

Sailing to the end of the Celestial Empire:

Cheng I Sao and the Eroding Qing Dynasty, 1810-1854.

Marc Avecilla

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**Placards hung on a local gentry post in the port city of Guangzhou, also known as Canton. The placards presented a manifesto that voiced the opinions of the Chinese citizens of the city, or as they called themselves, “the literati and righteous people of Guangzhou.”** The placards criticized the foreign powers that had crept and usurped their city.<sup>1</sup> After the First Opium War, China signed a peace treaty in 1842 and 1843 that opened five ports to western powers and gave Hong Kong to the British. The treaty also bestowed British subjects living in the city legal privileges such as being prosecuted under British laws. This act only solidified their status over the natives.<sup>2</sup> The people of Canton insulted the British on these placards by calling them barbarians and compared them to wild animals like wolves and foxes that wanted to spy in their country. While these placards provided an excellent perspective of the people’s reaction towards the opium war, the placards also presented insight on the trading system put in place in Canton. The placards pointed out that people never conducted trade inside the city, but rather outside.<sup>3</sup> The citizens of Canton viewed this practice as a barrier that halted British influence, but they seem to have left out the people that traded with their enemies.

**Cheng I Sao and her pirates willing interacted with these western invaders.** The journey of this pirate queen provides a captivating tale of a woman’s rise to power. Unfortunately, most historians seemed to only generally explore her achievements that coincide with her femineity. In more prominent topics of late imperial Chinese history, the infamous leader of this pirate confederation stands as a prominent figure other than a female pirate. Cheng I Sao and her pirate confederation weakened the Qing state power during the 19th century. Cheng's career expanded China's interaction with British mercantile trade, presented weaknesses

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<sup>1</sup>Unknown, “Placards Posted in Guangzhou,” in *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook*, ed. Patricia Buckley Ebrey (New York: The Free Press, 1993), pp. 489-490.

<sup>2</sup> Patricia Buckley Ebrey, ed., *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook* (New York: The Free Press, 1993), pp. 488-489.

<sup>3</sup> Unknown, “Placards Posted in Guangzhou,” p. 490.

within the Qing military, and rejected social ideals that showed a lack of support for a Confucian government.

**Despite resisting Westerners creeping onto their lands, China bled goods into the realm of foreign maritime trade, and pirates helped expand this economy.** They called them *tingfei* which means “boat bandits,” and they spawned into the 19<sup>th</sup> century because of famines, unemployment, and, most importantly, rebellions. Funds from a rebel faction turned these small bandits into organized fleets that dominated the southern seas of China.<sup>4</sup> They continued to rise in power under the command of Cheng I when in 1804 he gathered the rest of the straggling pirates and other pirate leaders to form a coalition. Cheng I’s coalition seemed unstoppable, but in 1807 he died in a typhoon.<sup>5</sup> This leaderless group found a new voice from an unexpected source. This individual will skyrocket their influences far beyond the coasts of South China.

**Cheng I Sao worked as a prostitute from a floating brothel in Canton, and she joined Cheng I’s side when she married him.** Despite this patriarchal period, Cheng rose as the new leader of her husband’s pirate fleet. Using her husband’s reputation and marrying her adopted son to build loyalties, Cheng’s wife became the commander of the coalition and the Red Flag Squadron consisting of about 300 junks and 40,000 men.<sup>6</sup> Her career revolutionized the loose organization of these pirates to a structured system. She established codes, militarized her forces to wreak havoc around the coasts, and extended their financial operations.<sup>7</sup> Unlike other pirates in the west, she did not meet her end with a noose around her neck. With a tight grip

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<sup>4</sup> Robert J. Antony, *Like Froth Floating on the Sea: The World of Pirates and Seafarers in Late Imperial South China* (Berkeley, California: Institute of East Asian Studies, 2003): pp. 38.

<sup>5</sup> Robert J. Antony, p. 44.

<sup>6</sup> Dian Murray, “One Woman's Rise to Power: Cheng I's Wife and the Pirates,” *Historical Reflections* 8, no. 3 (1981) pp. 149-150.

<sup>7</sup> Murray, p. 151-155.

around Qing officials, Cheng I Sao retired when she surrendered on her own terms and settled in Canton with the fortunes she collected throughout her career.<sup>8</sup>

**The topic of Southern Qing pirates contains minimal information because of a lack of documentation and academic studies.** Dian Murray, a prominent researcher on this topic, points out what kind of pirate “would want to keep written accounts of activities” so authorities could convict them?<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, many monographs and articles from scholars specializing in late imperialist China and European imperialism provide a transparent image about the weaknesses within the Qing government. These works talk about the Qing's maritime economy, military structure, and social thought.<sup>10</sup> When these themes accompany articles about Cheng I Sao, it opens a window to further studies about pirates weakening their country's government.

**Many monographs and articles discussing the Qing in the 1800s examine trade relations with foreign companies like the East Indian Company.** Earlier works like Paul A. van Dyke used Canton as a case study to investigate the systems put in place by the Qing government to control mercantile trade, and the flaws within the system.<sup>11</sup> Other academic texts like Chimee and Thirthankar investigate the maritime trade by examining Opium smuggling or

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<sup>8</sup> Dian Murray, “One Woman's Rise to Power: Cheng I's Wife and the Pirates,” pp. 157-159.

<sup>9</sup> Dian Murray, “Cheng I Sao in Fact and Fiction,” in *Bandits at Sea: A Pirates Reader*, ed. C. R. Pennell (New York: New York University Press, 2001), p. 257.

<sup>10</sup> Paul A. Van Dyke, *The Canton Trade: Life and Enterprise on the China Coast 1700-1845* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005); Ihediwa Nkemjika Chimee, “The Place of Opium in Anglo-Saxon Imperialism and Mercantilism in Asia: Fragments of Evidence from China,” *Cogito* 10, no. 3 (2018): 42-57; Thirthankar Roy, *The Story of Indian Business: The East Indian Company* (India: Penguin Group, 2012); Daniel Cone, “An Indefensible Defense: The Incompetence of Qing Dynasty Officials in the Opium Wars, and the Consequences of Defeat,” *Emory Endeavors in World History* 4 (2012): 65-77; Christine Moll-Murata, and Ulrich Theobald, “Military employment in Qing dynasty China” in *Fighting for a Living*, ed. Erik-Jan Zürcher, 353-392 (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018); Ho-Fung Hung, *Protest with Chinese Characteristics: Demonstrations, Riots, and Petitions in the Mid-Qing Dynasty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Junqing Wu, *Mandarins and Heretics: The Construction of “Heresy” in Chinese State Discourse* (Leiden, Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill, 2017); Jonathan Porter, *Imperial China: 1350-1900* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2016); Joseph MacKay, “Pirate Nations: Maritime Pirates as Escape Societies in Late Imperial China,” *Social Science History* 37, no. 4 (2013): 551-573.

<sup>11</sup> Van Dyke, *The Canton Trade: Life and Enterprise on the China Coast 1700-1845*, p. 2.

the effects on modern businesses.<sup>12</sup> One issue from these studies show a lack of perspective from the pirates. Luckily, Dian Murray provides a remedy for this issue as she analyzes Cheng's confederation structure, recruiting processes, and trading systems that connect pirates and the maritime trade.<sup>13</sup>

**Other widely explored topics related to late imperial China include the military of the Qing and the culture of maritime communities during the early 1800s.** Historians like Christine Moll-Murata, Ulrich Theobald, and Daniel Cone provide context of the Qing Military and criticize the choice from incompetent Qing officials to use peasant militia to suppress the British invasions. Though, the authors made broad strokes about piracy, but they have stated that they played an important part in the diminishing Qing military.<sup>14</sup> Dian Murray, Robert Antony, and Porter Jonathan paint a vivid picture of the life of maritime communities and made more apparent their counterculture practices towards Confucianism.<sup>15</sup> Later, articles and monographs from Joseph MacKay and Junqing Wu exhibit these communities as independent escaped states and connect religious groups to explain how the people questioned Confucius ideals during this period.<sup>16</sup>

**A plethora of articles and monographs written on Qing economics, military, and society provide a connection between Cheng I Sao to the deteriorating Qing.** This essay

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<sup>12</sup> Thirthankar Roy, *The Story of Indian Business: The East Indian Company*; Ihediwa Nkemjika Chimee, "The Place of Opium in Anglo-Saxon Imperialism and Mercantilism in Asia: Fragments of Evidence from China."

<sup>13</sup> Dian Murray: "Mid-Ch'ing Piracy: An Analysis of Organizational Attributes," *Qing Shi Wen Ti* 4, no. 8 (1982): pp. 1-28.

<sup>14</sup> Christine Moll-Murata, and Ulrich Theobald, "Military employment in Qing dynasty China", 388; Daniel Cone, "An Indefensible Defense: The Incompetence of Qing Dynasty Officials in the Opium Wars, and the Consequences of Defeat," pp. 65-69.

<sup>15</sup> Dian Murray, "Cheng I Sao in Fact and Fiction," 253-282; Dian Murray "One Woman's Rise to Power: Cheng I's Wife and the Pirates," pp. 147-161; Robert J. Antony, *Like Froth Floating on the Sea: The World of Pirates and Seafarers in Late Imperial South China*; Jonathan Porter, *Imperial China: 1350-1900*.

<sup>16</sup> Joseph MacKay, "Pirate Nations: Maritime Pirates as Escape Societies in Late Imperial China."; Wu, Junqing. *Mandarins and Heretics: The Construction of "Heresy" in Chinese State Discourse*.

portrays Cheng I Sao's pirate confederation as a significant player in the descent of state power for the Qing dynasty during the 19th century. Throughout the period, Cheng's career advanced the British mercantile trade, made the weaknesses in the Qing military more apparent, and denied Confucius ideals that represented early societies beginning to denounce a Confucian government. By examining and creating a bridge between Cheng I Sao and the diminishing of the Qing, this argument adds to the conversation a topic that views this pirate in a significant perspective other than gender studies. The claim within this essay portrays Cheng I Sao as integral to the collapse of the last Chinese dynasty, and without her, the outcomes in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century would have been different.

**Cheng I Sao's influence over the Qing's interaction with British trade diminished the Chinese empire's power.** Cheng's pirates provided access for foreign traders to continue smuggling opium. When she became a target, the hunt for her became a distraction that allowed an increase in smuggling from foreign powers. Contextual information needs to be established to provide insight into the relationship between China and foreign powers, and to better understand Cheng's involvement in international mercantile trade. In 1784, Britain removed obstacles that encouraged smuggling products, such as tea imports. This lift of a ban increased about £1 million worth of tea being sold by the East Indian Company.<sup>17</sup> Britain faced one issue after it opened trade on tea, China's views on international trade.

**China disliked outside influence, and the government enacted policies and systems that hindered international trade.** To trade in the coasts of China, a company needed to purchase their products in silver and surpass a system that gatekept outsiders. An example of the

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<sup>17</sup> Roy, pp. 12-13.

Qing suppressing trade comes from the system put in place in Canton. “Hoppo” acted as governors to supervise the trade entered the city. These governors also act supervisors that used “checks and balances” to manage competition, the number of ships that entered, and the goods exported.<sup>18</sup> In the perspective of the Chinese, they labeled silver not as a currency but as a product. This strategic move allowed the Hoppo to monitor silver exports and imports and force taxes on the metal. This system worked so efficiently that native merchants also found this system as “nothing but extortion”.<sup>19</sup> Traders and companies desired to find alternative routes to enter Chinese markets.

**The British turned to opium as an alternative because of their hesitation to use silver to purchase items from China.** The Chinese already knew about opium as a medical product to treat sicknesses like dysentery. That quickly changed when imperial officials banned the product when people used it as a recreational drug rather than for medicinal purposes.<sup>20</sup> This forced traders to smuggle Opium products into Chinese markets. Private merchants would buy opium from the East Indian Company and smuggle it through the Pearl Delta River. Through the silver that private traders used to buy opium, the EIC would purchase their tea to sell in Britain.<sup>21</sup> The system worked, but traders needed help from the Chinese people to protect their products. Cheng’s pirates would answer the EIC’s needs and became an integral part of this dynamic trade.

**Unlike the romanticized western counterparts that pillaged towns or ships, Chinese pirates diversified their economic base in multiple ways that made them dominate the coasts.** These sea bandits still raided like any other pirate, but they also made profits through

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<sup>18</sup> Van Dyke, pp. 1-2.

<sup>19</sup> Van Dyke, p. 119.

<sup>20</sup> Chimee, pp. 45-46

<sup>21</sup> Van Dyke, p. 125.

tributes. The salt trade flourished during the early 1800s in southern prefectures like Kwangtung, and the pirates devoured these government salt fleets that tried to sail to Canton. To avoid attacks from the pirates, the salt merchants paid the pirates for safe passage to protect their ships. This interaction allowed pirates to find an alternative business venture that became a regular practice. The effectiveness of this racketeering operation allowed pirates to expand their business inland. They targeted villages around the Pearl River Delta and forced them to pay for protection.<sup>22</sup> The power of this tributing system contained enough power that it threatened the opium trade.

**The pirates also found Western traders as easy targets for their racketeering operations.** A First Lieutenant on the *H.C. Bombay* in July 1807, Philip Maughan found that pirates forced his ship to stop near the island of St. John. In front of Maughan, a fleet of pirates blockaded the trading boats under the protection of Maughan's ships.<sup>23</sup> This interaction provides an example of pirates' domination over the entire maritime trade system. Moments like these had massive backlash for the maritime economy in southern China. British and Portuguese products plummeted in prices with blockades like the one Maughan experienced. The blockade tactics that these pirates used forced naval officers to negotiate with the pirates so they could lift the blockade.<sup>24</sup> Even though these two groups did not meet in a hospitable circumstance, this did start a reluctant relationship between foreign powers and pirates. Britain needed to pay the pirates to protect their products, but the pirates also extended their services in other means.

**Evidence presents that Cheng's pirates likely participated in helping merchants from foreign powers smuggle products.** After the British vessels paid their fines to the pirates,

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<sup>22</sup> Dian Murray, "Mid-Ch'ing Piracy: An Analysis of Organizational Attributes," pp. 11-12

<sup>23</sup> Philip Maughan, "Statement respecting the Pirates on the Coasts of China. Transmitted from Canton in the Year" 1805, February 20, 1812, in *Ladrones on the Coast of China* ed. Mr. Dalrymple (London: Lane, Darling, and Co., 1812): p. 13.

<sup>24</sup> Murray, p. 12.



they still faced the hefty fines placed by Qing officials to discourage them from trading in ports like Canton. The traders resorted to smuggling opium, silver, and other luxury items into China to maximize profits.<sup>25</sup> These smugglers found many Chinese willing to support them in transporting their contraband into the markets. They found friendly individuals to smugglers such as “fishermen, pilots, and compradors” from the harbors.<sup>26</sup> The pirate confederation controlled these fishermen and non-hostile harbors. One example of this came from a market town known as *Giang Binh*. Hidden behind the mountains and forests, pirates and smugglers conducted business and transferred products through multiple islands to reach black markets.<sup>27</sup> The pirates played the role as middlemen for the illegal transportation of opium, but sometimes the pirates did not have to participate at all to support foreign smuggling practices.

**In the early 19th century, the Qing government wanted to stop piracy, and this mission inadvertently allowed smugglers to increase smuggling without the worry of government intervention.** To solve the persistent growth of sea bandits along the coasts, the imperial governments turned to their customers. The viceroy of Canton once answered a Portuguese messenger that he gives them permission to arm their boats. He believed that the Portuguese’s purpose of arming themselves as an act to “be the enemies of our enemies.”<sup>28</sup> Even though the viceroy placed his trust on the foreigners to fight against piracy, the merchant fleets did the opposite. Many of these trader ships took advantage of the government’s focus on Cheng I Sao to smuggle their products. Examples arise from two instances of private traders, both before the rise of Cheng I Sao as a leader and after she established her rule. Qing officials hired a

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<sup>25</sup> Van Dyke, p. 117.

<sup>26</sup> Van Dyke, p. 126.

<sup>27</sup> Robert J. Antony, *Like Froth Floating on the Sea: The World of Pirates and Seafarers in Late Imperial South China*, pp. 122-123.

<sup>28</sup> “Answer of Cian Kiun to the Portuguese Petition, for leave to arm six Ships against the Pirates,” 1809, in *Ladrones on the Coast of China* ed. Mr. Dalrymple (London: Lane, Darling, and Co., 1812): p. 89-90.

Portuguese ship named the *Ouvidor Par* to eliminate pirates along the coasts. The ship ignored its main purpose and instead transported opium to another ship in Macao. Another example comes from two other Portuguese boats called the *Bellisarius* and the *Nossa Senhora de Conceição* in 1808. Officials also hired these ships to stop pirates, but the ships followed the path of the *Ouvidor Par* and made “routine [trips] to ‘Chin Chow’” to trade opium.<sup>29</sup> These examples make it clear that while the Qing campaigned against piracy foreign powers rooted their status deeper into the maritime economy. As European empires further established their status on the coasts of China, more effects will be felt years after the end of piracy.

**From helping smugglers sneak their products into ports like Canton, and being a distraction for smugglers, the pirates of Cheng I Sao helped solidify that Europe did not want to abandon the Qing’s coasts.** Private merchants working under contracts for the East Indian Company collapsed in 1833, and Cheng I Sao dismantled her pirate confederation in 1810, but the relationship between the two scarred the country to a downward spiral.<sup>30</sup> The illicit market of opium in China led to 10 million people addicted to the substance and the British expanding their mercantile empire through the first opium war. The war imposed a 15 million dollar fine onto China. They also had to give Hong Kong to their enemies and abolish their monopolies.<sup>31</sup> Though, wars cannot win with just Opium, Cheng I Sao also presents another problem that diminished the empire’s power.

**The Qing dynasty possessed an elaborate army consisting of organizations that monitored and defended the sea and land.** This unit known as The Green Banner guarded local governments, squashed rebellions, arrested criminals, and escorted copper around the

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<sup>29</sup> Van Dyke, pp. 131.

<sup>30</sup> Dian Murray, “One Woman's Rise to Power: Cheng I's Wife and the Pirates,”; Thirthankar Roy, p. 126.

<sup>31</sup> Chimee, p. 47.

empire.<sup>32</sup> The government had possessed what a professional national guard is, but they seemed absent against threats like the British during the opium war. Nonetheless, a glaring issue within the military began to arise, and Cheng I Sao exposed these weaknesses throughout her career. The organization showed the weak defenses on coastal communities and officials who underestimated the sea's threats.

**As mentioned before, the early years of the Qing would establish the Banner troopers to protect the coastal areas of the empire.** As time passed, the military would rarely place their soldiers along the coasts. According to Moll-Murata and Theobald, China only fought sea campaigns against “Burma, Taiwan, and Vietnam”. Many of the armies established themselves in areas of the north-east and the capital that people called “the belly of the empire.”<sup>33</sup> In the early 1800s, maritime communities in Southern China witnessed a lack of protection. The population desired a group to provide security, so they turned to pirate groups like Cheng I Sao’s confederation to defend the communities against other “bandits, raiders, and ... secret societies.”<sup>34</sup> The weak military presence can also be seen with Cheng I Sao’s military power.

**A few instances portray her military superiority over the Qing navy.** The first examples come from the size of her fleet and the weaponry her confederation possessed on their ships. Dian Murray describes the power of Cheng I Sao’s pirates as “floating fortresses.” Cheng’s husband’s, Cheng Pao, squadron consisted of about 36 junk boats. In total, all junks in Pao’s fleet contained 200 hundred cannons. The pirate also equipped themselves with a plethora of hand-to-hand combat weapons such as “1,300 fowling pieces, hooks, sickles, knives, and

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<sup>32</sup> Moll-Murata and Theobald, pp. 357

<sup>33</sup> Moll-Murata and Theobald, pp. 268

<sup>34</sup> MacKay, p. 562.

rattan shields.”<sup>35</sup> The Qing could not withstand this naval force. For instance, in 1808, the pirates battled the Qing navy, and after six months, the government had to hire 30 private junks to replace their entire fleet.<sup>36</sup>

**Cheng’s campaigns along the coasts illustrate examples of the navy power that the pirate confederation possessed.** In 1804, the pirates fought against the navy of Canton. The fighting crushed the spirit of the sailors and commanders guarding Canton. Soldiers would fire shots to warn other boats to avoid the pirates, “sabotage their vessels,” or not fight by waiting on the shore. The military’s inadequate drive to defend towns allowed moments such as 300 pirates moving inland, overwhelming officers, and destroying harbors to become common occurrences. From 1808 to 1809, Cheng I Sao’s pirates had the power to kill a “provincial commander in chief of Chekiang Province” and destroy 63 boats out of 135 of the entire Kwangtung navy. The pirates also announced an attack that captured a Portuguese governor, escaped five American ships, and blockaded the river that led to Siam in a matter of weeks.<sup>37</sup> The raids that the confederation conducted throughout the years would also be seen from an unusual source.

**Richard Glasspoole illustrates Cheng’s military prowess over the Chinese navy.** As a sailor on a British East Indian Company ship, the Red Banner Fleet captured Glasspoole on September 21, 1809.<sup>38</sup> Under captivity, Glasspoole experienced multiple raids that revealed multiple weaknesses with the Qing’s coastal defenses. An example of one of these flaws can be seen on November 1st when the pirates destroyed the fort walls in an hour, which caused the

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<sup>35</sup> Dian Murray, “One Woman's Rise to Power: Cheng I's Wife and the Pirates,” p. 154.

<sup>36</sup> Dian Murray, “Mid-Ch'ing Piracy: An Analysis of Organizational Attributes,” p. 13.

<sup>37</sup> Dian Murray, “One Woman's Rise to Power: Cheng I's Wife and the Pirates,” p. 155.

<sup>38</sup> Robert J. Antony, *Pirates in the Age of Sail*: (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), p. 126.

men defending to retreat.<sup>39</sup> This raid presents an example of the vulnerable state of the Qing coastal fortifications. The military could not defend against a bombardment and lost the town when the pirates tried again. This source also presents another flaw that will be exposed later.

**Pirates revealed that the military lacked properly trained soldiers since the government preferred militia over specialized units.** This change happened around the late 1700s to the early 1800s when the army began to use the militia to suppress local uprisings. The government found hiring a militia rather than a professional army as a cheaper solution towards solving these issues. Still, officials faced new problems because of militiaman's backgrounds. Armies consist of peasants, which resulted in an ill-equipped, untrained, and most importantly, unmotivated men in their army.<sup>40</sup> This eventually develops in soldiers cooperating with the pirates rather than eliminating them. A cheap army means these militiamen worked for less pay so that many soldiers would sell "their weapons, gunpowder, and information on naval deployments to pirates." An example of soldiers on the coasts of Dianbai provides an exciting encounter between armies and pirates. Antony mentions that the officials reported three batteries along the coasts as "'incompetency,' a euphemism for colluding with ocean bandits and smugglers."<sup>41</sup> The pirate's corruption over the militia shows a less formidable opponent if one combats against them. Eventually, this corruption from the pirates will reach higher levels of power.

**The influences of Cheng and her pirates would reach people in government.** The corruption of officials became a court issue, and an imperial edict in 1803 presents these growing

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<sup>39</sup> Richard Glasspoole, "Narrative of Richard Glasspool's Captivity," 1809, in *Pirates in the Age of Sail*, ed. Robert J. Antony, p. 130.

<sup>40</sup> Moll-Murata and Theobald, pp. 376-388.

<sup>41</sup> Robert J. Antony, *Like Froth Floating on the Sea: The World of Pirates and Seafarers in Late Imperial South China*, p.134.

misconducts. Here, the emperor declares that officials in Fujian started to collaborate with pirates. In turn, this cost other local authorities to ignore the pirate dilemma.<sup>42</sup> This form of corruption would further disrupt the quality within the military. First, corrupt officials will diverge the militia's primary purpose. The militia slowly transformed its main goal of stopping rebellions to protecting the elites. Funding for protections such as forts or training soldiers would depend on the local elite that oversaw them.<sup>43</sup> This caused many defenses along the coasts to submit to pirate pillaging and racketeering. Many leaders witnessed dilemmas like the Viceroy of the Canton province experienced in some instances. The Viceroy lacked funds to assemble a fighting force and scrambled for support. As he faced an imperial government that ignored him and struggled to find foreign help, he had to idly watch as the raiders demolished towns and killed thousands.<sup>44</sup> This system of corruption also explained another problem made apparent by the diminishing of standards for security along the coasts.

**Cheng I Sao's pirates helped establish fraudulent individuals in government throughout her career, and with this comes incompetence that undermines issues when they arise.** The government underestimated the pirates' power, which can be seen again with the emperor's edict. The emperor ordered officials to disguise themselves as merchants to investigate leaders influenced by pirates.<sup>45</sup> Other moments of inefficient solutions from bureaucracy comes from the firing of officials. In 1803, sea bandits defeated the commander-in-chief of Kwangtun Sun Ch'uan-mou. This failure to combat the threat at sea lead to the commander's demotion and would become a recurring answer in trying to solve piracy. The government replaced the position twice from 1805 to 1809 to stop piracy. Another ill-attempt to

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<sup>42</sup> Emperor Jiaqing, "Imperial Edict Concerning the Problem of Piracy," 1803, in *Pirates in the Age of Sail*, p.121.

<sup>43</sup> Moll-Murata and Theobald, p. 377.

<sup>44</sup> Unknown, "Further Statements from Private Letters," in *Ladrones on the Coast of China*, pp. 71-76.

<sup>45</sup> Emperor Jiaqing, p.121.

stop Cheng's pirates happened in 1809 when the emperor removed his Hoppo for "his inability to handle the pirates."<sup>46</sup> Piracy could not be solved by investigating or removing people from power. Misjudging opponents along the coastlines will be a continuing pattern with the Qing government.

**The British took advantage of the military issues that the confederation unveiled and used them against the Qing during the first Opium war.** Administrators possessed the incapacity to interpret the dilemma correctly by solving the invasion the same way they tried to solve piracy. They sent the local militia to face a national threat since most Manchurian officials saw European merchants as inferior and that the Qing possessed a superior military.<sup>47</sup> This had identical consequences to when the pirate confederation effortlessly occupied fortifications and raided the coasts. The British moved upriver, pillaged coastal towns, circled worthless junks, and repelled counterattacks.<sup>48</sup> Some forts did receive some credit as being appropriately constructed, but the understaffed local peasant militia stationed behind the walls lacked training. During the invasion, the sounds and the destruction made by the British cannons caused soldiers to flee, and the fleet entered Shanghai's dated harbor with little resistance. At the end of the invasion, the British only lost three men.<sup>49</sup> Qing's ignorance towards their maritime defenses cost their position as an imperial power. The defeat of their military would bleed into other obstacles that the government had to overcome to maintain their status.

**Between an economic system that chained itself to foreign powers and a military that consisted of peasant soldiers, late imperial China had to protect its last line of defense,**

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<sup>46</sup> Dian Murray, "One Woman's Rise to Power: Cheng I's Wife and the Pirates," p. 156

<sup>47</sup> Cone, p. 66-67.

<sup>48</sup> Jonathan Porter, *Imperial China: 1350-1900*, p. 327.

<sup>49</sup> Cone, pp. 71-72.

**the Mandate of Heaven.** This status for the emperor established that the dynasty possessed a divine position, and this meant that by religious and social presumption became the base their government.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, the Qing still struggled to maintain this social status from the perspective of their people. Throughout the eighteenth century, waves of resistance fought against the Manchurian's divine right to be on the imperial throne.<sup>51</sup> The dynasty based their rights on being able to uphold moral standards. The Qing state faced a constant battle on appealing to the people since they matched a lack of virtue with the decline of the Qing's administrative abilities.<sup>52</sup> As more people questioned the Qing's right to rule, the pirates of Cheng thrived, and with their power, they also exhibited defiance not only through criminal actions but through countercultural ideals. Under specific laws, Cheng's communities displayed insubordination by associating with heretical groups, ethnic backgrounds, and specific cultural practices. Social customs such as sexual standards and past time activities.

**The imperial government labeled acts of piracy as schismatic and heretical.** A law known as the "way of the left" generalized prohibited religious activities and groups. What made this law distinct from the others comes from the categorization. People that committed offenses that included participating in heretical groups fell under the banditry section.<sup>53</sup> During late imperial China, a heretical person had no connection to religion. The government labels heretics as political rebels that threaten the state.<sup>54</sup> The pirates acknowledged their profession categorized with insurgents against the government. They established a political culture that contained a structure of legal systems, economic systems, and most importantly, an organization that could

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<sup>50</sup> Ho-Fung Hung, *Protest with Chinese Characteristics: Demonstrations, Riots, and Petitions in the Mid-Qing Dynasty*, p. 7.

<sup>51</sup> Hung, p. 18.

<sup>52</sup> Hung, pp. 45-46.

<sup>53</sup> Junqing Wu, *Mandarins and Heretics: The Construction of "Heresy" in Chinese State Discourse*, pp. 84, 95.

<sup>54</sup> Wu, pp. 116-117.



secure positions of authority. The pirates accepting their description allowed for further independence that in turn represented the Qing's struggle in maintaining a homogeneous state.<sup>55</sup>

**Many Han Chinese societies recognized most of the pirates' cultural backgrounds as unorthodoxies.** Cheng's confederation thrived in the Kwangtung and Fukien provinces, and these areas contain a melting pot of different ethnic groups that defied common social customs in common Chinese communities.<sup>56</sup> The *Danhu*, Boat People, provide an ideal illustration of how the Han perceived these minority groups and the lifestyle. From the position of local historians, this community contained uneducated and impoverished individuals that behaved in animalistic behaviors with most people using them for petty tasks.<sup>57</sup> From this stereotypical depiction, Han possessed an apparent egotism towards these groups. At the same time, this historian's narrative points out community structure that these people rarely left their boats and built their societies on the waters. Even though the writer also presents them as barely having clothes, the description also frames an equal relationship between males and females from this period.<sup>58</sup> Overall, the pirates' ethnic customs share some relation to insubordination towards the government under the visions of the Qing.

**Other than laws and ethnic groups, the pirates also showed defiance through their sexual morality.** These practices defied the values of Confucian principles of the family.<sup>59</sup> The role of women illuminates the challenging of sexual customs that went against common Confucian moral codes. In the world of Confucianism, women found themselves locked into the

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<sup>55</sup> MacKay, pp. 558-559.

<sup>56</sup> Dian Murray, "Cheng I Sao in Fact and Fiction," p. 256.

<sup>57</sup> Gazetteer of Gaoyao, "Boat People," 1826, in *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook*, pp. 487-488.

<sup>58</sup> Gazetteer of Gaoyao, p.487.

<sup>59</sup> Robert J. Antony, *Like Froth Floating on the Sea: The World of Pirates and Seafarers in Late Imperial South China*, p. 147.

domestic sphere and under the subordination of a patriarch. The traditional Chinese saw women as simple-minded individuals that depended on the care of a male authority.<sup>60</sup> The status of women on these pirate ships showed a clear defiance against these traditional morals. Unlike their inland counterparts, everyday duties in maritime communities allowed female pirates to hold leadership positions and participated in combat.<sup>61</sup> Cheng I Sao may seem like a rare case when it comes to woman at the helm, but she represented a common practice. Glasspoole recollects Cheng as the head of the confederacy, but through his description of how the pirates attacked other vessels, he points out women's roles. He found junks with women as the leading voice on ships and participating in the fighting with bamboo lit aflame to set other ships on fire.<sup>62</sup>

**Loose sexual relationships also contrasted Confucian ideals.** These pirates had no limitations that bounded them towards sexual restraint. Pirates, male and female, had multiple partners, and Cheng I Sao and her second husband's relationships paint a picture that represents the lack of constraints pirates had when they chose partners. Cheng had an incestuous relationship with her second husband, Cheng Bao, because of her being his adoptive mother. Before marrying Cheng I Sao, Bao also had a homosexual relationship with his adoptive father.<sup>63</sup> Even though this displays a culture that countermeasures the Confucian virtues that the Qing needed to uphold, other factors also incapacitated moral standards.

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<sup>60</sup> Junqing Wu, p. 73.

<sup>61</sup> Dian Murray, "Cheng I Sao in Fact and Fiction," p. 276.

<sup>62</sup> Richard Glasspoole, "Substance of Mr. Glasspoole's Relation, upon his return to England, respecting the Ladrões," in *Ladrões on the Coast of China* pp. 40-41.

<sup>63</sup> Robert J. Antony, *Like Froth Floating on the Sea: The World of Pirates and Seafarers in Late Imperial South China*, p. 149.

**The Qing wanted to prevent many of the sinfulness found in everyday activities from the realm of sea bandits.** Many of these pass times stem from the living conditions in maritime communities. Life aboard ships contains toilsome and mundane labor while squeezing into restricted living quarters. Many pirates aboard slept in tight living spaces that also stored the little belongings they had and ate food that consisted of dried vegetables, fish, rodents, and even caterpillars with rice.<sup>64</sup> This dreadful way of living at sea lead many members in these communities to turn to activities that the government saw as illegal pass times. Pirates gambled, smoked opium, and spent the night in floating brothels to quell sexual urges.<sup>65</sup> Pirates also found entertainment through drinking blue liquor or playing sports that they learned from adolescence, such as street fighting or throwing stones at each other.<sup>66</sup>

**The status bestowed to them by the government, ethnic backgrounds, sexual freedoms, and impulsive pass times all represent a cultural movement of defiance that rose during this period.** The spread of these cultural practices became a crutch that the celestial empire did not need if they wanted to maintain their state. This expansion of anti-Qing morals can be seen with the common image of a rebel during Late imperial China. Female figures became the dominate image for majority of religious rebellions that rose against the Qing.<sup>67</sup> Overall, the strength of these pirate ideals became influential towards the building animosity towards Confucian morals. Antony delivers an excellent note about the lifestyle of these pirates as he says, “piracy was the most radical form of protest against poverty, prejudice, and

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<sup>64</sup>Robert J. Antony, *Like Froth Floating on the Sea: The World of Pirates and Seafarers in Late Imperial South China*, pp. 141-143.

<sup>65</sup>Dian Murray, “Cheng I Sao in Fact and Fiction,” p. 257.

<sup>66</sup>Antony, p. 145.

<sup>67</sup>Junqing Wu, p. 74.

injustice.” Unlike protesters, Pirates lacked the desire to alter the state of the world but rather adapt to it.<sup>68</sup> Despite that, a plethora of other political groups readily challenged authority.

**While the pirates of Cheng evolved to an oppressive world, rebellions like the White Lotus and other protests that the movement influenced readily confronted a declining Qing.** Piracy thrived throughout Guangdong, and it forced ethnic and social groups that never interacted before to rub shoulders. The Han Chinese created an “incubation of a dissident movement” because many saw the mixing of groups as toxic.<sup>69</sup> One of these movements known as the White Lotus rebellion started in 1796 and ended in 1805. The White Lotus spread the issue that the dwindling ethics such as a corrupt government and social disorder presents that the Manchus lost their legitimacy to the Mandate of Heaven.<sup>70</sup>

**Similar revolts occurred with similar motives after the Qing’s defeat in the First Opium War.** In the 1840s, major armed revolts arose in areas where Westerners had access to markets such as port cities.<sup>71</sup> One such case of rebellion occurred a decade after the war. A group known as the Xiamen Small Sword Society declared that the “mandate has come to an end.” The leader, the Grand Marshal, vowed to travel to the southern provinces of China, areas that included the realm of pirates, and eliminate the “wicked advisors and officials.”<sup>72</sup> They clashed against the insurgents to try and reestablish stability, but it became too late. People also questioned the teachings of Confucianism. A religion protected to keep moral standards high had become viewed as irrelevant in a modernizing world with new cultural movements rising.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>68</sup>Antony, p. 172.

<sup>69</sup>Porter, p. 339.

<sup>70</sup>Hung, pp. 128,131-132.

<sup>71</sup>Hung, p. 183.

<sup>72</sup>Xiamen Small Sword Society, “Proclamations of the Xiamen Small Sword Society,” 1853, in *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook*, pp. 501-502.

<sup>73</sup>Porter, pp. 294-295.

Their image of the celestial empire faded, and now the people asserted that the Manchus as immoral deceivers on the heavenly throne.

**The state power of China's last imperial dynasty crumbled during the 19th century, resulting from Cheng I Sao's pirates.** The confederation solidified British mercantile trade in the southern provinces by providing support in smuggling or acting as a distraction, so it turned the spotlight away from the opium trade. The pirates' raids along the coasts presented weaknesses within the Qing military. Matters such as fortifications and training soldiers for defenses depended on corrupt officials that misjudged national threats as local matters. Finally, the lifestyles of the pirates rejected social ideals that blended with the issue of morality in the empire. The spread of local customs like the pirate's way of life caused people to show a lack of support for a Confucian government.

**Historians characterize the significance of Cheng I Sao's career around her rise to power after the death of her husband.** Many excessively analyzed topics of conversation study on Cheng's femineity and her achievements on instituting order in a loose confederation.<sup>74</sup> The anomaly that a woman like Cheng rose into power has been made apparent by an abundance of historians but categorizing this topic solely to this pirate seems counterproductive. As mentioned before, the norm for women in these communities allowed them to work in positions that men would also participate in.

**Overall, her position of power that Cheng achieved during her lifetime could be surprising to anyone outside this community and to the people of today.** Although, Cheng I Sao represents more than being a woman in power. Cheng and the pirates embodied an era that

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<sup>74</sup>Dian Murray, "Cheng I Sao in Fact and Fiction," p. 276.

the Qing did not understand. A period that represented a maritime revolution where ordinary people such as merchants, sailors, and explorers set their eyes on Asia.<sup>75</sup> China stayed ignorant towards a crucial international trade, and the responsibility of running a complex economy laid on the shoulders of pirates like Cheng. She exploited the flaws of the defenseless coasts and had a culture that supported her to establish an economy that connected beyond the grips of the Qing. When she retired by petitioning her surrender on February 21st, 1810, the imperial government could have monopolized on Westerners' desire for Qing products.<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, this did not happen, and Britain exploited these flaws to dominate the coasts and government that had been established by Cheng. Cheng I Sao maybe a female pirate, but she became a catalyst that befell the celestial empire.

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<sup>75</sup>Roy, p. 20-21.

<sup>76</sup> Murray, p. 260.

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