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Violence and Predation on the Sino-Vietnamese Maritime Frontier, 1450–1850

Violence and predation, mainly in the form of piracy, were two of the most persistent and pervasive features of the Sino-Vietnamese maritime frontier between the mid-fifteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries.[1] In the Gulf of Tonkin, which is the focus of this article, piracy was, in fact, an intrinsic feature of this sea frontier and a dynamic and significant force in the region's economic, social, and cultural development. My approach, what scholars call history from the bottom up, places pirates, not the state, at center stage, recognizing their importance and agency as historical actors. My research is based on various types of written history, including Qing archives, the Veritable Records of Vietnam and China, local Chinese gazetteers, and travel accounts; I also bring in my own fieldwork in the gulf region conducted over the past six years. The article is divided into three sections: first, I discuss the geopolitical characteristics of this maritime frontier as a background to our understanding of piracy in the region; second, I consider the socio-cultural aspects of the gulf region, especially the underclass who engaged in clandestine activities as a part of their daily lives; and third, I analyze five specific episodes of piracy in the Gulf of Tonkin.

The Gulf of Tonkin (often referred to here simply as the gulf), which is tucked away in the northwestern corner of the South China Sea, borders on Vietnam in the west and China in the north and east. (See the following map.) It has always been a dynamic and diversified political, social, and economic contact zone. Besides a vibrant maritime trade, the political economy of the region also included the important areas of fishing, pearl collecting, and salt production. The innumerable

[1] For convenience, I use the term Vietnam rather than Annam throughout this article, although the name did not officially change to Vietnam (Yuenan 越南) until 1803.

islands and hazy jurisdictions assured widespread and persistent piracy and smuggling, and a clandestine trade that undoubtedly always surpassed the legitimate trade. In fact, Vu Duong Luan and Nola Cooke have remarked about the gulf of more than a century ago that piracy was "so deeply embedded in the lives of the Chinese and Vietnamese communities there that most local people were involved in piracy or smuggling to some extent."[2] In short, the gulf was a highly integrated region where national boundaries meant very little and where trade, smuggling, and piracy were interconnected and indistinguishable.

2 Vu Duong Luan and Nola Cooke, "Chinese Merchants and Mariners in Nineteenth-Century Tongking," in Nola Cooke, Li Tana, and James Anderson, eds., *The Tongking Gulf through History* (Philadelphia: U. of Pennsylvania P., 2011), p. 152.

A TURBULENT SEA FRONTIER

After Owen Lattimore published his seminal study on inner Asian frontiers in 1940, there was, until recently, a long hiatus in the publication of other studies on China's frontiers. The newer studies have added significantly to our understandings about empire building and ethnic relations on imperial China's frontiers, not only on the northern steppes but also on the southern and southwestern borderlands. In general terms, authors of these studies have conceptualized late-imperial frontiers in terms of both place and process, and as quintessential liminal spaces. Politically they were zones of transition where borders were vague and the reach of the state was weak or nonexistent; economically they were undeveloped areas that presented both challenges and opportunities. Frontiers were fundamentally ambiguous spaces noted for their freedom, lawlessness, and violence. Compared to the hinterland, frontiers were sparsely populated and the people living there were highly mobile and not bound to any particular state. Known for their independence and recalcitrance, peoples of the frontiers were frequently at odds with the authorities. Frontiers were also zones of contact – "middle grounds" – characterized by "fluid cultural and economic exchange" in which acculturation and hybridity were "contingent on local conditions."[3] In those zones peoples of different social, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds freely intermingled. The encounters among natives, frontiersmen, and officials brought them together in mutual efforts to overcome the shared problems of living in a harsh frontier environment, but they also brought them into conflict with one another over use of land and resources. The result of interactions was the creation of a society and culture that were not quite the same as, and in fact often in opposition to, the ones that they left behind. Although all of these previous studies focused on inland frontiers, nevertheless, the maritime frontier discussed in this article also shared these same basic characteristics.[4]

[3] C. Patterson Giersch, *Asian Borderlands: The Transformation of Qing China's Yunnan Frontier* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 2006), p. 4.

[4] Owen Lattimore, *Inner Asian Frontiers of China* (1940; Oxford U.P., 1988). More recently a number of important studies of Chinese land-based frontiers have appeared in English; e.g., see Stevan Harrell, ed., *Cultural Encounters on China's Ethnic Frontiers* (Seattle: U. of Washington P., 1995); Peter Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 2005); Giersch, *Asian Borderlands*; Leo K. Shin, *The Making of the Chinese State: Ethnicity and Expansion on the Ming Borderlands* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2006); Pamela Crossley, Helen Siu, and Donald S. Sutton, eds., *Empire at the Margins: Culture, Ethnicity, and Frontier in Early Modern China* (Berkeley: U. of California P., 2006); Diana Lary, ed., *The Chinese State at the Borders* (Vancouver: U. British Columbia P., 2007); Dai Yingcong, *The Sichuan Frontier and Tibet: Imperial Strategy in the Early Qing* (Se-

More specifically, the maritime frontier examined here refers to the narrow stretch of land along the long coast and the adjacent offshore islands and waters in the Gulf of Tonkin. Before the modern era, the area separating Vietnam and China never had clear-cut boundaries that demarcated one country from the other. This frontier zone (like others) was an overlapping one, in the sense that several different groups of people and polities shared the same space.[5] During the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1912) periods local people referred to the mountainous southwestern corner between China and Vietnam as a no-man's-land; it was a bandit-ridden, malarial-infested barren area that neither Vietnam, Guangdong, or Guangxi wanted ("the triply unwanted place"; *sanbuyaodi* 三不要地) because it was too difficult to rule. According to the author of a late-nineteenth-century edition of the local gazetteer of Fangcheng 方城, the area was unfit to inhabit because the "environment was extremely poisonous" (*shuitu zuidu* 水土最毒).[6] On land, the rugged terrain hindered the specifying of exact boundaries. Both Vietnam and China utilized zones, or belts, of natural obstacles, such as mountains, deep forests, and rivers, as natural boundaries to separate one another. In the past, one or both governments planted rows of thick bamboo hedges in an attempt to mark the border, but the topography and sandy, alkaline soil made all such efforts futile.[7] In this area (as in others) the borderland was simply marked by a series of military posts, which moved forward or backward according to changing circumstances. Along the shore and in the gulf, borders were even more imprecise. The sea, of course, was boundless and could not be marked with borders. In 1750 one official put it simply: "at sea there is

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attle: U. of Washington P., 2009); and Wang Xiuyu, *China's Last Imperial Frontier: Late Qing Expansion in Sichuan's Tibetan Borderlands* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2011). To date, however, there are no major studies on the history of China's maritime frontier, although Li Tana and Nola Cooke, eds., *Water Frontier: Commerce and the Chinese in the Lower Mekong Region,* 1750–1880 (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), and Cook, Li, and Anderson, *Tonking Gulf*, broach the subject for Vietnam.

5 On overlapping frontiers in Southeast Asia, see Thongchai Winichkul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: U. of Hawai'i P., 1994), pp. 97–101.

6 For both phrases, see *Fangcheng xian xiaozhi* 方城縣小志 (Guangxu 光緒 edn.; Guangzhou: Lingnan meishu chubanshe, 2006), p. 209; *Fangcheng xianzhi chugao* 防城縣誌初稿 (Minguo 民國 edn.; Guangzhou: Lingnan meishu chubanshe, 2006), *j.*14, pp. 86b–87a; and *Zhong Yue bianjie lishi ziliao xuanbian* 中越邊界歷史資料選編 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe 1993), p. 43.

7 Yunnan sheng lishi yanjiu suo 雲南省歷史研究所, ed., *Qingshilu Yuenan, Miandian, Taiguo, Laowo shiliao zhaichao* 清實錄越南緬甸泰國老撾史料摘抄 (Kunming: Yunnan renmin chubanshe, 1995; hereafter, *QYMTL*), p. 61; also see *Gongzhongdang Qianlong chao zouzhe* 宮中檔乾隆朝奏摺 (Taibei: Gugong bowuyuan chubanshe, 1985), vol. 20, pp. 766–68; and *Fangcheng xianzhi chugao*, *j.*14, pp. 88a, 89a.

no way to fix boundaries."[8] What is more, the countless bays, islands, sandy shoals, and mangrove swamps were bureaucratic nightmares that were impossible to administer. Not until 1887, after the Sino-French War, were the borders on land firmly set and a series of stone markers put in place.[9] Figure 1, which is a section of a late-eighteenth-century Chinese coastal defense map, depicts the open, rugged geography of the Sino-Vietnamese sea frontier. The map shows that most of the coastal area belonged to Vietnam (shaded areas), while the inland areas belonged to China (unshaded); the exception, of course, was the area around Dongxing on the coast, which belonged to China. The map is important because it clearly shows the imprecise – and therefore – contested space separating the two countries during the years discussed in this article.

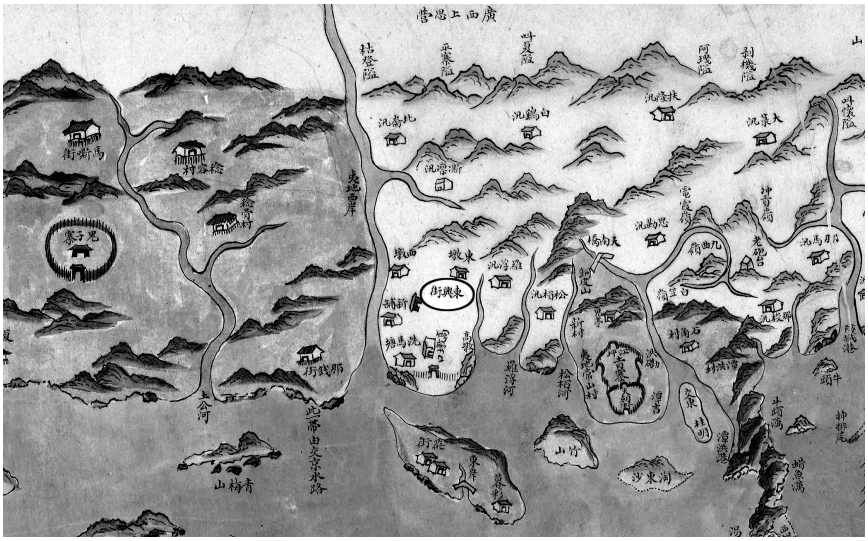

Figure 1. Late-18th c. Coastal Defense Map of Sino-Vietnamese Maritime Frontier

Detail of a large, rice-paper map, a section of which came into the author's personal collection. The Dongxing area, in the center of this image, has been marked as a light cartouche. The part shown here is a very small section of the total map, which was originally perhaps about 20 inches by 20 feet. Remaining parts of the whole are probably in private collections.

[8] *QYMTL*, p. 52.

[9] *Fangcheng xianzhi* 防城縣誌 (Nanning: Guangxi minzu chubanshe, 1993), pp. 567–68.

Neither Chinese nor Vietnamese states had firm control over this maritime frontier. Outside of the walled administrative cities, such as Leizhou 雷州, Hepu 合浦, Qinzhou 欽州, Thang Long 升龍, and a few others, the rule of law was feeble and ineffective. For Ming and Qing officials the Gulf of Tonkin was simply a "turbulent sea frontier."[10] Outlaw groups flourished: bandits in the mountains and pirates and smugglers on the coast and offshore islands. During the Ming and Qing periods (as earlier), the gulf was the weakest link in China's coastal defense system. At the fringe of the imperial administration, the area was poorly staffed with civilian and military officials, and its land and water forces were always undermanned and inadequately equipped.[11] Although the center of Vietnam's government was located in the north, in the area referred to as Tonkin in Western literature, after the tenth century northern rulers concentrated on developing overland trade with the neighboring Cham, Lao, and Yunnan regions. By the sixteenth century the commercial center of gravity shifted southward to Hoi An 會安, and large sections of the northern coast became increasingly under-governed. Not only were the Chinese and Vietnamese governments unable to curb illegal activities, but often, too, regional authorities and local strongmen actually cooperated with pirates and smugglers.[12]

The Sino-Vietnamese maritime frontier was also a contested zone. The area had a long history of invasions, conquests, and occupations by one side or the other. Significantly, as Li Tana has recently explained, most of the fighting occurred in coastal, not inland mountain, areas, and conflicts were often fought for control of the littoral and maritime trade.[13] Even after Vietnam gained independence from China in the

[10] See, e.g., Pan Dingqui 潘鼎珪, *Annan jiyou* 安南紀遊 (1689; rpt. in *Annan zhuan* [*ji qita erzhong*] 安南傳(及其他二種) [Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985]), p. 4.

[11] See, e.g., Li Qingxin 李慶新, *Binhai zhi di: Nanhai maoyi yu Zhongwai guangxi shi yanjiu* 瀕海之地, 南海貿易與中外關係史研究 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2010), pp. 268–69.

[12] For an example of the collaboration of a local Vietnamese official with Chinese pirates in 1666, see *Qing shilu Guangdong shiliao* 清實錄廣東史料 (Guangzhou: Guangdong sheng ditu chubanshe, 1995), vol. 1, pp. 96–97; and for the collaboration between the Tay Son regime and Chinese pirates from 1780 to 1802, see Robert Antony, "Maritime Violence and State Formation in Vietnam: Piracy and the Tay Son Rebellion, 1771–1802," in Stefan Eklöf Amirell and Leos Müller, eds., *Persistent Piracy: Maritime Violence and State Formation in Global Historical Perspective* (New York: Palgrave, 2014), pp. 113–30; for general discussion of northern Vietnam during the mid-15th to mid-17th cc., see John Whitmore, "Van Don, the 'Mac Gap,' and the End of the Jiaozhi Ocean System: Trade and State in Dai Viet, Circa 1450–1550," and Iioka Naoka, "The Trading Environment and the Failure of Tongking's Mid-Seventeenth-Century Commercial Resurgence," both in Cooke, Li, and Anderson, *Tongking Gulf*, pp. 101–16, 117–32.

[13] Li Tana, "Introduction. The Tongking Gulf through History: A Geopolitical Overview," in Cooke, Li, and Anderson, *Tongking Gulf*, pp. 12–13.

tenth century, its northern regions remained as the scene of numerous bitter conflicts, even up to recent times. Between 1406 and 1427, Ming armies invaded and then occupied northern Vietnam. In 1598, followers of the Mac 莫 insurgents in northern Vietnam raised an army of several thousand men and took to the sea to plunder Fangcheng and several coastal villages in the gulf. There were Chinese reports of several Vietnamese raids along the borderlands of Yunnan, Guangxi, and Guangdong in 1607. In 1662, once again, Vietnamese raided the coastal border area, destroyed the fort at Fangcheng, and forced the Qing government to relocate the fort and market farther northeast (today's location). In 1684 the Qing reoccupied and refortified some of the areas between Qinzhou and Dongxing 東興, but other coastal areas around Jiangping 江坪 and Bailongwei 白龍尾 remained under Vietnamese jurisdiction for another two centuries.[14] In 1760 Chinese officials in Dongxing reported that several hundred Vietnamese bandits looted and burned down shops and homes in the border market at Mong Cai 芒街.[15] In 1788 Chinese armies again invaded northern Vietnam to help suppress the Tay Son 西山 Rebellion, but the attempt failed miserably.[16] Mixed bands of mountain peoples, which included local aborigine tribesmen and Chinese frontiersmen operating from bases in the Great Shiwan Mountains 十萬大山 (the no-man's-land, mentioned above), attacked military posts and pillaged villages on both sides of the border in 1848.[17] Skirmishes and raids in the border zone, in fact, have continued into our day.[18] Conflicts and shifting borders have always characterized this frontier zone.

Throughout history, writers of all sorts viewed the southern maritime frontier as a perilous place infested with dangerous wild creatures, deadly diseases, and hostile natives. For the early-Qing scholar Li Guangpo 李光坡, the sea was an unpredictable, unsafe, and unnatural environment. It was best to be avoided.[19] Landsmen typically portrayed the southern sea peoples as a subhuman race. For instance, Wang Qi 王圻, in his well-known *Collected Illustrations of Heaven, Earth,*

[14] *Fangcheng xianzhi*, pp. 2–3, 433, 568.

[15] *QYMTL*, p. 64.

[16] On the Tay Son Rebellion and the Qing military campaigns, see George Dutton, *The Tay Son Uprising: Society and Rebellion in Eighteenth-Century Vietnam* (Honolulu: U. of Hawai'i P., 2006).

[17] *Fangcheng xianzhi chugao*, *j.*14, p. 102a.

[18] During the Sino-Vietnamese War in 1979, for instance, Mong Cai was destroyed in the fighting and remained virtually uninhabited until trade reopened in the late 1980s.

[19] He Changling 賀長齡, comp., *Huangchao jingshi wenbian* 皇朝經世文編 (1827 edn.; Taibei: Guofeng chubanshe, 1963), *j.* 83, pp. 1a–b.

and People (*San cai tu hui* 三才圖會), published in 1609, depicted one group of people who lived somewhere "southeast of the sea" as the Feathered People (Yumin 羽民) and another group, called the Di 氐, as having the bodies of fish and heads of humans.[20] There was also a persistent bias, continuing in many ways even today, against Dan 蛋 (Tanka) boat people, who were seen as uncouth and dirty; some writers even claimed that Dan fishermen and pearl divers had webbed feet and could breathe underwater like fish. It was taken for granted that Dan men were pirates and their women whores. Respectable families on land did not allow their sons or daughters to marry with boat people. Even after the Dan were emancipated by the Yongzheng emperor in 1729, they still were discouraged from residing on land, holding government office, or wearing clothing made of silk. Such attitudes and stereotypes perpetuated mutual mistrust and rifts between the two worlds of land and sea.[21]

As for the indigenous people living in the gulf area, borders simply did not exist.[22] This was especially true of those peoples who lived and worked on the seas and who traveled by boat. For the fishermen, sailors, pirates, and smugglers, who lived most of their lives on the water, borders and boundaries simply made no sense. They were not tied to any particular territory or state, and borders, like laws and taxes, were unnatural to their ways of life. In this sparsely populated region one's very existence seemed fleeting and makeshift. Permeability was a defining characteristic of this sea frontier. In fact, it was precisely the ambiguity and fluidity of this whole region, as Li Tana has explained, that "made life uncertain and potentially violent."[23]

Not only feeble governments, a negligent military presence, and porous borders, but also the geography of the gulf region proved conducive to piracy. The long jagged coast, lined with innumerable bays, sandy shoals, mangrove swamps, lagoons, and islands, provided countless hideaways and safe havens. In selecting their lairs pirates preferred

[20] Shin, *Making of the Chinese State*, p. 169; and for the ancient period, see Nicola Di Cosmo, "Han Frontiers: Toward an Integrated View," *JAOS*, 129.2 (2009), p. 209.

[21] See Robert Antony, *Like Froth Floating on the Sea: The World of Pirates and Seafarers in Late Imperial South China* (Berkeley: U. of California, Institute of East Asian Studies, China Research Monograph 56, 2003), p. 139.

[22] In interviews in the summer 2011 along the Beilun River on the Sino-Vietnamese border in Guangxi, local Chinese informants told me that even in the 1950s–1960s they made no distinction between areas that were China and those that were Vietnam. For them there were no borders hindering the free flow of people and goods.

[23] Li Tana, "The Water Frontier: An Introduction," in Cooke and Li, eds., *Water Frontier*, p. 8.

isolated coves and islands, located along sailing routes yet also removed from the centers of government. They also wanted bases with protected harbors where they could careen and repair their ships without notice. A good supply of firewood and fresh water was also important, as was close proximity to markets where they could sell their prizes and buy provisions. Lairs became outlaw communities where pirates gathered to refit their ships, relax, and do a bit of trading outside the gaze of the state. Pirates purposely established bases near major and minor ports so as to have access to markets where they could sell their booty and purchase supplies. In the gulf, trading and raiding overlapped and complemented one another. In fact, raiding frequently functioned like trade in that it involved an exchange of goods and was a means for acquiring wealth.

Weizhou 澳洲 Island, Longmen 龍門 Island, and Jiangping served as three of the most important pirate havens throughout this period in the Gulf of Tonkin. All three base areas were situated near the major and minor ports of Hepu, Qinzhou, Dongxing, and Pho Hien 鋪憲 (see the modern map). Weizhou Island, the largest island in the gulf after Hainan, is situated west of the Leizhou peninsula and south of Hepu (roughly 35 nautical miles south of present-day Beihai City 北海市). Fishing, pearl cultivation, and subsistence agriculture were the main economic activities of the islanders. South Bay (Nanwan 南灣), formed out of an extinct volcanic crater, was, and still is, the main harbor. Since at least the Yuan dynasty, seafarers have frequented the bay to replenish their supplies of fresh water and food and to careen and refit their vessels. At the end of the sixteenth century, Guo Fei 郭棐 explained that because the waters around Weizhou Island provided a safe harbor to as many as fifty vessels during the southerly monsoons, it was the frequent resort of fishermen, smugglers, and pirates. The island had a regular seasonal transient population, as well as several villages that specialized in illegal pearl collecting.[24] The famous early-nineteenth-century pirate Wushi Er 烏石二 made Weizhou one of his main bases (and in fact, his father was buried on the island). About five kilometers south of Weizhou is the tiny island of Xieyang 斜陽, also a known pirate retreat. Because of such reputations, successive Chinese governments repeatedly tried to make both islands off-limits to settlers. For example, in the 1570s the Ming government ordered islanders to relocate back to the mainland; many islanders left Weizhou for the Leizhou peninsula.

[24] Chen Xujing 陳序經, *Danmin de yanjiu* 蛋民的研究 (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1946), p. 111.

Again, in 1811, Governor-General Bailing 百齡 issued a proclamation, etched in a stone inscription depicted in figure 2, forcing islanders to evacuate the two islands in perpetuity. Despite prohibitions, however, both islands remained pirate and smuggler bases into the mid-twentieth century.[25]

Figure 2. Proclamation of 1811 Requiring Residents of Weizhou to Vacate the Island

Photograph in the author's collection. This is a stone inscription encountered during author's fieldwork in January, 2010, on Weizhou Island. The stele is located in front of the Sanpo 三婆 Temple, which is dedicated to a female deity closely associated with fishers and seafarers. It is not clear where the stele was originally set up, but it is very likely that it was at this temple, since temples were important gathering places where information was shared among a diverse group of people, thus officials and locals often placed announcements there. Villagers on the island stated that during the Cultural Revolution this stele ended up in the nearby fish market and was used as a cutting board for chopping fish. Only in recent years was it recovered and restored, and placed outside in public in front of the temple.

Longmen Island is located at the mouth of the Qinjiang 欽江 and Yuhongjiang 漁洪江 rivers. By the seventeenth century, because of silting in the two rivers, Longmen became the main harbor for the walled city of Qinzhou (see map). The island was on the main coasting route between Vietnam and south China. Because Longmen and several neighboring islands were capable of accommodating hundreds of ships, they became the headquarters for various smuggling and pirate organizations. According to the early-Qing scholar Pan Dinggui 潘鼎珪, in his *Travel Record of Annam* (*Annan jiyou* 安南紀遊), first published in 1689, Longmen was the outer door to Qinzhou, strategically located between Guang-

[25] Fieldwork notes from Leizhou, January 2009, from a stone inscription dated 1587 in the Xiajiang Tianhou Temple 夏江天後宮; and fieldwork notes from Weizhou Island, Janu-

dong and Vietnam. He described the area, with its more than seventy islands and vast mangrove swamps, as a sea frontier that for centuries had served as a major refuge for pirates. One mangrove swamp, called the Seventy-two Passages (*qishier jing* 七十二徑) because of its intricate waterways and dense vegetation, had a deserved reputation as a resort for pirates and smugglers since at least the thirteenth century. From Longmen, ships could easily and clandestinely sail eastward towards Hepu and Leizhou or westward towards Tonkin, and in either direction the journey took about one day. In the late-seventeenth century Longmen became an important center for anti-Qing resistance.[26]

Like Longmen, Jiangping (or Giang Binh in Vietnamese) was surrounded by numerous islands and sandy shoals, but was located just within Vietnam (see map, above). As mentioned above, the area was only incorporated into China in 1887; today it is part of Guangxi province. Snuggled between two shallow rivers and backed by craggy mountains and dense forests, it was nearly impossible to reach except by boat. Jiangping was a typical border town and black market, famous for its China Bazaar (Huajie 華街), where almost anything imaginable could be bought or bartered. The market town, known in the eighteenth century as Little Foshan 小佛山 (after the major entrepôt of Foshan near Canton) because of its bustling trade, was a gathering place for laborers, sailors, fishermen, and traders from Guangdong, Fujian, Hunan, and Sichuan, as well as from Vietnam and other areas of Southeast Asia.[27] For Ming and Qing officials it had always been a trouble spot, where people of varied ethnicities gathered and mixed, including Han Chinese, Kinh (Jing 京), Dan, Zhuang 獞, and Yao 猺 minorities. Vietnamese (Kinh) fishermen began settling on the sandy shoals and the three adjoining islands of Wanwei 澫尾, Shanxin 山心, and Wutou 巫頭 in the early-sixteenth century. In the Ming and Qing periods well-known pirate lairs were located on several nearby islands, which had such names as Green Plum Island (Qingmeishan 青梅山), Snake Island (Sheshan 蛇山), Big Rat Island (Dalaoshushan 大老鼠山), Small Rat Is-

ary 2010; also see Chen Xianbo 陳賢波, "Ming-Qing huanan haidao de jingying yu kaifa: yi Beibuwan Weizhou dao wei li" 明清華南海島的經營與開發：以北部灣瀾洲島爲例, *Mingdai yanjiu* 明代研究 15 (2010), pp. 85–117.

26 See *Qinzhou zhi* 欽州志 (Jiajing 嘉靖 edn.; Qinzhou: Qinzhoushi difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui bangongshi chongyin, 2009), pp. 36–37, 62; Guo Fei 郭棐, *Yue daji* 粵大記 (1598 edn.; Guangzhou: Zhongshan daxue chubanshe, 1998), Pan, *Annan jiyou*, pp. 3–4; and fieldwork notes from coastal Guangxi, January 2010 and July 2011. Also see Li, *Binhai zhidi*, pp. 271–72; and Niu Junkai and Li Qingxin, "Chinese 'Political Pirates' in the Seventeenth-Century Gulf of Tongking," in Cooke, Li, and Anderson, *Tongking Gulf*, pp. 216–17.

27 *Fangcheng xianzhi chugao*, *j*.1, pp. 20a–b.

land (Xiaolaoshushan 小老鼠山), and Dog Head Island (Goutoushan 狗頭山). Today, as in the past, fishing and smuggling are major sectors of the local economy. Jiangping and the island pirate bases were along the coasting route between Qinzhou and Dongxing.[28]

These bases pirates also depended on networks of friendly ports where they could sell their goods, purchase provisions, recruit followers, and carouse. Wherever there were friendly ports there could be found shops, inns, brothels, and gambling dens that catered to the needs and whims of spendthrift pirates.[29] As long as they proved profitable, few places turned away pirates and smugglers. Rarely did merchants ask questions about the origins of the merchandise they bought, and even local officials paid little attention to illegal enterprises as long as they remained discrete and orderly. The pirate trade was mutually beneficial, and in fact without such local support piracy could not exist.

In the Ming and Qing periods, the Gulf of Tonkin ports were integrated among themselves, as well as with ports throughout the South China Sea. The gulf was dotted with numerous large and small ports that readily engaged in both legal and illegal trading. Indeed, there was little to distinguish licit from illicit commerce, or what one might call the shadow economy. Among the larger ports were Hoi An, Ha Tien 河仙, and Sai Gon 西貢 on the Vietnamese coast. For instance, Ha Tien, located on the Cambodian and Vietnamese border, developed in the late-seventeenth century as a "refreshment port," much like Jamaica's Port Royal, where all sorts of seafarers, traders, and adventurers gathered to barter, carouse, drink, and gamble. Among the larger friendly ports on the Chinese side were Leizhou, Zhiliao 芷了, Canton, Macao, Zhanglin 樟林, Amoy, and many others. Macao, for one, had a reputation as a seedy, disreputable, and dangerous city, known by many travelers as the "wickedest city in the Far East." Although outside the Gulf of Tonkin, all of these ports were within the gulf's trading network.[30]

28 *QYMTL*, pp. 300–4; Pan, *Annan jiyou*, p. 3. Also see Robert Antony, "Giang Binh: Pirate Haven and Black Market on the Sino-Vietnamese Frontier, 1780–1802," in John Kleinen and Manon Osseweijer, eds., *Pirates, Ports, and Coasts in Asia: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2010), pp. 31–50; and Suzuki Chūsei 鈴木中正, "Re Chō koki no Shin to no kankei" 黎朝後期の清との関係, in Yamamoto Tatsurō 山本達郎, ed., *Betonamu Chūgoku kankeishi: Kyoku-shi no taitō kara Shin-Futsu sensō made* ベトナム中國関係史, 曲氏の抬頭から清仏戦争まで (Tokyo: Yamakawa shuppansha, 1975), pp. 480–81; and fieldwork notes from Jiangping, July 2011.

29 *Ming-Qing shiliao wubian*, 明清史料戊編 (Taibei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo, 1953), pp. 305, 492–93.

30 For a discussion of clandestine trade in the Gulf of Tonkin in the 15th–19th cc., see Robert Antony, "War, Trade, and Piracy in the Early Modern Tongking Gulf," in Angela Schottenhammer, ed., *Tribute, Trade, and Smuggling: Commercial, Scientific and Human Interaction in the Middle Period and Early Modern World* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, forthcoming).

There were also countless smaller ports and harbors, mostly nameless, that had cordial relations with pirates and smugglers. In Vietnam's Quang Yen 廣安 province, in the area on the coast that borders with China, there were many unnamed islands where Vietnamese and Chinese set up makeshift markets to trade with the pirates and smugglers who frequented the area.[31] Some places, however, were well known. The *Great Events of Guangdong* (*Yue daji* 粵大記) mentioned several minor ports that accommodated clandestine trade, such as Baili 白黎港, Baisha 白沙港, and Santiao 三條港. Among the known marts in the seventeenth century were those clustered around the mouth of the Beilun 北崙 (or Gusen 古森) River, such as Dongxing, Zhushan 竹山, and Mong Cai.[32] Countless fishing villages also actively participated in the shadow economy, including Tanji 潭吉 near Jiangping and Wushi 烏石 on the Leizhou peninsula.[33]

THE UNDERSIDE OF FRONTIER SOCIETY

The Gulf of Tonkin was a precarious place where fishermen and traders indiscriminately mingled and colluded with refugees, fugitives, dissidents, smugglers, bandits, pirates, and indigenous peoples.[34] Up until modern times the area was viewed as a wild frontier inhabited by unruly "raw" (*sheng* 生) natives on both land and sea. It was an open society populated by a large mix of peoples and ethnicities: Han Chinese, Dan boat people, Kinh (Jing) fishers, and Yao, Zhuang, and Li 黎 mountain dwellers. In fact, ethnic identities were complex, fluid, and even temporary (much like the frontier itself); and therefore it was difficult to give exact ethnic labels to the various groups living in the area.[35] After the fifteenth century, Portuguese, Dutch, English, French, and Japanese also arrived in the region. Precisely because of the hybrid nature of the population the maritime frontier was difficult to govern and the people impossible to restrain. Anyone from any of these groups was a potential pirate and a likely smuggler.[36]

[31] Xu Wentang 許文堂 and Xie Jiyi 謝奇懿, eds., *Da Nan shilu Qing-Yue guanxi shiliao huibian* 大南實錄清越關係史料彙編 (Taipei: Academia Sinica, 2000), pp. 191–93.

[32] *Fangcheng xianzhi*, pp. 434, 292; Niu and Li, "Chinese Political Pirates," p. 216; information in *Yue daji* cited in Li, *Binhai zhidi*, pp. 270–71.

[33] Gongzhongdang 宮中檔 (4602) 嘉慶 4年5月29日; and fieldwork notes, Leizhou and Guangxi coast, 2010–2011.

[34] Pan, *Annan jiyou*, p. 4.

[35] Li, "Water Frontier," p. 7.

[36] Xu and Xie, *Da Nan shilu*, p. 172.

For both Vietnamese and Chinese officials one of the most perplexing problems was how to distinguish between criminals and honest folks, and more specifically, to distinguish between fishermen and pirates.[37] In fact, they were often one and the same. Most pirates were amateurs who took to crime as an occasional occupation. While piracy was an important, sometimes essential, component of their livelihood, nonetheless they also engaged in legitimate occupations as fishermen, sailors, farmers, laborers, traders, and the like. Such men joined pirate gangs during times when they were also lawfully employed to supplement low but honest wages, or they went on temporary sprees of criminality during intervals between periods of legitimate work. Attuned to a time-honored life cycle, they "assumed several roles, opportunistically shifting between fishing, smuggling, piracy, and trading as circumstances allowed."[38]

Official documents from both China and Vietnam often used the unflattering term drifters (in Chinese, *liumin* 流民) to describe the underworld denizens of this sea frontier. They included homeless wanderers, runaways, displaced persons, squatters, vagabonds, fugitives, and refugees. According to Wang Gungwu, the term *liumin* "suggests people whose anti-social behaviour and irresponsible acts had led to their homeless state and to their status as outcasts, vagrants, and even outlaws." The term also referred to people who left China without permission.[39] In fact, in Ming and Qing law codes border-crossing without permission was a serious crime.[40] One such rogue who crossed over into Vietnam was a monk named Jue Ling 覺靈, who hailed from Guangdong. In his youth, he was a hoodlum and assassin who first sought the safety of the monastery by becoming a monk and then later fled to Vietnam to avoid arrest. Another Chinese fugitive named He Xiwen 何喜文 had been a Triad boss, but because of involvement in sectarian disturbances in Sichuan province, he fled to Vietnam in 1778, where he joined the fight against the Tay Son rebels.[41] These sorts of people were the most mobile and lawless segment of the gulf region's population.

37 See, e.g., *QYMTL*, pp. 34–35.

38 Vu and Cooke, "Chinese Merchants and Mariners," p. 158.

39 Wang Gungwu, "Sojourning: The Chinese Experience in Southeast Asia," in Anthony Reid, ed., *Sojourners and Settlers: Histories of Southeast Asia and the Chinese* (St. Leonards, Australia: Allen and Unwin, 1996), p. 4.

40 E.g., see *Da Ming lü* 大明律 (Beijing: Falü chubanshe, 1999), p. 49; and *Fangcheng xianzhi chugao*, *j.*14, p. 87a.

41 Xu and Xie, *Da Nan shilu*, pp. 29–31.

Mobility and poverty, in fact, epitomized the lives of the underclass in the maritime frontier. They were restless individuals who lived on the fringes of respectable society and who made barely enough money to make ends meet. They were classic examples of "marginal men" – impoverished, single men who moved about from place to place earning only a scant living. Take the case of Wang Yade 王亞得, who was arrested for piracy in the gulf in 1772. He came from Hepu and was a twenty-year-old roving sailor and occasional pirate at the time of his arrest. As a hired sailor he earned 150 copper cash (*wen* 文) per month, which was about the average wage for hired sailors at that time. Because a male Chinese normally ate one catty (1.3 pounds) of rice each day and a catty of rice cost about five copper cash, therefore, wages provided a sailor hardly enough money to buy daily rations of rice and little else. In short, wages provided only a bare subsistence.[42] In the fall of 1772 Wang Yade joined a gang of seven pirates who robbed a small passage-boat off the coast of Qinzhou, near the Vietnamese frontier. The loot consisted of the following items: 63 strings of cash, 15 pecks of rice, 3,000 dried betel nuts, 2 catties of fresh betel nuts, 7 catties of tobacco, 2 boxes of gilded paper, 1 iron wok, 1 basket, 2 hand towels, 3 paper fans, 20 writing brushes, 1 sickle, and a bundle containing clothing, a purse, and an umbrella. After the heist the pirates retreated to a secluded spot in Vietnam where they split up the loot. Wang's share was 2,000 cash. Soon afterwards, however, he was apprehended. Thus, the 2,000 cash Wang received as his share of the booty was an enormous sum of money, and apparently worth the risk of committing piracy.[43]

Most of the people living and moving about in this sea frontier were fishermen, and fishermen constituted the majority of individuals involved in piracy (both as perpetrators and victims). The table here provides a breakdown of the occupational backgrounds of 207 convicted pirates who operated on the Sino-Vietnamese maritime frontier between 1773 and 1802. In the historical records most fishermen, both Chinese and Vietnamese, were simply lumped together as Danjia 蛋家 (Tanka). Another group of fisherfolk that originally migrated from northern Vietnam to the islands off Giang Binh (Jiangping) in the Ming period is today labeled as the Jing (Kinh) ethnic group in China by

[42] On the cost of living and sailors' wages at that time, see Antony, *Like Froth Floating on the Sea*, pp. 71–73, 76–81.

[43] Xingke tiben 刑科題本 (乾隆 48 年 10月 11日) Beijing, First Historical Archives; this document is translated in Robert Antony, *Pirates in the Age of Sail* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), pp. 114–18.

the current government, while another group on the Vietnam side is labeled as the Ngai; the latter group actually comprised several ethnic Chinese groups who arrived in northern Vietnam from southern China in several waves beginning in the tenth century.[44] The above three groups were the quintessential aquatic people, living and working their entire lives (or nearly so) on water. In the gulf, besides fishing, pearl gathering was another of their major occupations. Characteristic of most fisherfolk, they led highly mobile lifestyles that was punctuated with extreme hardship and poverty. It was not uncommon for them to alternate between legitimate pursuits and criminal activities in order to survive in their harsh environment.[45]

For fishermen, piracy and smuggling were simply alternative jobs, often necessary for survival, and not necessarily something that they considered as crimes. The case of a Chinese fisherman named Li Guanliu 李關六 was typical. Li regularly fished in Vietnamese waters with other fishers who put up temporary sheds on isolated shores and islands where they dried and salted their catch and did a bit of trading with passing fishermen, merchants, smugglers, and pirates. When Li was arrested in 1796, he confessed that in the previous year in the fourth lunar month he and his fishing mates (*gupeng* 罟朋) (that is, a small fishing fleet of five to ten boats) plundered several ships in the Gulf of Tonkin and afterwards took the loot to Vietnam to sell. Otherwise he and his companions continued as before, as fisherfolk.[46]

As indicated in the table, below, other members of the sea frontier's underclass included hired sailors on fishing and cargo junks, day laborers, peddlers, porters, and petty or itinerant merchants. One interesting, and revealing, example of the latter occupational group was Luo Yasan 羅亞三, who was a merchant, smuggler, and pirate. Luo, who was thirty-three years old at the time of his arrest, was a Chinese from Qinzhou; his family had migrated to Vietnam three generations earlier. In the summer of 1796, he received a license from a Tay Son official to transport rice to sell in Giang Binh and then buy medicine, ceramics, and cloth to bring back to the rebel camp. On his way home a month later, however, pirates robbed him. Undaunted, he returned to Giang Binh where he was able to procure a boat, weapons, and eigh-

[44] On the Ngai, see Christopher Hutton, "Cross-Border Categories: Ethnic Chinese and the Sino-Vietnamese Border at Mong Cai," in Grant Evans, Christopher Hutton, and Kuah Khun Eng, eds., *Where China Meets Southeast Asia: Social and Cultural Change in the Border Region* (Singapore: ISAS, 2000), p. 263.

[45] On the role of fishermen and other groups in piracy on the South China coast in the late-18th c., see Antony, *Like Froth Floating on the Sea*, pp. 82–104.

[46] *QYMTL*, p. 270.

teen men from an acquaintance, a pirate named Liang Er 梁二; and so Luo set out once again – this time as a pirate – to recover his losses. Luo and his mixed Sino-Vietnamese gang plundered two junks off the coast of Qinzhou before being wrecked in a storm off Hainan Island.[47] Luo's case illustrates just how easy it was for someone to move back and forth between criminal and legitimate pursuits in the gulf's murky socio-cultural environment.

Table. Occupational Backgrounds of Convicted Pirates on the Sino-Vietnamese Maritime Frontier, 1773–1802

OCCUPATIONS	NUMBERS
Fishermen	102
Hired Sailors	34
Hired Laborers	18
Peddlers	14
Merchants	12
Porters	10
Boatmen	8
Monks	2
Soldiers	1
Miscellaneous	6
Total	207

The denizens of this sea frontier also created their own rough-and-tumble underworld culture. It was a collective culture of their own making, quite different from that of people living in inland agricultural villages and walled cities in the hinterland. Forged out of hardship, prejudice, and poverty, they created a culture of survival based on violence, crime, and vice, and characterized by excessive profanity, intoxication, gambling, brawling, and sexual promiscuity. It is likely that they spoke a common language of the sea, a sort of creole or pidgin, which was a mixture of southern Chinese, Vietnamese, and local dialects. Most of the pirates hailed from Guangdong and would have spoken Cantonese, while many of their Vietnamese counterparts, especially those expatriate Minh huong 明香 (Ming loyalists), also would have spoken Cantonese.[48] In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,

[47] Gongzhongdang 宮中檔 (file 1643, 嘉慶 1年 12月 7日) and (file 2010, 嘉慶 2年 2月 14日), National Palace Museum, Taibei, Taiwan.

[48] For an insightful discussion on creole languages and culture in Southeast Asia, see G.

in defiance of dominant culture and the Qing imperium, and perhaps as a political statement as well, many Chinese who lived or sojourned in the gulf region cut off their queues and let their hair hang loose in the fashion of outlaws and rebels.[49] The Qing government was sensitive to the issue of queues because of its policy of using hairstyle as a sign of loyalty. Pirates were social and cultural transgressors, who stood in marked defiance of orthodox values and standards of behavior.[50]

The Sino-Vietnamese maritime frontier was also a male-dominated, bachelor culture where the place of women was subordinate, submissive, and demeaning. Pirates acted without restraint. The only sexual conventions that they followed were their own. In general, pirates treated women and boys just like any other type of booty that could be bought and sold in markets like Giang Binh. Pirate chiefs frequently kept several wives and boys, as many as their fancy dictated. Regular gang members also took and discarded women and boys like empty bottles of liquor. Frequently female captives were the objects of wonton brutality, being battered and raped as their captors saw fit.[51] For large numbers of pirates, the acquisition of "wives" was done simply by forceful taking. In the language of official reports pirates indiscriminately abducted Vietnamese and Chinese women whom they "forcefully raped and slept with." Just as often, pirates sodomized young male captives and forced them to serve them both on and off ship. In one case, Yang Yazhang 楊亞章, a bankrupted- merchant-turned-pirate, kidnapped and raped several Vietnamese women and young boys.[52] In another case, Chen Zhangfa 陳長發, a fisherman from Xinhui county 新會縣, had gone to Jiangping where he joined a gang of pirates in 1795. After plundering a fishing junk off the Dianbai 電白 coast, Chen and several cohorts gang raped four captured sailors, while another pirate forced a Dan

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William Skinner, "Creolized Chinese Societies in Southeast Asia," in Reid, *Sojourners and Settlers*, pp. 59–61; also see Antony, *Like Froth Floating on the Sea*, pp. 143 n. 10. On the Minh huong, see Charles Wheeler, "Identity and Function in Sino-Vietnamese Piracy: Where Are the Minh Huong?," *Journal of Early Modern History* 16.6 (2012), pp. 503–21.

49 Gongzhongdang (file 1047, 嘉慶 1年 8月 19日).

50 On the culture of pirates and seafarers in southern China see Antony, *Like Froth Floating on the Sea*, pp. 139–63.

51 Although in the early-19th c., in China, a number of female pirates, such as Zheng Yi Sao 鄭一嫂 in Guangdong and Cai Qian Ma 蔡牽媽 in Fujian, commanded pirate fleets, there is no evidence that women played any leading roles in piracy in the Gulf of Tonkin. Also later on, in the first decade of that century, although Chinese pirates under the female chieftain, Zheng Yi Sao, issued a code of conduct that attempted to protect female captives from rape, the evidence is mixed as to just how effective this rule was in actual practice.

52 Gongzhongdang (file 2845, 嘉慶 2年 7月 6日).

woman aboard his junk where he raped and kept her against her will.[53] In terms of sexual mores the pirates broke all the rules. Sexual violence against both women and boys was a regular feature of the pirate's life in this sea frontier.[54]

EPISODES OF PIRACY IN THE GULF OF TONKIN

Piracy has appeared in many forms and shapes over the centuries, and it is perhaps best to think of it in terms of a continuum: on one end were the small-scale, ad-hoc gangs of pirates and on the other end were the large-scale, well-organized gangs and sometimes even leagues of pirates (huge groups in the thousands), with much variation in between. Most cases of piracy in the Gulf of Tonkin, as elsewhere in Asia, were petty, spontaneous hit-and-run robberies perpetrated by local gangs of five to ten individuals against small fishing and cargo boats. Although several local pirates also organized large-scale professional gangs, a much larger number originated from outside the gulf, including some Europeans and Japanese. Sometimes piracy was sanctioned by a government or other political entity (what was called privateering in the West); at times piracy became deeply involved in political intrigues and struggles. Based on my analysis of roughly 350 pirate incidents in the Gulf of Tonkin between 1450 and 1850, we can discern five waves or episodes: the pearl thieves between 1450 and 1650, the *wokou* raiders in the 1550s to 1580s, the political pirates of the Ming-Qing transition between 1640 and 1680, the sanctioned Chinese pirates during the Tay Son era from 1780 to 1802, and the pirates of the post-Opium War period in the 1840s and 1850s. What follows are examples from each of these episodes.

First Episode: The Cases of Su Guansheng 蘇觀升 *and Zhou Caixiong* 周才雄

In the Gulf of Tonkin, Chinese and Vietnamese pearl thieves (*zhuzei* 珠賊) typified local pirates. Although they mostly operated in small gangs, they were normally well organized, and sometimes, as the cases of Su Guansheng and Zhou Caixiong demonstrate, they expanded into formidable forces that represented a significant challenge to authorities. In the Ming period the government monopolized the pearl industry and strictly regulated its collection and distribution, much to the disadvantage of the pearl divers who found it increasingly difficult

[53] Gongzhongdang (file 1448, 嘉慶 1年 11月 10日).

[54] On the sexual behavior of Chinese pirates see Antony, *Like Froth Floating on the Sea*, pp. 147–50.

to earn a living. There were therefore frequent reports throughout the Ming of pearl thieves operating around Weizhou and Longmen islands. These thieves were mostly poor Dan fisherfolk from China and Vietnam who clandestinely gathered and sold pearls to merchants in Qinzhou, Hepu, and Vietnam.[55]

In the fifteenth to early seventeenth century bands of what Ming officials specifically labeled "pirates" clandestinely harvested, stole, and traded gulf pearls. Many of these so-called pirates were Vietnamese, such as Fan Yuan 範員 in 1458 and Li Mao 李茂 in 1475; others were Chinese, mostly poor Dan fishers; also many gangs were of mixed Chinese and Vietnamese ethnicities (however, as mentioned earlier, ethnic labels are confusingly abstruse and imprecise). In 1469, for example, a band of Sino-Vietnamese pirates in ten black ships robbed the pearl beds at Yangmei 楊梅池. By the early-sixteenth century residents of Weizhou Island and the three Dan villages of Wutu 烏兔, Duolang 多浪, and Pang 龐 on the Shicheng 石城 coast had notorious reputations for pearl thievery and resisting officials.[56] In 1589 one official reported to the throne that soldiers had apprehended 1,121 pearl thieves who had been operating in more than a hundred double-masted junks in the Hepu pearl beds off the Lianzhou and Leizhou coasts. In 1630 officials in Hepu reported pearl thieves privately gathering and selling pearls to unscrupulous merchants in several gulf ports.[57] The problems persisted and in 1647 the new Qing government reinstated regulations to prohibit and suppress pearl thieves in the Gulf of Tonkin.[58]

The largest and most significant episode involving pearl thieves occurred in the late 1570s when the two pirates Su Guansheng and Zhou Caixiong led the largest Dan "uprising" in western Guangdong in the Ming dynasty. Both men came from coastal Shicheng, an area notorious since the sixteenth century for Dan pearl thieves; typical of this area, their forefathers had migrated from Vietnam. Su and Zhou,

[55] Gu Yanwu 顧炎武, *Tianxia junguo libing shu* 天下郡國利病書 (Xuxiu SKQS edn.), vol. 597, p. 445; *Haikang xianzhi* 海康縣志 (Beijing: Zhonghua shu ju, 2005), p. 21; Chen, *Danmin de yanjiu*, pp. 112, 115; also see Li Qingxin 李慶新, "16–17 shiji Yuexi zhuzei, haidao yu xizei" 16–17世紀粵西珠賊、海盜與西賊, *Haiyang shi yanjiu* 海洋史研究 2 (2011); and Wu Xiaoling 吳小玲, "Guangxi Beibuwan diqu Ming Qing shiqi de haishang wenhua yu yimin" 廣西北部灣地區明清時期的海上文化與移民, Conference on "Nanhai No. 1," Maritime Silk Road Museum, Hailing Island, Yangjiang, April 24, 2011.

[56] *Fangcheng xianzhi chugao*, *j.*14, p. 66a; *Gaozhou fuzhi* 高州府志 (Wanli 萬曆 edn.; Beijing: Shumu wenxian chubanshe, 1986), pp. 111–12; also see Li, "16–17 shiji Yuexi," pp. 122–31."

[57] *Guangdong shengzhi dashiji* 廣東省志大事記 (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 2005), p. 103; *Lianzhou fuzhi* 廉州府志 (1755 edn.; Haikou: Hainan renmin chubanshe, 2001), p. 58.

[58] *Qing shilu Guangdong shiliao*, vol. 1, p. 10.

like a large number of other Dan sea people, had for many years been engaged in the lucrative, but illegal, pearl trade in the Gulf of Tonkin. Finding it increasingly difficult to make a living, in 1570 they organized a gang, composed of eighteen ships, to rob villages on the Lianzhou and northern Vietnamese coasts. Within a few short years they had gathered a force of more than a thousand Dan fishers, and from bases on Weizhou Island their forces sallied forth in violent protest against corrupt and malicious officials (in this case imperial eunuchs) who oversaw the government-monopolized pearl trade. Su was reportedly captured with more than 400 followers in 1581, but Zhou's plight remains unknown.[59]

Second Episode: The Case of Wu Ping 吳平

While *wokou* 倭寇 pirates began to appear on the coasts of China during the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), they did not pose a serious problem until the mid-Ming dynasty (sixteenth century). Although the Chinese used the term *wokou* pejoratively for "Japanese dwarf bandits," in reality most gangs and leaders in the mid-sixteenth century were Chinese. Actually many gangs were of mixed ethnicities and nationalities, including Chinese, Japanese, Southeast Asians, and occasionally Europeans and even some Africans. These raiders (at least their leaders) are best described as merchant-pirates because they combined both activities of raiding and trading (activities also characteristic of frontier society). In fact, many of the leaders had been merchants before turning to piracy.

Although *wokou* gangs operated mainly along the Zhejiang, Fujian, and eastern Guangdong coasts, beginning in the 1550s they also appeared in the Gulf of Tonkin. These pirates were all outsiders, coming mostly from Fujian and eastern Guangdong. One of the first was a notorious pirate named He Yaba 何亞八, originally a sea merchant from Dongguan 東莞 county near Canton. After being driven away from his raiding areas in Fujian and eastern Guangdong, he fled to the waters of western Guangdong and then to the Gulf of Tonkin in 1554. Around this same time there were other reports of Japanese merchant-pirates in the gulf and on the coast of northern Vietnam. In 1574 *wokou* gangs attacked and occupied the fort at Shuangyu on the Leizhou peninsula, and soon afterwards there were reports of foreign pirates in the same

[59] Qu Jiusi 瞿九思, *Wanli wugong lu* 萬曆武功錄 (Xuxiu SKQS edn.), vol. 436, pp. 238–40; and *Haikang xianzhi* (2005 edn.), p. 23.

general area. In 1580 *wokou* raiders from Fujian and Zhejiang plundered coastal villages from Hainan to Lianzhou.[60]

Wu Ping was another infamous Chinese pirate associated with the *wokou*. He hailed from Zhaoan 詔安 county on the coast of Fujian province. He was described as a short, pudgy, and cruel man, and was married to the niece of another pirate chief named Lin Guoxian 林國顯. From his base on Nan'ao 南澳 Island, on the Fujian-Guangdong border, Wu Ping launched raids on shipping, towns, and villages mostly in nearby Fujian in the 1550s. Then in 1565, because the Ming military intensified its suppression campaigns and also because of a severe famine in Fujian, he and several other pirates felt compelled to leave their usual bases on the Fujian-Guangdong border. Wu Ping and one of his associates, Zeng Yiben 曾一本, fled to western Guangdong and then to the Gulf of Tonkin, where they continued their nefarious activities over the next year. For instance, in the winter of 1565 Wu Ping plundered the area near Longmen and soon afterwards he fled to Vietnam.[61] What happened to him after that is a mystery: some sources said he was captured and executed, while others said he drowned at sea. Still other sources claimed that he had not died in 1566, but had continued his pirating activities off the southern Hainan coast, where soldiers reportedly captured his wife and one of his chief lieutenants, but not Wu Ping.[62]

Third Episode: The Case of Yang Yandi 楊彥迪

The next major upsurge in large-scale, organized piracy in the Gulf of Tonkin occurred during the turbulent Ming-Qing transition between the 1640s and 1680s. In this period of warfare and anarchy it became impossible to distinguish pirates, insurgents, and merchants. Like their *wokou* predecessors a century earlier, they combined raiding with trade, but with the addition of political entanglements. In fact, many so-called political pirates raised the banner of Ming loyalism in

[60] *Haikang xianzhi* 海康縣志 (1938 edn.; Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, n.d.), pp. 539–40; Guo, *Yue daji*, *j.* 32, p. 89; *Guangdong shengzhi dashiji*, p. 97; also see Hoang Anh Tuan, "Tonkin Rear for China Front: The Dutch East India Company's Strategy for the North-Eastern Vietnamese Ports in the 1660s," in Kleinen and Osseweijer, *Pirates, Ports, and Coasts*, p. 21; and Li, "16–17 shiji Yuexi," pp. 132–34.

[61] *Lianzhou fuzhi*, p. 55.

[62] *Fangcheng xianzhi chugao*, j.14, p. 72a; *Yai zhouzhi* 崖州志 (Guangxu edn.; Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 1983), p. 231; also see Chen Chunsheng 陳春聲, "16 shiji Min Yue jiaojie diyu haishang huodong renqun de tezhi, yi Wu Ping de yanjiu wei zhongxin" 16世紀閩粵交界地域海上活動人群的特質, 以吳平的研究爲中心, *Haiyangshi yanjiu* 1 (2010), pp. 143–50.

opposition to the nascent Qing dynasty.[63] Many of these pirates were sanctioned by one or another Southern Ming court or by some other political regime. Although Zheng Chenggong 鄭成功 (better known in the West as Koxinga), in Fujian and Taiwan, was the most famous, nonetheless, there were many others who operated in the Gulf of Tonkin, forming a sort of second maritime front of resistance against the Manchus: Huang Hairu 黃海如, Wang Ji 王吉, Deng Yao 鄧耀, Yang Yandi, Chen Shangchuan 陳上川, Zhou Zhaoliang 周肇良, and others. With the collapse of pro-Ming resistance in the 1670s-1680s, several thousands of pirates and refugees fled to Vietnam where they formed the basis of the Ming loyalist communities that evolved into important merchant-bureaucratic elites.

Undoubtedly the most famous and colorful political pirate in the Gulf of Tonkin in the late seventeenth century was Yang Yandi (Duong Ngan Dich in Vietnamese), also known as Yang Er 楊二. His origins are obscure but it is likely that he was born either in northern Leizhou, in Wuchuan 吳川, or somewhere near Qinzhou, as all three areas claim him as a native son. Today he is a renowned anti-Qing folk hero in the region. In the Fangcheng-Qinzhou area he is known as "Righteous Yang" (Yang Yi 楊義), and there are legends about how he constructed, near Longmen, a walled fortress, a palace, and canals linking his base to the sea (providing a fast, easy escape when in danger).[64]

Yang Yandi and his younger brother, Yang San 楊三, began their piratical careers in the 1640s or 1650s as local pirates (*tufei* 土匪) in association with another pirate boss named Huang Zhansan 黃占三 and a Tonkin pirate named Huang Mingpiao 黃明票. The Yang brothers were first mentioned in official records in 1655 when they pillaged the Lingshui 陵水 coast on Hainan Island. For the next thirty years they remained active in the Gulf of Tonkin and elsewhere; they also joined the Ming resistance and, for a time, the Zheng camp in Taiwan.[65]

Probably sometime in the 1650s, Yang Yandi and Yang San joined forces with the Wang brothers, Wang Zhihan 王之瀚 and Wang Zhijian 王之鑒, who had also started out as local pirates in their home area of

[63] Niu and Li, in "Chinese Political Pirates," use the term "political pirates" to argue that the pirates were politically motivated anti-Qing, pro-Ming insurgents; I simply use the term to indicate that they were involved in the political struggles of the time, without speculating about their motivations.

[64] Li, *Binhai zhidi*, pp. 274–75; and fieldwork notes from Qinzhou, January 2010, and from Fangcheng and Qinzhou, July 2011. Also see Robert Antony, "'Righteous Yang': Pirate, Rebel, and Hero on the Sino-Vietnamese Water Frontier, 1644–1684," *Cross-Currents* (e-journal) 11 (June 2014), at http://cross-currents.berkeley.edu/ ejournal/issue-11, pp. 4–30.

[65] *Qing shilu Guangdong shiliao*, vol. 1, p. 89.

Leizhou. Later they joined the Ming resistance against the Manchus in western Guangdong with another pirate-rebel leader named Deng Yao 鄧耀. Between 1652 and 1656 their forces occupied several coastal areas around Leizhou and in the Gulf of Tonkin. In 1656 the Qing defeated and captured Wang Zhihan with more than 5,400 followers, both men and women. Wang Zhijian, however, continued his activities as a pirate and Ming loyalist for several more years. Deng Yao was defeated at Longmen in 1661.[66]

In the meantime the Yang brothers continued to operate as pirates and rebels in the Gulf of Tonkin. By the 1660s, official sources now referred to them as sea bandits (*haizei* 海賊) and sea rebels (*haini* 海逆), no longer simply as local bandits. The Yang brothers and several other pirates briefly reoccupied Longmen and other nearby islands as their bases, but after repeated attacks by Qing forces in 1663–1666, Yang Yandi fled to Vietnam where he received protection and support from a local strongman. Around this same time, he also associated with a turncoat and rebel named Zu Zeqing 祖澤清 and a local outlaw named Xie Chang 謝昌. When the Qing government requested that the Tonkin authorities arrest Yang, he fled to Taiwan and joined the Zheng camp, reportedly receiving an official position as a military commander. In 1677 he and another pirate named Xian Biao 冼彪 left Taiwan in eighty ships with several thousand followers to return to the Gulf of Tonkin and to reoccupy Longmen, which once again became a pirate base. Raiding and fighting continued intermittently until 1682, when Yang and other pirate-rebels were driven out of Longmen. Yang retreated with several thousand followers to Vietnam, finally settling in the south around My Tho (near Sai Gon) in the Mekong delta and helping the Nguyen lords secure this area for Cochinchina.[67] According to the historian Yumio Sakurai 櫻井由躬雄, a subordinate assassinated Yang Yandi in 1688.[68] As for his brother, the Qing Veritable Records mentioned that a notorious pirate named Yang San was apprehended and summarily executed in 1700.[69]

[66] *Haikang xianzhi* (1938 edn.), p. 542; *Haikang xianzhi* (2005 edn.), p. 26; and Li, *Binhai zhidi*, pp. 273–74.

[67] Xu and Xie, *Da Nan shilu*, p. 3; *Qing shilu Guangdong shiliao*, vol. 1, pp. 89, 96–97, 149, 162, 165, 178; *Haikang xianzhi* (1938 edn.), pp. 543–44; and *Haikang xianzhi* (2005 edn.), pp. 27–29; *Fangcheng xianzhi* chugao, *j.*14, pp. 83a–b; and Li, *Binhai zhidi*, pp. 274–76.

[68] Yumio Sakurai, "Eighteenth-Century Chinese Pioneers on the Water Frontier of Indochina," in Cooke and Li, eds., *Water Frontier*, p. 40.

[69] *Qing shilu Guangdong shiliao*, vol. 1, p. 217.

Fourth Episode: The Case of Wushi Er

After a hiatus of about a hundred years, a new cycle of large-scale piracy emerged in the Gulf of Tonkin during the Tay Son Rebellion in Vietnam between 1780 and 1802. As a means of obtaining revenue and fighters, the Vietnamese rebels actively recruited Chinese pirates, guaranteeing safe harbors, ships, weapons, and supplies. Jiangping became one of several important pirate bases during these years. Analogous to privateers, though the Vietnamese never used the term, Tay Son rulers utilized Chinese pirates, and commissioned many as officers with seals and certificates (similar in function to the letters of marque issued in the West) authorizing commerce raiding in Chinese waters. Among the most notable Chinese pirate leaders were Chen Tianbao 陳添保, Mo Guanfu 莫官扶, Zheng Qi 鄭七, and Wushi Er. They proved crucial to both the development of large-scale professional piracy and the formation of the Tay Son state. Even after the Tay Son state was crushed in 1802, Chinese pirates continued their excursions into Vietnamese waters until their huge confederation was defeated in 1810.

Like Yang Yandi, today Wushi Er is a local folk hero in the Leizhou peninsula, where he is regarded as something like a freedom fighter battling against Qing oppression. Wushi Er was the archetypical professional pirate, one of the earliest to join the Tay Son Rebellion in the 1790s and the last major pirate to be defeated by the Qing in 1810. Born Mai Youjin 麥有金 in the small fishing village of Wushi on the west coast of the Leizhou peninsula around 1765, he began his criminal career as a petty thief and blackmailer in several ports around the gulf. After being abducted by a gang of local pirates, Wushi Er later claimed to have been coerced to enlist with them in their raids in the waters of western Guangdong and Vietnam. Sometime in the 1790s he joined the Tay Son cause and was quickly appointed as a brigade general (*zongbing* 總兵). By 1797 he commanded a band of roughly a hundred men and three vessels and received a new title from the Tay Son ruler – General Who Pacifies the Sea (*ninghai fujiangjun* 甯海副將軍). After the Tay Son collapsed in 1802, he returned to Chinese waters, with bases on Weizhou Island and on the Leizhou coast. By 1805 Qing officials reported that he had become the most powerful pirate in the Gulf of Tonkin with a fleet of eighty to ninety war junks. By the time of his capture and execution in 1810, his fleet had grown to more than a hundred ships and several thousands of pirates.[70]

[70] Gongzhongdang (file 3728, 嘉慶 3年 2月 19日); (file 10138l, 嘉慶 13年 3月 2日); and fieldwork notes from Wushi and the Guangxi coast, 2009–2011.

In the several years before his capture Wushi Er oversaw a vast criminal network that centered on the waters between Hainan Island and the northern Vietnam coast, but also had branches in eastern Guangdong and southern Fujian. Each year his fleets took in profits of several thousands of taels silver from plunder, ransoms, and extortion, making it necessary for him to employ a small bureaucracy of scribes to write blackmail letters and to keep accounts of the loot, as well as of weapons and provisions. Over the years he had slowly built up his organization by cultivating kinship and native-place relationships with subordinates and followers on land and on sea. His formidable Blue Banner Fleet, as it was labeled, was divided into eight squadrons, organized around a central core of family members, including his elder brother and several cousins.[71]

Fifth Episode: The Cases of Shap-ng-tsai and Chui-A-Poo

Between the 1830s and 1850s piracy was once again on the upswing in the Gulf of Tonkin, as several gangs of well-organized pirates from outside the region – many from the Hong Kong area – fled the suppression campaigns of the British Royal Navy to seek refuge in the gulf. Between 1835 and 1850, for instance, the *Dai Nam thuc luc* 大南實錄 (*Veritable Records of Vietnam*) recorded hundreds of incidents of (mostly) Chinese pirates plundering ships and villages on the Vietnamese coast.[72] Despite the British navy's suppression campaigns, these pirates retained close contacts with unscrupulous merchants in Hong Kong, Macao, and Singapore who bought their booty and supplied them with armaments and other necessities. Several notorious pirates in the gulf at this time were Ruan Yaguan 阮亞官, Yang Yasi 楊亞四, Yang Jiufu 楊就富, Chen Jiahai 陳加海, Li Yazhi 李亞志, Liang Aqiao 梁阿喬, Shap-ng-tsai, and Chui-A-Poo.

Among those pirates just mentioned, Shap-ng-tsai (Shiwuzai 十五仔) and Chui-A-Poo (Xu Yabao 徐亞保) were the two most formidable Chinese pirate leaders in the 1840s. Figure 3 is a contemporary sketch of Chui-A-Poo. Both men were professional pirates who regularly collaborated with one another, the former commanding a gang of 3,000 men and more than sixty junks and the latter commanding a gang of 1,800 men and about twenty junks. Shap-ng-tsai had previously commanded a Portuguese lorcha, and had resided on and off in Macao and

[71] Gongzhongdang (file 10138, 嘉慶13年3月2日); Zhupizouzhe 硃批奏摺 (file 1058, 嘉慶10年11月22日, and file 1121, 嘉慶15年7月12日), Beijing, First Historical Archives; Shangyudang fangben 上諭檔方本 (嘉慶14年9月12日 and 嘉慶16年3月15日), Taibei, National Palace Museum.

[72] This information is culled from Xu and Xie, *Da Nan shilu*, pp. 163–268.

Hong Kong. His colleague, Chui-A-Poo, had been a barber and was an occasional paid informant for the Hong Kong government. Both men had first-hand knowledge of modern weapons and fighting methods, Shap-ng-tsai from his many years as an experienced lorcha captain and Chui-A-Poo from having been licensed by the Hong Kong government to manufacture gunpowder. The former's main base of operation was in western Guangdong on several islands off the Leizhou Peninsula and among the Van Don islands, while the latter had his stronghold in Bias Bay to the east of Hong Kong.[73]

In the years following the First Opium War, Shap-ng-tsai and Chui-A-Poo repeatedly pillaged ships and villages between Fujian and Vietnam. They forced fishing and trading vessels to pay regular protection fees so as not to be attacked. After defeating the Qing navy in a battle off Hainan Island in 1848, the two pirates raided the important salt mart at Dianbai, captured forty junks, and levied US$120 for protection fees on every salt junk. In February 1849 they gained notoriety after Chui-A-Poo's gang killed two British officers, and that summer when Shap-ng-tsai's gang robbed a junk registered to a British subject. Later that same year in two separate campaigns the Royal Navy nearly destroyed the two pirate fleets, and, although Shap-ng-tsai escaped, his comrade Chui-A-Poo was captured but afterwards committed suicide in a Tasmanian jail, where he had been deported.

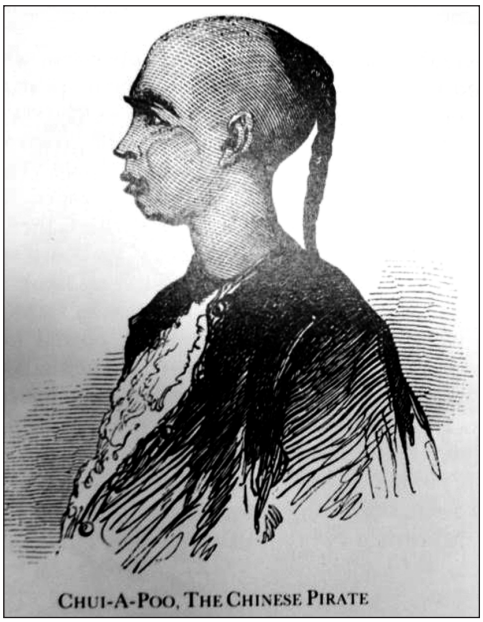

Figure 3. Contemporary Sketch of Chui-A-poo

A sketch-engraving, originally published in the Illustrated London News, *June 14, 1851. The depiction is interesting because it shows a typical, young Chinese male who appears to be a normal citizen: nothing in particular reveals him as a pirate.*

[73] John C. Dalrymple Hay, *The Suppression of Piracy in the China Sea, 1849* (London: Edward Stanford, 1889), pp. 27–28; and *China Mail*, November 1, 1849.

Despite the apparent naval successes, in which nearly 5,000 pirates were reported killed in battles with the Royal Navy, piracy continued to flourish in the Gulf of Tonkin, and new pirate fleets soon afterwards replaced those that had been destroyed.[74] Piracy in fact remained a problem in the gulf until the late-twentieth century.

CONCLUSION

For centuries, piracy was a persistent and inherent feature of the Sino-Vietnamese maritime frontier. While most piracies continued to be perpetrated by small, ad hoc gangs, upsurges in large-scale, well-organized piracy occurred during times of political turmoil and wars (such as during the Ming-Qing dynastic wars and the Tay Son Rebellion). Fishermen, sailors, traders, smugglers, and pirates, whose activities were all too often indistinguishable from one another, knit together the social, cultural, and economic fabric of the Gulf of Tonkin. Together they helped to create a highly integrated political economy that depended as much on trade as it did on piracy and smuggling. Denizens of the gulf's maritime frontier shared in a collective culture of their own making, a distinct culture of survival and resistance that stood in marked contrast to the land-based culture of the hinterlands. This sea frontier was one of shared social, economic, and cultural activities, and of patterns not easily defined and delimited by ethnic and linguistic differences or by national boundaries. The long and jagged coast, lined with countless offshore islands and mangrove swamps, served as welcoming refuges for anyone seeking to avoid the notice of the state. As a frontier zone the gulf remained until recent years an ambiguous and lawless no-man's-land where violence and predation were the norm.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

QYMTL *Qingshilu Yuenan, Miandian, Taiguo, Laowo shiliao zhaichao* 清實錄越南緬甸泰國老撾史料摘抄

[74] Beresford Scott, *An Account of the Destruction of the Fleets of the Celebrated Pirate Chieftains Chui-Apoo and Shap-ng Tsai, on the Coast of China, in September and October,* 1849 (London: Savill and Edwards, 1851), pp. 139–41, 173; Qiongshan xianzhi 瓊山縣志 (1857 edn.), *j.* 11, p. 13b; and *Gaozhou fuzhi* 高州府志 (1889 edn.), *j.* 20, p. 19a; 50, p. 6b.