

R C Y C L U M I N A R A · H O N G K O N G T O T O K Y O
F E A T U R E D G U E S T L E C T U R E

The Pirate Coast

Hong Kong and the South China Sea

A Companion Guide to the Presentation Slides

Dr Christopher Gerteis

Associate Professor in Modern and Contemporary Japanese History

SOAS University of London

Executive Brief

The harbour the Luminara sailed out of was a pirate harbour long before it was a British colony. This lecture tells that story.

For five hundred years, the South China Sea was governed — but not by states. Merchant-pirate networks controlled the trade routes, collected taxes, issued safe-conduct passes, and enforced their own codes of law. The same captain could be a legitimate trader in one port and a pirate in the next. The label depended on who was asking.

The lecture traces three centuries of this history, from the destruction of the smuggling base at Shuangyu in 1548 to the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842, when Britain took Hong Kong. Along the way, it covers the Ming Dynasty's failed attempt to ban maritime trade (the *haijin*), the great wakō crisis that ravaged the Chinese coast in the 1550s, the regional shipbuilding traditions that produced the vessels dominating these waters, and the remarkable career of Zheng Yi Sao — a woman who commanded a pirate fleet larger than the Royal Navy, then negotiated her own retirement on her own terms.

The argument is simple and consequential: when the British chose Hong Kong, they chose it for exactly the same reasons the pirates had valued it for centuries. Deep water, sheltered anchorages, command of the Pearl River approach. The harbour changed flags. It did not change function.

Tonight the Luminara enters the Taiwan Strait — the next chapter of the same contest over who controls the water.

About This Guide

This companion document accompanies the PDF slides from Dr Christopher Gerteis's guest lecture, delivered on Day 2 of the Luminara voyage after departing Hong Kong. It is designed to be read alongside the slides, providing the narrative and context that a live audience would hear during the presentation. Dr Gerteis is Associate Professor in Modern and Contemporary Japanese History at SOAS University of London. You can email him anytime at cg24@soas.ac.uk. All inquiries are welcome.

Slide-by-Slide Companion

Slide 1 — Title

The lecture opens with a seventeenth-century painting from the Rijksmuseum depicting a sea battle between Japanese pirates and Chinese naval forces, c. 1650. It sets the tone for what follows: this is not a story about treasure maps and skull flags. It is a story about power, trade, and who gets to decide the difference between a merchant and a pirate.

Slide 2 — Victoria Harbour, Hong Kong

The harbour the Luminara sailed out of is one of the most photographed waterfronts in the world. But for most of its history, it looked nothing like the skyline you see in the photograph. No skyscrapers, no Star Ferry, no neon. What it had — for centuries — was pirates.

The pirate fleets that controlled these waters in the early 1800s were larger than any Royal Navy squadron the British sent to stop them. One confederation, at its peak, operated roughly 1,800 vessels and 70,000 crew. They collected taxes from fishing villages. They issued safe-conduct passes to merchant ships. They had a bureaucracy.

The woman who ran the most powerful of these fleets — a former sex worker who married into piracy and then took over the business when her husband died — negotiated her own retirement with the Qing government. She walked away with her fleet, her fortune, and a second career running a gambling house in Canton. Her name was Zheng Yi Sao. And the harbour you just left was her office.

Slide 3 — Map: Piracy and Trade on the South China Sea

This custom map shows the coast the Luminara is sailing — and the same coast that pirate fleets controlled for centuries. The trade routes ran from Hong Kong and Macao through the Taiwan Strait, connecting Guangdong, Fujian, the Philippines, and Japan. Every harbour, every island, every strait marked here was fought over — not by nations in the modern sense, but by merchant-pirate networks that operated across borders that did not yet exist.

The trade routes and the pirate routes were the same routes. The difference was who was telling the story.

Slide 4 — The Sea Floor Remembers

In 2007, archaeologists recovered a shipwreck off Nan'ao Island — right at the junction of Guangdong and Fujian provinces. Inside: over 10,000 pieces of blue-and-white porcelain, still stacked for transport. But the porcelain was probably ballast. The real cargo — tea and copper coin strings — had long since dissolved.

The ship also carried bronze cannons, still half-buried in the mud. This was a vessel that expected to fight. It dates to roughly 1573–1620 — a period when maritime trade was technically illegal under the *haijin* ban. The sea floor does not care about government edicts.

In 2023, two more wrecks were found at 1,500 metres depth: one outbound with porcelain, one inbound with timber. It was the first time export and import cargo had been recovered in the same area. The trade network was two-way, continuous, and enormous.

The photographs on this slide show artefacts from the Nan'ao No. 1 wreck, now held at the Hong Kong Museum of History: a dragon jar and blue-and-white porcelain pieces recovered from the sea floor.

Slide 5 — Ming Shipwrecks: A Comparison

This table compares the key shipwreck discoveries. The Nan'ao No. 1 (2007) was found at 27 metres depth and yielded over 20,000 pieces of porcelain plus bronze cannons — proving the militarisation of private trade in defiance of the maritime ban. The Northwest Slope wrecks (2023), discovered at 1,500 metres, yielded over 100,000 porcelain pieces in one vessel and neatly stacked ebony logs in the other — physical evidence of a sophisticated two-way trade system operating at enormous scale despite official imperial restrictions.

Slide 6 — The Ming Dynasty Haijin ('Sea Ban') Policy, 1371–1567

The *haijin* — literally 'sea ban' — was one of the most ambitious attempts to control maritime trade in world history. Imposed by the Ming Dynasty from 1371, it mandated that all international trade be conducted exclusively through the official Tribute System, effectively criminalising private commerce. It served three purposes: maintaining the state monopoly on foreign exchange, cutting off the logistical networks of pirates and remnants of the defeated Yuan Dynasty, and enforcing a Confucian economic vision that prioritised agrarian stability over commercial expansion. Unregulated maritime merchants were viewed as a source of cultural and political instability.

The ban lasted nearly two centuries. It did not stop trade. It handed it to people who did not mind breaking the law.

Slide 7 — Merchant Monday, Pirate Friday

This slide presents the lecture’s core conceptual argument. The same ship — the same crew, the same captain — could be a legitimate trader in one port and a pirate in the next. It depended on who was asking.

On the left of the slide: a Chinese captain sails to Manila with silk. He carries a licence from the provincial governor. He is welcomed at port, his cargo inspected, his duties paid. Legitimate trader — by that government’s definition.

On the right: the same captain encounters a weaker vessel in open water. He takes its cargo. The robbed ship’s government calls it piracy. The provincial governor back home does not want to know.

The Europeans who arrived in the 1500s — Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch — brought a legal framework that tried to separate trade from piracy into clean categories. Privateers had government licences; pirates did not. But that framework did not map onto how the South China Sea actually worked. The licence and the raid were part of the same business model.

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.

Slide 8 — The Four Grand Chuan

Chinese shipbuilding was not one tradition but four, each tied to a stretch of coast and to the conditions of its home waters. The *shachuan* (sand ship) was the flat-bottomed workhorse of the Yangtze delta, built for silted shallows. The *niaochuan* (bird ship) from Zhejiang was slender and fast — favoured by pirates because it could outrun heavier vessels.

The two that matter for the Luminara’s route are the *fuchuan* (Fujian ship) and the *guangchuan* (Guangdong ship). The *fuchuan* had a deep V-hull, heavy keel, and watertight bulkheads — the classic Chinese innovation, three centuries ahead of European practice. It was the ocean-going workhorse that ran silk to Nagasaki, porcelain to Manila, and tea to Batavia. The *guangchuan*, built of teak with fan-shaped sails and a distinctive fenestrated (perforated) rudder, was the ship of the Canton trade and the ship Hong Kong’s waters knew best.

When Zheng Yi Sao's pirate confederation swept this coast, her fleet was predominantly *fuchuan* and *guangchuan*. The water the Luminara sails tonight belonged to these two types.

Slide 9 — Timeline: The Pirate Coast, 1540s–1844

This timeline provides the structural backbone for three centuries of history. Key moments to note: the destruction of the smuggling base at Shuangyu in 1548 (which scattered the trade rather than stopping it); the rise of Zheng Zhilong, a pirate who became a Ming dynasty admiral; his son Koxinga's expulsion of the Dutch from Taiwan in 1662; and Zheng Yi Sao's negotiated amnesty in 1810, when she kept her fleet and her fortune.

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

Slide 10 — The Great Wakō Crisis

In the 1550s, the South China coast exploded. Six events in thirty years created a perfect storm: the Portuguese reached China (1513), a diplomatic disaster at Ningbo wrecked Japan–China relations (1523), Japanese silver production was surging, the Ming navy destroyed the smuggling hub at Shuangyu (1548), and the Mongol leader Altan Khan besieged Beijing (1550), pulling military resources away from the coast.

The result: pirate armies numbering in the thousands sacked cities along the coast, reaching the suburbs of Nanjing. Ming sources acknowledged that most of the raiders were Chinese, not Japanese — the label *wakō* ('Japanese pirate') was political, not ethnic.

The general who finally contained the crisis, Qi Jiguang, rebuilt the Ming military from the ground up. But the real turning point came in 1567, when the Ming court reversed the maritime trade ban — conceding what the pirates had been demonstrating for decades: you cannot ban the sea.

Slide 11 — The Reach of the Wakō

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

The numbers tell the story. During the Jiajing reign (1522–1566) there were 601 recorded raids — more than all previous reigns combined. The maritime ban, meant to starve the pirates, created them instead. When you criminalise commerce, you do not stop commerce. You hand it to people who do not mind breaking the law.

And the twist that changes everything: by the 1550s, 70% of *wakō* crews were Han Chinese from Fujian and Zhejiang. The most powerful pirate leader of the era, Wang Zhi, helped the Portuguese reach Japan. The label was political, not ethnic — it let the Ming court blame outsiders for a crisis that was fundamentally domestic.

Slide 12 — The Pirate Queen: Zheng Yi Sao, 1775–1844

Around 1801, a woman known as Zheng Yi Sao — ‘wife of Zheng Yi’ — took command of a pirate confederation that dwarfed anything the European navies could field in these waters. Her fleet numbered roughly 1,800 vessels with some 40,000 crew. For comparison, the entire Royal Navy at the time had about 900 ships.

Her confederation operated under a unified code of laws. She collected taxes from fishing villages and merchant ships, issued safe-conduct passes, and enforced strict discipline — including execution for pirates who assaulted captives. Brutal, but consistent. That consistency held six rival fleets together under one authority.

In 1810, she negotiated her surrender on her own terms. She kept her fleet. She kept her fortune. Her lieutenant Zhang Bao received an imperial military commission. Zheng Yi Sao retired to Canton, where she ran a gambling house until her death in 1844.

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

Slide 13 — Why the British Chose a Pirate Harbour

When the British took Hong Kong in 1841, they chose it for exactly the same reasons the pirates had valued it for centuries: deep-water harbour, sheltered anchorages, and command of the Pearl River approach.

The chart shown on the slide is Captain Belcher’s 1841 Admiralty survey. But Belcher did not discover this harbour. The pirate fleets had already mapped it. What the Admiralty did was formalise what the pirates already knew — and claim it as their own.

The Treaty of Nanjing in 1842 gave Britain control of Hong Kong. The harbour changed flags, but it did not change function. The British imposed harbour fees, pilot requirements, and customs duties — structurally the same mechanisms as the pirate safe-conduct passes. Pay the fee, follow the rules, your ship is protected. The trade was opium from British India exchanged for Chinese tea.

Slide 14 — Closing

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

The water is the asset. Control the water, and you control the trade.

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

About the Lecturer

Dr Christopher Gerteis is Associate Professor in Modern and Contemporary Japanese History at SOAS University of London. His books include *Gender Struggles* (Harvard University Press, 2010) and *Mobilizing Japanese Youth* (Cornell University Press, 2021). He is General Editor of the six-volume Bloomsbury *Cultural History of East Asia* and director of the [Simulating Silence](#) digital heritage project. His research examines how institutions produce the categories through which societies are governed — from postwar Japan to the pirate coast of the South China Sea. You can read more about Chris at <https://christophergerteis.net>
