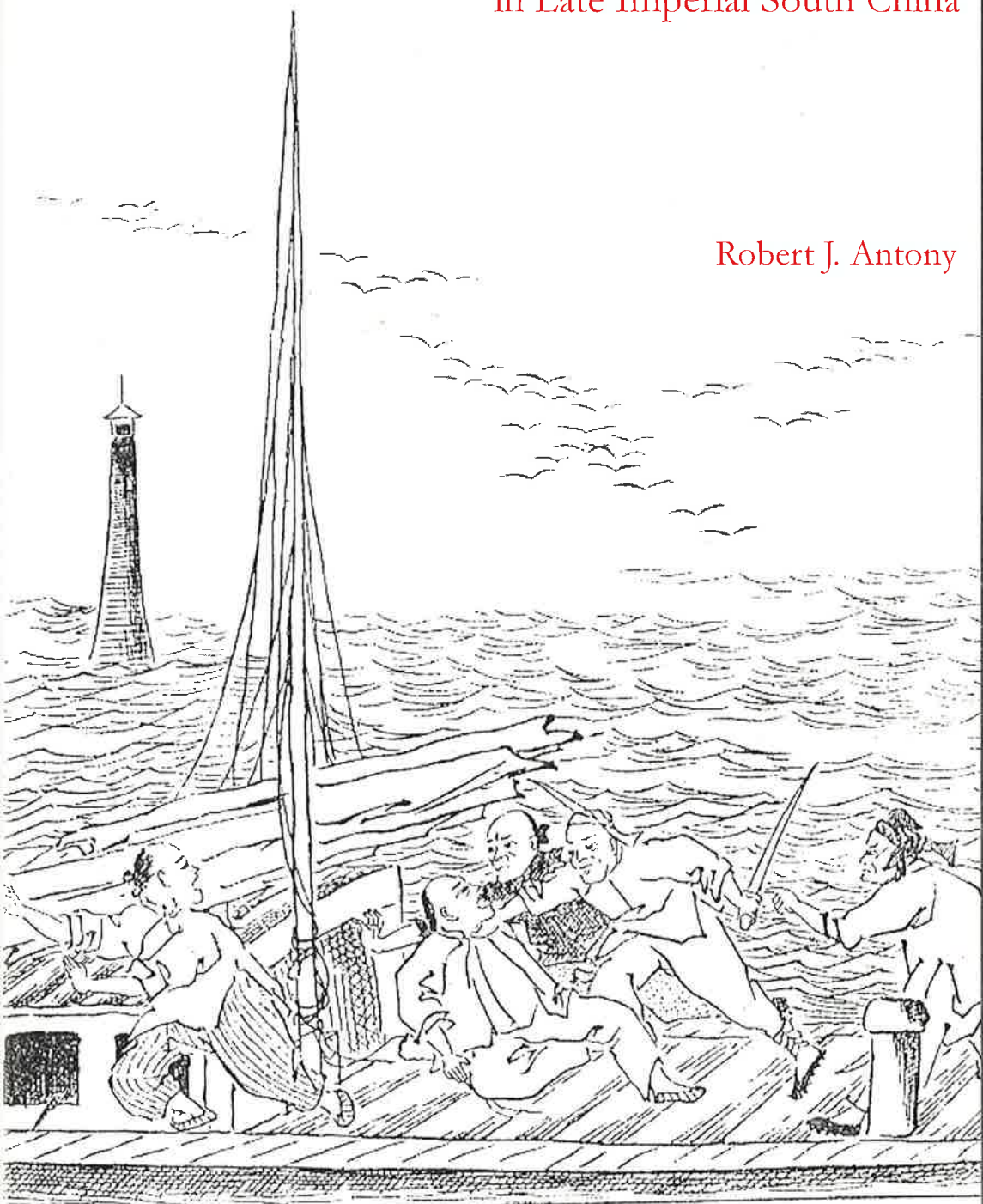


Like Froth Floating on the Sea

The World of Pirates and Seafarers
in Late Imperial South China

Robert J. Antony





INSTITUTE OF EAST ASIAN STUDIES
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CENTER FOR CHINESE STUDIES

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Acknowledgments

The genesis of this book was in the stories my father told to me as a child about the sea and Chinese pirates. My father worked in the merchant marine for most of his life, and he visited at one time or another nearly every major port in the world. In the 1930s, during one of his early voyages, he had shipped out to the Orient as an ordinary seaman aboard an old freighter. I remember one story he told me about Shanghai. The waters around the port were teeming with pirate craft, fishing boats, and myriad other Chinese junks, all indistinguishable from one another. At night pirates would sneak up alongside their prey and, using long bamboo poles with hooks on their ends, would shimmy up the side of the ship to steal cargo and anything else that was not secured. The situation got so bad that every night the captain of my father's ship distributed weapons and assigned crewmen to stand watch. But no matter what precautions were taken, when day broke there would always be something missing. One night the pirates even pilfered a large motor bolted down to the aft deck. No one knew how they could have unhinged and removed this huge machine without making a noise or ever being spotted by the sailors on guard.

Although the Chinese pirates that I have encountered are of an earlier age, they were no less wily. And while I never came face to face with any of them, as had my father, the ocean bandits that I have discovered in the dusty archives are just as real. For Qing scholar-officials, such as Li Guangpo, pirates were nothing more than "froth floating on the sea." He was not the first to describe pirates in this manner, and, in fact, traditionally China's landed elite often referred pejoratively to pirates and seafarers as "froth" or "flotsam," a vile scum and hence debased group of people. This book is an attempt to recover and rewrite their history on their own terms.

The actual research for this book began some twenty years ago when I presented a paper on early-nineteenth-century pirates in the Canton delta to Professor Harry Lamley's seminar in Modern Chinese History at the University of Hawai'i. With his encouragement I expanded the paper, and the topic, into a doctoral dissertation. Throughout the long process of writing the dissertation and later this book, Professor Lamley has read and commented on every revision, and I have continued over the years to benefit from his advice. While owing my greatest scholarly debt to Professor Lamley, I have accumulated many other debts over the years. It would be impossible to acknowledge all my obligations to the many fellow researchers, colleagues, and former schoolmates over the past twenty years whose conversations have contributed to my understanding of the subject. Nevertheless, I would like to mention a few. I am especially grateful to Professors Jane Leonard and Robert Marks for their careful readings and discerning suggestions on several versions of the manuscript. Jack Wills, Chi-Kong Lai, K. C. Liu, and Nancy Park have read parts of the manuscript, and I thank them for their useful comments. Although we differ on several important points, I am indebted to Dian Murray for her insights and suggestions. In general I have condensed my discussions of topics that she has focused on in her studies and instead have paid more attention to other topics that interest me.

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I also want to thank Joanne Sandstrom for her expert editing and the anonymous reviewers for recommending the manuscript for publication. Last but not least I wish to thank Lanshin for her unbending patience and enthusiasm over the many long years in writing this book.

Conventions and Equivalencies

With only a few exceptions, all Chinese names and terms are transliterated in pinyin romanization. I have retained the better-known English renderings for Canton, Hong Kong, Macao, and Amoy, and also have parenthesized several words when other names are in common use, such as Dan (Tanka), Huangpu (Whampao), Jinmen (Quemoy), Pingzhou (Peng Chau), Giang Binh (Jiangping), and so forth.

Throughout the book a person's age is calculated according to the Chinese system of reckoning in *sui*. The *sui* age is the age a person will attain in the current year, not the actual number of months that have elapsed since birth. For example, someone who was born in November will become one *sui* at the Chinese New Year, although by Western calculations he or she is only two or three months old. Thus, in general, a person who is thirty *sui* is actually only twenty-nine years old by Western reckoning.

In the footnotes dates to archival materials are given according to the Chinese lunar calendar as follows: QL 59.3.27, indicating the twenty-seventh day of the third month in the fifty-ninth year of the Qianlong reign, and JQ 6.r7.2, indicating the second day of the seventh intercalary month in the sixth year of the Jiaqing reign (the "r" indicates an intercalary month). In citing sources in the footnotes I use the following conventions: when given, publication dates are followed by a colon and then the page number (e.g., Chang 1983:68–69) or the volume number, which is followed by a slash and then page number (e.g., Morse 1926:3/117); if no publication date is given, then the source is followed simply by the page number (e.g., XMZ 43) or volume number followed by a slash and page number (e.g., DGXZ 33/25b). Full citations of abbreviations used in the footnotes are given in the Bibliography. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

Where indicated in the text, measurements are given in the Chinese style of calculating. Because of fluctuations in money the

equivalencies given below are only approximate. References to dollars in the text refer to Spanish silver dollars.

Measures and Weights

1 <i>li</i>	=	1,890 feet
1 <i>jin</i> (catty)	=	1.3 pounds
1 <i>shi</i> (picul)	=	120 <i>jin</i> = 0.07 tons

Volume (for Rice)

1 <i>shi</i>	=	138.75 <i>jin</i>
1 <i>dou</i> (peck)	=	316 cubic inches (approx. 10 <i>jin</i> = or 13.3 pounds)

Currencies

1 <i>wen</i> (cash)	=	approx. 0.00125 tael
1 <i>liang</i> (tael)	=	approx. 1.33 dollars
1 <i>yuan</i> (dollar)	=	approx. 700 to 1,100 cash

Sources: Ng Chin-keong 1983:xiv; and Lin Man-houng 1989: xvi, 239.

Prelude: The Empress of Heaven Saves Dianbai

It was late September 1801, the sixth year of the Jiaqing emperor's reign and the time of the Mid-Autumn Festival. The townspeople of Dianbai city, a county seat on the southwestern coast of Guangdong province, were busy preparing moon cakes and planning family outings to the hills beyond the city walls. Outside the south gate, at the market in Longchuan harbor, fishermen and sailors crowded the Empress of Heaven Temple to beseech the goddess for fair winds and good catches. Sea merchants and shopkeepers who worshipped alongside them at the temple prayed for wealth and protection from those who would deprive them of it. Further to the south, beyond the entrance to the harbor, lurking among the islands that dotted the coast, pirate junks were gathering like froth floating on the sea.

Dianbai was a strategically important but poor county. Nearly nine thousand *li* from Beijing and eight hundred *li* from Canton, Dianbai was still a remote frontier in the early nineteenth century. Its interior was hemmed with rugged mountains and infested with bandits and uncivilized aborigines, making overland passage to and from the county both difficult and hazardous. Water routes provided the chief access to the outside world; the sea was the lifeblood of the region. Rivers linked the walled farming villages of the hinterland to the market towns and fishing ports that lined the seacoast. Along the narrow coastline, where population was dense and arable land scarce, people "regarded the sea as fields" (*yihai weitian*). Most of the people earned their livings as fishermen or laborers working in the salt fields. By the late eighteenth century Dianbai had become an important supplier of marine products and salt for the entire province. Situated as it was along a major coasting route, merchant junks from Canton, Chaozhou, Hainan, and Fujian paid regular calls to Dianbai ports, and

hundreds of salt junks plied back and forth each year between its salt fields and Canton. Figure 1 presents a panoramic view of the Dianbai coast looking southward out to sea, that dominating presence in the lives of the people of the county.

On the eve of the Mid-Autumn Festival as many as a hundred pirate junks, under the commands of Zheng Qi, Mo Guanfu, Wushi Er, and others, lay at anchor outside Dianbai harbor readying for what would be their most daring venture to date. Lately these ocean bandits had become quite bold in their attacks. Less than a week earlier they had raided Shuidong, a major port about seventy *li* to the west, where they sacked the customs office and plundered eighteen salt junks and several fishing boats. They then looted and burned down Baimiao landing and a few other small fishing villages, only desisting after hearing the sounds of gongs summoning local militiamen to the scene. But now the pirates were preparing to attack the county seat, the walled city of Dianbai. The last time that pirates had threatened the city was over a century and a half earlier, during the turmoil preceding the collapse of the Ming dynasty. At that time local officials had averted disaster by quickly fortifying the city walls.¹

The pirates in 1801 prepared themselves well for this raid. They had already dispatched several of their men, disguised as merchants and peddlers, into the city to gather information.² From their spies they knew that Dianbai was vulnerable. Several hundred feet of the city wall were in disrepair, having previously collapsed in a typhoon that hit the city in 1774. The several forts and blockhouses around the harbor, as depicted in Figure 1, were mostly outdated and understaffed. There were fewer than a dozen war junks defending the entire county and only about a hundred soldiers billeted in the city. What is more, the county's chief official, Hang Yuyi, had just recently assumed his post as acting magistrate and therefore could not have been fully acquainted with the situation under his jurisdiction. Not coincidentally, too, the pirates planned to launch their attack on the day of the festival, expecting to catch the city off guard.³

That evening before battle, aboard their vessels, pirates lit incense and prayed to Mazu (Venerable Mother), the familiar

¹ GZD (6211) JQ 6.9.23; SYD, JQ 6.10.18; and DBXZ 20/7b.

² SYD, JQ 6.10.18; also see GZD (6211 *fupian*) JQ 6.9.23, and (6793) JQ 6.11.28.

³ SYD, JQ 6.10.18; GZD (7209) JQ 7.1.19; DBXZ 1/8b, 7/3a-5b, 8/2a, 13/15b-17a; and Jiang Weitan 1990:317.

Waves of Piracy in Late Imperial China

Although pirates have been active along the South China coast throughout history, the golden age of Chinese piracy appeared only in the late imperial era, roughly the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries. At that time there was an unprecedented growth in Chinese piracy unsurpassed in size and scope anywhere else in the world. In South China during the late imperial age piracy surged in three great waves: one from 1522 to 1574, another from 1620 to 1684, and the last from 1780 to 1810. The three great pirate epochs were characterized by the rise of huge leagues whose power overshadowed that of the imperial state in the maritime world. At other times, while the seas around China remained relatively calm, petty localized piracy continued unabated.

Both petty and large-scale piracy ebbed and flowed in predictable seasonal patterns according to the rhythms of climate and trade, as well as of fishing seasons and costs of food. Although piracy was a year-round operation, it increased dramatically along the southern littoral each year between the third and seventh lunar months (roughly April through August) and then dropped off precipitously during the tenth and eleventh lunar months (around November and December). As early as the Song dynasty (960–1279), as Brian McKnight has noted, most piracies were committed during “the period of fair winds that brought merchants from Southeast Asia to the ports of southern China.”¹ Each spring and summer, availing themselves of the southwest monsoons, vast numbers of trading junks and Western merchantmen from the Celebes, Malacca, Borneo, Java, and Manila sailed into the South China Sea heading northward. For many fishermen in Guang-

¹ McKnight 1992:106.

THREE

Prosperity and Poverty in Maritime South China

Different from the land-bounded interior, South China's maritime region had its own distinct economy and social customs. The littoral attuned itself much more to the rhythms of sea, wind, and monsoon than it ever did to the rhythms of the soil. Although intimately linked to the interior, the coast supported a different and diverse sort of economic complex. If for the most part the people living inland depended on agriculture for their livelihoods, those living along the shoreline were dependent upon the sea. Though the late imperial state often regarded the sea as a pestering nuisance, by the 1680s Qing rulers had come to cautiously promote the maritime economy as vital to national security. Maritime trade brought growth, vitality, and prosperity to the entire region, but its benefits were unevenly distributed. As a result, by the late eighteenth century, South China's maritime world evidenced striking contrasts and contradictions: fabulous wealth in the midst of extreme privation, sharpening divisions and anxieties between seafarers and landsmen, and the indiscriminate mingling of respectable people (*liangmin*) with wicked villains (*jiangui*).¹

The rise of large-scale piracy and its interconnections with maritime society in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries can best be understood in this context. The social and economic changes occurring over the Qing era were unprecedented and dynamic, and although they fostered growth and prosperity, they also produced dislocation, economic privation, and social unrest. This chapter, which examines socioeconomic changes during the eighteenth century, is divided into two sections. The first explores the commercial growth and prosperity of South China's maritime economy by examining the overseas and domestic seaborne trade

¹ SCSX 12/13b.

Fishermen, Sailors, and Pirates

In the fall of 1788, Liu Yaer and thirteen other men were arrested for piracy. In his deposition Liu said that he and ten companions had formed a gang because of “increasing difficulties in finding work and earning an honest living.” All of the men were fishermen and hired sailors from Xin’an, Xiangshan, Xinning, and Yangjiang counties in Guangdong. Because Liu had a boat and had been the one to suggest banding together as pirates, he took command. He was thirty-two years old, married, but had no children. The ages and family backgrounds are known for nine others. Their ages ranged from twenty-four to forty-seven *sui*, with five in their twenties, three in their thirties, and one in his forties. Of these nine men six were single. All of the gang members, including Liu, claimed that one or both of their parents were dead, and only two said that they had elder brothers. During questioning, it also came out that Liu and four other men had been involved on and off in other previous piracies. The remaining three arrested men had been abducted from their fishing junks by Liu’s gang and coerced to work for their captors.¹

The above case points out three salient features that characterized Chinese piracy in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: one, most pirates were poor fishermen and sailors who could not depend solely on honest work to sustain their lives; two, most gang members were occasional not professional pirates; and three, gangs usually included a number of captives who had been forced to serve the pirates aboard ship. In fact, captives, who frequently outnumbered actual pirates, especially during the heyday of pirate disturbances between 1795 and 1810, were of vital importance to the growth and development of large-scale piracy in the mid-Qing era. Both groups of pirates and victims had similar

¹ XKTB (69) QL 55.3.23.

Pirate Brutality and Hegemony

On July 10, 1809, Governor-General Bai Ling memorialized the throne about a naval engagement with Zhu Fen's fleet that had taken place near the island of Nan'ao earlier that year. It was an important victory for the government forces: hundreds of pirates were reported killed or drowned and more than twenty of their vessels were captured or sunk. Soldiers apprehended some thirty-seven suspects involved in piracy, including one Wang Pao. According to Wang's deposition, he was a native of Chenghai county in Chaozhou prefecture. In the summer of 1808 he had signed on as a sailor aboard a coasting junk owned and registered to Huang Yuanxing, also from Chenghai. The ship, skippered by the owner's two younger brothers, Huang Yaer and Huang Yawu, had a crew of more than forty sailors. After an uneventful voyage of several months the ship arrived in late winter at its final destination, the port of Rongcheng on the Shandong peninsula. Once the cargo was sold, the Huang brothers purchased soybeans and bean cakes, took on a passenger whose surname was Gao, and then set sail for the return trip to Guangdong.

Before reaching home, on February 5, 1809, Wang's ship was plundered off the Zhaoan coast by five or six pirate junks belonging to Zhu Fen's band. After firing cannons and muskets the pirates, with knives and sabers in hands, came alongside the merchant junk and boarded it. In the ensuing struggle Wang and several comrades were wounded, and Huang Yaer and seven other crewmen were killed and thrown overboard. When the smoke had settled the pirates had control of the ship and began apportioning the surviving victims aboard the pirate junks. Huang Yawu, the passenger named Gao, and eleven sailors were held for ransom, while one victim, Cai Azhao, was put ashore to report to Huang Yuanxing, the ship's owner, with the ransom note. The pirates tried to force Wang Pao and another twenty

Piracy and Seafaring Society

Like all seafarers, pirates too relied on others for their survival. Cut off from land by their life on the seas, they ultimately depended upon people on shore for victuals, water, matting, rope, spars, and tar, as well as gunpowder, weapons, and information. Pirates also needed help for disposing of their booty. Boats had to be beached and careened every several months for cleaning and repairs. Those who aided pirates became partners in crime, and the state ruthlessly hunted them down and prosecuted them with a vengeance. The worst thing that could happen to pirates, as officials well understood, was to be cut off from their sources on land. By extending their operations inland, pirates entrenched themselves in local villages and made contacts with a wide cross section of local society. They built up a huge network of accomplices that included fishermen, merchants, soldiers, gentry, and officials, as well as bandit gangs and sworn brotherhoods. This chapter examines pirate bases and the black markets that served them, as well as the various people on shore who aided them and came to depend on them, at least in part, for their own livelihoods. The final section of this chapter discusses the effect of piracy on local economies.

Pirate Lairs and Black Markets

Pirates established bases just about everywhere. Contrary to conventional wisdom, they were not only in remote, thinly populated peripheral areas or along borders where jurisdictions were imprecise. Rather, "pirate nests" could be found in core areas, some of which were close to the seats of state power, and they were in these areas not only during the heydays of large-scale piracy but at most other times too.¹ More often than not lairs were

¹ For example, even after the decline of large-scale piracy in 1810, later

The Cultural World of Seafarers and Pirates

For the most part, pirates shared with other seafarers a common culture that was substantially different from that of peasants, merchants, gentry, and officials living on shore. Many landmen would have agreed with Li Guangpo, an early Qing scholar-official, who was perplexed and wary about the sea. For him it only meant trouble:

Nothing is more dangerous than water except seawater, which is all the more unpredictable. It is a vast expanse stretching to heaven, and nothing can measure its length. What is more, the boats of wicked scoundrels are like froth floating on the sea and are impossible to apprehend.¹

Social customs highlighted and nurtured differences. Even after the Dan boat people were “emancipated” by the Yongzheng emperor in 1729, they still were discouraged from residing on land, holding government office, or wearing silk clothing. Land dwellers looked down upon seafarers and refused to let their daughters marry them. Written accounts depicted them as uncouth and vile. They were regarded as a sort of subhuman species living beyond the pale of civilization; some writers even claimed that Dan sailors had webbed feet and could breathe underwater like fish.² Such attitudes and stereotypes only furthered mutual mistrust and rifts between the two worlds of land and water.

It was not only the dominant society on land that demarcated sharp cultural boundaries; mariners too deemed themselves a separate group. Popular sayings among Dan boatmen—such as

¹ He Changling 1827:83/1a.

² See Qu Dajun [1700] 1985:485–486; *Guishan xianzhi* 1783:15/9a–10a; and Gray 1878:2/283.

Conclusion: Maritime History from the Bottom Up

This book set out to explore South China's maritime history from the bottom up, to reconstruct the world of ordinary seafarers and pirates through their own eyes in the context of the social and economic transformations of the late imperial period. The story of maritime South China is not simply that of gentry, merchants, and ship owners who engaged in seaborne trade and reaped most of its profits. It is equally the story of those men and women who sailed their ships and endured untold hardships and dangers for barely enough wages to live. Pirates, in particular, played important roles in shaping seafaring culture and society. Only by going beyond the Confucian-dominated stereotypes to examine the poor, marginalized, and criminalized elements in society can we understand more fully and accurately the social history of late imperial China. The underside of history puts everything else in proper perspective.

Let us conclude by addressing several questions. What can we learn about South China's maritime history by looking at it from the bottom up? How, indeed, did pirates and seafarers help shape the maritime economy, society, and culture? Did Chinese pirates attempt to radically remake the world in which they lived? In answering these questions we will draw upon comparisons with Western maritime history to highlight the salient features of Chinese seafaring and piracy and to put this study in a larger historical context.

In China the golden age of piracy lasted from 1520 to 1810, and for no less than half of those 290 years pirates dominated the seas around South China. Never before in world history had piracy been so strong and enduring. In the West the heyday of piracy began to decline by the early eighteenth century, and even at its peak the pirate population had never exceeded fifty-five hundred

Glossary

aogui 澳規

bafeng 把風

baidichuan 白底船

Bai Ling 白齡

bang 幫

baoshui 報水

Beidi 北帝

beilu ruhuo 被擄入夥

beilu zhe 被擄者

beixie fuyi 被脅服役

Cai Qian 蔡牽

Cai Qian Ma 蔡牽媽

caifu 財副

caochuan 艚船

choufen 抽分

chuanzhang 船長

chuanzhu 船主

chuhai 出海

da bang 大幫

da hengyang chuan 大橫洋船

dage 大哥

dangce 檔冊

dao'an 盜案

daofan 盜犯

dashi 大事

dasima 大司馬

diaochuanbang 釣船幫

Donghai Ba 東海八

Donghai wang 東海王

dou 斗

Dou Lao 斗老(姥)

Dou Mu 斗母

duogong 舵工

ermu 耳目

falü 法律

fan 犯

fangsheng 放生

Fengbo 風伯

fengsu 風俗

ganggui 港規

Guandi 關帝

guanggun 光棍

guanxi 關係

Guo Podai 郭婆帶

gupeng 罟朋

haidao 海盜

haifeng 海俸

haijin 海禁

haikou 海寇

Hainan wang 海南王

haizei 海賊

haizhan 海戰

Hong Dizhen 洪迪珍

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Hou Han 候漢

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