



Macao, 1835-36. (General Research Division, The New York Public Library. "Schets van het Schier Eiland Ou-Moon, de Ty-Pa en de haven van Macao." New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed June 9, 2018).

The Pirates of Macao in Historical Perspective

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ABSTRACT: The history of Macao is closely associated with piracy. It is often said that the Portuguese acquired Macao as a result of helping the Chinese Ming government suppress piracy in the area in the 1550s. Yet some Chinese sources claim that actually the Portuguese were pirates who kidnapped Chinese women and children to sell into slavery. While there is a good bit of truth in both stories, the undeniable fact is that the waters around Macao had always been notorious for piratical activities. Even centuries before the Portuguese settled Macao neighboring islands served as pirate bases. One of the earliest pirates was Huang Yi, who had strongholds on Montanha and Dom Joao islands in the 14th century. But perhaps the most notorious pirate was Zhang Baozai who operated out of bases in Taipa and other nearby islands in the first decade of the 19th century. In the early 20th century a female pirate known as Lai Choi San was dubbed the “Queen of Macao pirates” in Western accounts. While Macao is certainly important for its multiculturalism and as a bridge between East and West, nonetheless piracy reveals another important but darker side of the city’s history.

KEYWORDS: Pirates; Zhang Baozai; Zheng Yi Sao; Lai Choi San; Portugal; Fanny Loviot.

Among the archival records on Macao there is the confession of a man who was arrested for piracy in 1830. His story reveals vividly the nature, organization, and social backgrounds of the sorts of pirate

gangs that operated in the South China Sea at that time. Here is what the prisoner, Zhang Runsheng, confessed:

I am 34 years old, a native of Guishan County (Guangdong). Both of my parents are dead and I have no brothers. I'm married to a woman named Zeng. Normally I'm a hired worker on a boat, but last year (1829) in the 7th lunar month I came to Macao, and am now out of work. On the 16th day of this month (first lunar month, 1830), an acquaintance named Dou Pi Guang, whose surname I don't know, came to Xinhui County [to see me]. He told me how to get rich [and] I agreed. We [afterwards] ran into Ya Hei Zai and Liu Yahai, who had a small boat; on board were seven

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sailors: Moluo, Yazhang, Yaliu, and five others [I] don't know the names of, and three Western devils and one black devil. We had a total of 15 men. On board the boat were rattan shields and ... knives.

On the 16th we set off in the boat and arrived at Shizimen, where we spotted a foreign sampan [in the distance] along the shoals, transporting goods. We began to follow it. Then on the 19th or 20th, I don't remember, we arrived at sea eastward of Lingding. We [now] drew in close. That Dou Pi Guang, Liu Yahai and Ya Hei Zai grabbed rattan shields; I picked up a knife and that black devil, Moluo, and the other sailors also grabbed knives and weapons, and we boarded the [victim's] boat. There were six foreigners and one Chinese aboard the sampan. After killing them [we] threw them into the sea. In the sampan's hold were two small cannons, but we didn't remove them.

We [then] sailed our small boat back to Nanwan where we anchored. The three foreign devils on board our boat got seven boxes of opium [from the loot]. I and the other eleven Chinese got seven boxes of opium. I and the other Chinese divided our seven boxes into 18 shares; each share weighed 40 jin of opium. I got one share of 40 jin. I gave Dou Pi Guang and Zui You 20 jin to sell for me and gave them the other 20 jin as payment for their service.

That Ya Hei Zai and Dou Pi Guang kept six [boxes?] of opium at Zui You's place. That Zui You had a small opium den in Xinweiwei. That Dou Pi Guang is a Tanka from Macao; he's about 30 years old. Liu Yahai, I don't know where he's from, is about 30. Ya Hei Zai is a Tanka from Macao and is in his 20s. Moluo is in his 40s. Yazhang is in his 20s. Yaliu is also in his 20s and is pockmarked. They are all Tanka.¹

What important features of piracy can we learn from this case? And what does this case reveal about Macao and its connections with piracy? First, although there occasionally were large, well-organized gangs and even huge pirate leagues, more typically pirates organized themselves into small, ad hoc gangs, like the one mentioned above. Second, most pirates were in their 20s and early 30s, highly mobile, poor, and unemployed or chronically underemployed

sailors and fishermen. Third, gangs were composed of a large mix of individuals that included both professional and amateur pirates, as well as Chinese and foreigners. If it is true that Macao served as an important arena for multiculturalism and the harmonizing of East and West, it is equally true that the persistent and ubiquitous existence of piracy in and around the city reveals another important, but much darker, side of Macao's history. This short essay will discuss this dark side of Macao's history and development.

Piracy was intimately tied to the history and development of Macao. It is often said that the Portuguese acquired Macao as a result of helping the Chinese Ming government suppress piracy in the area in the 1550s. Yet some Chinese sources claim that actually the Portuguese were pirates who kidnapped Chinese women and children to sell into slavery. While there is a good bit of truth in both stories, the undeniable fact is that the waters around Macao had always been notorious for piratical activities.²

Macao's reputation as an open and friendly port was well known to everyone. After the Portuguese settled Macao in 1557, the city grew rapidly and served as an important trading hub for Portugal, China, and Japan, especially in the 17th century. By 1640 the city had an estimated population of 26,000 people, of which only 1,200 were Portuguese. By then Macao had already become a predominantly Chinese city, though the city's political administration and ruling class remained Portuguese. Ostensibly under Portuguese management, nonetheless the city and its Chinese population were subject to Chinese laws. In fact Portugal had not occupied Macao as a colony but rather as a leased territory from the Ming and Qing governments.³ This mixed jurisdictional arrangement also made it easy for Macao to become a haven for pirates and other dissidents. Because the Portuguese were always a small minority in the city and because their main interests were making money and proselytizing the Catholic religion, the Portuguese showed little interest in suppressing piracy, especially as long

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as pirates could help the city's economic growth. Like other pirate havens in other parts of the world, Macao too had its fair share of taverns, brothels, gambling parlors, opium dens where pirates congregated to relax, exchange information, sell booty, refit their ships and recruit new gang members.⁴ During the height of piracy in the early nineteenth century, Zhang Baozai and other pirate bosses openly operated "tax bureaus" in Macao where they collected ransom payments and protection fees.⁵

The geographical and ecological environment were, in fact, conducive to piracy in the region. Besides the Macao peninsula itself, Taipa, Coloane, and the many other islands that peppered the Pearl River estuary had for centuries served as pirate bases. This area, especially in and around Macao, was a veritable maritime frontier where it was easy for unlaw-

ful, clandestine activities to mingle with more peaceful, legitimate pursuits. The lower West River and the so-called Crossgate (Shizimen 十字門) at its entrance were the major arteries for the innumerable trading and fishing junks coming to and leaving from the inner harbor of Macao (Porto Interior). Located along this busy thoroughfare were the islands of Coloane (Guoluhuan) and Taipa (Danzai) on the eastern bank, and Montanha (Greater Hengqin 大橫琴), Dom João (Lesser Hengqin 小橫琴), and Lappa (Duimianshan 對面山) on the western bank. Because of the disputed jurisdictions and inadequate policing provided by either China or Portugal, these islands (and many others in the estuary) provided pirates, smugglers, and other dissidents safe havens free from the close scrutiny of any state. In short, as several scholars have pointed out, because of the unresolved issues between Portugal

Male and Female Members of Lai Choi San's Gang, c. 1930. (Photo Collection, The Hague, ca. 1930). (accessed 16 June 2018).



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and China over the sovereignty of the islands, pirates were able to take advantage of the dispute to establish lairs on these islands.⁶ (Map 1)

Even centuries before the Portuguese settled Macao in the late 1550s neighboring islands served as pirate bases. Although pirates were undoubtedly active in the waters around Macao since ancient times, the earliest accounts of pirates in this area only date from the late Yuan dynasty (1271-1368) when official documents depicted the depredations of Huang Yi, a pirate boss who was based on Montanha and Dom João islands. As with pirates centuries later his gang was involved in a multitude of nefarious activities, including robbery, kidnapping, and murder, in the Pearl River estuary and on the coast.⁷ In the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties piracy in this region reached unprecedented heights, with perhaps the most

famous pirate being Zhang Baozai, who had strongholds on both Taipa and Coloane (and elsewhere in the Pearl River delta) in the first decade of the nineteenth century. He was the son of a Tanka (Dan) fishing family in Jiangmen, and became a pirate after being abducted by the powerful pirate chief, Zheng Yi, when he was teenager. He slowly made his way up the ranks and after Zheng Yi's sudden death in 1807, with the help of Zheng Yi's widow, Shi Xianggu (see below), together they commanded the Red Banner fleet, which at its height of power came to number nearly 20,000 pirates and several hundred ships. But suddenly in 1810 they surrendered to the Qing government. Afterwards Zhang Baozai became an officer in the Qing navy and was instrumental in defeating the other pirates along the Guangdong coast. He died a natural death in 1822, still a young man in his early 30s.⁸

After 1810 never again would Chinese waters see such huge pirate leagues. But piracy persisted, with a marked upsurge between 1840 and 1870, prompting one foreign skipper to describe this period as a piratical "reign of terror." The political anarchy brought on by the Opium War (1839-1842) and the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1865) provided new opportunities for this upsurge in piracy. During the Opium War numerous Chinese junks acted as privateers and once the war ended many of them became outright pirates. It was said that pirates easily purchased all the firearms they needed in Macao, Hong Kong, and Singapore. Many opportunistic and well-armed gangs of Chinese pirates regularly plied the waters between Macao and Southeast Asia, attacking both native craft and foreign merchantmen.⁹ In January 1854, for example, the Portuguese warship Amazonas, stationed at Macao, captured a gang of notorious Chinese pirates who were operating near Macao.¹⁰ Another famous instance of piracy was the capture in October 1854 off Macao of the South American ship Caldera bound for California. Among the passengers taken prisoner and held for ransom was a French woman, Fanny Loviot, who later wrote about her harrow-



The Pirate Zhang Baozai . Yuan Yonglun袁永纶, Jinghai fenji 靖海氛记 (Canton, 1820).



Piratas prisioneiros

Captured pirates on Coloane Island, 1910. Machado, Alvaro de Mello. *Coisas de Macau* (Lisboa: Livraria Ferreira, 1913).

ing experience in a popular adventure book called *A Lady's Captivity among Chinese Pirates*. Only after several weeks in captivity was she rescued by the British Royal Navy stationed in Hong Kong.¹¹

Adding to the turmoil of Chinese piracy was the appearance once again of foreign piracy along the China coast. European and American renegades, runaway slaves, and the so-called “Manilla-men” from the Philippines occasionally joined with native pirates or formed gangs of their own. In 1852 six Portuguese sailors were hanged in Hong Kong for piracy.¹² In another

notorious case, in April 1865, the Portuguese-flagged *lorcha* *Maria del Carmo*, under the command of Captain Machado, had engaged in at least two piracies in collaboration with several Chinese piratical vessels off the Fujian coast. Later four Portuguese and one Spanish seamen were captured by the British gunboat *Bustard* and brought back to Hong Kong for trial, where they were convicted of murder and piracy.¹³ Decades later, in the early twentieth century, there were still reports that Portuguese sailors from Macao had joined bands of Chinese pirates to rob ships and villages in

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the lower Pearl River delta. The fact is that a number of gangs of pirates in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were multi-ethnic and multi-national in composition, being often composed of mixed crews of Chinese, Portuguese, Japanese, Southeast Asians, and Africans.¹⁴

In the last half of the nineteenth century, there also were gangs of Portuguese sailors, working in conjunction with several Macao merchants, who, under the pretense of providing convoy services for coastwise shippers, extorted protection fees that earned for them \$50,000 to \$200,000 annually. They openly robbed and murdered anyone who did not comply with their demands. According to George Cooke, the London Times correspondent in China, the crews of these so-called convoys committed the “most frightful atrocities,” burning down villages, kidnapping women and murdering their menfolk. “They became infinitely greater scourges than the pirates they were paid to repel.”¹⁵

While most scholarly and popular depictions of piracy tend to focus on sensational and large-scale incidents of maritime violence perpetrated by professional gangs of pirates, such cases were the exceptions and not the rule. In fact, typical acts of piracy mostly involved petty, small-scale gangs that engaged in a variety of crimes, including robbery, extortion, and kidnap for ransom, much like the Zhang Runsheng case in 1830 mentioned at the start of this essay. Although occasionally Western vessels were assaulted, most attacks were against small Chinese trading and fishing junks and unprotected villages along the coast, offshore islands, and internal rivers. In fact, most pirates were part-time armatures, not professional criminals. They came largely from the working class of poor fishermen and sailors, and the great majority were unmarried and in their mid-20s and early 30s.¹⁶

On occasion small piratical incidents, however, escalated into larger affairs. One of the most famous cases of piracy took place in 1910, when gangs of pirates on Coloane Island kidnapped dozens



Movie Poster “Angry Sea and Good Pirates,” 1993. Author’s Copy.

of school children and held them for ransom. This incident gained international attention as it became embroiled in the delicate issue of sovereignty over the island between China and Portugal. The kidnapping incident on Coloane in the summer of 1910 began as just another petty piracy perpetrated by one or more of the small gangs on the island, but because of the intervention of the Portuguese government at Macao it developed into a large-scale incident involving several hundreds of pirates, villagers, and soldiers. In response, in July, the Portuguese Macao government sent gunboats and soldiers to the island, and after a fierce battle and several skirmishes that lasted weeks, the Portuguese declared a victory. Hundreds of people suspected of being pirates had been killed in the fighting and perhaps another hundred men, women, and children had been arrested.¹⁷

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Despite protests from the Chinese government, Portugal insisted that their presence on Coloane was needed to protect the island and surrounding areas from pirates. The Portuguese therefore stayed and the island became a part of Macao. To commemorate the victory over the pirates the Portuguese government in Macao erected a stone monument on the island at the head of St. Francis Xavier Square and made 15 July a public holiday. However, for many local villagers on the island, even to today, the Portuguese attack resulted in the “massacre” of many innocent villagers and fishermen, not only pirates.¹⁸

Unlike in the West, women have always played integral roles in seafaring in South China. Many Dan (Tanka) and other subethnic groups of “water people” (shuishangren) lived their entire lives aboard boats. The water was home to the entire family. For many seafaring women, just as for men, pirating came naturally and was simply a part of their everyday life. Some women married (both voluntarily and by force) into the pirate profession while others were born into it. One of the most famous female pirates was Shi Xianggu (Miss Fragrant Stone), better known today as Zheng Yi Sao (Wife of Zheng Yi). She originally was a Dan prostitute who married the powerful Cantonese pirate Zheng Yi, and later after his death in 1807, took over command of his pirate fleet with the help of Zhang Baozai. Together they terrorized the waters around Macao until their surrender to the Qing government in 1810. According to local legend, the surrender came about because of squabbles and dissention among the two most powerful pirate bosses. At the heart of the dissention was Zheng Yi Sao, who became the object of rivalry between Zhang Baozai and another powerful chief named Guo Podai, leader of the formidable Black Banner fleet. In fact, in January 1810, the two male pirate leaders clashed in a brief battle in the Pearl River estuary near Macao. Although the battle was indecisive, soon afterwards Guo Podai surrendered to the government, and not too long after that Zheng Yi Sao negotiated with the provincial authorities for the sur-

render of the Red Banner fleet, which she and Zhang Baozai jointly commanded. After much haggling the surrender was accomplished in April 1810.

After retiring from the pirate trade, Zheng Yi Sao moved on shore to Macao, where she reportedly operated a gambling parlor and opium den in the district known as Shalitou. Later she moved to Canton where she continued to run gambling and opium establishments until her death in 1844.¹⁹ Yet even after her death, she has lived on in legends. Her life, adventurous exploits, and her sordid love affairs, have been told and retold many times in oral folktales, novels, and in movies. One of the latest was the highly popular 1993 Hong Kong movie called “Angry Sea and Good Pirates” (*Nuhai xiadao* 怒海俠盜), an adventurous and romanticized tale about Zheng Yi Sao and Zhang Baozai.

Another equally famous female pirate was Lai Choi San, who was born and grew up on the waters around Macao in the early part of the twentieth century. Unlike Zheng Yi Sao, who had married into the pirate profession, Lai Choi San had been born into it. Growing up on ships, as journalist Aleko Lilius explained, “her father used to take her with him on his trips along the coast. . . . And now she loved the sea.” Her family members were all notorious pirates and



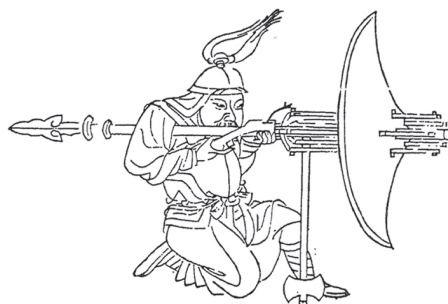
Portuguese Monument Commemorating Victory over the Pirates of Coloane. Machado, Alvaro de Mello. *Coisas de Macau* (Lisboa: Livraria Ferreira, 1913).

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smugglers around the Macao and Hong Kong area. They controlled Macao's lucrative fishing industry through a systematic and extensive protection racket that was shielded by close connections with local officials and businessmen. When her father died, Lai Choi San inherited the family trade. She became so powerful that she was called the "Queen of Macao Pirates."²⁰ In the 1930s and 1940s, she became immortalized in the West as the quintessential "Dragon Lady" in the highly popular syndicated cartoon *Terry and the Pirates*.

Besides these two famous female pirates of Macao, of course, there were many other women among the male pirates. Unfortunately we know very little about them. What we can surmise is that they were able to survive in a male-dominated society because they proved themselves to be as capable as men in battle and in their duties aboard ship. In many cases they even surpassed their male crewmates. Women were not merely tolerated by male shipmates, but, as we have noted above, actually took active leading roles aboard the pirate ship. Their example offered an important alternative image of womanhood in Chinese history, one that challenged and contradicted the ideals of dominant patriarchal Confucian society. Among the pirates, females represented a dangerous "other" and the most radical departure from dominant society on land.

Let me end where I began, it is often said that the city of Macao was founded because of piracy. It is hard to imagine but just forty years ago pirates still infested the waters between Macao and Hong Kong, and kept lairs on the many islands that dot the delta. Back then ferries took four hours to make the crossing, and they had to protect themselves against pirates with iron grills enclosing the bridge and Sepoy guards armed with Winchester rifles. Today, although newspapers occasionally report petty piracies of fishing boats along the South China coast, pirates are no longer a serious threat to commerce or life in and around Macao. While piracy in Chinese waters may be mostly something of the past, pirates nevertheless live on in legends, folklore, movies, and popular imagination. Often ignoring the facts, writers, journalists, and tour guides have used and misused pirates in many interesting ways. We can still hear stories in Macao about Zhang Baozai, Zheng Yi Sao, Lai Choi San, and the pirates of Coloane. The irony, of course, is that a society which has worked so diligently to eliminate piracy has in the end immortalized the very same condemned pirates as folk heroes. Even in death pirates still defy authority. **RG**



NOTES

- 1 Liu Fang 劉芳 and Zhang Wenqin 章文欽, eds., *Qingdai Aomen Zhongwen dang'an huibian* 清代澳門中文檔案彙編 [Collection of Chinese archival documents on Macao in the Qing period] (Macau: Macau Foundation, 1999), 1: 344.
- 2 Among the numerous studies on the Portuguese acquisition of Macao see for example, Manuel Teixeira, *Primórdios de Macau* (Macau: ICM, 1990); Rui Manuel Loureiro, *Em busca das origens de Macau* (Lisbon: Grupo de Trabalho do Ministério da Educação para as Comemorações dos Descobrimentos Portugueses, 1994); W. Robert Usellis, *As Origins de Macau—The Origin of Macao* (Macau: Museu Marítimo de Macau, 1995). In Chinese see Dai Yixuan 戴裔煊, “Guanyu Aomen lishi shang suowei ganzou haidao wenti 關於澳門歷史上所謂趕走海盜問題 [On the question of Portuguese expelling the pirates in Macao's history] (Macau: Aomenx ingguangc hubanshe, 1987); Zhang Ting-mao 張廷茂, “Puren quzhu Aomenhaidao de Ao shuo: yanjiu silude lishi yanbian” 《葡人驅逐澳門海盜得澳說》研究思路的歷史演變 [On the evolution of the historical debate on the Portuguese acquisition of Macao after destroying the pirates], *Review of Culture (Chinese Edition)* 51 (2004), 79-86; and Tang Kaijian 湯開建 and Zhang Zhao 張照, “Ming zhonghouqi Aomen Puren bangzhu Mingchao jiaochu haidao shishi zaikao” 明中後期澳門葡人幫助明朝剿除海盜史實再考 [Historical examination about the Portuguese helping the Ming government destroy pirates in the mid and late Ming dynasty], *Journal of Hubei University (Philosophy and Social Science)* 32.2 (March 2005), 192-197.
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- 4 See the brief discussions in Geoffrey C. Gunn, *Encountering Macau: A Portuguese City-State on the Periphery of China, 1557-1999* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 15-18, 35-37, 87-89; and Jonathan Porter, *Macau: The Imaginary City* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), 47-50, 127-131, 148.
- 5 *Chinese Repository* 3 (1834), 82-83; Hosea Ballou Morse, *The Chronicles of the East India Company Trading to China, 1635-1834* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926-1929), 2: 68; and Robert J. Antony, *Like Froth Floating on the Sea: The World of Pirates and Seafarers in Late Imperial South China* (Berkeley: University of California, Institute for East Asian Studies, China Monograph Series, 2003), 127-129.
- 6 See Manuel Teixeira, *Taipa e Coloane* (Macau: Direcção dos Serviços de Educação e Cultura, 1981), 167, 170; and Zheng Weiming 鄭煒明, *Tanzai Luhuan lishi lunji* 仔路環歷史論集 [Anthology of the history of Taipa and Coloane] (Macau: Cultural Affairs Bureau, 2007), 113-115.
- 7 Yin Guangren 印光任 and Zhang Rulin 張汝霖, *Aomen jilue jiaozhu* 澳門記略校註 [Record of Macao], ed. Zhao Chunchen 趙春晨 (Macau: Macau Cultural Affairs Bureau, 1992), 50.
- 8 On Zhang Baozai, see Antony, *Like Froth Floating on the Sea*, 48-52.
- 9 See Robert Antony, “Pirates, Dragon Ladies, and Steamships: On the Changing Forms of Modern China's Piracy,” in *Beyond the Silk Road: New Discourses on East Asian Maritime History*, Robert Antony and Angela Schottenhammer, eds. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2017), 165-188.
- 10 Macau Archives, AH/AC/P-00037, Processo no. 147 Série P (25 January 1854).
- 11 Fanny Loviot, *A Lady's Captivity among Chinese Pirates in the Chinese Seas*. Trans. by Amelia Edwards (London: Geo. Routledge and Co., 1856).
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- 14 See, for example, Liu Fang and Zhang Wenqin, eds., *Qingdai Aomen Zhongwen dang'an huibian* [Collection of Chinese archival documents on Macao in the Qing period] (Macau: Macau Foundation, 1999), 1: 19, 133-136, 145, 344-345.
- 15 George W. Cooke, *China, being “The Times” Special Correspondence from China in the Years 1857-58* (London: G. Routledge & Co., 1858), 130.
- 16 On the social composition of Chinese pirates, see Robert J. Antony, *Like Froth Floating on the Sea*, chap. 4.
- 17 *Ming Qing shiqi Aomen wenti dang'an wenxian huibian* 明清時期澳門問題檔案文獻匯編 [Collection of archival materials on the Macao question in the Ming and Qing periods], First Historical Archives, Macau Foundation, and Jinan University Research Unit on Ancient Texts, eds. (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1999), 4: 569-572; and Manuel Teixeira, *Os Piratas em Coloane em 1910* (Macau: Centro de Informação e Turismo).
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