



Bloodthirsty Pirates? Violence and Terror on the South China Sea in Early Modern Times¹

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Abstract

All pirates had reputations for violence and terror, but in Asia people also depicted them as bloodthirsty demons who practiced cannibalism and human sacrifices. But how deserved were those reputations? Here I examine the images, nature, and meanings of pirate violence in the South China Sea between the fifteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Pirates consciously used violence and brutality to obtain money and goods, to seek vengeance against their enemies, and to instill fear in anyone who might resist them. In this article I focus on what I call the cultural construction of violence with Chinese characteristics.

Keywords

Piracy, violence, torture, rumors, South China Sea, Ming dynasty, Qing dynasty, dismemberment, cannibalism, human sacrifice

Introduction

Asian pirates had notorious reputations for violence, terror, and cruelty. Two examples will suffice. In the fifteenth century, we have this vivid record of the barbarities of a gang of *wakō* pirates on the coast of southern China:

In the fourth year of the emperor Zhengtong's reign (1439), pirates attacked Dasong, burning and plundering the town and desecrating graves. They tied infants to polls and splashed them with boiling water, laughing at their screams. They wagered on the

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gender of fetuses of pregnant women they had captured and then slashed their bellies open to see who won the bet.²

In another incident, in the winter of 1807, off Macao, pirates abducted John Turner, first officer of the ship *John Jay* bound for Bombay, and held him prisoner for several months. During his captivity he witnessed the daily activities and routines of the pirates and later wrote about his harrowing experiences. On the eighteenth day of captivity, he described how the pirates captured a small “Mandarine boat,” with a crew of four sailors; the pirates brought one of the captives aboard their junk and brutally tormented him:

He was nailed to the deck through his feet, with large nails; then beat with four rattans, till he vomited blood. And after remaining sometime, in this horrid state, he was taken on shore and cut to pieces.

Turner later witnessed another prisoner, also a military officer,

put to death with circumstances of particular horrors, being fixed upright, his bowels were taken out and his heart likewise, which they [the pirates] afterwards soaked in spirits and ate. The dead body I saw myself.

Such “shocking treatment,” he assured his readers, was common for anyone who “annoyed” the pirates. Turner witnessed many other unsettling horrors during his captivity.³

What are we to make of these stories of extreme violence and terror? How did such tales get started and how did they spread? How typical or common were these horrifying incidents? Were these merely the actions of

² *Wozhi* [Record of the *wakō*] (Taibei, 1985; originally published in the Ming dynasty), 447. Although mention of *wakō* (in Chinese *wokou*) raids on the China coast date back to the early thirteenth century in the Yuan Dynasty, they only became a serious problem in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. By and large, important differences between the *wakō* activities of the Mongol and Ming periods were that in the former case Japanese constituted the majority of pirates and they mostly raided the Korean coast, and in the latter case the pirates were multinational in composition, and they mostly raided the Chinese coast.

³ John Turner, *A Narrative of the Captivity and Sufferings of John Turner, First Officer of the Ship John Jay of Bombay, among the Ladrones or Pirates, on the Coast of China, Showing the Manners and Customs of the Natives—their Mode of Warfare, Treatment of Prisoners, and Discipline, with the Difference between the Pirate and the Chinese, in the Year 1807* (New York, 1814), 12, 19.

a few deranged, psychopathic men? Was there some deeper meaning and logic to all this violence and terror? Were such stories even true or real? This article addresses these and other questions concerning the nature and meanings of pirate violence and terror in the South China Sea in the early modern period, roughly between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁴

Over those five centuries we can discern several cycles of piracy in the seas around China. Much of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was the age of the *wakō* pirates, composed of ethnically mixed crews of Chinese, Japanese, and occasionally European marauders who combined trade, smuggling, and piracy. This was followed in the middle of the seventeenth century, during the turbulent Ming-Qing dynastic wars, by a wave of mostly ethnically Chinese rebel-pirates who took advantage of the anarchy to pursue personal, political, and economic ambitions. Following a lull of nearly a century, a new upsurge in piracy appeared in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when tens of thousands of pirates, who were mostly poor Chinese fishermen and sailors, took to the seas to indiscriminately plunder ships and coastal settlements all along the South China coast. Finally, another wave of piracy occurred during the mid-nineteenth century, in the wake of the disorders caused by the Opium War and Taiping Rebellion.⁵ Although each of these cycles had its own distinct characteristics and activities, in this study I take a Braudelian approach to emphasize the common, shared features of pirate violence over the *longue durée*, what I call a cultural construction of violence with Chinese characteristics. My focus, therefore, is on the physical, emotional, and magico-religious aspects of pirate violence, and since I am dealing mainly with images of violence and the motives of individuals who are long deceased much of what I have to say is speculative.

⁴ Although there is no general agreement about the dates of China's early modern period, nonetheless a number of historians use the term to broadly describe the period encompassing the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368–1911), a period also often labeled late imperial China.

⁵ On early modern Chinese piracy see, for example, So Kwan-wai, *Japanese Piracy in Ming China during the Sixteenth Century* (East Lansing, 1975); Tanaka Takeo, *Wakō: Umi no rekishi* (Tokyo, 1986); Ota Koki, *Wakō: Shogyo, gunjishiteki kenkyu* (Yokohama, 2002); Dian Murray, *Pirates of the South China Coast* (Stanford, 1987); Robert Antony, *Like Froth Floating on the Sea: The World of Pirates and Seafarers in Late Imperial South China* (Berkeley, 2003); and Robert Antony, "Piracy on the South China Coast through Modern Times," in *Piracy and Maritime Crime: Historical and Modern Case Studies*, ed. Bruce Elleman, Andrew Forbes, and David Rosenberg (Newport, 2010), 35–50.

Rumors, Reputations, and Terror

Encounters with pirates, such as the ones mentioned above, created pirate reputations for violence and terror throughout the maritime world. Paradoxically such reputations may have helped to reduce unnecessary bloodshed. As the economist Peter Leeson suggests in his book on Western piracy in the age of sail, pirates skillfully manipulated their images of savagery and cruelty to minimize resistance and to maximize profits. If piracy was fundamentally a profit-seeking venture, then it made sense to avoid battles that could result in the damage or destruction of ships and property, as well as injury and deaths of both pirates and victims. Battles not only raised pirates' operating costs but also endangered their revenues. Therefore, contrary to our expectations, pirates did everything they could to avoid fights and to encourage victims to surrender peacefully. To accomplish these ends, Leeson argues, they relied upon their reputations for violence, brutality, and ruthlessness.⁶

Rumors and tales about pirates' brutality flew like the wind between ships and ports across the South China Sea and throughout the maritime world. While occasionally pirates became heroes in sea yarns, more commonly story-tellers spoke of pirates as murderous, cruel, and insane villains. Rumors were a sort of "improvised news" under constant construction;⁷ they also were vital sources of information which, although unsubstantiated, were often taken as true. Transmitted by word of mouth, rumors often arose out of pre-existing fears among a group of people, a community, or society at large.⁸ Although today most of our images of pirates come from movies and television, rumors always have been important in the spread of pirate reputations.

As an oral tradition, most rumors have been lost, but occasionally they were recorded and thus we have some knowledge about their content and how they were transmitted. For instance, one writer described the famous early nineteenth-century Fujian pirate, Cai Qian, as a bloodthirsty scoundrel who wantonly disemboweled victims and ate their livers. It was said that "he could eat as many as four livers in a day." As the author explained,

⁶ Peter Leeson, *The Invisible Hook: The Hidden Economics of Pirates* (Princeton, 2009), ch. 5. See also the discussion in Michael Pearson's article in this issue.

⁷ Tamotsu Shibutani, *Improvise News: A Sociological Study of Rumor* (Indianapolis, 1966), 16.

⁸ On rumors in imperial China, see Barand ter Haar, *Telling Stories: Witchcraft and Scapegoating in Chinese History* (Leiden, 2006).

he had heard this story from his father “who had heard it from his teacher, Wu Zhipu, who lived in Quanzhou during the Jiaqing reign, just a few years after Cai Qian had been killed.”⁹ Obviously the teacher had heard stories circulating along the waterfront of Quanzhou, Cai Qian’s home area.

Storytelling was a favorite pastime among all sailors. Most everyone aboard ships heard bloodcurdling tales about pirates from shipmates. Tales were told and retold, fashioned and refashioned many times. Edward Brown, who was captured off the Vietnamese coast by Chinese pirates in 1857, related how during his voyage his crew of Asian sailors told stories about how pirates cut to pieces anyone who dared to resist them.¹⁰ John Turner and Richard Glasspoole had heard similar stories aboard their own ships before being taken by pirates in the early nineteenth century. Fanny Loviot, who wrote a best-seller about her captivity among Chinese pirates in 1854, related how Capt. Rooney told passengers over dinner about an earlier voyage in Southeast Asia when his ship had been taken by “Indian pirates,” who murdered his entire crew in front of his eyes and then bound him to the ship’s mast and cruelly abused him.¹¹ Loviot also reported how within a couple of days after being captured by pirates, rumors already were flying in Hong Kong that she had been sold into slavery or viciously murdered.¹²

In telling their stories, victims rendered pirates as barbarous ruffians. Brown described the pirates that attacked him as “a savage race of beings.”¹³ Pirate attacks, which often occurred late at night when everyone was asleep, became “frightening nightmares.” Just to mention the word “pirate” conjured up images of gruesome characters and awful brutality. Loviot opined that “such is the terror of the pirate-name that . . . they ravage the seas with impunity.” She described the pirates who attacked her ship as “barbarians” who “seemed to delight in our terror.” “The sight of these monsters was alone sufficient to make death welcome.” She continued:

⁹ *Maxiang tingzhi* [Gazetteer of Maxiang subprefecture, Fujian] (1893), 235.

¹⁰ Edward Brown, *Cochin-China, and My Experience of it. A Seaman’s Narrative of his Adventures and Sufferings during a Captivity among Chinese Pirates, on the Coast of Cochin-China, and afterwards during a Journey on Foot across that Country, in the Years 1857–8* (London, 1861), 25–26.

¹¹ Fanny Loviot, *A Lady’s Captivity among Chinese Pirates in the Chinese Seas*, trans. Amelia Edwards (London, 1856), 67.

¹² *Ibid.*, 132–133.

¹³ Brown, *Cochin-China*, 75.

They looked unspeakably hideous. . . . They wore scarlet turbans on their heads, and round their waists broad leather belts garnished with knives and pistols. In addition to this each man carried in his hand a naked sword. . . . I believed my last hour was at hand.

What was most frightening for her and other captives was their helplessness, being, as she put it, “utterly in their power.”¹⁴

The fearful images of Asian pirates made them appear more like wild beasts or demons than humans. The first Ming emperor, Zhu Yuanzhang, said that *wakō* pirates made sounds like the “croaking of frogs,” and a Chinese literati a century and a half later reported they made “bird-like sounds” when they spoke. In *Treatise on Japan*, the authors described *wakō* pirates having long disheveled hair, blackened faces, and tattooed bodies, which gave them the appearance of ghouls.¹⁵ Likewise, Fanny Loviot depicted pirates: “These creatures seemed like demons, born of the tempest, and bent upon completing our destruction.” They attacked with a frightful yell that “sounded like nothing human.”¹⁶

Pirates apparently knew well the effects that such images had on people and, in fact, they may have deliberately cultivated terrifying demeanors. Some *wakō* purposefully created frightful appearances by wearing demon masks and horned helmets. Similarly, eighteenth century Chinese pirates wore ragged, blood-stained clothes, blackened their faces, and let their hair long and uncombed, like beggars, butchers, and ghosts. Their long, unbound hair not only sent a political message symbolizing denunciation of the Qing dynasty, but also unbound or disheveled hair was a distinguishing trait of demons and ghosts.¹⁷ Pirates very likely perpetuated or constructed self-images as fearsome, indeed demon-like, beings to frighten victims and to discourage resistance.

Besides reputations for cold-blooded, inhuman brutality, pirates also cultivated reputations for treating badly anyone who resisted them but not harming those who surrendered peacefully. It was well known, or at least widely believed, that those who dared to resist would be tormented and

¹⁴ Loviot, *A Lady's Captivity*, 68, 69, 70, 73, 84, 97.

¹⁵ Li Yangong and Hao Jie, *Riben kao* [Treatise on Japan], in *Xuxiu siku quanshu* [Continuation of the Book of the Four Treasuries] (Shanghai, 1995; originally published in the Ming dynasty), 744: 736; also see *Wozhi*, 385.

¹⁶ Loviot, *A Lady's Captivity*, 69.

¹⁷ Barand ter Haar, *Ritual and Mythology of the Chinese Triads: Creating an Identity* (Leiden, 1998), 116.

killed. In Turner's words: "If a vessel they [i.e., pirates] capture happens to have made resistance, they in general murder some of the crew and cruelly treat the residue. . . . In other cases they are satisfied with the plunder and detention of the crew," implying that no one would be harmed.¹⁸ During his captivity, Brown witnessed what the pirates did to the crew of a Fujianese junk that defied them. After the attack ended Brown boarded the prize:

Oh what a slaughter house! There were more than fifty bodies lying mangled on the deck, some without heads, some without arms or legs, others run through, and weltering in their gore; in fact, the picture is too dreadful to describe. There had been no quarter given; young and old were alike slain: they had not left one alive.¹⁹

With such a reputation for slaughtering anyone who resisted no wonder few victims fought back.

Actually pirates relied on survivors who could spread tales of their ordeals. Although in some instances pirates murdered some or all of the crews of the ships they attacked, at other times they actually released some or all of their victims to return home where they could convey their experiences to others. It appears that in a large number of cases victims surrendered quietly without a fight. Many Western victims were dismayed by Chinese crews and passengers who just passively stood by and calmly watched the pirates overrun the ship without the slightest attempt at resistance. What these Western observers took as cowardliness was in fact sound, pragmatic judgment, for the Chinese knew to resist meant certain injury and perhaps death. They also knew if they did not fight back the pirates would most likely just rob them and then be on their way. No one would be wounded or killed. Westerners missed the point and often paid dearly for it. Usually Western officers and passengers were the ones who resisted and usually they were the ones tortured and murdered.

The Meanings of Torture

Pirates and governments both tortured prisoners, and they did so for similar reasons—to extract confessions, as punishment, and for revenge. More specifically, pirates used torture on captives to elicit information, usually

¹⁸ Turner, *Narrative*, 38.

¹⁹ Brown, *Cochin-China*, 76.

about where they hid valuables; to punish soldiers and officials who opposed and attempted to arrest them; and as a form of reprisal against foreigners, especially Westerners. In the first scenario the purpose was not to kill prisoners, but in the other two scenarios torture often resulted in death; in fact, a gruesome, painful death seems to have been the purpose in most of the latter two scenarios. In imperial China the government's use of torture was legal, but frequently exceeded the legal limits, and therefore occasionally resulted in death. Judicial courts routinely used torture to extract confessions, which were necessary to close most cases. Sometimes officials also used torture for revenge or retribution.²⁰

Pirate torture was rarely arbitrary, but rather calculated and purposeful. As Leeson suggests, among Western pirates torture was "a rationally chosen means to develop a reputation" for barbarity and wickedness.²¹ It seems the same for Chinese pirates. Because some victims were unwilling to disclose where they had hidden valuables, torture had to be applied to loosen their tongues. To force information from reluctant captives, torture had to be gruesome and agonizing, but not cause death. Dead prisoner could not reveal where valuables were hidden, could not be sold into slavery, and were worth considerably less in ransom.²² A certain amount of torture and even killings, however, was necessary to maintain reputations for cruelty, insanity, and fearsomeness. If pirates did not occasionally kill or torture victims then, I would argue, few people would be afraid of them, and there would be more resistance and less cooperation.

Pirates were quite skillful in inflicting pain on reluctant captives. Brown described how the pirates treated the owner aboard his lorch: they "hauled [him] up on deck in a rough manner" and with their knives took turns cutting him several times across his abdomen, not to kill him but to encourage him to confess where he stowed his treasures. Brown: "I felt extremely sorry for him; he must have been in great pain, mentally and bodily." Although the pirates repeated the ordeal several times, the owner refused to confess, and in the end the pirates left him.²³

²⁰ On the regulation and abuses of legal torture, see Timothy Brook, Jérôme Bourgon, and Gregory Blue, *Death by a Thousand Cuts* (Cambridge, MA, 2008), 46-49, 178-179.

²¹ Lesson, *Invisible Hook*, 115.

²² In one case, for example, pirates kidnapped for ransom the younger brother of a man named Xu Ze, and when the payment was not paid on time the victim was brutally murdered; afterwards Xu Ze still had to pay the pirates a ransom to recover the corpse. *Jinmen zhi* [Jinmen Gazetteer] (1882), 195.

²³ Brown, *Cochin-China*, 29-30.

Flogging was a common mode of torture used by pirates and governments, and sometimes even privately within family compounds. According to Loviot, after taking a prize the pirates “cruelly interrogated passengers” in order to “wring from them a full avowal of their riches.” The victims were suspended from the masts bound by “only one thumb and one toe” and “swung violently backwards and forwards,” while from time to time they were severely beaten with canes.²⁴ Turner reported that if prisoners were suspected of destroying or secreting valuables they were put to a similar torture:

The unhappy victim being first stripped of his clothes, has his hands tied behind him, a rope passing from the mast head, then made fast to his joined hands by which he is hoisted from the deck; and while thus suspended, repeated stripes are inflicted on every part of his body with a rod formed of two or three rattans twisted together. Blood frequently follows the stripes, and in some cases the miserable sufferer is left suspended by his hands for upwards of an hour.²⁵

Another captive, Richard Glasspoole, reported a few years later that the pirates who had abducted him not only used a similar torture to elicit information, but also to force reluctant captives to join their gang.²⁶ Figure 1 depicts an illegal form of “private torture” similar to the ones mentioned above.

Pirates also occasionally nailed prisoners to the deck, not only to inflict pain but also to make sure they could not escape. We already have noted Turner’s account where pirates nailed a captured officer to the deck with large nails and beat him repeatedly with rattan whips before finally mutilating his body. George Cooke, the *Times* correspondent in China during the 1850s, reported that when a British gunboat captured a pirate vessel near Hong Kong in 1857, the sailors found two male captives “nailed to planks, each with a stink-pot tied round his neck and slow matches burning.”²⁷

²⁴ Loviot, *A Lady’s Captivity*, 113.

²⁵ Turner, *Narrative*, 38.

²⁶ Richard Glasspoole, “A Brief Narrative of my Captivity and Treatment amongst the Ladrões,” in *History of the Pirates*, comp. and trans Charles Neumann (London, 1831), 114-115.

²⁷ George Cooke, *China: Being ‘The Times’ Special Correspondence from China in the Years 1857-58* (London, 1861), 68.

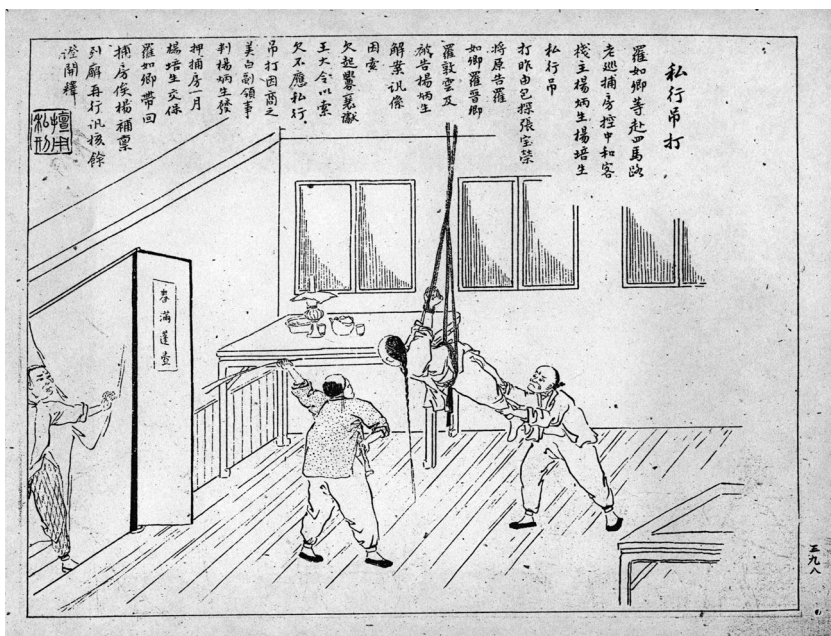


Fig. 1. Beating as a form of private punishment (Source: *Dianshizhai huabao*, Shanghai, 1884).

Apparently officials and runners also used the same barbarous techniques. In the 1850s, while on a road to Beijing, Évariste Régis Huc passed a cart-load of prisoners in the most horrible circumstances: “these unfortunate creatures were nailed by the hands to the planks in the cart.” When questioned, the officers explained that these men were all thieves and because they did not have sufficient chains to bind them, they nailed them to the cart to prevent them from fleeing.²⁸

Physical torments were not enough. Pirates were also adept at mental or psychological torture. Turner and all of the other victims who survived pirate attacks and later wrote about their experiences explained that they were “continually threatened with death.”²⁹ Glasspoole relates that soon after being captured the pirate chief interviewed him and his fellow prisoners to elicit information, with threats to put them all to death if they did

²⁸ Évariste Régis Huc, *The Chinese Empire: A Sequel to Recollections of a Journey through Tartary and Tibet*, revised edition (London, 1859), 443-444.

²⁹ Turner, *Narrative*, 11-12; also 16, 26, 27.

not cooperate. On the chief's command, several pirates took out their swords "and laid them on our necks, making signs that they would soon take us to shore, and cut us to pieces." At any moment he expected to be tortured and "put to a cruel death." On several other occasions he and his fellow captives were likewise threatened with being brutally killed, which in fact, "I am sorry to say was the fate of some hundreds [of other prisoners] during my captivity."³⁰

During her captivity, Loviot was in a constant state of mental "anguish" and "despair," expecting to be raped or put to death at any moment. She also experienced another sort of mental torture that she and a Chinese passenger had to suffer. Her captors forced them into "a kind of trap, about two feet square," what she could only describe as a "narrow dark hole below deck," with no room to either stand up or lie down. At first the pirates nailed the trap door shut and Loviot could only imagine a horrible, slow death, as if being "buried alive." She pondered, "Was this hole destined to be our coffin and our tomb?" "A cold chill ran over all my body." After a few hours, however, the pirates let them out, and crowding around them sadistically laughed at their anguish: "It was, but a cruel jest."³¹

Actually such treatment of prisoners was not unusual. Chinese jails were not much better than black holes. When pirates were apprehended, they expected to be treated brutally by the authorities, often also being confined in small cages. John Gray explained that there were different size cages. One was "too short to allow the prisoner to place himself in a recumbent position, and too low to admit of his standing. Another is a narrow cage, not high enough to admit of the offender standing altogether upright. To the top is attached a wooden collar or cangue, by which the neck of the criminal... is firmly held."³²

Dismemberment and disembowelment were extreme forms of torture (or, as jurists prefer to say, torment) regularly inflicted against soldiers and officers captured by pirates. *Wakō* pirates badly treated officials, often mutilating their bodies in the cruelest manner, whenever they were captured.³³ Several centuries later, according to Turner and other witnesses, whenever a Mandarin boat fell into the hands of pirates, officers and men

³⁰ Glasspoole, "Brief Narrative," 103, 104; also 106, 116, 117.

³¹ Loviot, *A Lady's Captivity*, 73, 103–106.

³² John Gray, *China: A History of the Laws, Manners, and Customs of the People* (London, 1878), 1: 57.

³³ See, for example, Zheng Ruozeng, *Chouhai tubian* [Illustrated compendium of sea-board strategies] (Beijing, 2007; originally published in 1562), 334.

were routinely killed in the most brutal manner, whether they attacked pirates or not. We have previously mentioned how pirates nailed the feet of a captured officer to the deck, beat him with rattans until he vomited blood, and then afterwards took him ashore and “cut him to pieces.” The same pirates later disemboweled another officer.³⁴ Glasspoole also reported witnessing similar atrocities. For example, on November 23, 1809, after victory in a battle, sixty or seventy officers and soldiers were taken prisoner and immediately “cut to pieces and thrown into the river.”³⁵ Pirates purposely used torture and dismemberment to deter the authorities from fighting or trying to arrest them. Evidence suggests that pirates’ reputation for extreme violence towards officials and soldiers did put pressure on authorities to think twice before launching attacks.³⁶

When pirates decapitated or dismembered officers and soldiers they did so out of hatred and revenge against a state that treated them with equal vehement and brutality. Pirates mimicked state executions. In China the imperial state usually summarily executed pirates either by beheading or by death-by-slicing, if they had resisted officials or soldiers.³⁷ Afterwards the severed heads were hung from poles for public display in markets and ports. The sight of dangling heads of pirates was ubiquitous along the south China coast in the early nineteenth century, when thousands of pirates were executed.³⁸ Similarly, in a number of instances pirates cut off the heads of soldiers and villagers and then suspended the severed heads from trees.³⁹

The state and even local villagers occasionally used extreme violence against enemies they considered particularly vile. Actually disembowelment was an accepted, but rarely used, form of punishment in ancient China, used as a just retribution in homicide cases involving slaves and

³⁴ Turner, *Narrative*, 12, 19, 39.

³⁵ Glasspoole, “Brief Narrative,” 121.

³⁶ See, for example, Shangyudang fangben [Imperial decrees], Qianlong 60.4.27 [1795], Jiaqing 11.9.6 [1806], and Jiaqing 12.6.19 [1807] (National Palace Museum Archives, Taipei, Taiwan); and *Guangdong haifang huilan* [A conspectus of Guangdong’s coastal defense] (Guangzhou, n.d.), 26: 3b.

³⁷ Ernest Alabaster, *Notes and Commentaries on Chinese Criminal Law and Cognate Topics* (London, 1899), 469.

³⁸ Between 1795 and 1810, there were no fewer than 2,803 executions of pirates in Guangdong alone; see Robert Antony, *Like Froth Floating on the Sea*, 97–101.

³⁹ *Guangzhou fuzhi* [Gazetteer of Guangzhou prefecture] (Guangzhou, 1879), 81: 20b.

servants who murdered their superiors.⁴⁰ In 1808, for example, the Jiaqing Emperor ordered an extraordinary execution of a servant who had killed his master. The murderer was mutilated before his victim's grave, and his heart ripped out and presented as a sacrificial offering to pacify the dead man's ghost, as well as to serve as a warning to others.⁴¹ Near the end of the nineteenth century, the Rev. J. Turner related an incident that he witnessed on the Guangdong coast: "a crowd of villagers fell upon some pirate junks in the bay, hacking to pieces all the occupants, with the exception of two men whom they solemnly sacrificed to the spirit of the headman's son, whom the pirates had previously murdered."⁴² Such instances of revenge, retribution, and bloody sacrifice were not so unusual, as we will see in the next section.

Dismemberment and disembowelment aimed not only to torment the body but also the soul. Significantly, a disembodied corpse "violated the filial obligation to parents and ancestors to keep the physical body in one piece, even in death."⁴³ These were acts of extreme punishment that went beyond the world of men into the afterlife for all eternity. They were more than just physical ordeal for they aimed "to destroy the future as well as the present life" of the victim, who became "unworthy to exist longer either as a man or a recognizable spirit."⁴⁴ Cutting the body to pieces was part of a process of dehumanization, reducing the mutilated bodies to nothing more than comestibles. The executed subject was transformed into a beast or, even worse, a ghost. "An incomplete corpse, or mutilated caucus, would render the body unfit to receive the soul again." Thus, the soul of the disembodied person became forever a malevolent ghost.⁴⁵ Such extreme violence was also reminiscent of popular Chinese depictions of hell, as

⁴⁰ See, for example, Wang Yongkuan, *Zhongguo gudai kuxing* [Cruel punishments of ancient China] (Taipei, 1991), 62-71.

⁴¹ Joanna Waley-Cohen, "Politics and the Supernatural in Mid-Qing Legal Culture," *Modern China* 19, no. 3 (1993): 337-338.

⁴² J.A. Turner, *Kwang Tung or Five Years in South China* (London, 1894), 174.

⁴³ Donald Sutton, "Consuming Counterrevolution: The Ritual and Culture of Cannibalism in Wuxuan, Guangxi, China, May to June 1968," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37 (1995): 145.

⁴⁴ Alabaster, *Notes and Commentaries*, 57.

⁴⁵ See Virgil Kit-yiu Ho, "Butchering Fishes and Executing Criminals: Public Executions and the Meanings of Violence in Late Imperial and Modern China," in *Meanings of Violence: A Cross Cultural Perspective*, ed. Göran Aijmer and Jon Abbink (Oxford, 2000), 145-146.

illustrated below (Fig. 2), in which demonic figures tore apart and disemboweled victims for misdeeds they had committed during their lifetime.

Perhaps there was also a political message in such pirate executions. Since at least the ancient Han dynasty, the imperial state claimed a monopoly on violence, particularly with regards to capital punishment. Indeed, the right to execute criminals helped to define and legitimize imperial authority. At least from the imperium's perspective, when pirates decapitated, dismembered, and disemboweled captives they were appropriating important prerogatives of the state. Pirates did not simply mimic state practices, but they also sent a political message that challenged its authority, and at the same time claimed a sort of legitimacy for themselves.⁴⁶

Pirates also used torture and murder as forms of reprisal against foreigners. When taken by pirates, Capt. Rooney of the *Caldera*, told his captors that he was Spanish and that the passengers and crew were composed of various other European nationalities, but not English. The year was 1854, and the pirates in this case did not like England. The lie worked, according to Loviot, "for the pirate [chief] instantly replied that, had we been English, our throats should have been cut upon the spot."⁴⁷ Yet, for Brown, who was also English, and taken a few years later, during the Arrow War (1856-1860), when the provincial authorities in Canton had offered rewards of 100 taels of silver for the heads of every Englishman, his captors treated him politely and assured him that they would not harm him if he cooperated. Later the pirate chief explained that he wanted to befriend the English to help fight the Manchus, whom he hated even more. In fact, the chief claimed that he and his men were Taiping rebels, not pirates.⁴⁸ Here, then, was another form of anti-foreignism, in this case against the alien Manchu rulers of China.

However, it would be rash to declare that in all or even most cases where pirates tortured foreigners it was because of anti-foreign sentiments. There are actually many cases in which Westerners were not badly treated by their pirate captors. In some cases, we do not know if the pirates treated

⁴⁶ On the concerns of the state on blood sacrifices, see Terry Kleeman, "Licentious Cults and Bloody Victuals: Sacrifice, Reciprocity, and Violence in Traditional China," *Asia Major* 7, no. 1 (1994): 191-197; and on imperial and popular legitimation lore, see ter Haar, *Ritual and Mythology of the Chinese Triads*, 306-324. The pirates' appropriation of popular legitimation rhetoric, however, did not mean that they actively challenged state authority.

⁴⁷ Loviot, *A Lady's Captivity*, 74.

⁴⁸ Brown, *Cochin-China*, 10, 28, 34.

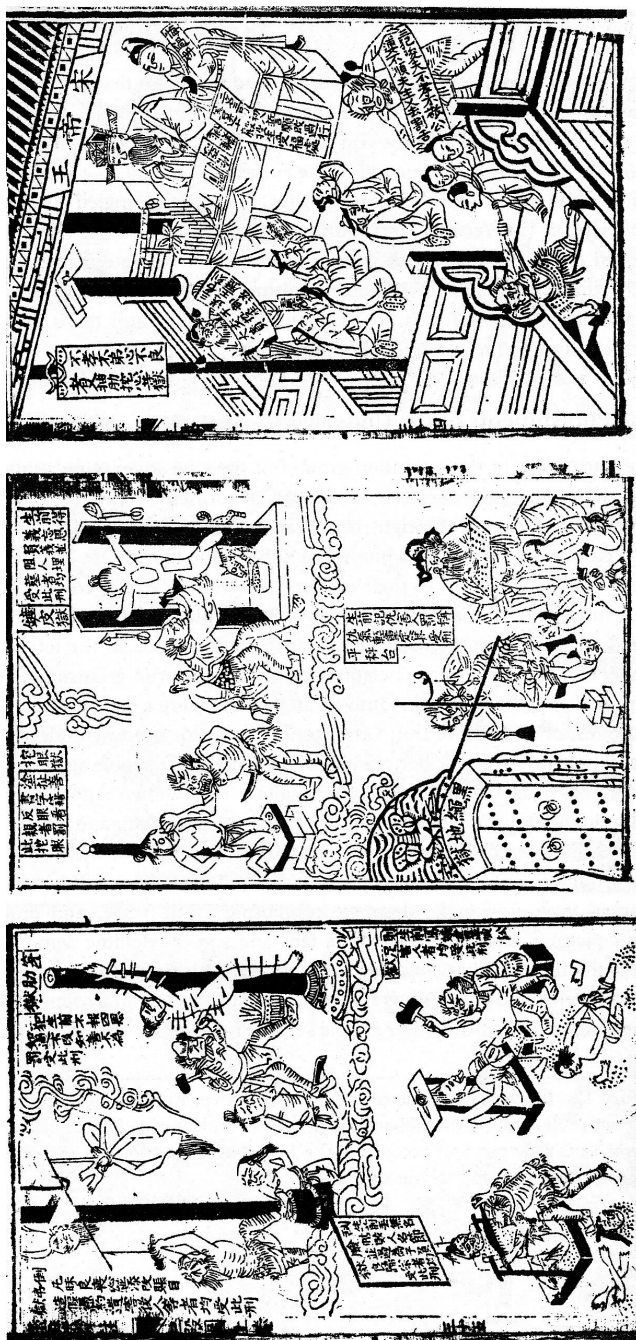


Fig. 2. Tortures in Chinese hell (Source: *Yuli baochao*, Taiwan, undated).

Western victims cruelly because they hated Westerners or because the victims resisted the pirates. There was usually much more involved than mere anti-foreignism. Western officers, crew, and passengers tended to be wounded or killed mainly because (as mentioned above) they were the ones most likely to resist pirate attacks. Brutality towards foreigners may not have had anything to do with hating foreigners, but rather everything to do with hating anyone who dared to oppose them.

Marcus Rediker and others have argued that, at least in the case of seventeenth and early eighteenth century Atlantic pirates, torture was used against unjust, predatory sea captains, as a sort of popular justice.⁴⁹ Although there were a number of instances where Asian pirates abused or killed sea captains and ship owners—such as when the pirates who attacked Brown's vessel tortured the owner—nevertheless, there is no clear evidence that this was done as a form of justice. I have not seen any cases that mention brutal or dishonest captains, or that pirates specifically picked captains to teach them a lesson (though, of course, this is not to say there were no bad captains sailing the South China Sea). This then does not seem to have been an important reason for torture. Evidence, to the contrary, indicates that torture was chiefly used to extract information or for hatred against those who resisted.

Bloodthirsty Pirates?

This brings us back to the question posed in the title: were Asian pirates bloodthirsty villains? We have already noted two instances where Chinese pirates disemboweled and cannibalized their victims. Turner described how he witnessed pirates cut out a victim's heart, soak it in spirits, and eat the mixture; and we have read another account about how Cai Qian likewise ate the livers of his victims, as many as four each day.

These, however, were not isolated cases. In fact, there were many other similar tales, told over a long period of time and by many different people, Chinese and foreigners alike. In some cases, witnesses claimed that they had seen these horrendous acts with their own eyes; in other cases, people merely had transmitted them from hearsay. But whether true or not, what

⁴⁹ See, for example, Marcus Rediker, "The Pirate and the Gallows: An Atlantic Theater of Terror and Resistance," in *Seascapes: Maritime Histories, Littoral Cultures, and Transoceanic Exchanges*, ed. Jerry Bentley, et al. (Honolulu, 2007); and Leeson, *Invisible Hook*, 126–131.

is important is that many people believed these tales to be true. In ancient China a pirate named Sun En was known not only for his perverse cruelties, but also for cannibalizing victims and even forcing their wives and children to share in the bloody feasts.⁵⁰ At the end of the eighteenth century a pirate named Chen Laosan, who operated off the coast of Guangdong, followed in Sun En's footsteps. After his arrest Chen confessed that when a passenger on a Chaozhou trading junk had tried to resist him, he sliced and quartered the poor man and then had his liver and heart mixed with spirits for his gang to consume. A week later, a helmsman on a fishing boat who had resisted also suffered the same fate.⁵¹ Years later, a Fujianese pirate, He Song, and some members of his gang, admitted at trial that on more than one occasion they disemboweled victims and devoured their blood and organs.⁵² Brown, too, witnessed how the pirates, who had tortured the lorch's owner with repeated cuts across his abdomen, "caught the poor man's blood, and actually drank it!"⁵³ The pirates, however, were not alone in perpetrating such gruesome acts.

Although there undoubtedly were some sadistic, psychopathic pirates who had perverse pleasure in mutilating and eating victims, nevertheless we can also perhaps find deeper purpose in such apparent madness. Certainly these horrendous acts would have added further to pirates' reputation for brutality, perverseness, and insanity. Yet there were still other possible and more pragmatic reasons: for medical and prophylactic purposes, for the magico-religious benefits derived from human sacrifice, and for political purposes. Such appalling practices, in fact, were highly ritualized and had profound meanings for participants and victims. Indeed, more than one scholar has explained that China had a "culture of cannibalism" deeply rooted in its history and literature.⁵⁴

Generally speaking, only specific body parts were chosen to be consumed, not the whole body, and usually not even the flesh (as would have been the case in instances of survival cannibalism). In most cases only the

⁵⁰ Antony, *Like Froth Floating on the Sea*, 22.

⁵¹ Gongzhongdang [Unpublished Palace Memorials] (no. 2779), Jiaqing 2.r6.21 [1797] (National Palace Museum Archives, Taipei, Taiwan).

⁵² Gongzhongdang (no. 8052), Jiaqing 7.5.12 [1802].

⁵³ Brown, *Cochin-China*, 29.

⁵⁴ See, for example, Sutton, "Consuming Counterrevolution," and Yue Gang, *The Mouth that Begs: Hunger, Cannibalism, and the Politics of Eating in Modern China* (Durham, 1999).

blood, heart, liver, and other internal organs were consumed.⁵⁵ Why these? Because human blood and internal organs were thought to contain a concentration of life-force, therefore, they were considered very effective in the cure of many ailments.⁵⁶

According to popular belief, the blood and internal organs of people who met violent deaths, such as by execution either by the state or by pirates, were particularly potent. What is more, the potency and efficacy of the life-force contained in human blood and organs could be greatly enhanced “by means of gruesome torture” before they were removed and consumed.⁵⁷ Therefore, the consumption of the blood and organs, whether of executed criminals or the innocent victims of pirates, was an especially potent cure-all for illnesses and a prophylactic for warding off demons. That is why we find numerous stories, both oral and written, about crowds attending executions and afterwards taking steamed buns or rags to soak up the blood or to take some body parts home as medicine or prophylactic. Indeed, executioners reportedly did a brisk business in selling the hearts, livers, and blood of executed criminals; executioners even rented out their blood-stained swords to eager customers.⁵⁸ Because of the dehumanizing or demonizing process involved in mutilation there was also a widespread conviction that the blood and organs of executed persons possessed important menacing properties that could frighten away evil spirits and ghost, the very elements that brought on illness and death.⁵⁹

The cannibalistic practices of pirates were extreme acts of ritualized violence. For the pirates (and others) they signified blood sacrifices purporting magico-religious importance, which they believed bestowed them with supernatural strength to vanquish their foes. Ritualized cannibalism was an awesome act of empowerment by which the life-force of victims was incorporated into those partaking of the sacrifice. When pirates drank the blood of their victims, they consumed life’s vital force, and when they ate the hearts and livers of their foes certain desirable characteristics, namely

⁵⁵ The male and female genitals were also favored, but I have not come across any cases where pirates consumed these organs.

⁵⁶ Sutton, “Consuming Counterrevolution,” 152; and ter Haar, *Ritual and Mythology of the Triads*, 157.

⁵⁷ Ter Haar, *Telling Stories*, 136.

⁵⁸ Gray, *China*, 2: 31; also Turner, *Kwang Tung*, 127.

⁵⁹ Ho, “Butchering Fishes,” 156.

courage, strength, and longevity, were transferred from the dead to the living.⁶⁰

Such blood sacrifices, however, were nothing new in China. Since ancient times, war and sacrifice were closely linked; the victors in battle would present prisoners, often killing and devouring them, as offerings to the gods and ancestors. Even China's most famous cultural hero, the Yellow Emperor, was said to have killed and made a stew out of the flesh and bones of his enemy, Chi You, which he then shared with his followers in a victory feast.⁶¹ From ancient to modern times, both rebels and officials made sacrifices of animals and humans to military banners. According to Paul Katz, "Such rituals were more than acts of random violence; they served as a creative force to strengthen bonds between members of armed groups, as well as to draw sharp boundaries between group members and their enemies."⁶² I would further suggest that when pirates, bandits, and rebels joined together in blood sacrifices, they called upon the gods to witness and consecrate their actions and to solemnly bind everyone together as blood brothers. The human sacrifice underlined the seriousness of purpose and strengthened their resolve, loyalty, and solidarity as a group.

The killing, offering, and consumption of animals or humans were, in fact, central features of sacrifices. The bloody sacrifice and shared feasting on the meat (or blood and organs) at the end of battle was a ritual climax, a celebration, whereby both gods and men shared in the spoils of victory. Because the offerings were believed to be sanctified, they were imbued with magical powers that conferred health and power on those making the sacrifice. Making sacrificial offerings and then ingesting those offerings were the chief means by which men and gods interacted and reciprocated. The gods depended on men for sustenance and in return granted them material benefits.⁶³

From the state's perspective, and perhaps also from the pirates themselves, blood sacrifices were compelling political acts. They not only legitimized group solidarity and dominance over those they had defeated, but also represented an exercise of power. Such acts formally challenged state

⁶⁰ See the discussions in ter Haar, *Ritual and Mythology of the Triads*, 157; and Kleeman, "Licentious Cults and Bloody Victuals," 186-191.

⁶¹ Mark Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China* (Albany, 1990), 23-27, 148.

⁶² Paul Katz, "Banner Worship and Human Sacrifice in Chinese Military History," in *The Scholar's Mind: Essays in Honor of Frederick W. Mote*, ed. Perry Link (Hong Kong, 2009), 219.

⁶³ See Kleeman, "Licentious Cults and Bloody Victuals," 185, 189-190.

authority and at the same time claimed legitimacy for the activities of the pirates. Because in ancient China the heart was a metaphor for the sovereign, to devour the heart may have symbolized the desire to usurp power.⁶⁴ Pirates and rebels who practiced human sacrifice directly challenged the state's prerogatives to control and define orthodox religious practices, which, after all, were monopolized by the state. An important instrument of rulership was the supernatural support of the gods. "To usurp this aid through unauthorized sacrifice was to raid the state's arsenal and threaten it with its own weapons."⁶⁵ Therefore, any challenge to its legitimacy was a grave concern of the state. Because human sacrifice gave pirates awesome power that was beyond the state's control, it was very dangerous.

Although in many cases these tales of bloodthirsty pirates may not have been factual, but rather metaphorical, nonetheless they were well-accepted and widely believed as true. Importantly, what these stories do show is that tales about cannibalism and human sacrifice were familiar to many people. As Gang Yue has explained, "Myth, symbol, or metaphor may not reflect facts, but they are not necessarily false either."⁶⁶ Whether real or not seems unimportant; what is important is that many people believed these stories to be real.

Conclusion

Piracy was a metaphor for violence and terror. It conjured up images of brutality and savagery. To the ruling class and to victims, pirates were wild, uncivilized, and lacking in true human qualities. They were often likened to beasts and demons. But the violence that was senseless and irrational to the ruling class and victims was perhaps meaningful and rational to the pirates. On sea and shore pirates consciously used terror and violence to obtain money and goods, to punish those who resisted, to seek vengeance against their enemies, and to instill fear in anyone who might fight back. They apparently promoted and deliberately constructed reputations for brutality to minimize resistance and maximize profits. Their reputations for violence and terror may actually have helped to reduce unnecessary bloodshed.

⁶⁴ Sutton, "Consuming Counterrevolution," 152.

⁶⁵ Kleeman, "Licentious Cults and Bloody Victuals," 195.

⁶⁶ Yue, *The Mouth that Begg*, 27.

The types of extreme violence and torture employed by the Asian—mostly Chinese—pirates examined in this study were not so unusual, as the cases of such Western pirates like François l'Olonnais and Edward Low, who also reportedly mutilated and ate their victims, suggest.⁶⁷ However, what were different and unique in the Chinese cases were the meanings that pirates and victims placed on violence. In fact, what we are dealing with here was a cultural construction of violence with Chinese characteristics. When Chinese pirates dismembered and disemboweled victims, such gruesome acts were meant not only to torment the body but also the soul. These acts intentionally transcended the world of men into the afterlife. Cutting the body to pieces, whether by pirates or the state, was a dehumanizing ordeal that reduced the body to a mere slab of meat. It also transformed human beings into wandering, malevolent ghosts.

When bloodthirsty pirates devoured the internal organs and blood of their victims this was much more than simply violence for the sake of violence. These were ritualized sacrifices imbued with deep magico-religious significance. Blood was the vital force of life important in curing illnesses, warding off evil spirits, and bringing good luck and fortune. When pirates tortured, dismembered, and then drank the blood and ate the hearts and livers of their victims they did so to acquire for themselves power, courage, longevity, and luck. Human sacrifice empowered pirates and directly challenged the state's authority and legitimacy. These acts were part of a well-established, but heterodox, tradition that was deeply imbedded in everyday life and popular culture of the South China Sea.

⁶⁷ Alexander Exquemelin, *The Buccaneers of America*, trans. Alexis Brown (Mineola, NY, 2000), 107; and Daniel Defoe [Capt. Charles Johnson] *A General History of the Pyrates*, ed. Manuel Schonhorn (Mineola, NY, 1999), 323–324, 334. Although these two examples may have been untrue, nonetheless they were widely accepted at the time as real.

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