



**Book Review: Antony, Robert J. *Like Froth Floating on the Sea: The World of Pirates and Seafarers in Late Imperial South China*. Berkeley: Institute of East Asia Studies, University of California Press, 2003. Xiii, 198 pp.**

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This book offers a "bottom-up" history of Chinese piracy along the South China coastline between the 1790s and 1810s, which was the height of pirate activity in the South China sea. Numerous common individuals were involved in pirate activities. Through historical and anthropological methodology, the book reveals a fresh viewpoint on the social history of Chinese pirates, who were viewed as outcasts, violent criminals, and brutal individuals in the context of mainstream history. Chinese historiography, like that of other Asian countries, primarily focused on the land-based and agrarian society. In this book, the author emphasizes the importance of understanding the socioeconomic conditions in pre-modern South China from the perspective of the history of sea space, sea activities, and sea people, especially pirates and seafarers.

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The history of Chinese piracy also extends past the dominant historical narrative, which mostly concentrates on top-down history, or the history of the imperial courts and the emperors. The name "water people" (*shuishangren*), which signified a second-class citizen in the land-centric state, shows how the seafarers were seen derogatorily in agrarian communities where land promised economic wealth and social status. The history of common people who lived on land was typically sparse, but the history of outcasts like pirates was much less common. As a result, the author tries to write this book from the perspective of regular mariners and pirates by delving deeply into their daily lives and the causes that motivated them to become pirates.

This book's main objective is "to investigate the world of the seafarers and pirates," as well as their crucial role in marine and coastal communities during the late imperial period. As an alternate history of China, the author concentrates on the lives of pirates and their piratical activities. The extreme change brought on by the overcrowding and unequal economic distribution in coastal communities had an impact on Chinese residents and littoral communities in South China, particularly in Fujian and Guangdong province. Understanding piracy in South China provides a dynamic picture of societal changes caused by economic growth, demographic increase, poverty, malnutrition, displacement, conflict, violence, and criminality. The perception of piracy was not solely negative, as it played a significant role in depicting the expansion of trade along the coast. Contrary to popular belief, the author makes the case that piratical activities helped spread products and people and created new marketplaces. Additionally, piracy provided disenfranchised fishermen, sailors, and small-scale merchants with an opportunity to participate in the wider marine economy.

The Qing imperial court accounts, unpublished palace memorials, routine memorials, imperial edicts, official record books, authorized official gazetteers, and some primary accounts recorded by Western captives of Chinese pirates are among the extensive primary and archival sources the author consulted in Beijing and Taipei. In the cultural section, the author gathered ethnographic data about pirates' local customs, beliefs, habits, and cultural rules. To paint a fuller picture of piracy, the author also included drawings of pirate life and maps, as well as tables and charts documenting piratical operations.

The book mostly delivers from a pirate-centric viewpoint and frequently demonstrates sympathy for the pirates. As stated in the introduction, the main contention of this book is that "contradictions inherent in maritime society in the mid-Qing period fostered conflict, violence, and predation in the form of large-scale piracy characterized by preponderance of poor seafarers engaging in crime as a means of survival". The author cites the immense riches that was intermittently allocated between merchants, mandarins, shopkeepers, peasants, and fishermen as the main cause that led a large number of the impoverished to join the pirates. Pirates were the only option for survival and escape from poverty. Therefore, piracy must be inevitably seen as an integral component of the maritime community. Being pirates was mostly a result of their struggle for existence and their intertwined alternative lives on the sea and in coastal villages.

In order to understand the social history of the poor, marginalized, and criminalized people, the author asserts that it must go beyond "the Confucian-dominated stereotypes" imposed by Chinese courts, such as lifestyles, beliefs, rituals, and gender ideals. Though these seafarers undoubtedly engaged in land-based culture, the author contends that their sociocultural environment was nonetheless distinct from that of the inland population. Both seafarers and pirates belonged to the seafarers' society, which had unique slang, pastimes, sexual customs, and religious views from the group on land. The author posits that the distinctive rituals and practices of the mariners were a culture of alienation and resistance.

The book consists of eight chapters. The first chapter, titled "Prelude: The Empresses of Heaven Save Dianbai," provides a summary of the study and explains the significance of piracy in the South China coastline waters. In chapters two and three, "Waves of Piracy in Late Imperial China" and "Prosperity and Poverty in Maritime South China," the social and economic context of the maritime region throughout the Ming and Qing dynasties and the transitional period is mostly discussed. Three waves of piracy are distinguished by the author. The first wave of piracy (between 1522 and 1574) was prompted by the Ming court's ban on maritime trade, which led to the transformation of renowned merchants into pirates. The second wave (1620–1684) emerged from the transitional period between the Ming and Qing dynasties, which was increasingly internationalized and politicized. The third wave (between 1790 and 1810), the time on which this book focuses, was characterized by the reappearance of widespread piracy

in South China as a result of economic instability and hardships endured by a large number of common people. Due to big natural disasters, the nature of piracy had evolved significantly since the past. The author notes that the pinnacle of piracy occurred amid periods of political instability and the rise of rebellions. Another element that contributed to the acceleration of piracy was the problem of classes, which illustrates the contradiction between the wealthy and the poor. Overpopulation, scarcity and starvation, high food prices, exploitation, and low salaries compelled the poor to become pirates in search of a better life.

The four major chapters of this book—Chapter 4: "Fishermen, Sailors, and Pirates," Chapter 5: "Pirate Brutality and Hegemony," Chapter 6: "Piracy and Seafaring Society," and Chapter 7: "The Cultural World of Seafarers and Pirates"—examine the life of pirates in great detail, covering their personal lives, their social interactions and structures, as well as their cultural world and beliefs. According to the author, there were three key aspects of Chinese piracy during this time: 1) most pirates were impoverished fishermen and sailors who came from similar socioeconomic backgrounds and could not support themselves solely through their jobs; 2) most pirates were occasional, not professional, and 3) piracy gangs frequently contained captives who had been coerced into serving the pirates. In addition, women pirates had more freedom than those who lived on the coast and might cooperate with male pirates in their activities. Regarding pirates' typical mode of operation, the author provides several specifics, including boat technology and operating strategies. To maintain their control over the weak captives, pirates employed brutality and violence. By creating tax offices to collect ransoms and tribute payments, pirates had an impact on the coastal villages. The cooperation and assistance came from the coastline and the pirate nests found practically anywhere, not necessarily in the hinterland or a remote region, but also in close proximity to the seats of state power. Pirate social customs and cultural practices are also reflected in Mazu Goddess' supernatural and superstitious beliefs. Sexual practices, such as heterosexual and homosexual relationships, and amusement activities, such as gambling and prostitution, also exemplified the pirate lifestyle.

By drawing comparisons between Chinese pirates and Western mariners and pre-colonial banditry, the author also makes an effort to present Chinese piracy as a component of world piracy in the concluding chapter. The author explains how Chinese

pirates differed from Western pirates in that they were more democratic and egalitarian in nature. The Chinese pirates were driven mostly by economic necessity. Piracy also played a significant role in forming the culture and society of seafarers.

The author asserts that the internal factor was the most important in driving up the number of pirates, despite mentioning that this book makes a different argument from Dian Murray's work, which contends that the increase in pirates was caused by the external conditions of the seafaring situation between South China and Vietnam. While Murray meticulously illustrates the piracy organization, Antony proposes smaller pirate groups. However, the specifics of pirate life in Murray's and Antony's accounts were comparable. Some aspects in this book require clarification, notably the extent to which pirate groups were interconnected or coordinated and how to prove that women pirates were more pleasant than land-dwelling ladies. In addition, it remains unclear to what extent the pirates integrated the Vietnamese and other littoral communities as far as the Lower Mekong. Because Chinese migrants also went to Southeast Asia before and during the time period that this book focuses on, how we could explain this occurrence suggests that piracy was not the only option for the poor.

The author successfully delivers a valuable study of pirates, focusing on the significance of pirates who were marginalized from the standpoint of central power. This book serves as a reminder of both the ground-level history and the internal dynamics between economic and social transformation that influenced the history of the sea. The author broadens the new research boundary, particularly in Asian history, which was much more centered on the land-based agrarian society.

### References

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