

Defending Canton: Chinese Pirates, British Traders, and Hong Merchants, 1780–1810¹

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ABSTRACT: A great upsurge in large-scale piracy between 1780 and 1810 had a tremendous impact on the Canton trade. Provincial officials, Hong merchants, and foreign traders repeatedly acknowledged that pirates, operating from bases scattered throughout the Pearl River Delta, greatly hindered commerce and communications. Several times pirates threatened Canton, each time triggering a great panic in the city. To help defray the high costs of defending the city and surrounding delta, officials called on the Hong merchants to “contribute” money. In fact, whenever the government’s coffers were insufficient, the government levied Hong merchants. Periodic exactions were a fact of life for Canton’s Hong merchants, who were assessed monetary quotas for famine and flood relief, construction and repairs of forts and bridges, and for extraordinary military campaign, such as those against the Guangdong pirates. By the 1780s, contributions to the government were usually paid out in installments from the Hong merchants’ common chest, known as the Consou Fund. This article, which is divided into three sections, examines first, the development of large-scale piracy in the Pearl River Delta in the context of increasingly strained Sino-Western relations; second, the development of a customary contribution system that Qing officials imposed on the Hong merchants and its repercussions on them and the Canton trade; and third, the important role of Hong merchants in the defence of Canton between 1804 and 1810, at the height of the pirate crisis.

KEYWORDS: Canton; Piracy; Imperialism; Hong merchants; East India Company.

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INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1809, Zhang Baozai (1783?–1822) led a fleet of pirates deep into the Pearl River Delta, even reaching as far as the suburbs of Canton. The sudden appearance of large gangs of pirates just outside the provincial capital caused panic among the populace and officials, who hurriedly prepared the city’s defences. Pirates not only challenged the authority of the Qing

state and the welfare of its people, but also disrupted the Canton trade and drew foreign merchants into the fray. As was the custom, officials called on the Hong merchants to “contribute” money to help defray the high costs for the city’s defences. In fact, whenever the government’s coffers and budgets were insufficient the Hoppo and other high-ranking provincial officials levied Hong merchants. Periodic exactions were a fact of life for Canton’s Hong merchants, who were assessed monetary quotas for famine and flood relief, construction and repairs of forts and bridges, and for extraordinary military campaign, such as those against the Guangdong pirates and the White Lotus rebels who were active in central China at this time. By the 1780s, contributions to the government were usually paid out in installments from the Hong merchants’ common chest, known as the Consoo Fund.

This article, which is divided into three sections, examines first, the development of large-scale piracy in the Pearl River Delta in the context of increasingly strained Sino-British relations; second, the development of a customary contribution system that Qing officials imposed on the Hong merchants and its repercussions on them and the Canton trade; and third, the role of Hong merchants in the defence of Canton between 1804 and 1810, at the height of the pirate crisis. Building on a large body of previous studies this article focuses specifically on piracy and the impact it had on the pre-Opium War Canton trade, and in particular how piracy drew Hong merchants and British traders into the war against pirates. Map 1 depicts Canton and the Pearl River Delta during the time of the pirate disturbances in the first decade of the nineteenth century.

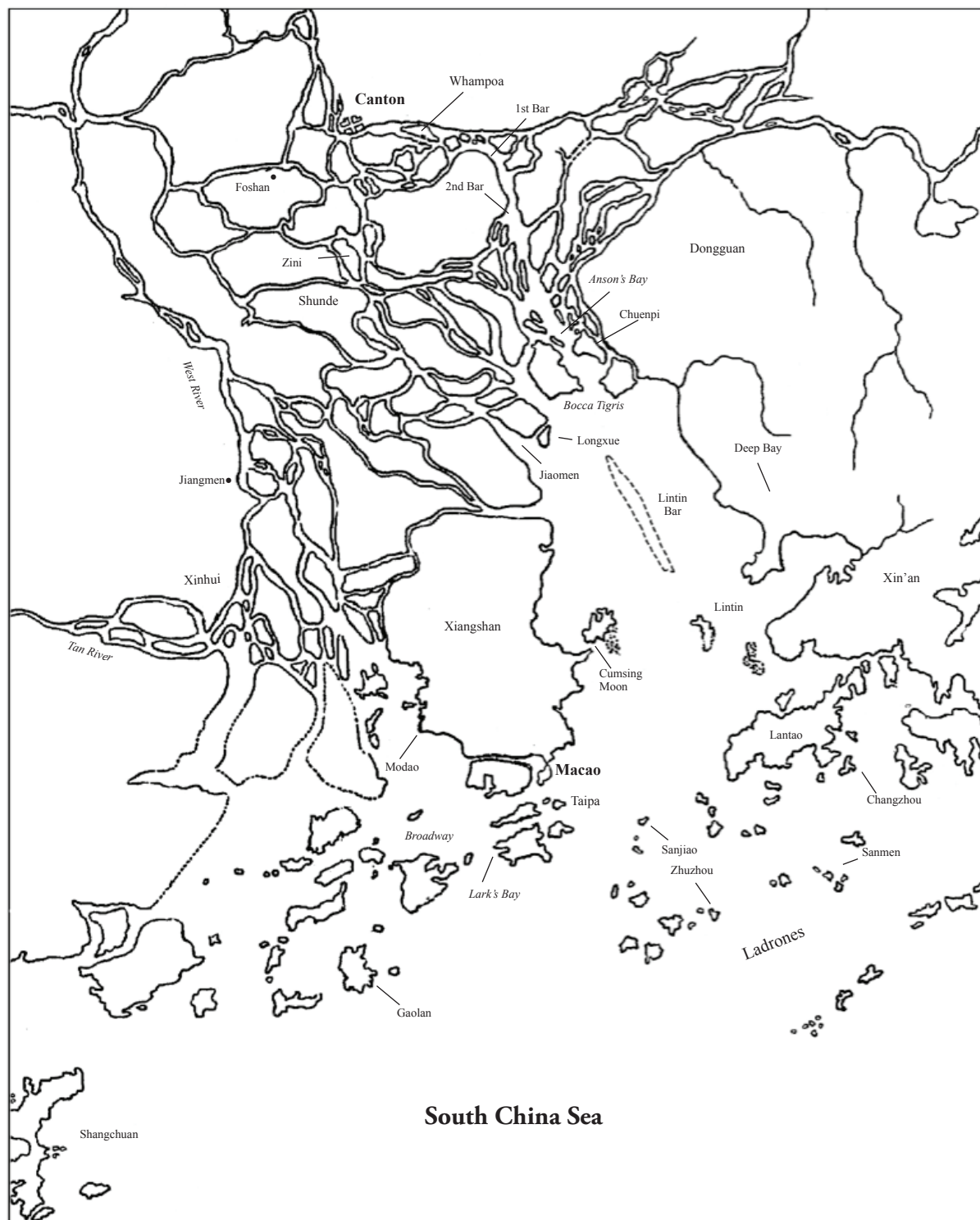
TROUBLED WATERS

Internal rebellions and foreign wars did not begin suddenly in the mid-nineteenth century with the Opium Wars (1839–1860) and Taiping Rebellion (1850–1865). Troubles actually started over half a century earlier with a series of escalating conflicts

both inside China and along its fringes. Internally, the most serious threat to Qing stability came from the massive White Lotus sectarian rebellion that erupted in central China in 1795 and took ten years to quell, resulting in the devastation of the regular army and the near bankruptcy of the national treasury. In the meantime, there were two Triad-led uprisings, the Lin Shuangwen Rebellion in Taiwan (1786–1788) and the Hakka-Tiandihui Rebellion that occurred less than a hundred miles from Canton between 1802 and 1803. There were also several ethnic uprisings, most notably by the Miao (1795–1806) in the mountainous Sichuan–Guizhou–Hubei borderland and by the Li (1803–1804) on remote Hainan Island. Between 1780 and 1810, all along the southern maritime frontier from Zhejiang to Vietnam several huge pirate leagues rose up to effectively challenge the state’s control over the littoral. Externally, the Qing dynasty became embroiled in the civil war in Vietnam (Annam) with an ill-conceived invasion in 1788 that attempted to crush the Tây Sơn Rebellion (1771–1802) and restore the Lê dynasty. At about the same time, in faraway Europe the Great Wars (1793–1815), associated with the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, became worldwide conflicts that spilled over into Asian seas, and in their wake left Britain the predominant maritime and imperial power. These domestic and foreign conflicts, though seemingly fragmented and disparate, were in fact closely interlocked in various ways to piracy and the Canton trading system.

Among these many troubles, piracy posed the greatest persistent and direct threat to Canton, especially between the years 1804 and 1810, when pirates were at the height of power in the Pearl River estuary. Officials, Hong merchants, and Western traders all feared that the security of Canton itself was endangered by the increasingly daring pirate attacks on towns and shipping in the Delta. Countless lives were lost and property damaged at the hands of pirates. With upsurges in piracy occurring during peaks in the trading season (roughly July to January)

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Map 1. Canton and the Pearl River Delta, c. 1804.

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increasing numbers of Chinese trading junks and Western merchantmen were put at risk, and when ships did not arrive at Canton there was insufficient hard cash to purchase cargo and repay debts. Pirates also interfered in the flow of tea, opium, cotton, tin, and other commodities, causing serious drops in sales and consequently in the profitability of both Chinese and Western merchants. Whenever staples such as rice and salt did not reach markets, prices skyrocketed and people suffered. Any decrease in the volume of trade forced Hoppo (Customs Superintendents)² and provincial officials to make up the shortfalls by increasing customs duties on foreign ships and putting pressure on Hong merchants to contribute funds to fight pirates and to open soup kitchens to feed the needy.³

The great upsurge in Chinese piracy began in the 1780s and came about largely because of the support of Tây Sơn insurgents in Vietnam, who needed capable fighters for their navy. The rebel camp provided pirates with safe harbours, ships, and weapons, and in return pirates provided their sponsors with desperately needed manpower and revenues. Each spring and early summer, availing themselves of the southwest monsoons, Chinese pirates set off from their bases in northern Vietnam to plunder shipping and settlements on the south China coast, and returned to their bases in the late autumn. Their most valued targets were large Chinese trading junks and Western merchantmen; in 1793, for example, pirates captured the Portuguese ship *Flore do Mar* off Macao Roads, killing all but four of its crew. Table 1 lists pirate attacks on foreigners between 1793 and 1810. In that same year (1793), British traders at Lark's Bay complained that their opium ships frequently suffered from pirate attacks, and two years later pirates had brought the opium trade to a complete halt. At about the same time, Chinese officials made their first overtures to the Portuguese government in Macao to cooperate in the suppression of piracy in the Pearl River estuary, and although the Portuguese outfitted ships to cruise for pirates, little was accomplished at that time.⁴ In

the meantime, although Tây Sơn forces drove the invading Qing army from Vietnam in 1788, the fruits of victory were short lived. Aided by French ships and mercenaries led by Catholic missionary Pierre Joseph Pigneau, Tây Sơn adversaries under Nguyễn Ánh slowly gained the upper hand, finally driving the rebels from the capital at Thăng Long (Hanoi) and bringing the uprising to an end in July 1802.⁵

During the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War (1780–1784), several Western countries found themselves entangled in the conflict in Asian waters, chiefly in the form of privateering. In 1781 and 1782, John McClary, skipper of an English country ship from Bengal, indiscriminately seized Dutch, Spanish, and Chinese merchant ships in the China seas. His actions “gave great offense to the Chinese,” who saw him as nothing more than a pirate; even some Europeans complained that he was “little better than a pirate.”⁶ One vessel he plundered was a trading junk near Banka that belonged to Hong merchant Chowqua (Chen Zuguan). Table 2 lists the cargo that McClary took from Chowqua's junk. McClary justified seizing the junk on the grounds that it carried cargo belonging to the Dutch East India Company (VOC). Afterwards when Chowqua claimed compensation of 36,398 taels from the British East India Company (EIC) his request was ignored.⁷ Off the south China coast after McClary seized and scuttled a Spanish sloop bound for Manila, officials in Macao arrested and held him for two months in jail, only releasing him after payment of 70,000 dollars, the assessed value of the sloop. From there he went upriver to Whampoa, where he seized a ship flying Dutch colours. Clearly an affront to China's territorial sovereignty, Canton officials demanded that McClary release the Dutch ship and leave the country. Finally after much discussion and threats from both sides, Hong merchant Poankeequa I (Pan Qiguan) devised a compromise.⁸

The year 1802 was momentous. In that year Hakka rebels in Huizhou prefecture, just east of Canton, staged a Triad uprising that lasted two years

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Table 1
Pirate Attacks on Foreigners, 1793–1810

Date (mm/yyyy)	Place	Particulars	Consequences
--/1793	near Macao	pirates attacked the Portuguese ship <i>Flore do Mar</i>	all but four crew members killed
--/1796	near Macao	a Portuguese ship plundered by pirates	pirates killed all non-Chinese aboard
--/1796	near Macao	pirates attacked British ship <i>Kennett</i>	most of the crew killed
--/1800	Whampoa	pirates attempted to board British schooner <i>Providence</i>	repulsed by schooner's crew
--/1804	Taipa	pirates occupied Taipa anchorage and threatened Macao	reduced Macao to two-day supply of rice
10/1804	near Lintin	pirates disrupted communications between Lintin and Macao	difficulties supplying foreign ships anchored at Lintin
--/1805	near Macao	pirates captured Portuguese brig returning from Manila	several crew held captive for over a year
08/1805	near Macao	chop boat belonging to Dobell and Biddle plundered by pirates	both men barely escaped but all their belongings taken
12/1806	near Macao	John Turner and five Lascars captured by pirates and held for five months	ransom valued at \$6,000 paid to pirates
02/1807	Macao	pirates attempted to land and attacked Guia Fort	repulsed by Macao soldiers
--/1808	near Macao	pirates attacked launch of the British ship <i>Dover</i>	ship escaped with little damage
--/1808	near Macao	pirates captured American schooner <i>Pilgrim</i> on route from Manila	8–9 crewmen held captive for several months
02/1809	near Chuenpi	an officer and two sailors of the <i>Royal George</i> in the ship's yawl attacked by pirates	
02/1809	near Macao	pirates captured Portuguese-flagged brig	pirates refitted brig for pirating; in September the brig was retaken
08/1809	near Macao	pirates attacked American ship <i>Atahualpa</i>	
09/1809	near Macao	pirates captured Richard Glasspoole and six sailors from the <i>Marquis of Ely</i>	ransom of \$4,200 and supplies paid to pirates
09/1809	mouth of Pearl River	pirates blockaded three Siamese tribute junks	
09/1809	near Macao	pirates captured brig belonging to Portuguese governor of Timor	
01/1810	near Whampoa	pirates attacked a small foreign boat	three chests carried away; boat's crew thrown overboard; one Lascar drowned

Sources: "Chinese Pirates" 1834, 71, 79; Glasspoole 1831, 123; Morse 1926, 2: 422–425; 3: 7–8, 32, 63, 95, 116–117, 123; Davis 1836, 1: 82; and Andrade 1835, 34.

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and affected a quarter of the province. The uprising was a particular concern not only to officials but also to the Hong merchants who feared for the security of both Canton and its trade. In fact, the trade in cotton was seriously affected by the unrest and sales dropped sharply when manufacturers in the vicinity of the disturbances abandoned their homes and looms.⁹ In the spring the British government also made its first attempt to occupy Macao, ostensibly to protect the city from a French invasion, as well as from pirates then rampaging the Delta. When the British naval taskforce refused to withdraw from the Pearl River, Jiqing, governor-general in Canton, imposed a strict embargo on British trade and cut off food supplies

for several months, until the British complied in early summer.¹⁰ In the meantime, in Vietnam, when the Tây Sơn Rebellion was finally crushed, the new Nguyễn dynasty (1802–1945) drove the Chinese pirates from their bases on the Sino-Vietnamese border back into Chinese waters where they gradually recuperated.¹¹

Despite setbacks in Vietnam, the pirates continued to grow in strength over the next few years. Numbering in the tens of thousands by 1805, they organised themselves into a loose confederation of six self-contained fleets. Until his death in 1807, Zheng Yi commanded the most powerful fleet that operated in the Pearl River Delta and nearby coast. By 1804, pirates had established anchorages and bases at crucial locations

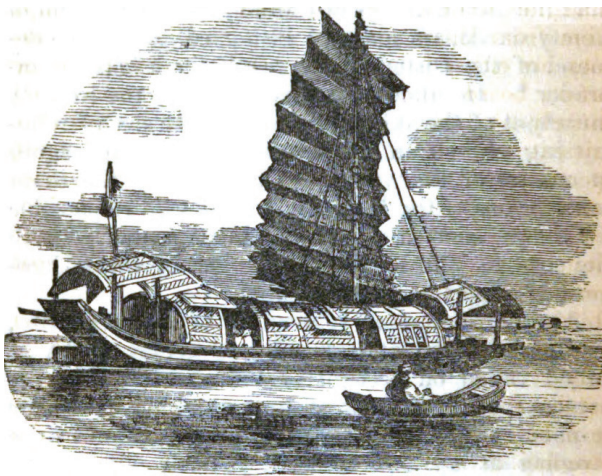
Table 2
Cargo on Chowqua's Junk Taken by Capt. McClary, 1782

Products	Units	Number	Piculs	Taels per picul	Taels
Tutenague (raw zinc)			700.00	6.000	4,200.000
Peko tea	chests	76	55.48	28.000	1,553.440
Hyson tea	chests	53	35.51	50.000	1,775.500
(Hyson) Chulan tea	chests	12	9.60	100.000	960.000
(Hyson) Skins tea	chests	28	15.60	18.415	287.280
Souchon tea	chests	199	149.25	28.000	4,179.000
Campoi tea	chests	38	23.56	20.000	471.200
Congo tea	chests	302	241.60	17.000	4,107.200
Cassia	bags	82	24.60	15.000	369.000
Rhubarb	chests	13	20.80	50.000	1,040.000
Chinaware	tubs	35			4,550.000
Sugar candy & sweet oranges	tubs	121			121.000
Plumbs preserved	tubs	1			20.000
Bohea tea	chests	521			12,764.500
Total			1,276.00		36,398.120

Source: Van Dyke 2011, Appendix 10G.

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in and around the Pearl River estuary: Taipa, Changzhou, Sanmen, Longxue, Jiaomen, Sanjiao, Gaolan, Zhuzhou, Pingshan, Dongyong, and Modao (see Map 1).¹² From their strongholds they extended their hegemony over the fishing, salt, and junk trade, as well as over many markets and villages through a formal protection racket headquartered in Macao and suburbs of Canton. It was reported that even Western merchantmen paid protection fees to pirates.¹³ So relentless had the pirates become that in 1805, British observers lamented about the large number of villages between Canton and Macao that had been looted and burned down by pirates; they also lamented that not a single chest of opium was sold, due in large measure to the marked increase in piracy in the estuary. The EIC reported a year earlier that because piracy had become so rampant that it was unsafe to supply ships in the Pearl River estuary. Around the same time a pirate fleet of about 70 ships blockaded the Broadway (see Map 1), the busy channel at the entrance to the West River, thereby threatening Macao. Also because so many salt junks had been plundered, the cost of salt in Guangdong had risen tremendously over these several years. There too was an increase in pirate attacks on Western vessels trading at Canton, which at times seriously hindered trade.



"Chinese Cargo boat" in John Francis Davis, *The Chinese: A General Description of China and Its Inhabitants*, vol. 2 (London: Charles Knight, 1836). Author's collection.

Although pirates rarely assailed the large, well-armed Indiamen, it was open season on the smaller lighters and passage boats plying the Pearl River between Macao and Canton. Two American merchants, Peter Dobell and George Biddle, barely escaped with their lives when their chop boat was attacked by pirates while en route back to Canton. Then in 1806, pirates attacked a passage boat and kidnapped John Turner, the chief officer of the English merchant ship *Tay*, and five Lascars, who were held for five months until a ransom of over 7,000 dollars was paid.¹⁴

In the autumn of 1804, EIC officers in Canton warned their home office in London and Hong merchants in Canton that unless the pirates were quickly suppressed they would continue to disrupt trade. Indeed, there was an "enormous value of the trade at stake — not less than 20 million taels, import and export — the magnitude of the merchant fleet endangered, valued at 30 million taels, and the Chinese revenue of not less than 1,300,000 taels a year, which would be lost if the trade came to an end."¹⁵ The Portuguese in Macao took the first initiative by twice providing patrol boats to accompany the Chinese naval squadron to fight pirates, but little was accomplished.¹⁶ Next, the British proposed to cooperate with the Chinese navy to suppress pirates in the estuary, but Canton officials dismissed the plea as unnecessary. Disregarding Chinese regulations, in October 1804, three British warships, commanded by Capt. B. W. Page, sent to convoy the homeward-bound Indiamen, anchored in Anson's Bay to better protect supply boats between Lintin and Whampoa (see Map 1). Next year, the EIC Select Committee requested approval from the provincial government for two British warships to be stationed permanently at Macao Roads to protect trade. Although at first this request was declined, soon afterwards the Jiaqing Emperor allowed the warships to temporarily anchor at Lintin and Taipa to protect foreign merchant ships from pirates and to assure that communications between Macao and Lintin would no longer be hindered.¹⁷

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During the next two years, although the Portuguese in Macao continued to cooperate on routine patrols with Chinese forces, the British tended to go it alone.¹⁸ The EIC in 1806 and 1807 employed first the *Antelope* and then the *Discovery* to survey the south China coast and approaches to Canton, as well as to hunt pirates. In the summer of 1807, the British warship *Diana* arrived off Macao purportedly “to aid in suppressing Chinese pirates.” With the war against France raging, armed British ships also engaged in privateering, or as a memorial from Governor-General Wu Xiongguang put it: “they proceed without authority to search and examine” the ships of other countries that came to trade at Canton.¹⁹ They not only boarded foreign ships to search for deserters and to impress sailors into the Royal Navy, but also on several occasions they seized ships as prizes. For example, the *Diana* seized the American schooner *Topaz* in August and the *Discovery* seized the American ship *Mount Vernon* in November.²⁰ At about the same time, Qing naval forces suffered repeated setbacks in campaigns against pirates along the coast and in the Pearl River estuary.²¹ Militarily the pirates had got the upper hand by 1807.

At a time when it became apparent that there was little that the Qing navy, or even a few armed foreign vessels, could do to eradicate piracy in the Pearl River estuary, China’s relations with Britain took a turn for the worse. With Portugal occupied by Napoleon’s army, Britain once again decided to seize Macao ostensibly for its own protection. In September 1808, Admiral William Drury arrived off Taipa with a squadron of nine warships, and soon afterwards landed a detachment of 300 soldiers in Macao against the wishes of the city’s Portuguese government. Governor-General Wu Xiongguang condemned the British armed occupation of Chinese sovereign territory and demanded that Drury immediately withdraw. Instead, Drury deployed another 400 troops and, in an act of calculated provocation, moved three warships into the Bocca Tigris (Humen, see Map 1), purportedly to



“View of the Canton River” in John Francis Davis, *The Chinese: A General Description of China and Its Inhabitants*, vol. 1 (London: Charles Knight, 1836). Author’s collection.

protect foreign trade from pirates. He even threatened to take Canton unless granted a personal audience with the Hoppo and governor-general. In response, Wu Xiongguang ordered an embargo in October and in the next month all food and provisions to British ships and troops were stopped. As tensions mounted, the EIC Select Committee reported rumours that the Chinese had dispatched 5,000 soldiers to expel the British and that fire boats were readied to be sent downriver among the foreign ships. Hostilities seemed eminent. Faced with a possible war and irreparable damage to trade, Drury withdrew from Macao at the end of December.²² Thus, by the end of 1808, the security of Canton faced serious threats from both pirates and British warships that sailed at will in the Pearl River estuary.

There were other incidents that also soured relations with the British. As Hosea Ballou Morse explained, with the Great Wars raging, “belligerents hit out blindly on all sides.” At the height of the Drury debacle, armed British ships repeatedly impressed seamen from American ships anchored at Whampoa. In March 1808, British warships entered Manila Bay and captured as prizes several country ships and two Spanish gunboats. Likewise, the French had seized some 23 English and several Portuguese vessels as

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Table 3
Pirate Invasion of Pearl River Estuary, 1809

Date	Place	Particulars	Consequences
20 July	Weijiamen 桅甲門	Zhang Baozai battled against Brigade-General Xu Tinggui	pirate Zongbing Bao (White Flag) killed; Xu also killed; navy defeated, losing 25 war junks
6–7 Aug.	Xiaolan 小欖 and Hengdang 橫檔	Guo Podai battled against Xiao Shitai	villagers defeated
9–12? Aug.	Zini 紫泥 and Sanshan 三善	Guo Podai attacked government installation and villages in Xiangshan	pirates burnt down customs house, blockaded river, demanded over \$10,000 tribute from villagers, women and children held for ransom, several hundreds of villagers killed
16–26 Aug.	Pingzhou 坪洲, Mazhou 馬洲, Shawan 沙灣, Dieshidun 疊石墩, and Huanglian 黃連	Guo Podai attacked villages in Panyu, Nanhai and Shunde	pirates defeated by local militia and braves
16? Aug.	Xiangshan 香山	Zhang Baozai attacked government post	pirates destroyed fort near Macao and drove Qing war junks further upriver to Huangpu
18–21 Aug.	Baotangxia 寶塘廈	Zhang Baozai attacked village in Dongguan	militia defeated pirates; over 100 pirates killed
23–24? Aug.	Laocun 勞村	Zhang Baozai continued attacks in Dongguan	pirates defeated; over 100 pirates killed and seven leaders captured
27? Aug.	Xintang 新塘	Zhang Baozai attacked village in Zengcheng	
8–10? Sept.	Jiaoxiang 滘鄉 and Dafen 大汾	Zhang Baozai attacked delta islands and villages in Dongguan	pirates killed several thousands of villagers and kidnapped women and children for ransom; Canton declared martial law
14 Sept.	Sisha 四沙 and Xinzao 新造	Zhang Baozai attacked villages and markets in Panyu	pirates defeated by local militia and braves; over 100 pirates killed
15 Sept.	near Huangpu 黃埔	Zhang Baozai battled with two Portuguese war ships	Portuguese defeated
16–20 Sept.	Pearl River Delta 珠江三角洲	naval battle with pirates	combined English and Chinese forces defeated pirates
25–26 Sept.	Shating 沙亭	Zhang Baozai continued attacks in Panyu	pirates burnt down customs house, killed several hundreds of villagers, and kidnapped 400 people; villagers paid \$600 tribute to pirates
1–3 Oct.	Chencun 陳村	Zhang Baozai continued attacks in Panyu	villagers resisted but defeated; over 250 women and children kidnapped for ransom; village burnt down; pirates withdrew after 1,000 braves appeared
5–8 Oct.	Lanshi 瀾石, Ganjiao 乾滘, Beihai 北海, and Fojiao 佛滘	Zhang Baozai continued attacks in Panyu and Nanhai	villagers defeated; nearby military post burnt down; women and children ransomed for over 15,000 taels silver

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20–22 Oct.	near Shawan 沙灣	pirates battled against Commander-in-Chief Sun Chuanmou	pirates defeated naval force
1–2 Nov.	Dahuangpu 大黃埔	Zhang Baozai, Zheng Yi Sao and Guo Podai stepped up attack with over 300 junks	naval forces and villagers defeated
4–5 Nov.	Dayushan (Lantau) 大嶼山	Zhang Baozai and Zheng Yi Sao battled with combined Qing and Portuguese force	pirates defeated combined forces
18–28 Nov.	near Dongyong 東涌, near Dayushan	combined Chinese and Portuguese naval forces battled with pirates	pirates defeated combined forces

Sources: *Gongzhongdang zhupi zouzhe* (14559) JQ 14.06.19, (15184) JQ 14.08.23; *Guangzhou fuzhi* (1879) 81: 19a–21b, *Dongguan xianzhi* (1921) 33: 25b–26a; *Xiangshan xianzhi* (1827) 6: 79b, 8: 58b; *Shunde xianzhi* (1853) 27: 4a–b, 20b, 31: 18b–19a; *Panyu xianzhi* (1871) 22: 16b–17a; *Nanhai xianzhi* (1872) 14: 21b–22a; FO 682/483/1 (JQ 14.08.04); Yuan Yonglun, *Jing haifen ji* (1830), 1: 13a–24a; and Andrade 1835, 34–45.

prizes, taking them to the Isle of France.²³ Another victim of privateering was Conseequa (Pan Changyao), a Hong merchant who was involved in the Manila trade. Together with several Fujian merchants, he conveyed a cargo aboard the American ship *Jefferson*, which was bound for Canton when it was seized by the frigate HMS *Dover* on 4 December, and brought first to Macao Roads and then to Lintin or Chuenpi (see Map 1). Conseequa had onboard a considerable amount of silver, some 200 chests valued at 50,000 to 60,000 dollars, which apparently were the proceeds from his business dealings in Manila. In an attempt to regain his losses, Conseequa appealed to the EIC Select Committee, which then referred the request to Admiral Drury, who replied rather tersely that the *Jefferson* was a legal prize under English law and therefore the seizure must be respected. But in fact, as Spanish officials informed the Select Committee in March 1809, the war with Spain had ceased in July, thus making the seizure illegal. Unfortunately, Drury had long since sailed for India, and it seems that Conseequa never received any satisfaction on his claims.²⁴ For Chinese, such as Conseequa, what Europeans called legal acts of privateering must have seemed no different than piracy.

In 1809, Zhang Baozai was the most powerful pirate in Guangdong. As William Hunter later recalled, “Apootsae [Zhang Baozai] had long been one of the most formidable and daring of pirates. He captured many of the Government forts, laid important towns under contribution, put to the sword all who resisted, and was the terror of the Canton authorities. He would sail up the Pearl River the whole length of the city with impunity.”²⁵ Throughout that summer and autumn he and his cohorts repeatedly invaded deep into the Pearl River Delta, openly collecting “tribute” from trading and salt junks, villages, and market towns along the coast and in the delta (see Table 3). In early summer, the pirates disrupted the supply of rice to Canton causing a scarcity and driving costs sky high, and by August pirate junks were harassing boats within five miles of the city. They also posted notices threatening to attack Canton unless a ransom was paid, once again causing panic in the city. Also that month pirates captured the government “chop house” (custom’s station) at Zini (see Map 1), only sixteen miles from Canton, which they held for four months using it as a headquarters for collecting tribute and ransom payments, as well as a staging base for further raids in the Delta.²⁶

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In the meantime attacks on foreign vessels increased precipitously in 1809 (see Table 1). According to John Francis Davis, "It was at this time that the British factory could not venture to move their boats between that place [Canton] and Macao without protection."²⁷ In February, pirates seized a Portuguese-flagged brig and outfitted it as a pirate for cruises around the delta; also that month near Chuenpi pirates robbed an officer and two sailors of the *Royal George* while aboard the ship's yawl. In August, Zhang Baozai's gang attacked the American ship *Atahualpa* near Macao, and in September, in quick order they captured the brig belonging to the Portuguese governor of Timor, blockaded three Siamese tribute junks at the mouth of the Pearl River, and abducted Richard Glasspoole and six sailors from the *Marquis of Ely*, whom they held for nearly three months until a ransom of over 7,000 dollars and provisions was paid.²⁸

The situation was quite bleak. In repeated campaigns in 1808 and 1809, the Qing navy had been nearly decimated, leaving only 14 warships and a few requisitioned merchant junks left to protect Canton. The city seemed defenceless and vulnerable. There was both a pressing need to restore public confidence and revive trading activities that had been interrupted because of piracy. At the same time the bottom dropped out in the foreign market and the supply of silver became rather scarce. As British supercargoes explained, there was an "almost total stagnation of trade" due to the increasing "depredations of the freebooters" in the estuary.²⁹ Although negotiations between the Cantonese authorities and EIC for assistance in suppressing pirates had broken down, an agreement for collaboration was signed in November with the Portuguese. At a fee of 80,000 taels to be paid by provincial officials, the Portuguese government in Macao agreed to supply six cruisers for six months to assist the Chinese navy fight pirates in the Pearl River estuary. Once the Macao Senate exhausted its funds of 12,000 patacas for outfitting the vessels and hiring sailors, it had to make up for the shortfalls by borrowing heavily from local Portuguese

merchants, in particular António Pereira Tovar and Félix José Coimbra. The EIC provided ammunition. By the end of the campaign the Senate had borrowed over 480,000 taels, a debt never repaid to the merchants. The combined Sino-Portuguese taskforce engaged in several undecided skirmishes with Zhang Baozai and other pirates off Lantao Island in December and January.³⁰

Although at the apex of power in 1809, the pirate confederation collapsed within half a year and large-scale piracy suddenly came to an end in China. There are many reasons for the sudden demise of piracy, among them were the strict embargo imposed by the Canton authorities, the lure of lenient amnesties offered by the government, and dissension among the pirate chieftains themselves.³¹ With stalemates on the battlefield, in December newly appointed Governor-General Bailing ordered the posting of notices offering pardons to pirates who surrendered, and monetary rewards and military commissions to top-ranking leaders. Almost immediately several gangs surrendered and in January 1810, Guo Podai, the second most powerful leader in the Pearl River Delta, surrendered and received a sub-lieutenant's commission and a substantial but unspecified monetary reward. By February, after some 9,000 pirates had already capitulated, Zhang Baozai also began negotiating terms of surrender with provincial officials.³² About the same time Zhang met with several British naval officers first at the anchorages at Chuenpi and later at Modao, presenting them safe-conduct passes for British trading ships in return for British non-interference with the pirates.³³ When the fleet of Indiamen with their convoy of British warships took their departure from Chuenpi on 2 March, Zhang's fleet of over 250 junks at anchorage at Longxue Island at the entrance to the Bocca Tigris also got underway. The first round of negotiations had stalled leaving Canton officials, Hong merchants, and foreign traders quite anxious as they believed that "the Ladrones are very indifferent to the proposals of the Viceroy."³⁴ Following a brief period of renewed raids in Xiangshan, Xinning, and

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Xinhui, Zhang Baozai and Bailing met again in April and reached an acceptable agreement. According to official records, a total of 17,318 pirates surrendered, including 5,000 women and children, together with roughly 280 vessels and some 12,000 firearms; the government rewarded Zhang with a naval lieutenant's commission and a subsidy of 18,000 taels a month, and ordered him to subdue the remaining pirates in western Guangdong.³⁵

GRATUITIES OR SQUEEZE

Piracy, rebellions, and wars all disrupted commerce and the profitability of Chinese and Western merchants at Canton. In Guangdong, the provincial government had a heavy responsibility to eradicate piracy, but had inadequate fiscal ability to meet the high costs of military suppression campaigns. Despite earlier efforts during the Yongzheng reign (1723–1735) to reform the fiscal system, throughout the Qing dynasty officials continued to depend on informal sources of revenue to operate their administrations.³⁶ A major source of informal revenue in Guangdong came from the exactions that provincial officials put on Hong merchants. As a result, according to Anthony Chen, “A large portion of the Hong merchants’ disposable profit went into the pockets of the Hoppo, other local officials, and their underlings.”³⁷ As foreign trade grew over the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Hong merchants became targets for official exactions, as well as for the assumption of debts of failed merchants. In fact, as Paul Van Dyke explains, “Meeting the debts of failed merchants, giving annual presents to superiors, and financing periodical government shortfalls were constant drains on merchants’ capital.”³⁸ For Hong merchants, there was always a thin line separating profits and debts.

There was also a thin line between “voluntary contributions” and “squeeze.” As long as exactions were reasonable they were tolerated, but once they became excessive they became criminal. “Because of conflicts between legal norms, fiscal realities, and social

mores,” explains Nancy Park, “many transactions that were banned under the law were tacitly condoned by those within the official culture.”³⁹ Irregular fees served indispensable functions within Qing government and society. Western merchants called exactions “squeeze,” viewing them as evidence of official greed and corruption. According to John Francis Davis, in Canton officials and their underlings used merchants “in the manner of a sponge,” which was “made regularly to yield up its contents, by what is very correctly termed ‘squeeze’.”⁴⁰ Although Chinese referred to exactions colloquially as “base customs” (*lougui*), they were generally treated as customary fees important in creating interpersonal relationships or *guanxi*, the sorts of social networking required in everyday dealings with officials and conduct of business. Contributions were obligatory, but as William Hunter explained, “secured influence and protection” for Hong merchants.⁴¹

Officials levied various types of exactions on Hong merchants. There were those that were imposed on the Hong merchants as a whole and those on individual or several merchants; levies could be annually or irregularly assessed; they could be paid in the forms of commodities or cash. Although in most cases the amounts of exactions could be negotiated, nonetheless merchants were obliged to contribute. While the amounts demanded were generally large, they could be paid in instalments, often over several years. Because the Hoppo knew the gross income and worth of merchants, they had a rough idea about how much each one was able to contribute. Whenever there was an emergency and the government needed money to fill its coffers, Hong merchants could expect to be summoned before the Hoppo or governor-general.⁴² They were required to make contributions for flood and famine relief, for repairs to the embankments of the Yellow, Yangzi, and Pearl Rivers, for construction and repairs of Bogue (Humen) forts, for building or repairing roads, bridges, and public buildings, and for financing military campaigns to quell rebellions and piracy. They paid a standing annual tax of 10,000 taels

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for the Imperial Ginseng monopoly and 55,000 taels for the so-called *Cong Ka*, which was presented to the Emperor each year supposedly in lieu of certain foreign gifts (see below). They were also required to clear the debts of insolvent Hong merchants.⁴³ Table 4 is a partial list of known government exactions on Hong merchants as a whole between 1787 and 1809; there certainly were other mandatory contributions not in this list. In the eighteenth century, between 1787 and 1799, Hong merchants as a group only paid out 920,000 taels in contributions, for an average of roughly 76,600 taels per year.⁴⁴ During the first decade of the nineteenth century, however, the amounts of contributions greatly increased. In 1806, the year that John Turner was captured and held for ransom by pirates and the Qing navy had suffered several devastating defeats at the hands of pirates, the EIC reported that “these gratuities are now established customs to the extent of 3 or 4/M Dollars annually.” Although the source is not explicit, this estimate was likely the total amount assessed on the Hong merchants both as a group and as individuals.⁴⁵

By the 1780s, whenever officials assessed contributions on Hong merchants as a whole, the payments came from the Consoo Fund. Some ten years earlier, Hong merchants had collectively organised, a “common chest” (*gonggui*) kept in the Consoo House, where they regularly held meetings.⁴⁶ The funds were a reserve set aside to defray the costs of government exactions, unpaid customs duties, and debts to foreigners and Chinese creditors. Every merchant had to participate. Although the amounts of funds in the chest fluctuated from year to year, from 1781 to 1829 they ranged between 300,000 and 720,000 taels. The funds mainly derived from special taxes levied on imports and exports of anywhere from 3% to 14% on 69 different items, including tea, camphor, cotton, silk, rock sugar, nutmeg, frankincense, sandalwood, and so on. Foreign merchants objected to the Consoo Fund because the money was obtained from additional levies on foreign

commerce, thereby putting “a severe burthen on the fair trade of Canton.”⁴⁷

Morse once described the Hong merchants as the “milker” of the Canton trade, but then added that they paid heavily for the privilege.⁴⁸ Between 1787 and 1809, based on figures from Table 4, the Consoo Fund paid out a total of at least 4,320,754 taels, a seemingly extraordinary sum of money. The largest amounts of money that the Canton authorities assessed on Hong merchants were during the three years from 1804 to 1806, when they contributed no less than one million taels for mandatory annual fees, repairs of river embankments, military expenditures, and presents for officials. After 1804, Hong merchants were required to make regular contributions for work on the Yellow River, both for repairs of embankments and relief for flood victims; amounts varied from 37,500 to 300,000 taels in any given year.⁴⁹ Mandatory contributions for military expenditures, what Western merchants called *Quan Suie*, amounted to no less than 1,566,666 taels between 1787 and 1806. Military campaigns against the Lin Shuangwen Rebellion (1786–1788) cost the Hong merchants at least 300,000 taels, the Gurkha Rebellion (1788–1792) at least 300,000 taels, and the White Lotus Rebellion (1790–1806) at least 571,666 taels. In 1803, they contributed no less than 100,000 taels for military campaigns to suppress the Triad Rebellion in Huizhou, just east of Canton. Normally, these large amounts of money were paid out in installments over three to twenty years.

Another customary contribution was presents to imperial, provincial, and local officials, as well as their underlings. In China gift-giving has always been an important mechanism for creating interpersonal relationships (*guanxi*) necessary for conducting business. Based on the figures in Table 4, Hong merchants would have paid no less than 1,890,000 taels, including 1,210,000 taels for the annual *Cong Ka* fees, for the 22 years between 1787 and 1809. The average yearly expenditure was 85,910 taels. Besides silver, the Hoppo obliged Hong merchants to provide

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Table 4
Government Exactions on Hong Merchants, 1787–1809

Year	Particulars	Amount (taels)
1787	<i>Cong Ka</i> annual fees for the Emperor	55,000
	Tax for Imperial Ginseng monopoly	10,000
	Military campaigns against the Lin Shuangwen Rebellion in Taiwan	300,000
	Total for 1787	365,000
1792	<i>Cong Ka</i> annual fees for the Emperor	55,000
	Tax for Imperial Ginseng monopoly	10,000
	Military campaigns against the Gurkha Rebellion	300,000
	Total for 1792	365,000
1793	<i>Cong Ka</i> annual fees for the Emperor	55,000
	Tax for Imperial Ginseng monopoly	10,000
	Military Campaigns against disturbances in Fujian and Sichuan	75,000
	Debts to Europeans	42,500
	Presents for the Emperor from the Hoppo	100,000
	Total for 1793	282,500
1796	<i>Cong Ka</i> annual fees for the Emperor	55,000
	Tax for Imperial Ginseng monopoly	10,000
	Military campaigns against the White Lotus Rebellion in Sichuan	25,000
	Debts to Europeans	99,788
	Presents for the Emperor from the Hoppo	100,000
	Total for 1796	289,788
1799	<i>Cong Ka</i> annual fees for the Emperor	55,000
	Tax for Imperial Ginseng monopoly	10,000
	Military campaigns against the White Lotus Rebellion in Huguang	120,000
	Total for 1799	185,000
1800	<i>Cong Ka</i> annual fees for the Emperor	55,000
	Tax for Imperial Ginseng monopoly	10,000
	Military campaigns against the White Lotus Rebellion in Sichuan and Shaanxi	250,000
	Total for 1800	315,000
1801	<i>Cong Ka</i> annual fees for the Emperor	55,000
	Tax for Imperial Ginseng monopoly	10,000
	Military campaigns against the White Lotus Rebellion in Sichuan and Shaanxi	75,000
	Relief work for floods in the vicinity of Beijing	250,000
	Total for 1801	390,000

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1802	<i>Cong Ka</i> annual fees for the Emperor	150,000
	Tax for Imperial Ginseng monopoly	10,000
	Total for 1802	160,000
1803	<i>Cong Ka</i> annual fees for the Emperor	150,000
	Tax for Imperial Ginseng monopoly	10,000
	Military campaigns against the Triad Rebellion in Huizhou, Guangdong	100,000
	Total for 1803	260,000
1804	<i>Cong Ka</i> annual fees for the Emperor	55,000
	Tax for Imperial Ginseng monopoly	10,000
	Repairs of embankments of the Yellow River	200,000
	Military campaigns against pirates in Guangdong	60,000
	Total for 1804	325,000
1805	<i>Cong Ka</i> annual fees for the Emperor	55,000
	Tax for Imperial Ginseng monopoly	10,000
	Military campaigns against the White Lotus Rebellion in Sichuan, Shaanxi, and Huguang	40,000
	Repairs of embankments of Yellow River	37,500
	Construction of warships for suppressing pirates in Guangdong	30,000
	Purchase of armaments for campaigns against pirates in Guangdong	40,000
	Presents for the Emperor from the Hoppo	150,000
	Presents for Mandarins in Beijing	5,400
	Total for 1805	367,900
1806	<i>Cong Ka</i> annual fees for the Emperor	55,000
	Tax for Imperial Ginseng monopoly	10,000
	Military campaigns against the White Lotus Rebellion in Sichuan and Shaanxi	61,666
	Repairs of embankments of Yellow River	37,500
	Construction of warships for suppressing pirates in Guangdong	70,000
	Purchase of armaments for campaigns against pirates in Guangdong	20,000
	Presents for the Emperor from the Hoppo	200,000
	Presents for Mandarins in Beijing	5,400
	Total for 1806	459,566
1808	<i>Cong Ka</i> annual fees for the Emperor	55,000
	Tax for Imperial Ginseng monopoly	10,000
	Repairs of embankments of Yellow River	300,000
	Total for 1808	365,000
1809	<i>Cong Ka</i> annual fees for the Emperor	55,000
	Tax for Imperial Ginseng monopoly	10,000
	Present for Emperor Jiaqing's 60 th birthday	120,000
	Total for 1809	185,000

Sources: Morse 1926, 3: 63; and Chen 1990, 93, 98.

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them with all sorts of European curios, most of which were sent as presents to the Emperor in Beijing. John Barrow, who travelled with the Macartney mission from Canton to Beijing in 1792, observed: “The various toys, automatons, moving and musical figures and Coxe’s museum,⁵⁰ the mathematical and astronomical instruments, clocks, watches, machinery, jewellery, all made in London, and now in the different palaces of the Emperor of China, are said to be valued at no less a sum than two million sterling, all presents from Canton.”⁵¹ Although the presents were normally purchased, but at drastically reduced prices, in 1754 the Hoppo demanded that all of the curios aboard foreign ships be handed over to him *gratis* for presenting to the Qianlong Emperor. At times, the Hoppo required cash payments in lieu of merchandise. The EIC Select Committee reported that Hong merchants had complained that each year they had to spend collectively over 100,000 dollars for furnishing clocks, watches, and other “sing-songs” to the Hoppo.⁵²

The abuses of the Hoppo had become so serious that after 1771 the Emperor decreed that clocks, watches, and other foreign gadgets were not to be sent to the court and officials were not to require the Hong merchants to purchase them for such purposes. In its place the authorities, beginning in 1786, required the merchants to pay annual fees, referred to in Europeans accounts as *Cong Ka*, of 55,000 taels, specifically earmarked for the Emperor. In two years, 1802 and 1803, however, the Hoppo Jianshan more than doubled the *Cong Ka* fees to 150,000 taels for each year. Despite the regulations, the Hoppo continued to collect private gifts for themselves, their superior officials in Beijing, and the Emperor. In 1796, for example, the Hoppo ordered the merchants to “prepare an assortment of toys and jewellery for his appropriation to be sent up without delay to the [Jiaqing] Emperor.” The total expenses incurred by the Hong merchants for presents in the trading season 1806–1807 amounted to over 200,000 taels. The

situation only got worse. In 1810, Hong merchants requested foreign traders not to bring expensive “sing-songs” to Canton because they suffered greatly from the Hoppo’s pressure to buy these curios as gifts.⁵³

Besides squeezing the Hong merchants as a group, Canton officials and their underlings also exacted money and foreign goods from individual merchants, especially the more economically stable and affluent ones. As Anthony Chen explains, one of the major expenses of the merchants was to cover “extortions by local officials on individual accounts.” The total amounts of cash and goods that individual Hong merchants contributed to Canton officials will never be known, but would have likely been between 200,000 and 300,000 taels per year.⁵⁴ A few examples from the early nineteenth century will suffice. In 1801, Poankeequa II (Pan Youdu) on his own account contributed 500,000 taels for flood relief in northern China after other Hong merchants as a group had already contributed 250,000 taels. That same year the Hoppo Sanyizhu reportedly collected over 600,000 dollars in gratuities from individual merchants. In 1806, after pirate depredations and an ensuing rice shortage had caused a famine in the Pearl River Delta, provincial officials inquired from the Hong merchants about purchasing rice in India. Mowqua (Lu Guanheng), Puiqua (Wu Bingjian), Poankeequa II, and Conseequa each subscribed 25,000 dollars to buy the rice, and within a few months a total of 300,000 piculs (*shi*) were imported to Canton. To become a licensed Hong merchant, one had to pay a large fee to the Hoppo; they also had to pay a large fee to renew licences and to retire. The costs of a licence or “Hong chop” ranged from roughly 70,000 taels — Poonequa (Mai Guanting), Lyqua (Zhou Xinzhaoh), and Fonqua (Mu Shifang) — to 200,000 taels. Puiqua reportedly spent 500,000 dollars to pass his Hong licence to his son in 1826. Also it cost anywhere from 30,000 to 80,000 dollars to renew Hong licences. In 1807, Poankeequa II retired only after paying the Hoppo a sum of 100,000 taels, as well as 210,925 dollars to liquidate debts to the EIC. As a gratuity for the Jiaqing Emperor’s 60th birthday in 1809, the Hong merchants as a group

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contributed 120,000 taels, and several merchants also contributed individually: Puiqua, 19,244 taels; Chunqua (Liu Dezhang), 13,425 taels; Loqua (Li Yanyu), 11,109 taels; and Mowqua 7,902 taels.⁵⁵

Many Western traders in Canton believed that official exactions on Hong merchants squeezed them dry and was the main reason for their frequent indebtedness and bankruptcies. In 1804, the EIC reported that the heavy assessments by the Hoppo placed “enormous demands on their [Hong merchants] property,” and somewhat later, John Slade, reminiscing about his nine years in Canton, opined that the exactions of officials occasioned the “losses and ruin, and consequent imprisonment and banishment” of Hong merchants.⁵⁶ More recently, however, scholars have shown that this was not the main or only cause of ruin. Anthony Chen, in his detailed study of the insolvency of Hong merchants, explained that the mandatory contributions were only one of several causes for their failures. In fact, the huge sums of money exacted from the merchants were not unbearable, but generally could be covered by their gains from dealings with foreign traders. More serious problems were financial mismanagement and persistent shortages of silver in Canton, which the Hong merchants depended on to pay off officials and debts.⁵⁷

Although the exactions may not have been the main cause of Hong merchant insolvency, nonetheless they were an important contributing factor that put additional strain on their limited capital. They also had an indirect negative impact on trade. By the end of the eighteenth century, one of the most pressing problems that Hong merchants faced was chronic debts to foreign traders, especially to private country traders and Parsee merchants. In 1780, after Yngshaw (Yan Shiyong) and Kewshaw (Zhang Tianqiu) were unable to repay debts amounting to 1,900,000 dollars, other Hong merchants began to use the Consoo Fund to help repay loans of failed merchants. Debts were owed not only to foreign traders but also to Chinese

creditors and to the government. In 1796, Munqua (Cai Wenguan) committed suicide after falling into debt of 270,000 taels to Fujian tea merchants. In 1803, Ponqua (Ni Bingfa) owed 1,450,000 dollars to various Chinese creditors, 360,000 dollars to European creditors, and another 300,000 dollars to the government for unpaid duties; in 1810, Gnewqua (Zheng Chongqian) had accumulated debts of roughly 1,400,000 taels, as follows: 396,793 taels to the EIC, 501,029 taels to private foreigners, about 400,000 taels to Chinese, and about 100,000 taels to the government. Usually whenever Hong merchants failed and were unable to repay their debts, officials threw them in jail or sent them into exile and confiscated all their property. For example, in 1811, Ponqua died in a Canton jail, and Gnewqua was sent into exile in Yili, where he died soon after his arrival. At the height of the piracy crisis between 1809 and 1810, most of the Hong merchants were in financial trouble; five Hong merchants — Lyqua, Fonqua, Ponqua, Gnewqua, and Inqua (Ni Yongguan) — declared bankruptcy and were unable to repay debts. Table 5 lists the Hong merchants’ debts to the EIC in 1809 and 1810; besides these debts they also owed money to private foreign traders, Chinese creditors, and to the government. Solvent merchants were required to take over the debts of failed merchants; in just those two years at least 885,000 taels were taken out of the Consoo Funds to pay debts and contributions. Hong merchants reported in early 1811 to the new governor-general, Songyun, that they could no longer contribute money for national exigencies because their obligations to repay the debts of failed merchants had become too burdensome.⁵⁸

A major problem that Hong merchants faced in paying debts to foreigners and exactions to Canton officials was the perennial insufficiency of hard cash in the Canton money market. The problem became critical between 1808 and 1810, again at the height of the pirate disturbances in the Pearl River Delta. There was at that time a precipitous plunge in the

Table 5

Debts Owed by Hong Merchants to the British East India Company, 1809–1810

Year	Debtor	Amount of Debt (taels)
1809	Conseequa (Pan Changyao 潘長耀)	670,769
	Mowqua (Lu Guanheng 盧觀恒)	541,856
	Chunqua (Liu Dezhang 劉德章)	486,232
	Puiqua (Wu Bingjian 伍秉鑑)	316,967
	Others	831,828
1810	Conseequa	610,626
	Gnewqua (Zheng Chongqian 鄭崇謙)	396,793
	Mowqua	331,366
	Ponqua (Ni Bingfa 倪秉發)	265,854
	Lyqua (Zhou Xinzhaoh 周信昭)	252,345
	Manhop (Guan Xiang 關祥)	183,466
	Chunqua	174,482
	Puiqua	170,180
	Fatqua (Li Xiefa 李協發)	115,411
	Loqua (Li Yanyu 黎顏裕)	81,968
	Poankeequa II (Pan Youdu 潘有度)	34,822

Source: Morse 1926, 3: 100, 130.

amount of foreign silver dollars available in Canton. The year 1809, in fact, marked the lowest point of silver imports between 1805 and 1813, due largely to the US embargo of 1808 (an outcome of the Great Wars); that year only eight American ships arrived at Canton. In the following year, US silver suddenly dropped from a yearly average of roughly 3,000,000 dollars to only 70,000 dollars. Also, between 1807 and 1810, there were no shipments of EIC silver from England to China, while at the same time the EIC exported (illegally) 6,811,588 dollars out of China. Although country traders and other foreign merchants continued to bring silver into China during these years, nonetheless there was an acute shortage. What this all meant, among other things, was that foreign merchants

had insufficient silver to buy full loads of export cargoes, and they could not provide the usual advances to Hong merchants for the following year. Hard pressed, as we have already noted, five Hong merchants failed in 1809, in some measure due to the silver shortage.⁵⁹

HONG MERCHANTS AND THE DEFENCE OF CANTON

During the height of the piracy crisis between 1804 and 1810, Hong merchants played an important role in the defence of Canton and the Pearl River estuary. They not only made large monetary contributions that helped defray the cost of military campaigns, construction of warships and fortifications, and purchase of armaments, but they also helped in

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many of the negotiations between provincial officials and foreigners and even with major pirate chieftains.

As we have already noted, large fleets of pirates with alarming frequency repeatedly invaded deep into the Pearl River Delta and even threatened Canton on several occasions. Although the city of Canton itself was well-protected behind massive walls, the suburbs, including the foreign factories and Consou House, were outside the walled city and thus virtually defenceless. In 1809, EIC supercargoes feared for the safety of the city whose inhabitants, they believed, were “totally unaccustomed to warfare [and] are almost without means of defence.”⁶⁰ Provincial naval forces, which were tasked to defend the city and estuary, were always undermanned and poorly equipped. Nominally, the navy stationed in the lower Pearl River consisted of about 80 warships and a few thousand marines who were pitted against some 20,000 well-organised pirates in several hundreds of heavily armed junks. The odds were always stacked against the government forces. Each time in major naval battles in 1803, 1805, 1808, and 1809, pirates easily defeated and nearly eradicated the imperial navy. In fact, pirates were destroying warships faster than they could be built. Little could be done by the provincial government to stop the pirates from raiding towns and villages inside the delta.⁶¹

As should be expected, the war against pirates was quite costly. Every time pirates destroyed warships or forts they needed to be rebuilt. In the meantime, officials had to supplement their regular naval forces by hiring private trading, salt, and fishing junks, as well as mercenaries (*yong*) to man them.⁶² In 1805, Governor-General Nanyangcheng requested the construction of 33 new “rice junks” (*miting*), the type of warship most commonly used in Guangdong, and at the same time engaged a fleet of 120 private vessels to fight pirates; and in 1809, Governor-General Bailing requested the construction of 100 new warships, as well as hiring over 250 private vessels to patrol the rivers and creeks in the Pearl River estuary.⁶³ According to official records in 1800, the construction of a single rice junk used

by the navy cost about 3,000 taels, and to equip each ship with cannon and other armaments another 1,000 taels.⁶⁴ In 1808, however, the costs for building war junks had increased substantially to 7,000 taels per ship, not including armaments.⁶⁵ Warships too needed to be continuously repaired and provisioned at considerable (but unspecified) costs. The costs (also unspecified) for hiring auxiliary private vessels and equipping them for war, as well as for the sailors manning these ships also needed to be paid for by the Canton authorities.

A good portion of the money used to pay for the war against pirates came out of the pockets of Hong merchants as exactions. Unfortunately the records are incomplete and we will never know the precise or total amounts that Hong merchants paid towards these military campaigns. Between 1804 and 1806, according to the figures in Table 4, a total of at least 220,000 taels came out of the Consou Fund to help defray military expenditures, mostly for the construction of war junks and procurement of armaments. Frederick Grant estimates that pirate suppression between 1807 and 1812 cost a total of 339,800 taels, or roughly 10% of the Consou Fund.⁶⁶ These figures, however, are certainly understated. For example, in 1804, the Guangdong government built and equipped 100 new warships that would have cost at least 400,000 taels (100 ships × 4,000 taels), but according to Table 4, Hong merchants only contributed 60,000 taels that year for pirate suppression. According to EIC reports in 1805, the provincial government demanded from Hong merchants “a benevolence of Tls. 200,000... for the costs of suppressing piracy,” but only 70,000 taels came out of the Consou Fund listed in Table 4. The difference was likely made up by individual contributions, such as Poankeequa II’s contribution of 50,000 taels that year.⁶⁷ Again, in 1809, Bailing’s new naval fleet of 100 war junks would have cost the provincial government at least 700,000 taels (100 ships × 7,000 taels), excluding armaments. Although Table 4 shows no contributions from Hong merchants for suppressing piracy in that

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year, according to John Roberts, President of the EIC's Select Committee, a total of 700,000 taels had been extracted that year from the merchants "in the fruitless attempts to destroy the Pirates" — the same amount it would have cost for constructing the warships. We do know that in 1809, Hong merchants as a group were contributing 30,000 taels each month for pirate suppression (possibly 360,000 taels for all 12 months). Individually, that year we also know that Ponqua pledged 30,000 taels to the provincial government for suppressing piracy, as well as another 88,000 taels owed to the Hoppo for unpaid duties and 265,854 taels owed to EIC merchants.⁶⁸ We do not know, however, what other individual merchants contributed. Furthermore, in August, Hong merchants bought the British brig *Elizabeth* (108 tons), outfitting it to cruise against pirates then operating in the vicinity of Canton, and a month later the Guangzhou prefect requested the Hong merchants to charter the country ship *Mercury* (250 tons) in order to "stiffen the Chinese navy." The latter vessel, equipped with 20 cannon and 50 American volunteers, joined the imperial fleet in battles with pirates between Lintin and Lantau islands. Possibly the money for both vessels came from the Consou Fund, but we do not know for certain.⁶⁹ In any case, in 1809, the Hong merchants' contributions must have been very large and likely beyond their means given the silver shortage and mounting bankruptcies; in fact, EIC supercargoes remarked that they were "sufferers from being obliged to advance the money which in their present embarrassed state but few of them are able to support."⁷⁰

Hong merchants also made other sorts of monetary contributions to the war against pirates, but again we have only a few vague references in our sources. Several examples will have to suffice. After 1800, it was standard practice to reward each pirate who surrendered with ten taels plus travelling and food money. Chieftains received considerably larger rewards. Thus when Huang Zhengsong and 1,422 of his followers surrendered in 1805, the government paid Huang a reward of 1,500

taels and his followers ten taels each. In that year over 3,000 pirates surrendered. Nayancheng said that Hong merchants had pledged 66,000 dollars (*yuan*) to help pay for these rewards.⁷¹ When Zhang Baozai surrendered in April 1810 with over 17,000 followers, it must have cost the provincial government no less than 170,000 taels in reward money, aside from travel and food expenses and the rewards paid to pirate leaders. Zhang himself was promised a subsidy of 18,000 taels a month.⁷²

Hong merchants would have also contributed money to help pay ransoms to pirates. In 1804, after pirates plundered a chop boat, they held its cargo for a ransom of 3,000 dollars, which the Hoppo paid, likely with funds squeezed from Hong merchants.⁷³ Apparently pirates also frequently captured and held low-ranking officials and yamen staff for ransoms, which the Canton government was obliged to pay; for example, in 1805, a customs house secretary was held for ransom until officials paid 2,000 taels for his release.⁷⁴ When John Turner and five Lascars were ransomed for 7,150 dollars, 3,500 dollars came from Hong merchants and 3,650 dollars came from private subscriptions from the European traders in Canton; and when Richard Glasspoole and six sailors were ransomed for 7,654 dollars, Hong merchants contributed 2,454 dollars and members of the British factory another 5,200 dollars.⁷⁵

Finally, as mentioned above, in 1809, the Canton authorities authorised a payment totaling 80,000 taels to the Portuguese government in Macao for providing six armed ships to accompany the navy on anti-pirate cruises in the delta. However, a year later only 50,000 taels had been paid to Macao.⁷⁶ Although the records are imprecise, it would not be unreasonable to assume that the Hong merchants contributed considerable amounts of money to help the Canton authorities pay for rewards, ransoms, and the leasing of private vessels.⁷⁷

As the sole legal agents commissioned by the Qing government to deal with foreigners in Canton, the Hong merchants acted as arbitrators between foreigners and officials. Long-time resident William

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Hunter explained, “In their *joint* capacity... they were the intermediaries between the local government in everything that related to the residence of foreigners at Canton, the safety of their persons and property... They were the medium of communication.”⁷⁸ As such they would have been involved in all complaints about incidents concerning pirates and foreigners, as well as in negotiations related to foreign military aid during the piracy crisis. Unfortunately, very few records mentioned their roles in these activities. We know, for example, in 1804, when the British proposed to cooperate with the provincial navy to fight pirates, Hong merchants forwarded their proposals and acted as go-betweens with the Hoppo and other high-ranking provincial officials. Although these negotiations failed, in the next year when the EIC Select Committee requested that two British warships be permanently stationed at Macao Roads to protect trade, once again Hong merchants acted as intermediaries. When John Turner was captured and held for ransom by pirates in 1806, Hong merchants not only pledged half of the ransom payment but also became involved in the negotiations for Turner’s release. They also negotiated with the British representatives in Canton in 1809 first about purchasing and outfitting the *Elizabeth* and later chartering the *Mercury* to be used in cruising for pirates in the estuary. Later in 1809 and 1810, at the time that Guo Podai and Zhang Baozai broached their surrender, several Hong merchants, including Puiqua, were also present at the negotiations between the pirate leaders, provincial officials, and representatives of the Portuguese government in Macao.⁷⁹

CONCLUSION

The upsurge in large-scale piracy between 1780 and 1810 had a tremendous impact on the Canton trade. Provincial officials, Hong merchants, and foreign traders repeatedly acknowledged that pirates, operating from bases scattered throughout the Pearl River Delta, greatly hindered Canton’s commerce and communications. They posed serious threats to the state, economy, and society. Countless lives and property were lost to pirates. After 1803, when the provincial navy was nearly destroyed, pirates became the

virtual masters of the Delta, where they repeatedly robbed and extorted protection fees from trading and fishing junks, towns and villages, and even foreign merchants. Several times they threatened Canton, each time triggering a great panic in the city. On more than one occasion, they caused scarcities in grain supplies to Canton and Macao, driving food prices sky high and obliging Hong merchants to contribute funds to purchase rice and to open soup kitchens. Between 1793 and 1805, foreign traders often complained that the opium trade had been disrupted due to piracy, and after 1804, because of so many pirates operating deep within the Pearl River estuary, it became risky for foreign traders and sailors to travel between Macao and Canton and to supply their ships at Lintin. To protect their economic interests, both the British and Portuguese armed ships to battle pirates either separately or jointly with the Qing navy. Piracy inescapably brought about the stagnation of trade, which further contributed to the perennial problem of silver shortages in the Canton market, and thereby adversely affected the purchasing power of Hong and foreign merchants. At the peak of the piracy crisis in 1809, and at a time when silver supplies were at an all-time low, five Hong merchants became insolvent and were unable to repay debts. Nonetheless, during these years of unrest the Hong merchants did contribute significantly to the defence of Canton and suppression of piracy in the Pearl River estuary.

Monetary contributions of Hong merchants to help the provincial government defray the high costs of pirate suppression were actually only one, and by no means the largest, of the officially imposed exactions. Officials also exacted money for debts owed to foreign and Chinese creditors, repair projects on the Yellow River and other rivers, flood and famine relief, military campaigns against the Lin Shuangwen, Gurkha, White Lotus, and other rebellions, and presents for the Emperor and other officials. Perhaps only a quarter of their total contributions between 1804 and 1809 were earmarked for military expenditures in the war against pirates. Nonetheless, over those six years, although the data is sorely incomplete, they must have contributed roughly a million taels to the anti-piracy war

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effort. These government exactions took hard cash away from the Hong merchants' profits, a burden that was ultimately passed on to foreign traders as excess duties and "extraordinary charges." By 1809 and 1810, faced with silver shortages and a depressed market, the already financially-stressed Hong merchants complained to the Hoppo and governor-general that they were hard-pressed to contribute any more money for military campaigns against pirates.

Finally, the many wars that raged in Europe between 1780 and 1810 also had major repercussions in China that adversely affected Hong merchants and the Canton trade. Piracy and privateering always followed in the wake of wars. In the 1780s, English pirate-privateers, most notably Capt. John McClary, arbitrarily plundered Western and Chinese ships in the South China Sea, including one of Chowqua's trading junks near Banka and a Dutch ship anchored at Whampoa. Britain twice, in 1802 and 1808, attempted to seize Macao, allegedly to defend the city against both

French warships and Chinese pirates, in complete disregard to China's territorial sovereignty. On several occasions, British warships impressed sailors and seized ships within Chinese waters, even within the Pearl River estuary. When the American ship *Jefferson* was seized by the British warship *Dover* in 1808, Conseequa's cargo and chests of silver were confiscated as prizes. For Hong merchants, such as Chowqua and Conseequa, whose businesses were directly harmed by European wars, there was nothing in the Chinese mindset that would have allowed them to distinguish privateering from piracy. Furthermore, these series of wars directly and indirectly contributed to the shortage of silver in Canton, especially in 1809 with the American embargo, which drastically reduced the amount of silver entering China. The combination of war and piracy indeed was detrimental to the free flow of the Canton trade and ultimately undermined the profitability of Hong and Western merchants. **RC**



Fort on Canton River. National Army Museum, United Kingdom, c. 1840. <https://collection.nam.ac.uk/detail.php?acc=1986-04-79-1>

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NOTES

- 1 The author presented an earlier version of this paper at the International Conference on Canton's Thirteen Hong and the Maritime Silk Road, Guangzhou University, China, 12–14 October 2018; revisions were made during his tenure in the Autumn 2019 as a visiting scholar in the School of Historical Studies at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Princeton. He is grateful for the comments from Frederick Grant, Jonathan Goldstein, and Ellen Xiangyu Cai, as well as to Paul Van Dyke for his helpful suggestions and sharing of documents from his personal collection. Nonetheless, whatever mistakes remain in this paper are solely the responsibility of the author.
- 2 The origin of the word Hoppo is uncertain. It has been suggested that it was a corruption of “Hoo-poo” (*Hubu*) or Board of Revenue, but the Customs Superintendent at Canton represented the Imperial Household (*Neiwufu*), not the Board of Revenue (Hunter 1882, 21).
- 3 Murray 1988, 242; Chen 1990, 86; and Van Dyke 2011, 223.
- 4 Montalto de Jesus 1902, 232; and IOR G/12/105, July 19, 1793.
- 5 See Antony 2014.
- 6 Auber 1834, 182; and Davis 1836, 1: 69.
- 7 IOR G/12/76, June 25 and September 9, 1782; Morse 1926, 2: 79–80; and Van Dyke 2011, 175–176, 396.
- 8 Auber 1834, 181–182; Davis 1836, 1: 67–69; and Morse 1926, 2: 63–64.
- 9 Chen 1990, 85.
- 10 Andrade 1835, 97–98; Maybon 1906, 302–306; Guimarães 1996, 78; and Wang 2014, 236–237.
- 11 Antony 2003, 43.
- 12 *Xiangshan xianzhi*, 8: 56b; and *Dongguan xianzhi*, 33: 22b.
- 13 Morse 1926, 3: 8; and Antony 2003, 118–120.
- 14 *Shangyudang*, JQ 10.5.21; Turner 1814, “Chinese Pirates,” 71; Morse 1926, 2: 422–425, 3: 8, 32, 63; and Greenburg 1951, 116.
- 15 Morse 1926, 2: 425.
- 16 Andrade 1835, 23; and Murray 1988, 238–239.
- 17 Morse 1926, 2: 423–426; and Wang 2014, 239–240.
- 18 Van Dyke 2005, 131.
- 19 Morse 1926, 3: 64.
- 20 IOR G/12/154, December 10, 1806; Morse 1926, 3: 32–33, 83; also see Davies 2012, 35–42.
- 21 *Gongzhongdang zhupi zouzhe* JQ 13.3.8, JQ 13.8.29, and JQ 13.11.26.
- 22 Andrade 1835, 100–105, 133–134; “Chinese Commerce,” 1840, 10–13; Maybon 1906, 306–309; Morse 1926, 3: 87–91; also see Wakeman 2004, Hariharan and Hariharan 2013, and Wang 2014, 241–245.
- 23 Morse 1926, 3: 83.
- 24 Morse 1926, 3: 83–85.
- 25 Hunter 1855, 158–159.
- 26 FO 1048/9/9, JQ 14.8.4 and FO 1048/10/3, JQ 14.12.14; *Guangzhou fuzhi*, 81: 19a; *Xiangshan xianzhi*, 8: 61a; Morse 1926, 3: 116–118; and Murray 1988, 240.
- 27 Davis 1836, 1: 85.
- 28 FO 1048/1/2, JQ 14.11.29; “Chinese Pirates,” 79; Andrade 1835, 34; Glasspoole 1831, 123; Hunter 1855, 157; and Forbes 1882, 390–392.
- 29 IOR G/12/168, October 4, 1809.
- 30 “Chinese Pirates,” 74; Andrade 1835, 45–46, 52; Morse 1926, 3: 117–118, 122; and Gomes 1987, 121–124, 129.
- 31 See Antony 2006.
- 32 *Yuezhedang* JQ 15.2.15; *Shangyudang* JQ 15.1.12, JQ 15.2.15, and JQ 15.4.27.
- 33 Murray 1979, 323–324.
- 34 Morse 1926, 3: 144; and Yuan 2007, 17.
- 35 *Shangyudang* JQ 15.4.27; IOR G/12/173, April 21, 1810; *Xiangshan xianzhi*, 8: 61a–b; Yuan 2007, 18–19; Morse 1926, 3: 123, 144; and Gomes 1987, 128.
- 36 Wang Huizu 1868, 1: 3a–b; also see Park 1997, 975.
- 37 Chen 1990, 121. According to Evelyn Rawski and Susan Naquin (2018: 513–514), contributions from Hong merchants actually provided a substantial amount of central government revenues, anywhere between 5% and 10%, of the total sums collected from the annual land tax between the 1770s and 1830s. As they suggest, such contributions constituted an important source of revenue for the Qing state.
- 38 Van Dyke 2011, 119, 222.
- 39 Park 1997, 975.
- 40 Davis 1836, 1: 194–195.
- 41 Hunter 1882, 22.
- 42 Chen 1990, 141; and Van Dyke 2005, 99.
- 43 Anonymous 1838, 25; Hunter 1882, 22; Morse 1909, 81; Chen 1990, 388–389 n. 117; and Grant 2014, 130, 137.
- 44 Chen 1990, 95.
- 45 Morse 1926, 3: 39.
- 46 The name Consou House was derived from the Chinese term for public hall (*gongsuo*); in Chinese it was called Waiyanghang huiguan (Liang 1959, 39 n. 21).
- 47 Davis 1836, 1: 78, 2: 424–425; Morse 1909, 70; White 1967, 162, 192; Sasaki 1976, 153–154; Chen 1990, 90; Van Dyke 2011, 29–30; and Grant 2014, 122–123.
- 48 Morse 1909, 81.
- 49 Somewhat later, in 1819, Hong merchants had pledged 600,000 taels for repairs on the Yellow River, but some 18 years later, 141,886 taels still remained to be paid (Tsiang 1932, 603).
- 50 James Cox (c. 1723–1800) was a British jeweler, goldsmith, and entrepreneur and the proprietor of Cox’s Museum. He is best known for creating ingenious automata, mechanical clocks, and other curios encrusted with gold, silver, and jewels, referred to as “sing-songs”. His primary markets were India and China (see Smith, 2000).
- 51 Barrow 2010, 611.
- 52 Chen 1990, 9, 99.

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- 53 Morse 1926, 3: 146–147; White 1967, 59–62; and Chen 1990, 95–98.
- 54 Chen 1990, 103, 136.
- 55 IOR G/12/108, April 28, 1795, IOR G/12/145, November 29, 1803, and IOR G/12/216, June 18, 1819; Morse 1926, 2: 356, 360, 421, 3: 60; Hunter 1882, 22; and Chen 1990, 123, 126, 317–318, 346.
- 56 Morse 1926, 2: 421; and Slade 1830, 25.
- 57 Chen 1990, 138, 251; also see White 1967, 161–168.
- 58 IOR G/12/144, May 6, 1803, and IOR G/12/174, October 31, 1810; Morse 1926, 2: 299–300, 3: 100, 130, 153; also see White 1967, 75; and Chen 1990, 37, 101, 162, 241.
- 59 Morse 1926, 3: 77, 80, 83, 101; Antony 2006, 5; Grant 2014, 155–156; and Bowen 2010, 455.
- 60 IOR G/12/168, November 27, 1809.
- 61 *Shangyudang* JQ 8.10.1; *Gongzhongdang zhupi zouzhe* JQ 13.8.29, JQ 14.5.28, JQ 14.6.19; Yuan 2007, 10–12; and Morse 1926, 3: 116.
- 62 At the same time, provincial and local officials also exhorted local communities to prepare their own defences against pirates by building walls, procuring cannons and firearms, and organising militia (*tuanlian*); these preparations were mostly paid for by local gentry and landowners (Antony 2006, 10–19).
- 63 *Gongzhongdang zhupi zouzhe* JQ 14.6.19; *Guangdong tongzhi* 1822, 179: 16b; and Antony 2006, 8–10.
- 64 *Gongzhongdang zhupi zouzhe* JQ 5.1.20, and JQ 5.2.11.
- 65 *Gongzhongdang zhupi zouzhe* JQ 13.r5.9.
- 66 Grant 2014, 154.
- 67 Morse 1926, 3: 10, 62.
- 68 Morse 1926, 3: 122, 130, 146, 150.
- 69 FO 1048/9/9, JQ 14.8.4; and Morse 1926, 3: 117–122.
- 70 Morse 1926, 3: 146.
- 71 *Nawenyigong zouyi*, 13: 54a–59b, JQ 10.11.16; and *Shangyudang* JQ 11.3.8.
- 72 *Shangyudang* JQ 15.3.23; and *Zhupi zhoushe* JQ 15.4.9.
- 73 IOR G/12/147, November 26, 1804.
- 74 IOR G/12/157, April 29, 1807.
- 75 IOR G/12/170, February 26, 1810; Turner 1814; Glasspoole 1831, 123; and “Chinese Pirates,” 69–70.
- 76 Morse 1926, 3: 122; and Gomes 1987, 121, 129.
- 77 According to Paul Van Dyke, besides these various monetary contributions for pirate suppression, Hong merchants were also obliged to loan, at their own expense, their trading junks, numbering about 30, to the Canton authorities for defence purposes, thus sparing the government the cost of maintaining a large naval fleet (personal communication, January 22, 2018).
- 78 Hunter 1855, 218–219.
- 79 FO 1048/9/9, JQ 14.8.4; IOR G/12/167, September 17, 1809; IOR G/12/168, October 25, 1809; IOR G/12/170, February 23 and February 26, 1810; Andrade 1835, 57–59; Morse 1926, 3: 63, 144; and Murray 1988, 239, 241.

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GLOSSARY OF CHINESE NAMES AND TERMS

- Bailing 百齡
Cai Wenguan (Munqua) 蔡文官
Changzhou 長洲
Chen Zuguan (Chowqua) 陳祖官
Chuenpi 川鼻
Cong Ka 貢價
Dongyong 東涌
Gaolan 高欄
gonggui 公櫃
guanxi 關係
Guo Podai 郭婆帶
Huang Zhengsong 黃正嵩
Humen (Bocca Tigris) 虎門
Jiqing 吉慶
Jiaomen 蕉門
Lê dynasty (Vietnam) 黎朝
Li Yanyu (Loqua) 黎顏裕
Lintin 伶仃
Liu Dezhang (Chunqua) 劉德章
Longxue 龍穴
lougui 陋規
Lu Guanheng (Mowqua) 盧觀恒
Mai Guanting (Poonequa) 麥觀廷
miting 米艇
Modao 磨刀
Mu Shifang (Fonqua) 沐士方
Nayancheng 那顏成
- Nguyễn Ánh 阮暎
Nguyễn dynasty (Vietnam) 阮朝
Ni Bingfa (Ponqua) 倪秉發
Ni Yongguan (Inqua) 倪永官
Pan Changyao (Conseequa) 潘長耀
Pan Qiguan (Poankeequa I) 潘啟官
Pan Youdu (Poankeequa II) 潘有度
Pingshan 平山
Sanjiao 三蕉
Sanmen 三門
shi 石
Songyun 松筠
Taipa 氹仔
Thăng Long 昇龍
Waiyanghang huiguan 外洋行會館
Wu Bingjian (Puiqua) 伍秉鑑
Wu Xionguang 吳熊光
Yan Shiyong (Yngshaw) 顏時瑛
yan 圓
yong 勇
Zhang Baozai 張保仔
Zhang Tianqiu (Kewshaw) 張天球
Zheng Chongqian (Gnewqua) 鄭崇謙
Zheng Yi 鄭一
Zhou Xinzhaoh (Lyqua) 周信昭
Zhuzhou 竹洲
Zini 紫泥