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Pirate Nations

Maritime Pirates as Escape Societies in Late Imperial China

This article assesses the pirate bands in the coastal waters of late imperial China as political communities in flight from the state. James C. Scott's (2009) recent work on fugitive political communities in the highlands of Southeast Asia presents a novel and compelling account of small, remote groups living as escapees from the state. I expand on Scott's thesis by considering pirate bands as escape groups that not only escape state coercion but go on to accumulate sufficient power to reengage with and sometimes coerce the states they escaped. The pirate bands of the period formed relationships with the Chinese state that were by turns competitive, cooperative, coercive, and extractive. They were persistently loyal to no one but themselves. Two cases illustrate the argument: that of the pirate band of Zheng Zhilong and his son Zheng Chenggong and that of the pirate queen Zheng Yi Sao.

During the seventeenth to early nineteenth centuries, maritime piracy proliferated on the southern and southeastern Chinese coasts. In establishing and consolidating their power, pirate bands became political actors distinct from the Chinese imperial project around them. They controlled sea routes, collected taxes, and often governed territory. They provided mercenary naval services alternately to successive Chinese dynasties and to European colonial powers. They granted persistent political loyalty to no one. They thus challenged the political legitimacy of the Chinese empire and also the mercantile interests of European colonial projects in the region.

This article provides a new theoretical account of their political signifi-

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cance, drawing on James C. Scott's (2009) recent work on fugitive political communities in the highlands of Southeast Asia. Scott presents a novel and compelling account of remote social groups living as escapees from the state.[1] The groups Scott describes—adapting his usage, I term them "escape societies"—are decentralized, horizontal social organizations. They leverage their relative size, local knowledge of physical geography, flexible agricultural practices, and diffuse social configuration to escape the taxing, conscripting, and labor-extracting powers of large, coercive state- and empire-building projects.

This article expands on Scott's thesis by considering additional groups that not only evade state control and coercion but also accumulate sufficient power for themselves to permit complex and ambiguous geopolitical relationships with the states they evade. These relationships are by turns competitive, cooperative, coercive, and extractive. These actors thus exceed the role Scott identifies, becoming rivals to the state and thereby challenging the state's claim to monopolize coercion and violence. Chinese coastal pirates thus constructed a novel cultural-political identity for themselves, constituting distinct political communities removed from and in tension with existing sovereign hierarchies. While certainly not secure, these relationships proved prudentially desirable: pirate gangs were able to leverage their autonomy to their advantage, by turns selling their maritime military power to imperial authorities and coercing them with it. Their relationship was thus ambiguous. Pirates were persistently loyal to no one but themselves.

I illustrate this account with reference to two historically prominent Chinese pirate bands. The first is the gang founded by Zheng Zhilong. As the leader of a large band on the Fujian coastline, he extracted protection money ("water taxes" [Andrade 2004: 427–28]), attacked Chinese commercial ships, and worked on contract as a naval mercenary for the Dutch East India Company (VOC). Later, however, the Ming dynasty purchased his services, and he became a prominent officer in its navy. His son went on to construct a maritime empire of his own and became the first Chinese ruler of Taiwan, which he seized from the VOC that his father had once served.

A second case is that of the early nineteenth-century pirate Zheng Yi Sao, who inherited from her late husband a pirate gang she expanded to some 70,000 men and 400 junks (Murray 2004: 52). Under her leadership, the gang collected protection money, raided extensively, and undermined Chinese imperial rule on the coast of Guangdong. Zheng Yi Sao also substan-

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tially reformed and formalized the gang's administrative structure, imposing complex systems for dispute resolution and division of acquired wealth.

The article proceeds as follows. First, it details Scott's analytic framework. Second, it provides a brief general sketch of maritime piracy in late imperial China and explores its theoretical significance. Third, it details the two empirical cases. I conclude by considering possible implications of this analysis.

The State and Those Who Flee It

Scott's (2009) account describes some small, nomadic societies as groups that have fled coercive political integration—that is, have opted out of state-building projects. The account explores tribal groups in the highlands of Southeast Asia—he terms the region "Zomia"—whose lowland peers have traditionally viewed them as social units in a prestate, precivilized stage of social development.[2] He argues that they were, rather, escapees from the state: groups that had fled the coercive taxing and conscripting powers of the consolidating state apparatus. Geographic constraint curtailed the state, permitting their flight: elevation physically blocked the expansion of premodern political authority.[3]

Many accounts of state emergence identify the state itself as founded on coercion rather than on a voluntary social contract (Carneiro 1970; Olson 1993; Tilly 1985). Such accounts, however, generally emphasize the political center, thereby ignoring its geographic and sociological foil—those who evade it. Nonetheless, through most of human development as a distinct species, social organization was nonstate and indeed was typified by small, horizontally organized groups, with the first major exceptions appearing only about 4,000 years ago. Even then, the state remained the exception and not the rule until recent centuries (Carneiro 1970: 733; Scott 2009: 3).

Scott's account inverts this emphasis, considering not the expansion of state power but those who evaded it. His argument proceeds as follows. Contra Thomas Hobbes and many social contract theorists and in line with many theorists discussed above, most subjects of premodern states were not free; rather, "they were subjects under duress." Those who lived in early polities were not rational individuals who freely joined a contractual social order. Instead, sovereignty was imposed on them. In consequence, "it was very common for state subjects to run away." Moreover, the communities

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themselves were impermanent: "States were, by no means, a once-and-for-all creation." More often, they "briefly flourished and were then eclipsed by warfare, epidemics, famine, or ecological collapse" (Scott 2009: 7).

In short, the rise and fall of states involves the acquiring and expelling of populations as they are brought into the taxing, conscripting, and labor-extracting mechanism of state building and as they subsequently flee its expansion or collapse. "This pattern of state-making and state-unmaking produced, over time, a periphery that was composed as much of refugees as of peoples who had never been state subjects. Much of the periphery of states became zones of refuge or 'shatter zones,' where the human shards of state formation and rivalry accumulated willy nilly, creating regions of bewildering ethnic and linguistic complexity" (ibid.). This process was possible for most of organized human history. While industrialization has permitted an unprecedented expansion of state coercive power, premodern state-making projects were more constrained in their ability to impose a power-political monopoly. Thus "a thousand years ago most people lived outside state structures, under loose-knit empires or in situations of fragmented sovereignty" (ibid.: 9). Under these more diffuse power structures, state borders were permeable, and subjection to sovereignty was neither reliably absolute nor permanent. State-building projects necessarily rely on sedentary agriculture and thus on a permanent rural agrarian population. States thus encourage farming in fixed locations. "In turn, sedentary agriculture leads to property rights in land" (ibid.). Settled populations were more easily governed and produced more taxable surplus.[4]

Those who fled these projects tended to seek shelter in what Scott terms "nonstate spaces." These are "locations where, owing largely to geographical obstacles, the state has particular difficulty in establishing and maintaining its authority" (ibid.: 13). Classically, these were highlands: areas where, owing to the physical difficulties of elevation, the state less easily projected coercive power. We can thus summarize Scott's geographic thesis in a sentence: the premodern state is a flood. It fills flatlands and valleys, imposing mechanisms of state control on settled populations in areas where both mobility and mass sedentary agriculture are readily possible. Where they are not—at higher elevations or where geography otherwise inhibits state coercion—the resulting negative spaces constitute zones of refuge or escape. The privations of state coercion provided these peoples with ample reason for flight. Thus "far from being 'left behind' by the progress of civilization in the

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valleys, they have, over long periods of time, chosen to place themselves out of the reach of the state" (ibid.: 22).

Expanding on Scott's usage, I term these groups "escape societies." Escape societies have distinct social structures. In most instances, they are necessarily small, with relatively weak and impermanent centralized authority. Generally, they are also redistributive—indeed, they must be, because membership is optional. People who join them do so for their own benefit. Were these societies persistently economically unequal, escape societies would be little better. Where disparities of wealth do occur, they tend to be localized and impermanent (ibid.: 21).

In Scott's usage, Zomia itself comprises the highland regions of Burma, Cambodia, eastern India, Laos, southern China, Thailand, and Vietnam. Today it comprises a population of minorities that may be as high as 100 million but that must historically have been lower. That number comprises no one cultural or ethnic identity or any composite of them. Languages from five families are spoken, and they are generally unrelated to those used in the valleys below. Lowlanders have traditionally referred to hill tribes as "our living ancestors" (ibid.: ix, 117, 128): primitives who lived as the lowlanders did before they were civilized. Scott (ibid.: 8, 13–19) contends that this narrative elides a history in which these groups actively configured themselves to resist reintegration into the state. They represent not relics of a period prior to state creation but instead self-conscious reactions to it.

The geographic range of escape societies is limited only to whatever areas the state cannot readily reach. Scott's (ibid.: 13) diagnostic case involves highland regions, but he offers a range of other possible geographic settings, including "swamps, marshes, mangrove coasts, deserts, volcanic margins, and even the open sea."

Consequently, Scott's account may well apply to cultures in a variety of historical contexts, from tribes escaping Spanish expansion in the Americas (Clastres 1989; Salomon and Schwartz 1999; Wightman 1990) to the Berber population of the Atlas Mountains of North Africa (Gellner 1969), to Iraqi Marsh Arabs (Ochsenschlager 2004), to the highland societies of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Caucasus (King 2008). What binds these accounts together is the social dynamic that follows state expansion: flight from state power followed by social reorganization that is smaller, less hierarchical, and distributively egalitarian. These adaptations are geared to preventing the reimposition of state authority.

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Group size is a core component of this dynamic. Small groups are more amenable to horizontal authority structures and are thus less likely to impose statelike coercion on their members. However, in rare cases such societies constitute themselves on a greater-than-local scale, taking on a complex relationship with the power-political capacity of the state from which their members fled. "When they occasionally appear to be relatively centralized, they resemble what Barfield has called the 'shadow empires' of nomadic pastoralists, a predatory periphery designed to monopolize trading and raiding advantages at the edge of an empire. They are also typically parasitic in the sense that when their host-empires collapse, so do they" (Scott 2009: 22).[5] This article argues that the pirate bands of late imperial China constitute such exceptional cases. Moreover, this additional category calls for theorization in its own right. I provide such an account below.

Chinese Maritime Piracy

For the purposes of this study, I define pirates as individuals or groups who engage in raiding, extortion, and other violent criminal activity at sea. Such actors clearly position themselves in opposition to the coercive and organizational power of the state. Nonetheless, I argue that they constitute communities of a sort, as they are the primary social units to which the men and women involved belong. To the extent that these people belong to communities or polities at all, they belong to their ships and in turn to their fleets.[6]

Groups of this kind have a long history in coastal China, a consequence in part of China's historical approach to the ocean. Successive imperial dynasties tended to view themselves as lying at the geopolitical center of the world. Other cultures were civilized (or not) by degrees of proximity to the imperial heartland, with surrounding states generally acknowledging the notional authority of the imperial throne and paying tribute to it. Consequently, Chinese society and politics denigrated seagoing pursuits, emphasizing instead agricultural development and the expansion of an inland empire—north toward Mongolia, east toward central Asia, and south toward Southeast Asia. Taken together, these tendencies led Chinese leadership to view the ocean less as a conduit and more as a wall—a barrier against foreign interference. There were exceptions—the port at Guangzhou (Canton) was at times among the largest in the world—but the general consequence was that most Chinese seafaring was coastal and comparatively small in scale (Sun 2010).[7]

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A consequence of this relatively closed policy toward oceanic trade and the resulting transnational contact was increased smuggling and, with it, piracy (Andrade 2004).[8] Indeed, coastal piracy dates at least to the Song dynasty (960–1279) (McKnight 1992: 105–7). By the mid-Ming period (the mid-sixteenth century), coastal piracy was flourishing (Antony 2003: 22). As I indicate below, bands could often be as few as 10 people with a boat. Occasionally, however, they were orders of magnitude larger and strikingly sophisticated in their organization.

These bands were effectively independent; that is, they recognized no external authority, and none was forced on them. They often controlled large swaths of coastal water and attendant coastal settlements. They provided leadership and thereby rules and (often quite strict) enforcement. When they did at times recognize Chinese dynastic rule, they generally did so with expectations of a quid pro quo—pirate leaders and those serving under them received legitimated wealth, power, and autonomy in return. While their relationship with the settled populations they ruled was chiefly extractive, they did provide some public goods, such as basic security, in exchange for protection money. Members of the pirate gangs themselves had additional privileges. These included redistribution of looted wealth and access to rough-and-ready rule of law through the rules of conduct within the band.

There are clear parallels between pirate bands, their leaders, and their membership, on the one hand, and Scott's hill tribes, on the other. First, the bands were composed of escapees from assorted state-building projects—chiefly imperial Chinese but also Japanese, Malay, Vietnamese, other regional imperial powers—and indeed from the expanding power of European colonial empires. Second, they made their escape into an archetypal nonstate space: the ocean. Third, they adopted the distinctive social structures of escape societies, more often than not small—often no more than a few ships—and, when larger, tending to adopt loose, confederated social structures. Fourth, they were redistributive, transferring the gains of piracy from those who immediately seized them to other members of the community. They also drew from a remarkable array of cultural and religious backgrounds.

However, while the pirate gangs represent a striking instance of Scott's thesis, they also provide occasion to expand it. When constituted as larger entities, they engaged in much more ambitious and invasive relations with the states from which their members fled. At times they sold them naval ser-

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vices. At other times they seized their goods, ships, and coastal settlements. They cajoled, coerced, and negotiated with their erstwhile rulers in ways that go well beyond Scott's image of escape societies as marginal groups in flight from large, coercive authorities.

Individuals taking up the life of the pirate, and thus opting out of existing imperial Chinese society, likely did so voluntarily. Turning pirate was economically rational. One could escape a state apparatus that was often corrupt and extractive and a rigid social hierarchy wherein one was near or at the bottom. While one sacrificed security and certainty leaving a conventional settled society, one probably gained greater wealth and freedom. This was especially true for pirate leaders, who advanced themselves immeasurably by operating outside the legitimate political system. However, it was also true for rank-and-file pirates, who would otherwise often have been poor fishermen suffering meager living conditions and subject to the extractive whims of corrupt officials.[9] By escaping the state, one stood to better one's lot. This makes them somewhat different from and more ambitious than most escape societies described by Scott, which escape primarily to evade privation rather than to pursue wealth in greater volume.[10]

Consequently, when China's coastal pirate gangs constituted themselves as political communities, they did so in unusual ways. By casting themselves as political units distinct from the imperial power structure, they put themselves in a position to develop distinct political cultures—and indeed were often required to, as they faced distinctive structural pressures and heterogeneous cultural roots. Pirate bands codified nascent legal systems governing the redistribution of looted wealth, the punishment of crimes, the provision of security to those who paid them protection money, and so on. They organized themselves, often on a large scale, to offset the preexisting power of regional imperial agents. Moreover, they were unusual cultural melting pots. Pirate crews could be drawn from multiple ethnicities from across and indeed outside the region. While the historical record is thinner here, this presumptively had sociocultural consequences.

When they arose, large pirate gangs risked undermining the political monopoly of the Chinese imperial project—a monopoly imperial authorities took to be unique. Entities that made themselves exceptions to it implicitly undermined it. Moreover, some pirate gangs found that they could occasionally buy into the extant political order, generally losing some of the free hand with which they extracted from merchants and local populations but

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gaining the rewards of political legitimacy. This afforded pirate leaders much greater office than they would otherwise have been entitled to in life. Rank-and-file pirates became members of the state security apparatus rather than the coastal peasants that many would otherwise have been. Moreover, when European colonial projects established themselves in the region, pirates allied intermittently with colonial rulers as well. Thus they could play the field: relative independence allowed them to enjoy increased flexibility as well as influence.

Ming and later Qing officials referred to these groups pejoratively as "Japanese pirates" (*wokou*), but they were more likely ethnically quite mixed, comprising Chinese, Japanese, Southeast Asian, and even African, Portuguese, and Spanish sailors. Nor were they always men—while certainly in the minority, women joined these gangs as well (Antony 2003: 22, 147; So 1975). Moreover, official records often referred to them as "sea rebels" (*haikou*), suggesting a recognition of their ambiguous role—at once bandit and political figure (Antony 2003: 28). In the first case below, the pirate king Zheng Chenggong was known to Qing imperial authorities and to Dutch colonials as a pirate. However, the English and the Spanish—who were more accustomed to dealing with privateers as legitimate figures of statecraft—called him a king outright. Neither classification was entirely wrong, historically speaking: he was both in practice (Clements 2004: 4).

To be sure, pirates were not the only sources of political instability at the time. The intermittent closures of China's borders to trade fed economic stagnation and insufficient rice supplies: famine resulted and produced village rebellions (Antony 2003: 30). The chief threat to Ming rule—the context of the first case below—came from the Manchus who would shortly overthrow them and found the Qing dynasty. Still, these state-making and state-breaking vicissitudes helped produce the conditions of upheaval and privation that encouraged potential pirates to escape the state onto the open sea. The two cases below document the rise and fall of two large pirate gangs.

The Zheng Maritime Empire, the VOC, and the Ming-Qing Conflict, 1621–1662

Zheng Zhilong (known to Westerners at the time as Nicholas Iquan) constructed a pirate maritime empire in the seventeenth century and passed it on in variant form to his son, Zheng Chenggong (often referred to as Coxinga).

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Their period of intermittent maritime dominance over the South China coast straddled the transition from the Ming to the Qing dynasties. It also overlapped with the presence of the VOC in the region.

The late Ming period was typified by bureaucratic decline. While the Ming dynasty had significantly commercialized Chinese society and survived multiple threats to its rule, its decline was marked by relatively weakened authority in local administration (Nimick 2008: 2–3). This was coupled with especially rigorous official maritime isolation for China guided by the maxim "Let not an inch of wooden board set out to sea" (Cheng 1990: 218). The reasons for this included a desire by those in authority to curtail piracy and prevent a potentially disloyal local population from acquiring undue wealth and thus power (ibid.: 218–19).

However, the policy had the opposite effect. Smuggling proliferated and fed political disloyalty to imperial authorities. Since smugglers needed to be armed to conduct their trade at sea, the move to piracy was easy. Ming authorities gradually opened trade in the hope that lifting the prohibition would cause piracy to wither away. This was partly successful, but interventions by European imperial powers in the region—chiefly Dutch and Portuguese—complicated matters, providing new sources of employment for pirate-smugglers as privateers (Andrade 2004). Thus Paola Calanca (2010a: 87) refers to "fleets of adventurers given both to business and to piracy."

The elder Zheng was among their leaders. His shifting political role in the region is indicative of the independent role he and his followers carved out. Zheng Zhilong was a product of sociopolitical margins, having left rural Fujianese roots for Portuguese Macao at the age of 18 and become involved in smuggling. When the VOC occupied Taiwan in 1624, he entered its service as a privateer. In this capacity, he raided coastal Chinese shipping (Blussé 1990: 253–55). He assembled a gang of several thousand men and a growing fleet. Having access to European military technology, he was better armed than Ming forces. Moreover, he acquired a reputation as a sort of seagoing Robin Hood—a robber as folk hero (Andrade 2004: 430–31).

The Dutch aimed to force the Chinese to open their closed ports to trade (Blussé 1981: 88–89). Zheng's effort for the VOC was its first that met with even partial success. Trade did not immediately open, but Zheng's piratical enterprises were so damaging that in 1628 the Ming decided to cut a deal. Unfortunately for the Dutch, the deal was not with them but with Zheng himself. Imperial authorities purchased his fleet's services to patrol

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the regional coastline, clearing it of pirates. However, with Zheng out of the pirate trade, new pirates emerged. Regional piracy proliferated and grew entirely out of hand. Briefly, Ming and VOC authorities allied against the pirates. Ming authorities largely succeeded in suppressing them but only by giving another of them, Zhong Bin, Zheng's job and moving Zheng to a bureaucratic role inland. Zheng, unhappy at being sidelined, retaliated by returning to the sea as a pirate and attacking Zhong. All of this frustrated the VOC. They, too, were victims of the pirates, but they liked the Chinese approach and decided to establish a pirate navy of their own. After a brief threat of all-out war fought by pirate proxies, a deal was struck. The VOC was given limited trade access, and Zheng, who had mediated the bargain, was made governor of Fujian (Andrade 2004: 432–38).

The story is more than a very complicated episode in early modern military history. Zheng's pirate activities were at times those of a criminal and at others those of an imperial agent. At each stage he commanded an autonomous fleet of thousands of men who were loyal to no one else (ibid.: 431).[11] A power broker unto himself, he served as a linchpin of regional politics. Still, the operation was at least as much a military enterprise as a political community. The same cannot be said of the maritime empire ruled by his son.

By the time of Zheng Chenggong's birth, his father was already wealthy and had acquired station in the Ming political power structure. Zheng Chenggong thus lacked the elder Zheng's marginal roots and grew up within the political establishment (Clements 2004: 4–5). The fall of the Ming dynasty and the establishment of the Qing dynasty by the invading Manchus in 1644 changed all that. Zheng Zhilong prevaricated for two years before agreeing to serve the Qing. However, the political chaos that the transition precipitated provided a fertile environment for crime, protection rackets, and the like. Many members of the Zheng clan, including Zheng Chenggong, did not ally with the new Qinq authorities. Piracy proliferated (Antony 2003: 33–34).

Qing authorities responded with maritime restrictions even more draconian than those imposed by late Ming rulers. The repressions were so severe (homes burned and populations forcibly migrated inland) that "the Qing restrictions backfired by alienating large segments of the population, sometimes turning innocuous fishermen into rebels" (Calanca 2010a: 91). Imperial authorities had once again created escapees from the state apparatus. Those escapees made ready rank-and-file participants for the Zheng political project.

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The Zheng clan remained loyal to the Southern Ming, the remnants of the previous dynasty, and was dedicated to its restoration. Nonetheless, this loyalty may have been largely a matter of appearances: Zheng Chenggong governed coastal southeastern China more or less as he pleased. The chaos that descended over the region after the fall of Nanjing (the southern capital) to the Qing in June 1645 gave him a free hand that lasted for a decade and a half.

While he had inherited a substantial maritime military capacity from his father, the coercive apparatus Zheng Chenggong developed himself was substantially larger. The gang used it to engage in an ambitious coastal and maritime state-building project. A system of taxation and regulation was imposed on the region, permitting an expansion of trade. A protection racket extracted funds from both coastal traders and local warlords who had emerged during the chaos of the dynastic transition. The local mercantile population seems largely to have been amenable to this: any provider of law and order was better than none (Struve 1984: 156–57). The pirate gang remained essentially extractive, but it attained a new and remarkable scale, becoming a significant social order unto itself.

This is not to say that the broader peasant population's experience was positive during this period. As Calanca (2010a: 89) notes, the decades following the Ming takeover were typified by persistent chaos. The peasantry was "effectively held hostage to various antagonists: pirates, bandits, and soldiers. Dispossessed by one side, people did not have time to recuperate before troops or brigands came back to raid again." On parts of the mainland and certainly at the margins, Zheng rule was never absolute and was never accepted as legitimate by imperial authorities. Prior to the consolidation of Qing authority in the South, government defense of the population was necessarily limited. In addition to pirate gangs, multiple other social orders appeared as defenses against bandits, raiders, and the like, among them secret societies and clan groupings that proved durable enough to outlast the period (Calanca 2010b). The vacuum of state authority thus permitted a proliferation of nonstate political orders.[12]

Beginning in 1652, the new Qing authorities attempted to bring Zheng Chenggong to heel by negotiation. His father was now in Beijing, stripped of authority and under tacit house arrest. Zheng Chenggong replied (accurately) that not only did he control the coast almost unimpeded, but his area of authority was so far from the capital that his power was unlikely to

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be challenged. He framed his approach entirely in terms of self-interest: if the Qing dynasty "cannot emulate the smart calculation of my dynasty, but insists on belaboring their troops to go back and forth, year after year, throwing away their resources to no good end, then how can they expect ever to rehabilitate the region?" (Struve 1984: 161). Nonetheless, the Qing authorities were determined to cut a deal, and negotiations persisted intermittently until 1655. Zheng Chenggong took the opportunity to expand. He seems to have wanted a region relatively free from the new dynasty—in effect, his own state, probably autonomous from and at peace with the dynasty if perhaps paying tribute (Struve 1984: 159–66).

In 1657 he seized additional towns, moving northeast along the coast. His power had limits, however. An attempt to take Nanjing in 1659 failed. The Qing pressed back, harder this time, straining his military control of the region. By way of establishing a new base of operations for the faltering Ming restorationist cause, Zheng Chenggong attacked the now weakened VOC settlement on Taiwan. He seized it in 1661 and became the first Chinese ruler of the island (Clements 2004: 143, 147–59, 166–87). He died in 1662, outliving the last claimant to the Ming throne by a matter of weeks. But the Taiwanese state he established outlasted him by decades.[13]

The Zheng maritime empire was a shadow empire. It existed only by preying on the larger imperial power structure. Shadow empires, we are told, tend not to outlive their hosts. Thus Qing consolidation against Ming remnants perhaps made the eventual Zheng collapse inevitable. Still, by the time Qing authorities reconquered the Zheng shadow empire, its impact had been transformative.

The Pirate Confederation of Zheng Yi and Zheng Yi Sao, 1800–1810

After being unseated from Taiwan by China's Qing rulers, many of the region's pirates returned to their traditional trade on a smaller scale in the Pearl River delta region (Antony 2003: 43). At the beginning of the nineteenth century, one pirate in the region, Zheng Yi, formed a large and organizationally sophisticated confederacy of pirate fleets. When he died, leadership passed to his wife, known variously as Shih Hsiang-ku and Shih Yang. She is now most commonly called simply Zheng Yi Sao (Zheng Yi's wife). The historical record concerning her personally is relatively sparse.[14] We

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know that she was Cantonese, born in 1775. After a period as a sex worker, she married Zheng Yi and became instrumental in the assembly of the pirate confederation (Murray 1995: 209).

The small-scale pirate groups of the period, which were later aggregated to form the confederated fleets, were ad hoc affairs, comprising fishermen turned traders whose "livelihood was often so miserable that, for many, a successful pirate foray was the sole hope for a better life." The groups already thus bore some resemblance to nascent escape societies, offering livelihoods beyond the power of the state apparatus for those willing and able to plunder. However, the practice was temporary, itinerant, informal, and seasonal. "At maximum strength, petty pirate gangs consisted of no more than ten to thirty men and a junk or two" (Murray 2004: 44–45).

The rise of large pirate fleets and their integration under Zheng Yi and Zheng Yi Sao at the beginning of the nineteenth century significantly changed the scale and formality of the phenomenon. Accounts differ on the confederation's size, but it was clearly large. Robert J. Antony (2003: 44) describes "more than ten thousand followers and hundreds of junks." Dian H. Murray (2004: 52) refers to "some 400 junks and 70,000 men" the same year. On that account, the number of junks rose to 2,000 the next year. Their power base in the Pearl River delta offered an ideal space in which to escape state power.[15]

The couple's rise to power had its roots in a period of chaos among South China Sea pirates. The Tâyson rule of Vietnam, whose authorities had sheltered and supported pirates, ended at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The pirates returned to their previous base of operation, the Chinese southern coastline surrounding the Pearl River delta. The resulting period of disorder allowed Zheng Yi to consolidate a leadership position (Murray 1987: 210). His wife assumed his role on his death in 1807.

The confederation's activities ranged from robbery to racketeering and to ambitious territorial acquisition. As had their forebears on the southern Chinese coast, they engaged in attacks on and seizures of trading vessels along with coastal raiding. This allowed them to set up a network of operational bases along the coast and on neighboring islands and facilitated the establishment of a protection racket. The confederation charged vessels for safe passage, replacing ad hoc theft with a regularized system of rough-and-ready taxation wherein payments guaranteed safe passage (Antony 2010c: 111).[16]

"In effect, they set up a pirate state, mimicking some aspects of the structure and functioning of the increasingly ineffectual imperial Qing state"

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(Anderson 1995: 197) such that they largely supplanted it, replacing the sclerotic imperial power structure with a more local and effective one. Like Zheng Chenggong's coastal pirate polity, they made an advantage of localized power, at once resisting and imitating the state. The power structure they created thus simulated shadow empires: polities on a large scale that sustain themselves only as parasites on extant imperial power structures.

Zheng Yi's tenure was marked by formalization of the pirate confederation. In 1805 the heads of seven pirate fleets signed an agreement confederating their organizations and regulating them (Antony 2003: 44). The document (translated in Murray 1987: 57–59) has a strikingly legalistic, even constitutional scope and structure. It delineates the seven (later reduced to six) confederated units of the band, restricts raiding practices, imposes fines and indemnities for disobedience, sets out which vessels have plundering rights to which attacked vessels, and abolishes attacks on vessels that have paid protection.

Zheng Yi Sao compounded the bureaucratization of the confederation by imposing a code of laws. Murray (1987: 72) helpfully glosses it:

> The code was severe. Anyone caught giving commands on his own or disobeying those of a superior was to be immediately decapitated. Pilfering from the common treasury or public fund (*kung-hsiang*) and stealing from villagers who supplied the pirates were also capital offenses. No pirate could retain any goods taken as booty without first producing them for group inspection. Such goods were to be registered by the pirates' purser and distributed by the fleet leader. Customarily, 20 percent of the booty was returned to the original captor, and the remainder, referred to as the "public fund," was placed in a joint treasury, or storehouse (*k'u*). Currency was to be handed over to the squadron leader, who would turn over a certain portion to the fleet leader and return a slight amount to the captor. The rest was to be reserved for purchasing supplies and provisioning vessels that were unsuccessful in their own pursuits.

The code thus provided order over a large organization, formalizing a group capable of engaging in a great deal of antistate violence. However, as is typical of Scott's escape societies, redistributive mechanisms were robust. Little surplus wealth was funneled to the top of the organization.

The confederation's tens of thousands of rank-and-file members were

typical of escape society members. Most had been fishermen and thus came from poor backgrounds. Their reasons for becoming pirates varied. Many no doubt sought to escape poverty. A few aimed at rank within the organization. Some simply wanted adventure. It is clear, however, that many became pirates to escape state subjugation. Murray finds that multiple European firsthand observers of the period identified "mandarin oppression" as a motivation for taking up piracy. Interestingly, they were able to escape a state apparatus they experienced as coercive and extractive. Moreover, rather than being extracted from, they joined in the extraction, claiming a contractually mandated portion of whatever resources their ship or their fleet acquired. Potential recruits multiplied such that by 1807 the leadership had become selective, stipulating that new members commit to staying eight months at a minimum (Murray 1987: 76–77, 197). This was striking in a context where the lower seagoing classes had habitually taken up piracy casually in times of deprivation and given it up when economic circumstances permitted (Murray 1995: 208–9).

The confederation was unstable, and it lasted only briefly. Toward the end of 1809 tensions emerged among the confederation's leadership. This and a series of military reversals culminated in the confederacy's capitulation to Chinese officials early the following year. It surrendered in April 1810, with several of the confederation's fleets submitting to Chinese authorities, under an agreement facilitated by the Portuguese at Macao. Most pirates were granted amnesty (about 350 exiles, prison terms, and executions were also meted out) (Murray 1987: 137–44).[17]

The brevity of the band's existence was perhaps related to its scale. While the consolidation and bureaucratization of the confederation produced increasing economic and geopolitical returns, it may also have threatened the antistate preferences of its participants. As escapees from the coercive taxing and conscripting power of the imperial Chinese state, they may well have chafed under this new imposition of authority. Moreover, geopolitical circumstances were significantly different from those faced by Zheng Zhilong and Zheng Chenggong, who could operate in the relative chaos of the Ming-Qing transition. Also unlike the Zheng polity, the confederation could not ally itself with European empires. This was not because the European powers had left the region (some remained) but more likely because by the early nineteenth-century European states no longer contracted violence to privateers.[18]

The collapse and defeat of the short-lived confederation did not end

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coastal Chinese piracy. However, it did signal the last major wave of the phenomenon (Antony 2003: 52–53): pirates never again organized on such a large scale in the region.

Conclusion

I conclude that during the periods detailed above, Chinese piracy can be usefully assessed in line with Scott's account. Like the hill tribes he documents, pirates formed "runaway, fugitive, maroon communities who have . . . been fleeing the oppressions of state-making projects. . . . Most of the areas in which they reside may be aptly called shatter zones or zones of refuge" (Scott 2009: ix–x). However, the pirate bands were exceptionally large, constituting a striking phenomenon in their own right and impacting the behavior of the states against which they oriented themselves. Despite appearing to engage in conventional banditry, the pirate bands played irreducibly political roles. They collected and redistributed wealth. They imposed order (however violently and arbitrarily) where it had often been absent. They wrote and followed laws. They emulated, when it suited them, the political structures from which they had escaped. Neither Ming nor Qing authorities could openly acquiesce in this form of rebellion. Often, however, they had little choice but to tacitly accept it. Successive dynasties thus had to deal with these entities, bargaining, cajoling, paying, attacking, defending, and finessing, until they could eventually suppress them.

For all that, however, pirate leaders seem not to have operated out of ideological commitment. Pirates looted, seized, racketeered, and conquered for profit, not political principle. They had little of the ambition to permanence and exclusivity that typifies most state-building projects. In this sense they were more analogous to contemporary warlords than modern states. The only instance of broader political allegiance, Zheng Chenggong's commitment to the Ming restorationist cause, is limited. He wielded authority himself rather than deferring to remnant Ming authorities and largely applied it to his own ends.[19]

Pirate leaders seem often to have been well liked despite their rapacious reputations. In the chaos of dynastic transition, Zheng Chenggong's provision of taxation and legal order along the Fujian coast was often accepted by the local population. Zheng Yi Sao's pirate confederacy had more recruits than it could handle. It is not hard to see why: they offered rank-and-file

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members a better lot than they would have had. It is less clear from the historical record that the broader nonpirate populations reliably cared for piratical rule. These periods were chaotic and imposed on them persistent imperial violence, as successive dynasties tried to bring the pirates to heel. Nonetheless, it is clear that pirates were sometimes able to impose law and order more effectively than the empire could. Absent good imperial government, many were willing to opt for what alternatives were available.

This suggests a much broader possibility. State makers, in this setting and perhaps in others as well, are shaped and constrained in their actions in part by those populations that escape their rule and turn against them. This implies that state making might be understood in part as a process not just of power-political consolidation—of monopolizing force—but also as a process of making competing models of social organization impossible. So long as they are possible, there will be incentives to opt out of the leviathan. Certainly, this seems to be a consequence of Scott's account.

The pirate gangs differed in at least one other important way from Scott's escape societies. Where the hill tribes he describes represented long-term, multigenerational societies, pirate bands were often more temporary. Membership could sometimes be seasonal, and bands often did not last more than a few months or years. Still, the case of Zheng Zhilong and Zheng Chenggong indicates that this was by no means necessary. The temporality and volatility of these societies perhaps reflects their basis in consensual membership and the ease of opting out when doing so suited, at least relative to conventional state social structures.

Today the monopolistic consolidation of the modern state has made nonstate spaces rare: opting out of the state is no longer readily possible. Scott (2009: ix) notes that Zomia's "days are numbered." Still, piracy continues to flourish in places where states are weak. One need only think of contemporary Somalia or the Malacca Strait to recognize this (Hastings 2009). Thus while opting out of the state may be difficult, the phenomenon continues at the geopolitical margins. Maritime piracy, by all appearances, continues to be one of the forms it takes.

Notes

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1 Like Scott and others cited below, I use the term *state* broadly. It thus includes modern states but also premodern social organizations, such as imperial China, that possessed a dominant and persistent capacity to tax, conscript, and extract labor.

2 The term is originally due to van Schendel 2002.

3 See also a special issue of the *Journal of Global History*, which sets out to expand analysis of Zomia beyond the Southeast Asian highlands (Michaud 2010).

4 Existing accounts, including Olson 1993; Spruyt 1994; and Tilly 1985, support this claim.

5 See also Barfield 2001.

6 Academic treatments of criminals as political actors date at least to Eric Hobsbawm's (1985: 17) account of "social bandits," whom he frames as quasi-political agents and populist heroes. Elizabeth Perry (1980) describes a somewhat similar account of bandit gangs in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century China. Marcus Rediker (1989) offers a Marxist consideration of pirates as redistributive agents that has been recently counterbalanced by a free market approach (Leeson 2007, 2009). Indeed, we might think of Mancur Olson's (1993: 568) analysis of sovereigns as "stationary bandits" or, especially, Charles Tilly's (1985) discussion of state builders as racketeers. Historical instances of pirates accruing political power include the pirate states of the Barbary corsairs in the early modern Mediterranean basin (Heers 2003), the Arabic-speaking coastal communities of the eighteenth-century Persian Gulf (Sweet 1964), and the canonical pirates of the Caribbean who briefly organized an independent polity in the Bahamas (Woodard 2008). Classical Greek leaders fallen on hard times were known to turn to piracy (De Souza 2002), and the so-called Sea Peoples of the ancient Mediterranean had piratical qualities (Sandars 1985). See also Thomson 1996.

7 As Robert J. Antony (2010b: 3) notes, "Most histories of Asia stop at the water's edge, treating the littoral and the seas beyond as peripheral and, therefore, less important."

8 As Antony 2010a has made clear, the relationships between smuggling, piracy, and organized political violence were persistently complex, with the roles and boundaries shifting frequently.

9 Official corruption during the Ming and Qing periods increased in the late stages of each dynasty (Huang 1974; Ni and Van 2006; Park 1997).

10 As with the societies themselves, the difference is one of scale. One group type sought to escape poverty institutionalized at the lower reaches of the state hierarchy; the other sought more ambitiously to become rich.

11 In one naval engagement, Zheng Zhilong deployed 150 ships, "many of them large war junks" (Andrade 2004: 439).

12 That these additional nonstate groupings formed in part as responses to piracy suggests an interesting dynamic. As escape groups themselves become predatory, they give rise to additional escape societies, proliferating the phenomenon.

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13 On Zheng Chenggong's conquest of Taiwan, see also Andrade 2011, 2012.

14 Because the academic historical record of this case is limited, this section draws chiefly on the work of two scholars, who in turn work largely from Chinese-language primary sources. Much writing about Zheng Yi Sao in English is of questionable quality. For discussion, see Murray 1995: 212–18.

15 Scott (2009: 13, 51) suggests that river deltas and similar areas offer possible sites for escape societies. For discussion of malleable social roles and weak government authority in the Pearl River delta, see Siu and Liu 2006, especially the discussion of piracy (299–300).

16 The parallel with Tilly's (1985) account of state builders as racketeers is especially striking here.

17 Zheng Yi Sao's story can be tracked beyond her loss of political office. Her deputy and second husband, Zhang Bao, who had negotiated the surrender, was made a lieutenant of the Chinese navy and retained a small private fleet. When he died in 1822 (aged 36), she returned to her native Kwangtung, accompanied by their son. Her efforts to make him a successful government official failed, and in the end she outlived even him, dying quietly in Canton in 1844 as the operator of a gambling hall (Murray 1987: 144, 149–50).

18 See the discussion in Thomson 1996.

19 For doubts concerning Zheng Chenggong's Ming loyalism, see Swope 2012: 500, which notes that his "loyalties were first and foremost to himself and that the cause of Ming restoration was a convenient cloak, worn when it suited him."

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