paid into a common fund for disbursement, thereby freeing pirates from their usual economic rhythm of feast and famine. To be a pirate suddenly meant you would receive a regular paycheque. This ensured commitment, reduced internal competition in favour of cooperation, and – not insignificantly – led to a transition away from lawless banditry towards a more conventional, professional, military structure. Murray claims that 'it was the pirates' ability to regularise their finances that affected their final transformation into true professionals.'²⁷ The pirates had no need to bury their treasure, unlike their amateurish compatriots in Europe and the Americas.

The pirates' supply lines also expanded – the arrest by the state of 500 local merchants, whom the authorities believed to be supplying the confederacy, failed to make a dent. In one sign of their extraordinary control, the pirates purchased their gunpowder directly from the same factories that ostensibly held exclusive contracts with the Chinese Imperial military. Indeed, the pirates' western advisor, Richard Glasspoole, claimed to have witnessed the pirates turning away further deliveries for want of space to store all the munitions that the confederacy had already stockpiled.²⁸ Those merchants willing to sell to the pirates not only received above-market fees for their goods, but were also safe from any piratical harassment.

Bolstered by the revenue from their coastal passport system, the pirates began sailing further and further up the Pearl River (and the thousands of other small waterways that intersected the shoreline), to extract levies from inland villages. By now consummate professionals, they went so far as to construct a centralised tax collection office in Canton – the kind of officious touch that blurred the line between a criminal protection racket and a regional tax system.

Villages that cooperated could sell their goods to the confederacy at a higher rate than the normal market price, and – of course – the pirates left the villagers alone in exchange for their payments to the confederation. The carrot, however, was dwarfed by the stick. In Sanshan, for example, when local villagers refused to pay the confederation protection money, the pirates slaughtered 2,000 of the inhabitants, and took captive the few remaining survivors.

In September 1809, the still-captive Glasspoole accompanied a pirate fleet of 500 junks on an inland mission to collect protection money. Towns that had already paid their dues saluted the procession with shots – but on anchoring at one village that had not yet paid, the pirates opened negotiations by burning the storehouses along the river's edge. A messenger entered the village to demand an annual payment of 10,000 dollars (likely Spanish, though the particular currency was not specified in reports) and when the local villagers refused, the pirates countered by threatening to execute every inhabitant. They soon settled on a fee of 6,000 dollars a year.

A flotilla of the fleet then continued upriver to collect other pre-arranged payments, all of them in the form of goods. The villagers paid in livestock, sugar, and rice, and also offered gifts as additional tributes. The remainder of the fleet collected an additional 12,000 items of an unspecified currency, identified only as ‘pieces of money’. The money will have been sent to the financial offices along the coast and in Macao, for subsequent redistribution. These raids were both frequent and successful, with sums of between 50 and 100,000 Spanish dollars routinely being carried aboard the confederate flagships.²⁹

The pirates became increasingly entrenched in Kwangtung’s power structures. One regional merchant and magistrate, in theory a pillar of the community responsible for the administration of justice, purchased shipments of black pepper at cut-throat rates from a pirate crew. His own records showed that he exchanged gifts with pirate captains, including gunpowder and elephant tusks. When the merchant heard that one squadron needed more firepower, he offered it a pair of his own cannons. That merchant worked willingly with the confederacy, but another wealthy official with mercantile interests weathered two pirate raids before conceding to join what he could not beat. While still holding office, he supplemented his legal income by selling pirate protection slips to other merchants in Kwangtung.³⁰



Chinese Pirates in Action

As the pirates reached the height of their power, the Imperial government stopped referring to them as bandits and instead labelled them rebels. The distinction is important. Bandits seek to profit within the existing system; rebels seek to supplant the state system itself. Indeed, Chang Pao increasingly spoke of seizing control. The Chinese state’s campaign began to resemble a civil war more than a law enforcement operation. In spite of the crusade, the pirates did not hide: in fact, the coastal garrisons remained among their preferred targets. Military sites were abundant with weaponry, supplies,

and currency and to destroy one provided the pirates a priceless boost in their reputation. It was ‘not uncommon for 300 pirates to come sweeping into a harbour and overpower the military officers stationed there.’³¹ The pirates’ deployed sophisticated tactics and weaponry in their raids – often more sophisticated than those of the garrisons that they struck – and they likely looked rather more like military units than packs of bandits.

In 1808, the pirates killed the commander-in-chief of Chekiang Province as he visited Kwangtung on an Imperial assignment. In the same year, the confederacy sank so many Imperial ships that the shortage of suitable ships forced the government to rent private junks to bolster its fleet. Many of the new reinforcements went the same way: during the next 12 months, the pirates sank 63 of the Navy’s 135 vessels.³²

It was such a one-sided fight that new naval recruits, poorly paid and undertrained, were reluctant to continue to serve the Imperial navy. Many found ways to avoid the fight. The Chinese navy charged some sailors with sinking their own vessels in harbour while others spent the majority of their time waiting for the right winds to set sail, winds that mysteriously never quite materialised. According to a Portuguese source, when the Imperial Navy did finally happen upon the pirates, they gave them provisions. Whether this was a peace offering, a bribe, or evidence that they were also in the pay of the confederacy, is not clear.³³

The Navy’s fears were well-founded. By 1809, the pirate fleet was double the size of the combined forces of England and Spain at the time of the great sea battle of the Armada.³⁴

War, peace, and foreign diplomacy

In 1810, both the state and the confederacy recognised their need for international allies. Up to that point, neither party had been interested in assistance from the Western colonial powers that were plying Chinese waters. For the pirates, the British and the Portuguese were targets and revenue sources, not prospective allies; for the Chinese state, to seek assistance from rival empires was a humiliation – the Chinese government officially designated Westerners as ‘barbarians’ until 1858 (when the British banned the

practice with the Treaty of Tianjin).³⁵ Eventually, however, the Emperor decided it was better to lose some international status than to lose his throne.

China was not the only empire on alert: the British lamented their loss of Chinese revenue. The captain of an East India Company ship issued a report: ‘We are sorry to state that the trade in opium and every other article is likely to suffer more seriously’ as a result of the confederacy’s strength. The British consulate in China expressed similar concern: ‘The markets for all imports are miserable’, he wrote, ‘...owing to the fleet of pirate junks infesting the rivers.’³⁶

Anti-West sentiment was strong in China at the time, justified in part by the trading strategies of the colonial powers. That said, the pirates could not be contained by domestic forces alone. By 1809, their ships could be seen (and cannon shots heard) from Canton on a daily basis. Merchants and politicians boasted of their connections to the confederacy, certain that its star was still rising, and the confederacy appeared to be in a position to take Canton – the most important international port in the country. Chang Pao posted ‘official’ notices along the coastline, signalling his intention to attack and seize Canton. In September, well on their way to the provincial capital, they captured Macao.

The Imperial government resigned itself to seeking foreign aid. It solicited assistance from the Portuguese, British, and American governments in turn, with some success; the Portuguese were especially happy to provide naval support to protect their commercial interests. Like China, they had lost publicly to the pirates – a pirate junk had recently towed a defeated Portuguese brig past Canton, with its flag trailing in its wake – and the Portuguese were eager to even the score.

Meanwhile, the pirate confederacy was also busily engaged in international politicking. Its total control over the waters, and the goods that moved across it, had stifled British trade in tin and opium. Desperate to secure its colonial revenue, the East India Company – which alone wielded more power than most nations – expressed its willingness to negotiate with the confederacy. A senior naval officer and the captain of a Company ship met with the pirates, who agreed to cease interference with British trade, and as an olive branch, released a Dutch hostage into British custody.

Chang Pao went on to guarantee safe passage to those ships holding British cargo. The Company reciprocated with small gifts, a letter from its president, and an agreement that the Company would not interfere with the pirates, as long as the pirates did not interfere with British business interests.³⁷

Pao was more aggressive in his negotiations with the Portuguese. He requested that representatives of the military lend him ‘two or three’ men-of-war (among the most formidable ships afloat), and in return he would grant them ‘three or four’ provinces to rule over once the pirates had toppled the empire and conquered the mainland. The Portuguese declined his offer.

Instead, the Portuguese threw their full weight behind the Chinese state. Several spectacular battles followed, involving tens of thousands of troops aboard hundreds of ships. The pirates and opposing countries were surprisingly even sided. The Sino-Portuguese alliance was unable to destroy the confederacy. Instead, the state began to gravitate towards conciliation.

The Chinese government began by offering amnesties, which – owing to tensions that had arisen within the pirate fleet – were markedly more effective than cannonballs. Joseph Mackay, a sociologist who studies pirate societies as a form of anti-state ‘escape societies’, suggests that the internal tensions were driven by a fundamental contradiction between the original function of the confederacy and the subsequent form that it had assumed. ‘While the consolidation and bureaucratization of the confederation produced increasing economic and geopolitical returns, it may also have threatened the anti-state preferences of its participants’, he argues.³⁸ Following the brutality of a pirate life, it seems likely that bandits were attracted to the idea of a quiet retirement with the loot they had amassed. The alternative would have been a vicious civil war, the best-case ending of which would leave them operating exactly the kind of coercive, far-reaching state that the confederacy had been founded to counter.

In-fighting had also become a problem. Ching Shih’s total control over her motley crews bothered those who had sought a life separate from traditional hierarchies. Retirement had previously been a risky proposition – the commander-in-chief might not react well, and it could leave an ex-pirate vulnerable. However, with amnesties and military appointments on offer, pirate alumni could leave the protection of one militarised confederacy for another.

The confederacy began to surrender, one squadron at a time, beginning in January 1810. Within three weeks, 9,000 pirates had laid down their arms and many of the pirates were offered a military rank in return by the Chinese government.³⁹ Murray believes that the first surrenders were prompted less by fear than by in-fighting: the first squadron leader to submit, Kuo P'o-tai, allegedly resented Chang Pao's rise through the ranks, and his relationship with Ching Shih.⁴⁰

Shortly after that first wave of surrenders, perhaps seeing the writing on the wall, Chang Pao and Ching Shih began to consider their own retirement. The Red Flag Squadron was still the largest and most powerful in the confederacy and the state was willing to make significant concessions, believing that if its leaders surrendered, then the holdouts would follow. The negotiations were fraught; at one point they came entirely to a halt when the pirates roundly rejected the government's demand that the confederacy relinquish their junks and settle on land. Instead, Ching Shih demanded that the couple be allowed to retain 80 ships and 5,000 troops which, she promised, they would use in the fight against future piracy in western Kwangtung.

The Emperor declined so the Red Flag Squadron decided to remind the state of what was at stake with a brief return to piracy. This included levelling of a nearby town, in the course of which the pirates burned 262 buildings and killed an unknown number of people.⁴¹ Having regained the upper hand, Ching Shih returned to the negotiating table and patiently waited the government out.

On 20th April, 1810, the pirates finally surrendered. The Chinese government granted amnesty to 17,318 pirates who simultaneously presented the Emperor with 226 junks, 1,315 cannons, and 2,798 assorted weapons. The Chinese conditions for surrender were generous. Chinese officials awarded the pirates a military rank that matched their rank within the confederacy; permitted Ching Shih and Chang Pao to marry (contrary to the laws regarding remarriage at the time); and awarded the couple an undisclosed but 'large' sum of money, to be added to the spoils they had already amassed. They also permitted the couple to retain between 20 and 30 junks as a fleet for their personal protection fleet.

At the same time, the state executed 126 pirates and displayed 14 of their heads on pikes outside Macao.⁴² These were symbolic executions; none of the deceased pirates was more important, or more guilty, than any of their associates.

The spoils of piracy

Ultimately, the pirates found their way to full legitimacy. However, Ching Shih and Chang Pao continued to invert and manipulate the structures of power through which they ascended.

In Confucian China, the exclusion of women from power was clear and codified. The state did not permit women to participate in the civil service entrance examinations, and officials curtailed their property rights. For the most part, the only access that women had to the upper echelons of power of any kind was through the personal relationships that they cultivated. The relationship most commonly leveraged for this purpose was marriage, a transactional institution that Ching Shih exploited twice, and which helped to set Chang Pao (who had a son with Shih) on a meteoric path through the ranks of the Imperial military.⁴³

Pao reached the rank of second captain and the navy awarded him a peacock feather – a grand honour – before he became a lieutenant-colonel. He used his knowledge of smuggling to break an opium ring which led to the Chinese promoting him to the position of colonel in command of two battalions. Pao eventually died of natural causes. Social mobility was not the norm in Confucian China, and the rise of Chang Pao from an illiterate fisherman to a decorated colonel would have been astonishing even if he had done it through established channels.

As the government hoped, once Shih and Pao gave up their piratical interests, the rest of the confederacy followed suit. Just as the pirates had filled the vacuum made by an absent state in 1800, the state brought the pirates' reign to an end by absorbing them into the official hierarchy.

By replenishing the ranks of Kwangtung's power structures with the former pirates, the state attempted to solve the instability that had provided the growing medium for piracy in the first place. As the power structures in contemporary China were often dynastical, many of the pirates achieved first-generation respectability. Their children would be the children not of pirates but of military officers, and so enjoyed far easier access to the corridors of power in adulthood.

The new pirates of the South China Coast

The confederacy assimilated into a China that was fading from the world stage. It had been humiliation enough for the empire to watch foreign merchant powers negotiate with pirates, but the damage to China's national pride was only just beginning. The supremacy of free trade over Chinese sovereignty and the growing imperial power of Western nations continued throughout the 19th century.⁴⁴



Canton harbour in 1830. Note the flags of France, the United States, Great Britain, and the Netherlands (Prince's Flag) flying above the warehouses.

the Chinese lost to the British navy. Forced to sign the Treaty of Nanking, now referred to as the first of the 'Unequal Treaties', China ceded Hong Kong to the British. Several vital ports, including Canton and Shanghai, were opened to British trade. These areas quickly fell under unofficial British economic and military control, and their balance of trade tipped in favour of the West; it drained China's economy of silver, while opium addiction soared. By the end of the century, China had 90 million opium addicts among a population of 300 million people.⁴⁵

This began what Chinese historians have termed the 'Century of Humiliation' – the 110-year period between 1839 and 1949, during which the Japanese, Russian, and Western European imperial powers forced China into a position of economic subservience. The vacuum of power that the pirates had occupied along the coastline was filled once again – but not by the Chinese state. If the pirates were a test of China's ability to control its coastline, then the westerners were its final exam.

As for Ching Shih, unfortunately, modern historians know very little about her retirement. This may have been deliberate – she was certainly aware that reputation is a double-edged sword. Gossip was a useful prop for a pirate who relied on intimidation. For a semi-retiree with a coastline full of enemies, it could easily have been fatal for others to know of her activities. It seems very likely that the absence of information on her whereabouts was a deliberate choice on her part.

We do know that, twice widowed, Ching Shih returned to Kwangtung. Perhaps tired of her short-lived legitimacy, she established an infamous gambling house and a smuggling ring in Kwangtung. Indeed, she lived what was – by her standards – a quiet life. Ching Shih's only significant return to the fray was as an advisor to the Imperial Navy during the first Opium War.

We do not know any more about the role she might have played in the huge expansion of opium smuggling that plagued China in the following decades. We also do not know when she came to live in Portuguese-run Macao – though the city had a chaotic reputation for internationalism and gambling that might have appealed to her affinity for China's borderlands. Miraculously, given her career trajectory, we do know that Ching Shih died of natural causes in Macao in 1844.

Piracy would never reach the same heights on the South China Coast again – but for China, a new generation of European bandits had already taken charge of the South China Sea.

Endnotes

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