

# The Third Silk Road: Pirates, Buried Treasure, and Sunken Ships

ROBERT J. ANTONY\*

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**ABSTRACT:** Most people know something about the overland Silk Road, but less about the maritime Silk Road, although both are equally important in history. Discussions about both the overland and maritime Silk Roads have focused on their importance in facilitating international trade and cultural exchanges. However, there is a third Silk Road, one that is seldom if ever mentioned, but is also important to history, archaeology, and cultural heritage. This third Silk Road is the pirates' Silk Road. Wherever there was a flourishing trade, there were sure to be pirates who preyed on that trade, and who also created their own networks of exchange through black markets and friendly ports. Wherever there was cultural exchange, there were pirates who actively participated in cultural dissemination. In this article, I develop these themes with specific examples from history (with a focus on East and Southeast Asia). First, I discuss the routes relating to the maritime Silk Road and their connections to piracy. Next, I examine several pirate lairs located along these routes, places where pirates purportedly buried their treasures. Then I discuss the exciting field of maritime archaeology to examine what has been uncovered about alleged sunken pirate ships along the maritime Silk Road. Finally, I explore some of the contributions that pirates have made to the dissemination of folk religion and popular culture, as well as possible contributions that the pirates' Silk Road can make to contemporary historical and cultural heritage projects.

**KEYWORDS:** Maritime Silk Road; Piracy; Maritime archaeology; Cultural heritage; South China.

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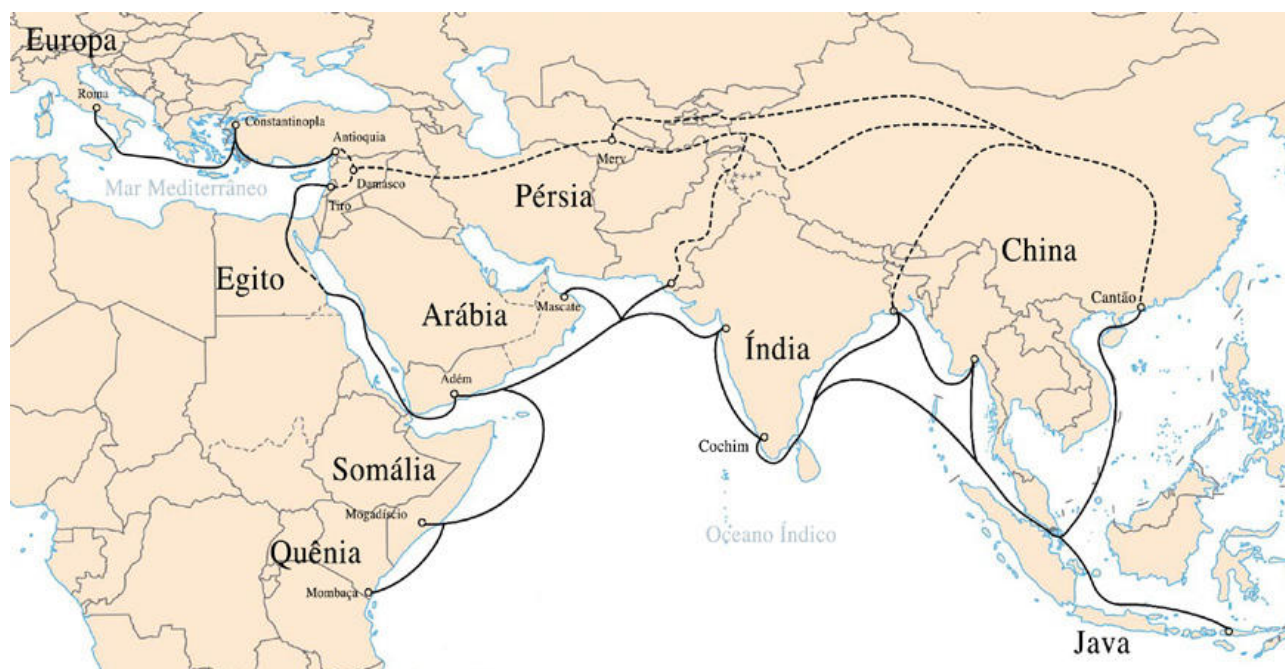
Today few, if any, people have never heard of the Silk Road. While most people know something about the overland Silk Road, they know less about the maritime Silk Road, although both are equally

significant in Chinese and world history. Discussions about both the overland and maritime Silk Roads have focused on their importance in facilitating international trade and cultural exchanges. Map 1

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\* Robert J. Antony, Ph.D. in Chinese History, retired distinguished professor from Guangzhou University. He is the author of a series of works about pirates, smugglers and bandits in the Ming and Qing dynasties.

*Robert J. Antony, doutorado em História Chinesa, professor distinguido, jubilado da Universidade de Guangzhou. É autor de várias obras sobre piratas, contrabandistas e bandidos nas dinastias Ming e Qing.*



Map 1: Overland and maritime Silk Roads, geospatial routes made by the editorial team. Base map source: The standard map service system, Shen tu hao 審圖號: GS(2016)1667, Ministry of Natural Resources of the People's Republic of China.

depicts a modern map of the overland and maritime Silk Roads. In this essay, after a short discussion of the better-known overland and maritime Silk Roads, I will explore in more detail another Silk Road — what I call the pirates' Silk Road.

## 1. OVERLAND AND MARITIME SILK ROADS

The vast trade networks of the Silk Road carried more than just merchandise and precious commodities, and in fact, the constant movement and mixing of populations brought about the widespread transmission of knowledge, cultures, and beliefs, all of which had a profound impact on the history and civilisations of Asian and European peoples. The name 'Silk Road', of course, derives from the precious commodity of silk produced in China and transported by caravans overland to the Roman Empire beginning in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE, where silk was a luxury item strictly regulated by the government to control prices and usage. The overland Silk Road was actually made

up of many roads and silk was not the only commodity. In fact, trade routes constantly shifted according to changes in climate and governments, as well as the risks of wars and bands of marauders along the route.<sup>1</sup>

As for the maritime Silk Road, its origins can be traced back to links between the Arabian Peninsula, Mesopotamia, and the Indus Valley Civilisation thousands of years ago. By the Early Middle Ages, there was an expansion of this maritime trading network, as sailors and merchants from the Arabian Peninsula opened new trading routes across the Arabian Sea and into the Indian Ocean. In fact, maritime trade links were established between Arabia and China since at least the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE. Like the overland Silk Road, the maritime Silk Road also developed several routes that shifted over time. These maritime routes that seafarers established actually became the longest, most regularly, and most heavily travelled sea lanes in the world, even after 1492, at the start of the so-called European Age of Discovery. During this early period

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Map 2: Zheng He's voyages, from 1405 to 1433, geospatial routes made by the editorial team. Base map source: The standard map service system, Shen tu hao 審圖號: GS(2016)1663, Ministry of Natural Resources of the People's Republic of China.

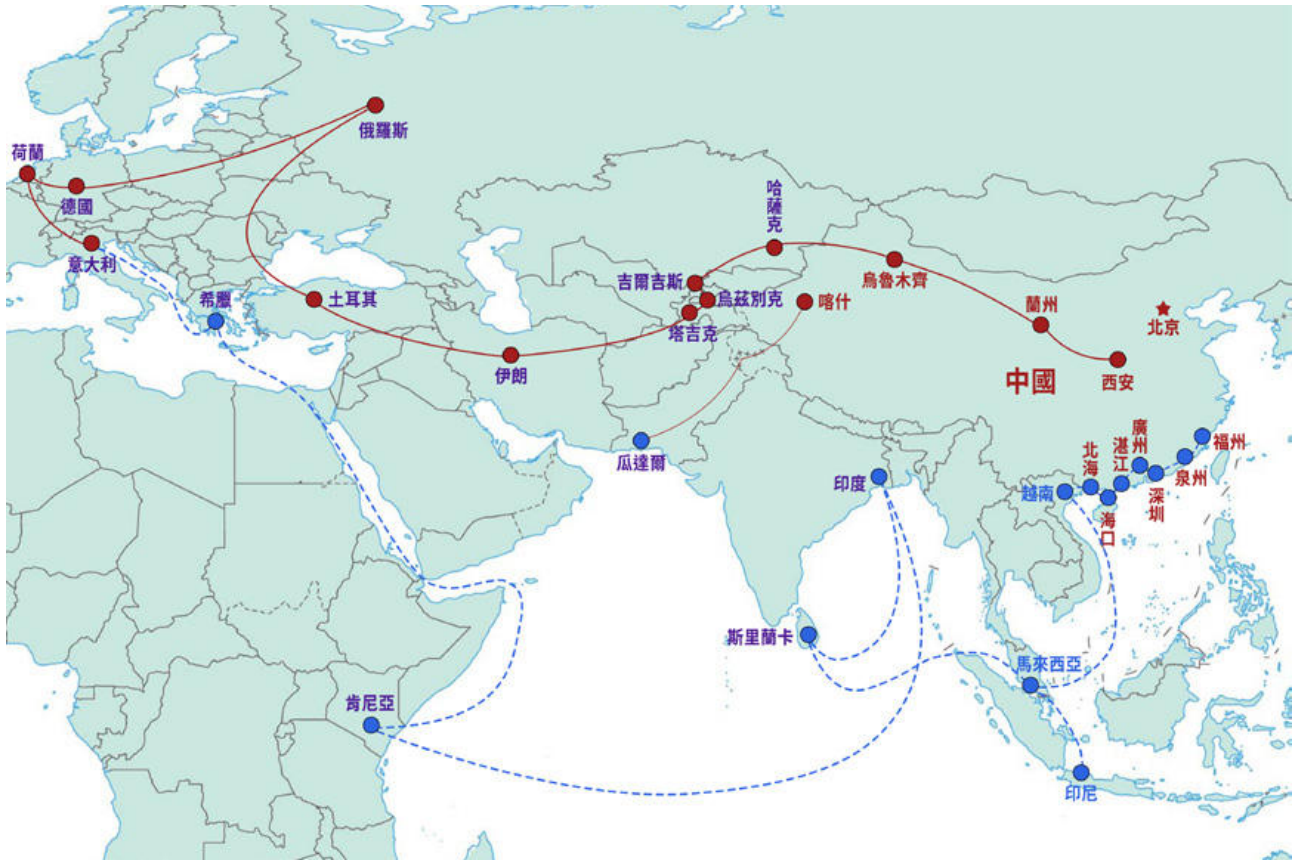
of the maritime Silk Road, Middle Eastern Muslim traders dominated the maritime trading routes.<sup>2</sup>

At first the Chinese were not directly engaged in operating their own ships along the maritime Silk Road. By the late 11<sup>th</sup> century, however, Chinese merchants became increasingly involved in direct trade along these sea routes. In fact, during the Song dynasty (960–1279), the Chinese gradually assumed the dominant position in long-distance maritime trade, thanks to innovations in shipbuilding, the introduction of the mariner's compass, and other technological advances. At that time, China experienced a commercial

revolution with the tremendous growth of cities, markets, and money economy.<sup>3</sup> Large coastal cities developed around the most frequently visited ports along maritime trading routes, including Guangzhou and Quanzhou in China, as well as in Zanzibar, Alexandria, Muscat, and Goa outside China. These cities became wealthy centres for the exchange of goods, ideas, languages, and religions, with large markets and continually shifting populations of Muslim and Asian merchants, officials, sailors, and travellers.<sup>4</sup>

Then in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), a Chinese Muslim by the

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Map 3: China's Belt and Road Initiative Map, geospatial routes made by the editorial team. Base map source: The standard map service system, Shen tu hao 審圖號: GS(2016)1666, Ministry of Natural Resources of the People's Republic of China.

name of Zheng He (鄭和) led the famous Chinese 'treasure ships' that explored Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and East Africa, almost a hundred years before Columbus and Vasco da Gama set off to explore the world. Between 1405 and 1433, Zheng led seven voyages that followed the ancient sailing routes that were well established by Chinese and Arab predecessors along the maritime Silk Road. His fleet reportedly consisted of more than 300 ships, including 62 treasure ships, which were loaded with silks, porcelains, and other precious items to trade for exotic products of the South China Sea, Indian Ocean, and African continent. It was also said that his fleet carried 30,000 sailors, merchants, and soldiers. While some scholars claim Zheng He's voyages aimed

at peaceful trade, other scholars claim that they were about 'gunboat diplomacy', coercion, and recognition of Ming dominance in Asia. What we know for certain is that he re-established China's tributary system along the maritime trade routes in the South China Sea.<sup>5</sup> Map 2 depicts the famous Zheng He voyages, as he retraced the ancient maritime Silk Road.

In 2013, Xi Jinping (習近平) revitalised the maritime Silk Road as an important component of China's 'One Belt, One Road' development initiative, whereby maritime routes linked with overland routes to connect China with eastern Africa, the Red Sea, and the Mediterranean through the Suez Canal. This 21<sup>st</sup>-century initiative actually follows in the footsteps of Zheng He and other earlier traders, scholars, and



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adventurers who first developed the maritime and overland Silk Roads a thousand years ago. Aside from commerce, another important aim of this initiative is to promote understandings of cultural diversity across Eurasia and to protect cultural heritage sites. To this end, in 2016, the Chinese government pledged to promote mutual endeavours with other countries to explore relics and sites along the ancient maritime Silk Road and obtain UNESCO status for them. The emphasis has been on developing ‘people-to-people’ engagements to focus on culture, education, science, and tourism. China has substantially invested in joint projects in art, cinematography, museums, and festivals, and in particular, China has cooperated with Singapore, Sri Lanka, and Kenya in archaeological expeditions to search for the remains of Zheng He’s fleets. These initiatives have helped to raise public awareness about each country’s maritime history and their connections to China.<sup>6</sup> Map 3 sketches the 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Silk Road.

### 2. THE PIRATES’ SILK ROAD

There is a third Silk Road, one that is seldom if ever mentioned, but is also important to history, archaeology, and even heritage conservation. This third Silk Road is what I call the pirates’ Silk Road. Wherever there was a flourishing trade, there were sure to be pirates who preyed on that trade, and who also created their own networks of exchange through black markets. Wherever there was cultural exchange, there were pirates, usually in the background, who actively participated in cultural dissemination. The pirates’ Silk Road, however, was not transoceanic, but rather remained regional and local. South Asian pirates by and large operated in the waters of the Indian Ocean, while Chinese and Southeast Asian pirates by and large operated in the South China Sea and in their respective coastal waters. Nonetheless, piracy had a great impact on the larger maritime Silk Road as a whole.<sup>7</sup>

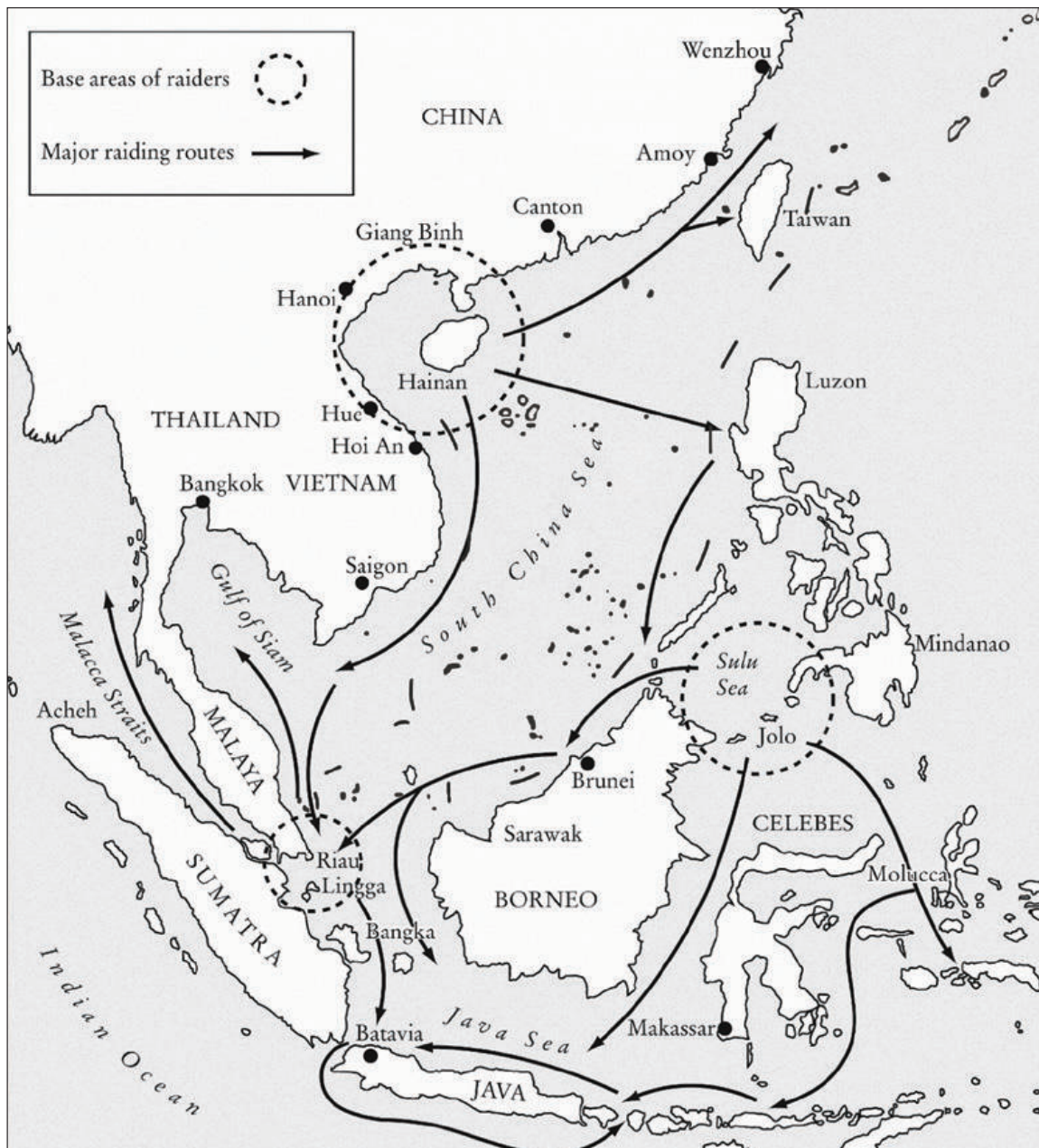
In the remainder of this article, I will develop

these themes with specific examples from history. My focus will be on the South China Sea region of southern China and south-eastern Asia. First, I will consider several well-known and less-known pirate lairs, places where pirates allegedly buried their treasures and operated clandestine trading markets. Next, I will discuss the exciting field of maritime archaeology to analyse what has been uncovered about sunken pirate ships along the maritime Silk Road. Finally, I will examine the role of pirates in cultural dissemination and popular culture today, and in conclusion I will suggest a few possible ways to preserve and open up for tourism several important sites along the pirates’ Silk Road.

Maritime traders faced many challenges on their lengthy journeys, including deadly illnesses and injuries at sea, running short of fresh water and food, and shipwrecks due to storms and rocky coasts. But an even greater and constant danger was pirates. Many ships carried valuable cargos that made them attractive targets, especially to many of the poor seafarers who lived along the coasts. From ancient times to the present, there have always been pirates active all along the maritime Silk Road. These included both indigenous Chinese and Southeast Asian pirates as well as pirates from Japan and Europe. Let me first briefly mention a famous South Asian ‘pirate’ who operated in the Indian Ocean. His name was Kanhoji Angre (also known as Conajee Angria or Sarkhel Angre, 1669–1729). He was a local ruler of the Colaba State and an Indian admiral of the Maratha Navy. He was noted for his devastating attacks on European merchant ships. For his actions, Europeans called him a ‘pirate’. However, in his homeland, he is remembered as a hero and freedom fighter.<sup>8</sup>

Among the many European pirates operating in the Indian Ocean and in the waters in and around Southeast Asia in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, I will name a few. During the mid-1680s, buccaneer William Dampier was aboard several pirate and privateer ships

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Map 4: The pirates' Silk Road. Created by the author.

that robbed Spanish and Portuguese vessels between Manila and Malacca. In 1683, the English freebooter Samuel White had organised a fleet of native craft, sanctioned by the King of Siam, to pillage shipping in the Bay of Bengal and off the coast of Aceh. Perhaps

the most famous European pirate to venture into the Indian Ocean and Red Sea was Capt. William Kidd in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>9</sup> All of these Western pirates operated along the routes that had long been established as the maritime Silk Road.

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A century earlier, there were also Japanese pirates, usually labelled *wokou* (倭寇) in historical accounts, who appeared in Southeast Asian waters where they mingled trade with plunder. They too followed the ancient maritime Silk Road routes. In the 1550s, Vietnamese officials reported the activities of Japanese pirates on their coast.<sup>10</sup> In 1585, for instance, a Japanese merchant-pirate named Shirahama Kenki (白濱頭貴) arrived in central Vietnam (an area at the time controlled by the Nguyen regime) in five large ships and plundered several coastal villages. Four years later, when he tried to return as a 'lawful merchant', Vietnamese officials apprehended him and threw him in jail.<sup>11</sup> Also in the 1580s, the Spanish reported Japanese pirates who repeatedly harassed shipping and towns in the Philippines from bases on Luzon.<sup>12</sup>

What about Chinese piracy along the south coast of China and in the South China Sea? Here too there were many pirates, most of whom came from southern China. Among the most famous Chinese pirates were Wang Zhi (王直/汪直), Baldy Li (李光頭 Li Guangtou), Lin Feng (林鳳), and Wu Ping (吳平) in the 16<sup>th</sup> century during the Ming dynasty; Li Dan (李旦), Zheng Zhilong (鄭芝龍), Zheng Chenggong (鄭成功), and Yang Yandi/Yang Er (楊彥迪/楊二) in the 17<sup>th</sup> century during the Ming–Qing dynastic wars; and Zheng Yi (鄭一), Zheng Yi Sao (鄭一嫂), Wushi Er (烏石二), Zhang Bao/Zhang Baozai (張保/張保仔), and Cai Qian (蔡牽) during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>13</sup> Map 4 illustrates three of the major pirate base areas and pirate sailing routes across the South China Sea in the early modern period.

### 3. PIRATE LAIRS AND FRIENDLY PORTS ALONG THE MARITIME SILK ROAD

I would like to turn our attention to the pirate lairs and friendly ports that appeared from time to time all along the maritime Silk Road, and in particular on the South China Coast and in the South China Sea. There are, of course, too many to discuss here,

so I will only briefly name a few places. First, I would like to point out that Chinese pirates established bases not only in remote out-of-the-way places (such as Weizhou Island [潯洲島] in the Gulf of Tonkin) and places with divided jurisdictions (such as Nan'ao Island [南澳島] on the Guangdong–Fujian border), but also in core commercial and political areas (such as in the Pearl River Delta in the vicinity of the provincial capital of Guangzhou). There were also many large and small black markets and 'friendly ports' — nominally legitimate ports that welcomed and serviced pirates and smugglers — in these areas as well.<sup>14</sup>

Two of the most famous pirates to have had bases on Nan'ao Island were the mid-Ming pirate Wu Ping and later Zheng Chenggong (or Koxinga [國姓爺], as he is better known in the West). Wu Ping had operated clandestine trading enterprises with other so-called *wokou* pirates for more than 20 years before fleeing to Vietnam in 1565. At that time, he commanded a fleet of more than 400 pirate ships, which were active along the coasts of Fujian and north-eastern Guangdong. As his primary base of operations, he chose Nan'ao, an island strategically located along the major North–South trading route and whose administration was split between the two above mentioned provincial jurisdictions. On the island, he built a stockade where he settled his family and amassed provisions, armaments, and loot. Today there is still a village on the island called Wu Ping's Stockade (吳平寨村).<sup>15</sup> Although most scholars today would not include Zheng Chenggong as a pirate, nonetheless during his lifetime, Qing officials and his many victims labelled him as a pirate and rebel. He too had one of his major bases on Nan'ao Island.<sup>16</sup>

The *Ladrones* (a name derived from Spanish and Portuguese seafarers) were the so-called 'Pirate Islands' located near the mouth of the Pearl River, and included islands near Hong Kong and Macao. Pirates, such as Zhang Baozai, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century even established lairs deep inside the Pearl River Delta.



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Fig. 1: Stone inscription of 1810, banning settlement on Weizhou Island. Photograph by the author.

One such lair was the tiny island named ‘Dragon’s Lair Island’ (龍穴島), a name derived from Chinese geomancy — *fengshui* (風水). The ‘dragon’s lair’ was the most optimal site receiving the earth’s vital energy — *qi* (氣), and therefore the best place to locate graves, houses, villages, and in this case even a pirate stronghold.<sup>17</sup> I will say more about Dragon’s Lair Island later.

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 some 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, neighbouring islands served as pirate bases. One of the earliest pirates was Huang Yi, who had strongholds on Great Hengqin (Montanha) and Small Hengqin (Dom João) islands in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. But perhaps the



Fig. 2: Purported Righteous Yang’s canal. Photograph by the author.

most notorious pirates were Zhang Baozai and Zheng Yi Sao who operated out of bases on Taipa and other nearby islands in the first decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a female pirate known as Lai Choi San (來財山) was dubbed ‘the Queen of Macao pirates’ in Western accounts. For about a decade, she and her gang controlled Macao’s fishing industry through a systematic extortion racket and collusion with local merchants and officials. While Macao served as an important friendly port for pirates and smugglers, the nearby islands, such as Taipa, Coloane, and Hengqin, served as pirate bases throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>18</sup>

The Gulf of Tonkin was peppered with countless pirate lairs. On the Chinese side of the Vietnamese border, Weizhou and Longmen (龍門) islands were two of the most important pirate bases between the 16<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Since at least the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368), Weizhou was a notorious resort of pirates, smugglers, and illegal squatters. The island had plenty of fresh water, firewood, and paddy fields to keep pirates replenished. Although Ming and Qing officials repeatedly attempted to make the island off-limits, they were unsuccessful. In 1810, for example, Governor-General Bai Ling (百齡) issued a proclamation, engraved on a stone inscription (Fig. 1),



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that permanently banned any settlement on Weizhou and neighbouring Xieyang (斜陽) islands. Despite such prohibitions, nonetheless in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, several pirate chieftains, such as Zheng Yi and Wushi Er, established permanent camps on Weizhou island.<sup>19</sup>

Also, in the Gulf of Tonkin, during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Longmen and several nearby islands were notorious havens for pirates and dissidents who opposed the new Qing dynasty (1644–1911). Deng Yao (鄧耀) and Yang Yandi (楊彥迪) were two of the most famous pirate-rebels who used Longmen as a base during the Ming–Qing dynastic wars. Yang Yandi, who was called ‘Righteous Yang’ by local villagers, built a fortress and one or more canals near Longmen. Figure 2 is a recent photo of what remains of one of the canals. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, even after military bases were established on the island, pirates and smugglers continued to operate in the area, but had moved their bases to other islands, such as Ox Head Island (牛頭山) in Fangcheng Harbour (防城港).<sup>20</sup>

On the Vietnamese side of the border, Chang Son, Cat Ba, and Van Don islands served as important pirate and smuggler bases in the early modern period. They were all situated near the Red River estuary and along major coasting routes. Van Don, which had been northern Vietnam’s most important legitimate port in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century, had by the next century degenerated into a minor port and then a pirate and smuggler anchorage. In 1838, Vietnamese patrols exterminated pirates on Chang Son Island, where they had built some fifty huts and planted 500 hectares of rice. Cat Ba Island remained a notorious pirate lair until the French destroyed it in 1877.<sup>21</sup>

Map 5, which is a section of a late 18<sup>th</sup>-century coastal defence map of Guangdong province, shows several pirate islands, such as Big Rat Island (大老鼠山), Small Rat Island (小老鼠山), Dog Head Island (狗頭山), and Snake Island (蛇山), which were

situated in the vicinity of the trading ports of Dongxing (東興), Zhushan (竹山), and Mong Cai on the border between China and Vietnam. These bases were also near the black markets around Jiangping/Giang Binh (江坪), which was nominally under Vietnam’s authority until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. These pirate lairs, on the Sino–Vietnamese sea frontier, were unambiguously situated in an area of imprecise and contested jurisdictions. Pirates selected such places for their bases for the convenience of both raiding and trading.<sup>22</sup>

Besides Macao, other cities and port towns served as friendly ports, that is, as free markets that served both legitimate merchants and the illegitimate trade of pirates and smugglers. In Vietnam, the ancient port of Pho Hien in the Red River Delta, Hoi An in the centre, and Ha Tien in the southern Mekong Delta were the most famous friendly ports trading with pirates in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Further to the south in Southeast Asia, the more famous pirate nests were in Malacca and Palembang in southern Sumatra. Between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, Malacca developed from a small fishing village into a major international port, which served both as a commercial *entrepôt* and pirates’ black market. The earliest ruler was a man named Parameswara, who according to tradition founded the city in 1402. There are two opinions about the man: one view says he was a vicious pirate, who led plundering raids against villages and ships, and another view says he was a fearless prince whose raids were justifiable warfare against Malacca’s enemies. Palembang has a similar history as being both a commercial *entrepôt* and pirates’ black market. During the time of Zheng He’s famous voyages, the leader of Palembang was a Cantonese merchant named Chen Zuyi (陳祖義). He too was accused of being a vicious pirate. In 1407, Zheng He attacked and captured Chen Zuyi, who was shackled and taken to Beijing where he was executed as a pirate.<sup>23</sup>

In the Philippines, Sulu was another famous base for piracy for many centuries. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> and



Map 5: Late 18<sup>th</sup>-century map of Sino–Vietnamese border. Owned by the author.

early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Sulu archipelago was one of the major centres for Southeast Asian sea raiding. Its towns and villages, which were constructed mainly on pilings above the water for easy access to boats, were notorious as pirate lairs and black markets. Iranun and Balangingi raiders, and their Tausog overlords, created a highly organised, large-scale operation which extended throughout insular Southeast Asia and to the shores of Thailand and southern Vietnam. Sulu sultans and *datus* (chiefs or nobles) supported raiders for a share of the booty. Marauding cruises were regular, annual undertakings, dubbed by their victims as the so-called Pirate Winds. In the winter during the north-east monsoons, raiders set sail from their Sulu bases to plunder ships and villages in the Celebes, Borneo, Java, Sumatra, and Malacca, and in the autumn, they returned home with the south-east monsoons with their ships laden with booty (see Map 4).<sup>24</sup>

#### 4. PIRATE BURIED TREASURE?

There are many famous stories about pirates' buried treasure in Western history and in literature. The best examples are legends of William Kidd's hidden treasures in several places along the New England coast of the United States (most famously on Gardiners Island off the eastern coast of Long Island, New York).<sup>25</sup> In literature, of course, everyone knows the adventure novel *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis

Stevenson, first published in 1881. But what about pirates' buried treasures in Asia along the maritime Silk Road? Below are a few stories, mostly legends and hearsay, that I have come across while doing fieldwork over the past 30 years. Although some of these stories I read in books and magazines, most were told to me by fisher folk and local coastal residents in southern China.

There are several legends about Wu Ping and his buried treasure. One concerns his sister, who may not even be a real person. Wu Ping was a notorious 16<sup>th</sup>-century pirate who established a base on Nan'ao Island (as mentioned above). According to one legend, after Wu Ping occupied the island, he built a fortified stronghold where he settled his family and stockpiled weapons and other provisions, as well as hid his treasure in 18 large containers that he buried in secret in 18 places across the island. In 1565, after a fierce battle with Ming General Qi Jiguang (戚繼光), Wu Ping decided to flee the island. However, when his younger sister (whose name we do not know) refused to leave the treasure behind, Wu Ping killed her, chopped her into 18 pieces, and buried her with his treasure. I was told that he did this to ensure that she would protect his treasure as an angry ghost. Today, Wu Ping's sister is venerated on Nan'ao Island as a treasure protecting goddess (Fig. 3).<sup>26</sup>

There is also the legend of 'Yang Er Sanpo' (楊二三婆), well known among people living along

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Fig. 3: The goddess Wu Ping's sister, Nan'ao Island. Photograph by the author.

the coast of the Gulf of Tonkin. The legend of Yang Yandi, who is also known as Yang the Second (Yang Er) and his third wife (Sanpo) is very similar to that of Wu Ping and his sister. As mentioned above, Yang was a famous pirate during the Ming–Qing transition in the Gulf of Tonkin. According to one legend, with the help of spirit soldiers, he built a fortress near Longmen Island and he took the title of king. Today the ruins of his fortress is still called the ‘King’s City’ (王城). In 1681, when the Qing armies attacked his fortress, Yang prepared to escape to Vietnam. However, his third wife refused to leave. In a fit of rage, Yang killed and buried her by throwing her into a deep well where he had hidden his treasure. In this legend, his third wife was transformed into a ghostly bird that local

villagers call ‘Yang Er’s Third Wife’ (Yang Er Sanpo). Each morning, nearby villagers still say that they hear the bird-ghost crying out to curse her wicked husband who murdered her. Up to today people dare not use the land near the ruins of Yang Er’s fortress because they say it is haunted and cursed.<sup>27</sup>

Zhang Baozai was certainly one of the most famous pirates in Chinese history. He was most active along the Guangdong coast in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Together with the female pirate Zheng Yi Sao, they led a formidable fleet of more than 20,000 pirates and had several bases in the Pearl River Delta and coastal area of central Guangdong. Perhaps his most famous base was on Cheung Chau Island (長洲島) (belonging to Hong Kong), where today tourists and school children regularly visit his so-called cave, where he was supposed to have hidden his booty. He also had another hideout in a cave on Dragon’s Lair Island (in the Pearl River Delta near Humen [虎門]), which today also attracts many tourists. Inside his cave is the statue of a deified Zhang Baozai.

## 5. SUNKEN PIRATE SHIPS ALONG THE MARITIME SILK ROAD

Besides buried treasures in caves and on remote offshore islands, marine archaeologists tell us about their discoveries of sunken ships that they believe may have been pirate vessels. In recent years, one of the most exciting areas of research has been Asian maritime archaeology. There are more than 3,000 ancient sunken ships along the Chinese coast, and even more in other waters along the maritime Silk Road.<sup>28</sup>

None of these finds, however, have been verified as pirate ships. There are many shipwrecks off the Nan’ao coast, an area, as mentioned earlier, that was prone to piracy. One of the most interesting sunken ships dates from the late Ming dynasty. The remains of the ship that has become known as the *Nan’ao Number One* (南澳一號) was discovered by Chinese fishermen in 2007, and the underwater archaeological excavation



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Fig. 4: Zheng Lianchang's stone inscription, Lei Yue Mun Tin Hau Temple. This is the rubbing obtained by the author from the temple.

began in 2009. A number of archaeologists estimate the ship sailed during the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, in the mid-Ming period, a time when China had several bans against maritime commerce. At another time, this ship would have been a legitimate merchant ship, following the busy Silk Road sea trading routes. But when China instituted sea bans, maritime trade became criminalised as piracy and smuggling. Officially, therefore, the *Nan'ao* ship was likely sailing along the coast illegally and would have been considered a pirate ship by the Ming government. Its cargo of ceramics, ironware, tea, and copper coins would have been considered contraband. The cargo of ceramics and ironware would have been used mainly for ballast, while the most valued cargo would have been the tea and copper coins. In addition to the cargo, *Nan'ao Number One* stands out for its weaponry, namely bronze cannons —



Fig. 5: The goddess Zheng Zuxi, Baishahu. Photograph by the author.

a necessary tool of the trade for merchants, pirates, and smugglers during this period. There are other scholars and journalists, however, who have suggested the ship actually belong to the pirate fleet of Li Dan, a famous merchant-pirate during the Ming–Qing transition in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, who was associated with Zheng Zhilong. In either case, according to Chinese archaeologist Cui Yong, the excavation of the *Nan'ao Number One* and stories of a Ming dynasty pirate ship have attracted a large amount of attention. Wrecks like the *Nan'ao*, Cui said, have helped to attract the media and to increase government funding. Unfortunately, on the downside, the increased exposure also attracted another kind of pirate — treasure hunting looters.<sup>29</sup>

There are even more excavated sunken ships off the coast of Vietnam, and some are believed to have been pirate ships (though none have been verified as such). In the offshore waters near Hoi An and just to the south in Binh Son district in present-day Quang Ngai province, marine archaeologists have discovered a large number of shipwrecks, some of which may have been pirate vessels. Although there is little information on another sunken ship found off the

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Fig. 6: Wushi beach resort. Photograph by the author.

coast of northern Vietnam near the Chinese border, several archaeologists believe that it belonged to the fleet of the famous Cantonese pirate Shap-ng-tsai (十五仔), who was defeated in this same area in 1849 by a combined Chinese and British naval expedition.<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately, we will need further material evidence before we are certain that these ships were sailed by pirates.

## 6. PIRATES AND CULTURAL DISSEMINATION ALONG THE MARITIME SILK ROAD

Like other sailors and fishers, pirates also worshipped many different sea deities, such as the Empress of Heaven (天后 Tianhou) or Maternal Ancestor (媽祖 Mazu). In Hong Kong, there is the Lei Yue Mun Tin Hau Temple (鯉魚門天后廟). In 1953, Hong Kong archaeologist Hsiao Wan-om, when doing excavation work on this temple, discovered a hidden stairway going beneath the temple that led to a small cave. Inside he found several silver doubloons and a seven-foot stone tablet. On the tablet was this inscription: 'Sea Goddess Temple, built by Zheng Lianchang (鄭連昌); henceforth, to be kept in perpetuity by his descendants; founded in the spring of 1753'. Zheng Lianchang was a pirate boss and the

father of Zheng Yi, also a famous Cantonese pirate most active at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. He died in a storm in 1807.<sup>31</sup> We can still make out most of the characters in Figure 4, which is from a rubbing of the stone inscription in the Lei Yue Mun Tin Hau Temple.

Pirates were also important in the spread of temple cults, such as the little-known deity called Sanpo (三婆). In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Zhang Baozai, in particular, was said to worship her at a temple on the Huizhou (惠州) coast, not too far from Hong Kong. However, long before this time, pirates and seafarers had been worshipping Sanpo on Weizhou Island in the Gulf of Tonkin, a famous pirate base since at least the Yuan dynasty. In fact, pirates (such as Zheng Yi, Wushi Er, and Zhang Baozai) were instrumental in spreading the Sanpo cult throughout the Gulf of Tonkin and even as far away as Macao and the Pearl River Delta. Today there still is a Sanpo Temple in Taipa (Macao) that is a UNESCO heritage site. It was originally constructed in 1843 or 1845.<sup>32</sup>

In some cases, pirates themselves were deified, including Zhang Baozai, Zheng Chenggong, and Yang Yandi. Earlier I mentioned how Wu Ping's sister became a treasure protecting goddess. The case of Zheng Zuxi (鄭祖禧) is another example of a female pirate who was deified. Zuxi was said to be the sister of Zheng Chenggong. Although there is no solid evidence that Zuxi ever existed in actual life, nonetheless for the past three centuries she has been worshipped as a reincarnated sea goddess whom villagers call the 'Warrior Mazu' (金剛媽祖). This virtually unknown cult exists only in one small temple in coastal Guangdong, near the port city of Shanwei (汕尾). There are several legends about Zuxi, two of the most popular ones are that she died in a naval battle fighting the Manchus and alternatively that she was murdered by her brother in order to ensure that she would protect his buried treasures as a ghost from the afterlife (stories similar to the ones about Wu Ping's sister and Yang Er's third wife). The temple was

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destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, but then rebuilt in 1985, and renovated in 1993 as a cultural centrepiece of the Honghai Bay (紅海灣) development area. Today, while local devotees continue to worship her as a protective sea deity, Zuxi is honoured by the local government as a patriotic anti-Manchu female hero.<sup>33</sup> Figure 5 is a photo of the Zuxi statue in her temple in Baishahu (白沙湖) near Shanwei in 2012.

Pirates, especially in recent years, have also made a huge impact on popular culture, in action films, television dramas, popular songs, and even operas. There are several Hong Kong movies about Zhang Baozai and Zheng Yi Sao, and even a popular historical sci-fi television series called *Captain of Destiny* that was first aired in 2015. There also are several modern Chinese operas that eulogise famous pirates as swashbuckling heroes, for example, *The Legend of Zhang Baozai* (張保仔傳奇) performed in Hong Kong in 2010 and *The Legend of Wushi Er* (烏石二傳奇) carried out in Leizhou (雷州) in 1997. Another interesting phenomenon, related to the recent trends in popular culture, is the fact that along the southern coast of China, several of the past pirate lairs have now become famous tourist resorts, such as Weizhou Island, the ‘Three Jing Islands’ (京族三島) off the Jiangping coast, and the sandy island off of Wushi Harbour (Fig. 6); they are all located in the previous pirate-infested Gulf of Tonkin.

## CONCLUSION: PIRATES AND HERITAGE CONSERVATION

As with the maritime Silk Road, the pirates’ Silk Road — its route network, sunken ships, and various cultural relics — are all rich components of cultural heritage that should be protected and preserved. As already mentioned, today stories about pirates have become an important part of maritime history as well as of popular culture. In Asia, at various places along the maritime Silk Road, governments and private individuals have built museums to feature artefacts

recovered from shipwrecks, including those from vessels which are believed to have been pirate ships. Past government fortifications along the coast are also being preserved and opened to the public.<sup>34</sup> All of these sites attract scholars and tourists who are interested in learning more about different aspects of the maritime Silk Road, including piracy.

What about the possibilities of establishing pirate museums? They too would certainly attract visitors. In the United States, there are dozens of museums that specialise in or at least feature historical pirates and piracy. Two of the most important and popular museums are the New England Pirate Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, and the Whydah Pirate Museum in Cape Cod, Massachusetts. The Salem museum features not only an ‘Artefacts Room’ of real pirate treasures, but also live interactive re-enactments that bring historical pirates back to life. The Cape Cod museum houses the largest collection of pirates artefacts recovered from a genuine pirate ship, the *Whydah*, which was skippered by the notorious Captain Samuel Bellamy (‘Black Sam’ Bellamy) in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. The *Whydah* was the first pirate shipwreck with its identity being authenticated beyond any doubts. Both museums have thousands of visitors each year.<sup>35</sup>

China (including the mainland, Hong Kong and Macao), Singapore, and Vietnam all have wonderful maritime museums, but as far as I know, there are no museums specialising on historical pirates. Nonetheless, several of these museums, such as the Hong Kong Maritime Museum, have had special exhibitions that focus on the history of Chinese pirates that include artefacts, documents, and maps. In 2020, the museum even sponsored a ‘Pirate Activity Day’, which aimed to teach children about real pirates and featured a ‘treasure hunt’. Such pirate museums and exhibitions should be something worth expanding in the future for both educational and recreational values.

All along the maritime Silk Road, a number of sites with past connections to piracy have become



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popular tourist destinations. As mentioned above, several former pirate lairs — Weizhou, Three Jing Islands, and Wushi — have now become popular beach resort areas. In Vietnam, the former friendly port of Hoi An is today restored and is an important UNESCO world heritage site. Also, marine archaeological sites, with excavations of sunken merchant or pirate ships, are visible reminders of history that help connect the past with the present. The shipwreck known as *Nan'ao Number One* has been designated as an UNESCO project singled out as being of special importance for research on the maritime history of the late Ming dynasty, on the maritime Silk Road, as well as a successful example of the development and practice of underwater archaeology in China. This and other shipwreck

excavation projects greatly raise the public awareness about underwater cultural heritage.

Such sites, however, need to be protected against the constant threats from treasure hunters who care only about profits and have little or no regard for conservation.<sup>36</sup> Protection and preservation should be a multi-dimensional effort that requires not only regulations and protection from national and local governments but also participation of local communities. The latter role is often crucial in ensuring the survival and preservation of historical sites, and at the same time can provide them with the economic benefits of tourism. The pirates of the past who operated along the maritime Silk Road can add an important additional and enriching aspect to cultural heritage preservation. **RC**

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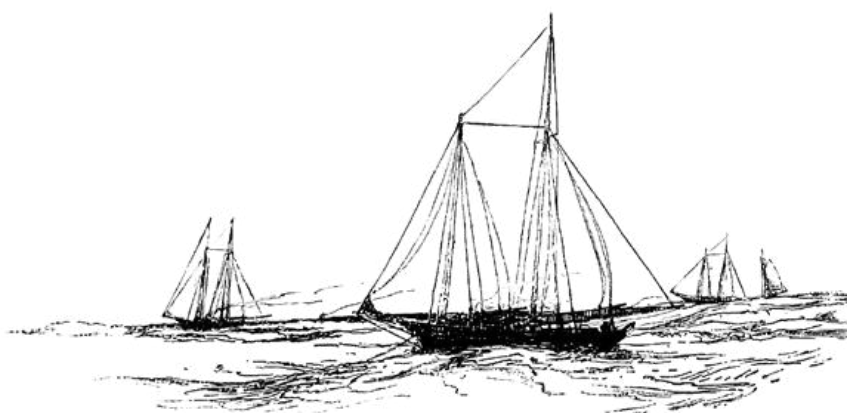


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*Ship at Sea*, late 19<sup>th</sup> century by Albert Ernest Markes. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.