

RCYC LUMINARA · HONG KONG TO TOKYO

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FEATURED GUEST LECTURE

# The Pirate Coast

*Hong Kong and the South China Sea*

with Dr Christopher Gerteis

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Sea Battle Between Japanese Pirates and Chinese naval forces (Qing), c. 1650 · Rijksmuseum



A wide-angle, nighttime photograph of the Hong Kong skyline as seen from across Victoria Harbour. The city's lights are reflected on the water's surface. The sky is dark with some light clouds. In the foreground, the dark water of the harbour is visible. The background shows the dense urban landscape of Hong Kong, with numerous skyscrapers and buildings illuminated. Some prominent buildings have their names or logos lit up, such as 'AIA', 'SOGO', 'Panasonic', 'Hitachi', and 'Philips'. The overall atmosphere is that of a bustling metropolis at night.

# Victoria Harbour, Hong Kong

*For centuries, a pirate harbour. By 1809, the fleet of Chinese pirates that controlled it was larger than any European naval squadron in Asia.*

**PIRACY AND TRADE  
ON THE  
SOUTH CHINA SEA**  
(15th-19th centuries)



- Legend**
- Pirate Base / Haven
  - ↔ Trade & Piracy Route
  - Commodity Flows:
  - Silk/Porcelain ● Tea

Distance in Miles  
0 30 60 130 200 MILES

118°E  
↑ SHANDONG  
32°N

TAIWAN  
(Formosa)

Guangdong

HANGZHOU  
NINGBO

SHUANGYU  
(destroyed port)

TAIZHOU

AMOY  
(Xiamen)

NAN'AO  
ISLAND

HONG KONG  
CHEUNG CHAU

MACAO

FORT ZEELANDIA

PENGHU  
(Pescadores)

Philippine  
Sea

HAINAN

South  
China  
Sea

LUZON

MANILA  
(Philippines)

ĐÀ NẴNG

ĐẠI VIỆT



15°N

20°N

33°N

32°N

118°E

105°E

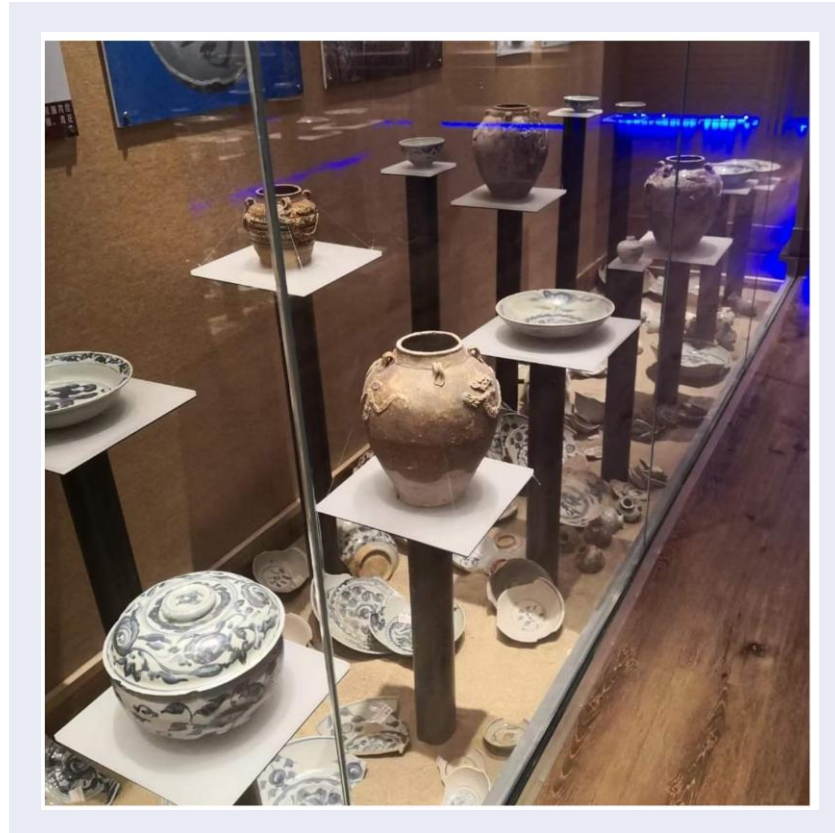
115°E

120°E

125°E

# The Sea Floor Remembers

*The Artefacts that Survived*



*Nan'ao No. 1 artefacts, Hong Kong Museum of History. CC0.*

# Ming Shipwrecks

Ming Dynasty shipwrecks off Nan'ao Island and the South China Sea

	Nan'ao No. 1 (2007)	NW Slope 1 & 2 (2023)
Location / Depth	Off Nan'ao Island; approximately 27 meters.	Northwest Continental Slope; approximately 1,500 meters.
Historical Era	Late Ming (Wanli Period, 1573–1620).	Mid-Ming (Hongzhi–Zhengde Periods, 1488–1521).
Primary Cargo	20,000+ pieces of <b>porcelain</b> , metal ware, and dissolved organic remains (tea/silk).	<b>No. 1:</b> 100,000+ porcelain pieces. <b>No. 2:</b> Neatly stacked <b>ebony</b> (timber) logs.
Key Significance	Discovery of <b>bronze cannons</b> , proving the militarization of private trade.	Physical evidence of a sophisticated <b>two-way trade</b> system (exports vs. imports).
Legal Context	Defiance of the <i>Haijin</i> (Maritime Prohibitions) through illegal smuggling.	Evidence of high-scale trade operating despite official imperial restrictions.

# Ming Dynasty *Haijin* (海禁) ('Sea Ban') Policy, 1371-1567

*Maritime Trade on the South China Sea*

- **State Monopoly on Commerce:** The policy mandated that all international trade be conducted exclusively through the official **Tribute System**, effectively criminalizing private mercantile activity to ensure imperial control over foreign exchange.
- **National Security and Isolationism:** It functioned as a defensive measure to stabilize coastal regions by cutting off the logistical and intelligence networks of **Wokou** (pirates) and remnants of the defeated **Yuan Dynasty**.
- **Confucian Economic Priority:** The ban was rooted in an ideology that prioritized **agrarian stability** and social order over commercial expansion, viewing unregulated maritime merchants as a source of cultural and political instability

# Merchant Monday, Pirate Friday

*The same ship, the same crew — the label depended on who was asking*

## THE MERCHANT

A Chinese captain sails to Manila with silk

Carries a licence from the provincial governor

Welcomed at port, cargo inspected, duties paid

Legitimate trader — by this government's definition

## THE PIRATE

The same captain encounters a weaker vessel

Takes its cargo in open water

The robbed ship's government calls it piracy

The provincial governor back home doesn't want to know

*Every power that tried to control these waters had to decide where to draw the line. None of them drew it in the same place.*

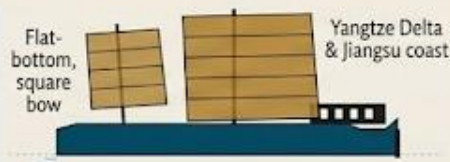
# The Four Grand Chuan

Four regional shipbuilding traditions — and the two that ruled the South China Sea

NORTHERN & EASTERN

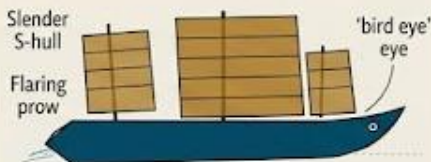
## THE REGIONAL JUNK TYPES

### 1. SHACHUAN (沙船) - SAND SHIP



Too shallow for a keel

### 2. NIAOCHUAN (鳥船) - BIRD SHIP



Favoured by merchants & pirates

## SOUTH CHINA SEA

### 3. FUCHUAN (福船) - FUJIAN SHIP



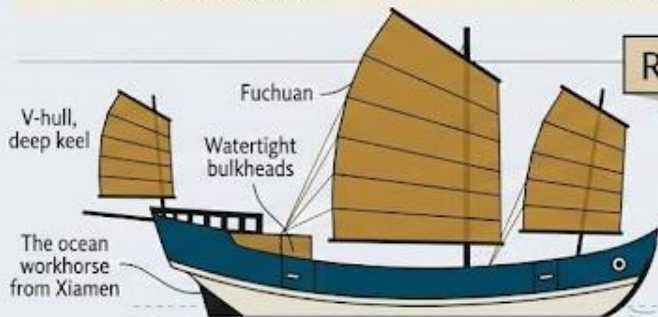
The ocean workhorse from Xiamen to Nagasaki

### 4. GUANGCHUAN (廣船) - GUANGDONG SHIP

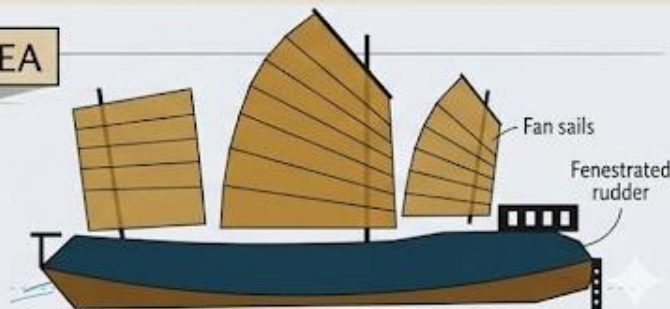


The Pearl River & Canton trade

## RULE OF THE SOUTH CHINA SEA



“The water we sail tonight belonged to the fuchuan and the guangchuan — the rest worked other seas.”

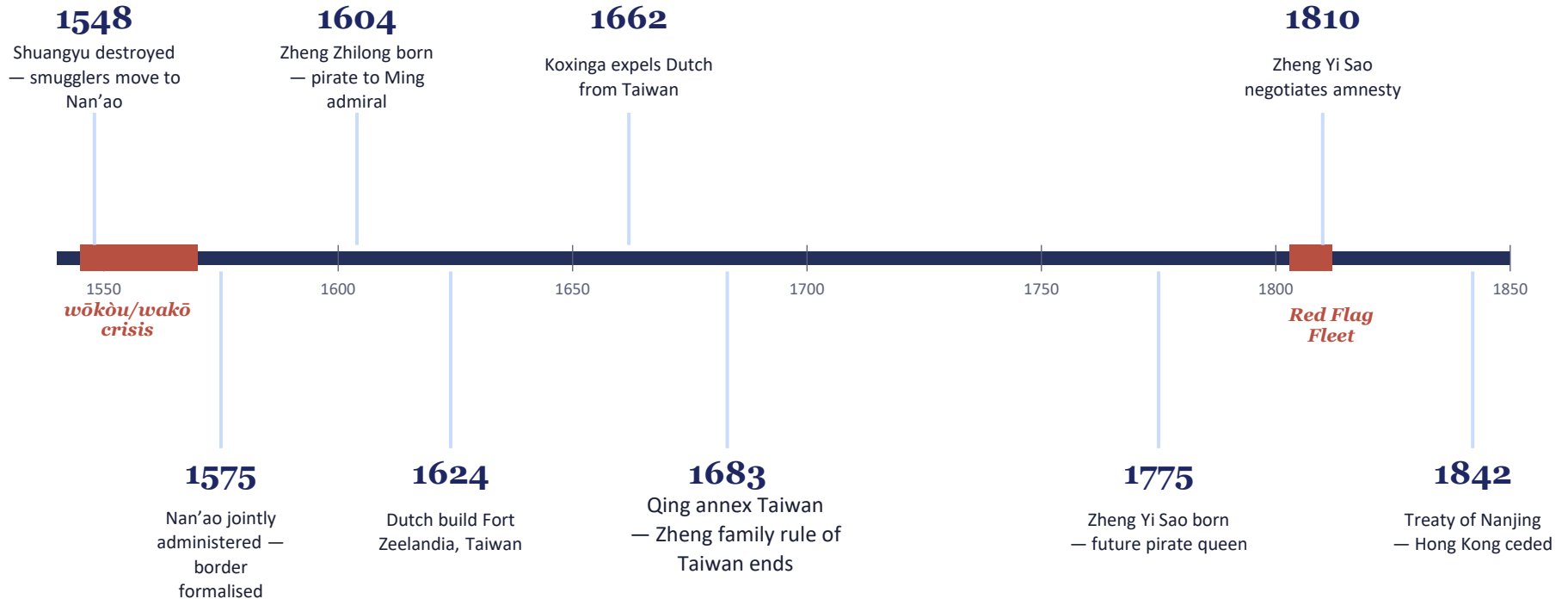


V-hull, deep keel, watertight bulkheads. The ocean workhorse from Xiamen to Nagasaki.

Teak-built V-hull, fan sails, fenestrated rudder. The Pearl River and Canton trade.

# The Pirate Coast: 1540s–1844

*Three centuries of pirate governance on the South China Sea*



*The sea was governed — it just was not governed by the state.*

# The Great Wakō Crisis

*How trade bans, silver, and diplomacy failures created the greatest pirate crisis in East Asian history*



*Sea battle between Japanese pirates and Chinese, c. 1599. Rijksmuseum, public domain.*

## THE PERFECT STORM

Six key events in thirty years: Portuguese reach China (1513), Ningbo Incident wrecks diplomacy (1523), Japanese silver takes off (1533), Ming coin shortages, Ming navy destroys smuggling hub at Shuangyu (1548), the Mongol Altan Khan besieges Beijing (1550).

## THE SCALE

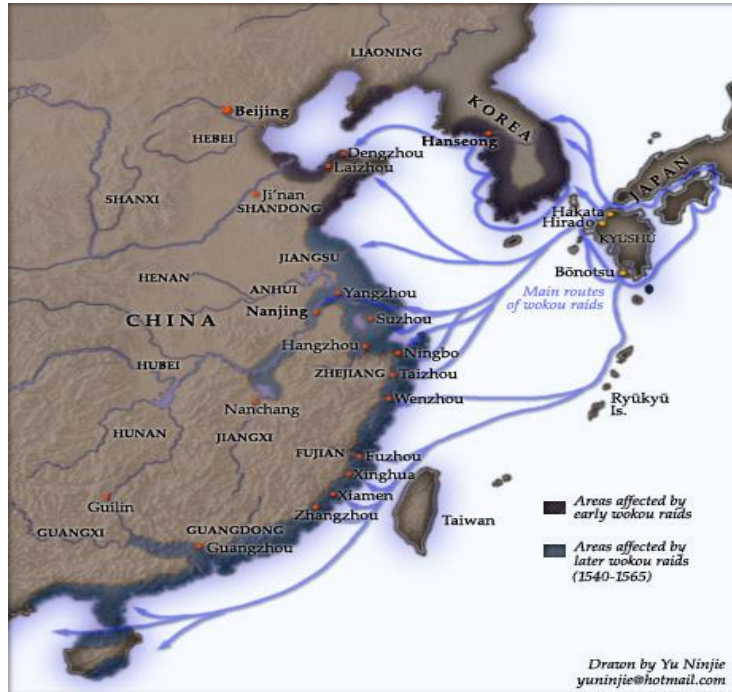
‘Three-tenths Japanese, seven-tenths Chinese followers.’ Ming sources admitted most raiders were Chinese. Pirate armies of thousands sacked Nanjing’s suburbs. 1552–1564: the peak years.

## THE RESPONSE

Qi Jiguang rebuilt the Ming military from scratch. Recruited farmers, drilled squad formations, defeated the wokō at Taizhou (1561). By 1567 the court reversed the trade ban — conceding the pirates had been right.

# The Reach of the Wakō

Four centuries of raids across the East Asian sea — and the ban that made them worse



Wakō raid routes, 14th–16th c. Map: Yu Ninjie, CC BY-SA 3.0.

## THE SCOPE

From the 13th century, fleets of dozens to hundreds of ships raided Korea, China, and the Philippines. By the 1500s, raids swept from Shandong to Guangdong — the entire coast the Luminara is sailing.

## THE SPIKE

601 raids during the Jiajing reign (1522–1566) — more than all previous reigns combined. The maritime ban, meant to starve the pirates, created them instead.

## THE TWIST

The ‘Japanese’ pirates were mostly Chinese. By the 1550s, 70% of wakō crews were Han Chinese from Fujian and Zhejiang. Wang Zhi, the most powerful leader, helped the Portuguese reach Japan. The label was political, not ethnic.

# The Pirate Queen: 1775–1844

*Zheng Yi Sao and the Red Flag Fleet*

~1,800   
40,000 soldiers & sailors

vs. ~900   
entire British Royal Navy



*Not defeated. Not imprisoned. Not executed. **She negotiated — and she won.***

# Why the British Chose a Pirate Harbour

## GOOD ANCHORAGE

The island was already mapped by pirate fleets. Deep water, sheltered anchorages, and command of the Pearl River approach.

## THE ADMIRAL'S SURVEY

Captain Belcher's 1841 chart documented what the pirates already knew. The Admiralty didn't discover this harbour, nor were they the first to chart it.

## TREATY OF NANJING

1842: the Treaty of Nanjing.  
The harbour changed flags, not function.  
The trade was Opium from British India for Chinese Tea



**Every power that has held Hong Kong's harbour  
understood the same thing the pirates understood.**

*Tonight we sail the Taiwan Strait — the next chapter of that contest.*



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