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Extended Abstract

Title: A Question of Legitimacy: The Creation of Cheng Shih's Floating Empire

When listing the famous figures of Piracy, many will immediately think of the violent men that came to represent the crime community. However, some of the most successful pirates in history were women. In the scholarship on pirates women are ignored or given a shallow analysis by historians. Men like Blackbeard and Bartholomew Roberts dominate the pirate narrative to the extent that even the most successful pirate in history, Cheng Shih, is relatively unknown. My research aims to fill the need for more gender analysis within the historic knowledge of piracy. Using primary sources of captivity narratives, this presentation will present a complexity of piracy often overlooked. The Chinese Pirate Queen Cheng Shih constructed a complex bureaucratic structure and social atmosphere that added legitimacy to her rule as a female pirate and ensured her legendary legacy.

The political bureaucracy Cheng Shih created allowed for tremendous growth under her leadership. She came to command 70,000 men and a pirate fleet with thousands of ships. In comparison, the usual Caribbean pirate fleet had less than ten ships. In order to keep tight control over such a large crew Cheng Shih instituted strict rules and due process. Her legitimacy was one brought on by force, with punishments for infractions like stealing and adultery. Her rules also protected female captives, with a punishment of death for crew members who would attempt to harm them. Her political structure also emphasized central control by forbidding private property and implementing a policy of communal wealth. She centralized control and instituted herself as the top of that political structure

Cheng Shih also fostered a social atmosphere in which she was revered as a semi-religious figure. In order to even join the ship, new crew members had to swear an oath to Cheng Shih in the presence of joss¹. The presence of religion on board is unique. Most western pirates openly mocked religion, but Cheng Shih used religion to boost her own legitimacy. The social atmosphere also played off the deep-seated roots of confucianism. She was the head and all underneath owed loyalty and respect to her. In terms of gender however, Cheng Shih's social atmosphere denied the traditional submissive role given to confucian women. Cheng Shih was not the only woman commander within her fleet, and her position of power innately defied Confucianism.

Why was Cheng Shih so successful? She provided an alternative lifestyle to those who were suffering under the current dynasty and the culture of neoconfucianism. One captive even notes that men of riches flocked to her ship, in order to escape the tyranny of the Qing dynasty. Cheng Shih created a structure to support this growing mass of unrest, and in turn this structure made her a revered ruler too large for even the emperor to ignore. Even at the end of her life, Cheng Shih had so much power she strong armed the dynasty into her own retirement terms, and was able to go free and run a gambling house on the rivers. Cheng shih created her empire and added to her own legitimacy.

The continuing study of female pirates is important to understand the complexity of piracy, a community committed to principle above all, including gender. Cheng Shih is a great example of the flexibility in pirate culture; embodying the principles of bravery and antiauthoritarianism is more important than gender. This research is one paper in a larger research project which takes the most prominent female pirates and compares them in order to have a deeper understanding of this anarchical pirate culture, and the women who drove it.

¹ Joss is the Chinese name of the deity worshipped on Cheng Shih's Ships.

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