



Specialized Agency

Golden Age of Piracy

Gabriel Harding and James Bae
Co-Chairs



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Golden Age of Piracy

Letter from the Chairs

Dear Delegates and Sponsors,

Your chairs, Gabriel Harding and James Bae, are excited to welcome you to the Golden Age of Piracy committee for GSMUN XXVI! This committee focuses on the Canton pirate federation in the early 19th century, and its leader, Zheng Yi Sao. Nicknamed the "pirate queen", she led the federation to the peak of its power in China, along with her second-in-command Zhang Bao. The committee begins in July 1809, in the midst of naval battles and the gradual opening of pirate negotiations with the Chinese government. As delegates, you will have to deeply consider the state that the pirate federation is in currently, and make decisions to guide its future.

Gabriel Harding is looking forward to serving as chair for the Golden Age of Piracy committee. This is his second year participating in Maggie Walker Model UN and in GSMUN, having served as a crisis staffer for GSMUN XXV. Outside of GSMUN, he is a violinist, and he also enjoys coding. He is excited to see what discussions come out of this committee, and can't wait for GSMUN XXVI!

James Bae is excited to chair the Golden Age of Piracy Committee. He has participated in Maggie Walker Model UN since his freshman year and was also a crisis staffer for GSMUN XXV. He is also a member of his school's tennis and robotics teams. He is excited to see where debate goes in committee!

Our goals as a committee are to not only have fun considering the military aspect of the issue and engaging in naval battles, but also giving serious consideration to the state that China is in and how piracy is impacting it. To be prepared as a delegate, you should have read the background guide, considered the questions within it for each topic, and have a good understanding of the forces at play within the Golden Age of Piracy. You should also understand how relations within and outside of China affected the power of pirate fleets and how this influenced conversations with the Chinese government.

As a delegate, you will also have to write a position paper about your position within the committee. This should be written in 12-point Times New Roman font, double spaced, with CMS (Chicago Manual Style) citations. It must follow the Maggie Walker honor code; no plagiarism is allowed, including ChatGPT and other AI tools.. Email your position papers to the chairs before 5 PM on the day of the conference!

Lastly, the chairs would like to remind you that there will be food, merchandise, and other things on sale at the conference. GSMUN is dedicated to assisting communities through charity, and the chosen charity for this conference is the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society! All proceeds from items bought will go to charity, so be sure to bring money!

If you have any questions, or would like feedback on your position papers, you can contact your chairs at gsmunxxvi.piracy@gmail.com. Once again, we look forward to seeing this committee unfold. Good luck, we'll see you at GSMUN XXVI!

Your Chairs,

Gabriel Harding
gsmunxxvi.piracy@gmail.com

James Bae

Golden Age of Piracy

Committee Overview

Background

In the early 19th century, Zheng Yi Sao was one of the most notoriously fierce pirates in the South China Sea. During this time, piracy ran rampant in China due to heavy foreign influence and socioeconomic factors, such as widespread poverty and an addiction to opium. The Opium Wars, a set of wars based around China's dependence on the British East India Company, disrupted and distracted the Chinese economy and government, allowing people to more easily partake in illegal activities, such as piracy and smuggling. This allowed piracy to expand and for pirates to gain wealth, power, and reverence. Due to China's decline in influence on the global stage and the excess spending of the government on decadent palaces and other miscellaneous purchases, poverty and social unrest led large masses of unemployed fishermen and sailors to turn to a life of piracy and crime. One of the most influential and powerful pirate fleets was born out of this turmoil. The Canton Pirate Confederation consisted of approximately 1,800 junks, a type of Chinese sailing ship, and was led by Zheng Yi Sao, who was aptly nicknamed the Pirate Empress. Zheng Yi Sao was born in 1775 under the name of Shi Xianggu. She worked in a brothel in Canton when she met Zheng Yi, an infamous pirate, and soon married him.

After becoming his bride, Zheng Yi Sao and Zheng Yi would go on to create a group of powerful pirate fleets. Many pirates had been hired by the Vietnamese government during a revolution, but following the revolution, many pirates were left stranded and without a leader. Sao began her rise to power when she and Zheng Yi established this federation, composed initially of Vietnamese pirates. The fleets were successful in establishing a large-scale racketeering

operation targeting villages and fishing fleets along the Chinese coast. After Zheng Yi died in 1807, Zheng Yi Sao was able to claim leadership of the pirate hierarchy. Zheng Yi Sao needed a male leader to secure control over her squadron along with the greater federation, which was similar to many other Chinese social systems at the time and was almost exclusively dominated by men. Despite being a formidable pirate, she did not have the respect of other pirates without her husband beside her. For this position, she chose Cheung Pao, who came to be considered to be an extension of Zheng Yi's family after having been admitted to the fleet 5 years ago by Zheng Yi himself. Cheung Pao was essentially Zheng Yi's apprentice, so he had developed the skill necessary to be a very strong leader within the federation.

Under the leadership of Zheng Yi Sao, the pirates expanded their ventures, planning to take control of the salt trade. After attacking many areas along the coast, Sao eventually gained control over approximately 270 government junks, leaving only a small number outside her control. With jurisdiction over a majority of these trade vessels, the pirates took control of the imperial supply lines, forcing the salt merchants to submit to their demands. In exchange for safe passage to transport their salt, the vessels had to pay a massive sum of money to the pirates, and stations were even created in many towns to collect the taxes more efficiently. Sao had developed a massive financial operation across much of coastal China, and the pirate federation had found great success.

Topic I: Conflicts between Chinese Pirates and other Naval Forces.

History of the Issue

The pirate federation finds its origins in Zheng Qi and his involvement with the Tay Son Dynasty in Vietnam. In 1788, Zheng Qi formed a partnership with Mo Guanfu, another influential pirate. Together, they assisted in the Tay Son Rebellion, an uprising orchestrated by three brothers in Vietnam. At the time, there were multiple separatist states within Vietnam ruled by various families, and the Ngyuen brothers led an army in an attempt to end their rule and unify Vietnam. They succeeded with the help of Zheng Qi and other pirates, and the Tay Son Dynasty was established. Zheng Qi and Mo Guanfu, along with other powerful pirates involved in the turmoil, were given the high ranking military positions of “soldier general” under the Tay Son Dynasty. Mai Youkin was also allied with Zheng Qi, and was granted the influential military position of Qinghai general.

The Tay Son Dynasty granted Zheng Qi 200 foreign ships, as well as extremely skilled troops. However, Zheng Qi became exceedingly prideful in his new position, and he started to become loose in disciplining his men. They began taking advantage of their positions; they terrorized the local townspeople, invaded their houses, and took their wives and daughters. Seeking aid, the locals contacted naval powerhouse Fu Ying, the brother of a former king. Fu Ying gave the order to attack, and in early 1802, Zheng Qi’s fleet was almost annihilated while he himself was shot to death by a cannon.¹

Zheng Qi’s younger brother, Zheng Yi, fled with multiple other crewmates. Yi rose to power within the pirate groups, and eventually pirate federation rose again in full force, with their main base of operations set in Canton, on the southeastern coast of China.² This pirate federation included many who served the Tay Son Dynasty and were involved in the Rebellion, such as Wu Shier, who had been granted great military influence

due to their service. The power that the federation held allowed them to constantly raid towns along the Chinese coast, and any attempts by the Chinese government to quell them failed. However, in 1802, the Tay Son Dynasty collapsed, and the coalition was plunged into turmoil, with pirates beginning to kill each other. In order to avoid self-destruction, the pirate leaders decided they needed to formally consolidate their power and create order within the pirate group.

In 1805, the heads of each of the pirate gang’s fleets signed a document officially declaring them united. Six of these fleets existed within the federation, each designated by the color of their flag—the Red, Blue, Yellow, Green, Black, and White Flag fleets. Within the document formalizing the federation, they established a pirates’ code, a strict code of conduct for the federation established by Sao herself.³ In February of 1805, the Jiaqing Emperor’s primary goal as the leader of China was to eradicate the pirates, since they were severely damaging China’s trading economy. He called in the high-ranking officer Nayancheng, who was previously appointed as a Special Imperial Commissioner to help deal with rebellion, and had significant experience in military command. The Emperor’s hope was that Nayancheng would be capable of finally crushing the pirates. Arriving at Canton, Nayancheng found that there was a severe lack of troops and warships—the Chinese government lacked the infrastructure, and the pirates greatly outnumbered them.

Furthermore, the imperial warships were slow, bulky, and armed with only two to four guns. Despite all of these issues, Nayancheng eventually led a month-long naval campaign against the pirates in Canton. He was able to nominally claim victory, having at least temporarily destroyed the pirate base, but he had barely put a dent in the ranks of the pirate federation—their power remained essentially unchallenged.⁴ The pirates maintained a hold on many offshore islands

and eventually gained control of the Pearl River delta and its archipelago, nicknamed the Ladrões (the Pirate Islands). This allowed them to continue raids, illegal activity, and racketeering profit.⁵

Current Status of the Issue

By 1808, Zheng Yi Sao was in control of the Red Flag Fleet and the pirate federation in its entirety. The federation had a strong military grip on the southeastern Chinese coast and on Canton, the main base of pirate operations.⁶ There was essentially no military success on the part of the imperial navy; multiple high-ranking officers had been killed, and their fleet had been reduced by over half.⁷ The federation had terrified the Cantonese navy to the point where they refused to leave land for fear of the sea's pirates. The resolve of the military continued to worsen, with naval personnel even beginning to sabotage their own ships in an attempt to avoid going out to sea and risking an encounter with the pirates. In early 1808, the pirates killed the commander-in-chief of Chekiang province, and six months later destroyed most of the ships allocated for the defense of Canton, along with a majority of Canton navy itself.⁸

In March 1809, Zheng Yi Sao, as leader of the Red Flag Fleet, defeated the Provincial Commander Sun Quanmao. The Commander had begun a battle with a small group of the federation pirates, and they called for Zheng Yi Sao's help. With the help of Liang Bao, leader of the White Flag Fleet, and Zhang Bao, they were able to decisively defeat Sun Quanmao by outflanking his forces. In July, the Qing Dynasty navy struck back against the pirates, killing Liang Bao and destroying his White Flag Fleet, although the imperial navy lost one of their commanders and 25 junks in the process.⁹ Meanwhile, the new governor-general of Canton, Bai Ling, began a plan to convince pirates to defect from the federation through bribes of rewards and amnesties.¹⁰ Throughout 1809, this began to impact the ranks of the pirate federation; but for the time being, the pirates maintained

dominant control over many territories along the Chinese coast.

Analysis and Solutions

The pirate federation has won many battles and has established its military might. The pirates' control over the salt trade and other investments ensures a steady income, and key territories have been secured, at least for now. The imperial navy is still terrified of the pirates, with many troops avoiding conflict with the federation altogether, and imperial victories have been scarce. However, the loss of Liang Bao and his White Flag Fleet has been severely damaging, and the pirate ranks began to diminish with the initiation of government negotiations.

One potential prospect is to fully engage in negotiations with the Chinese government. It is clear that the pirate federation is weakening; while the imperial fleets are still terrified of the federation, an advantageous deal could be secured, ensuring a comfortable future for the federation's pirates. However, there is value in continuing to fight. Currently, the pirates are experiencing the peak of the federation's success, and are almost uncontested within the Pearl River delta. The fact that the Chinese government is negotiating may imply a lack of confidence in engaging with the pirates through naval battles. The federation's decision must take into account the viewpoints of all the crew members, the fleet leaders, and even government and military officials.

Questions to Consider

1. Should negotiations with the Chinese government be embraced fully, approached at a tentative pace, or dismissed entirely?
2. What factors should be considered when deciding if the federation should be allowed time to recover from the loss of the White Flag Fleet? Is it a wise decision, or would it allow the imperial army to strike in a time of weakness?

3. What are the advantages and disadvantages of continuing to raid coastal towns and plunder for profit? Will it continue to be sustainable?
4. What are potential solutions to the ever-increasing number of pirates defecting to the imperial government?
5. How can potential conflicts between fleets within the pirate federation be dealt with, if they arise?
6. What measures should be taken if the imperial navy, or another navy, gains power and becomes a threat?

Further Research

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2. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2457394> 2: An article giving insight into the inner workings of the pirate federation and the people who formed it - specifically page 563 onwards.
3. https://www.worldhistory.org/Zheng_Yi_Sao/: Gives an overarching view of the pirate federation during Zheng Yi Sao's reign.
4. <https://library.um.edu.mo/ebooks/b35720116.pdf>: A primary source from an individual who was captured by the pirates themselves.
5. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2007863> 7: This article speaks about piracy as a whole, its causes, and its motivations.

Topic II: Negotiations between Chinese Pirate Groups and the Chinese Government

History of the Issue

By the mid-19th century, China rapidly declined from its position as a global superpower. The population had boomed to an approximate 450 million, more than three times the amount in the year 1500. The Chinese government was spending exorbitant amounts of money and consequently falling into debt. Poverty ran rampant across the

country, and many people were turning to crime in an attempt to feed themselves and their families. The government was failing to protect the populace, and subsequently people began to rely on pirates, rather than the government, for protection. Using their increased numbers and influence, pirate groups would control large swaths of land and trade routes, further limiting the government's power while increasing their own. During this time, Vietnam was in the middle of the Tay Son rebellion, a civil war spanning from 1771 until 1802. Vietnam hired and paid pirates very well, encouraging people to turn to piracy in an attempt to feed their families¹¹. With their increased numbers, pirate groups were able to control larger areas of land. Zheng Yi Sao's pirate confederation controlled the salt trade within China in the early 1800s. Other pirate groups would collect taxes in exchange for allowing companies, such as the East India company, to do business in their territory without being attacked. This led to powerful international companies beginning to support the pirates. The East India company would move on to having pirates sell opium on their behalf. By working with wealthy organizations that had lots of influence over port towns in China, pirates were able to flourish. Some towns would go so far as to even pay pirates to keep their towns from being burned and their villagers from being slaughtered.¹² The government not only failed to protect its citizens, but failed to hunt down the pirates due to their weak naval forces. China's once strong naval power was much weaker following the burning of their treasure fleet in 1525 and had never fully recovered.¹³ Additionally, many pirates had grown up exposed to the sea and seafaring, giving them an advantage due to their experience. This, combined with their comparatively smaller and less bulky ships, made it much easier for pirates to escape from the Chinese government.

Current Status of the Issue

By 1809, Zheng Yi Sao's pirate confederation was made up of approximately 1,800 ships and over 70,000 men. The Chinese government remained weak following rebellions and uprisings throughout the country.¹⁴ European powers also began to challenge China's position as a global superpower in international affairs. The British East India Company slowly began to gain more influence and power in China. The sale of opium had begun to weaken China's port towns due to their reliance on opium and the British East India Company. Opium being smuggled into China led to an increase in the power of pirate groups who would sell it and make the government weaker and less prevalent. Many people began to join pirate groups, hoping to increase their wealth and power, hereby increasing their numbers and weakening the government. Pirates not only had power through their large numbers, but also had control over trade routes. Zheng Yi Sao and her fleet controlled a majority of the salt trade in China.¹⁵

Chinese pirates had originally been hired by the Vietnamese government in order to help with the Tay Son rebellion.¹⁶ However, after the end of the rebellion, Zheng Yi, husband of Zheng Yi Sao, came forth as the head of a large pirate confederation. After his death in 1807, Zheng Yi Sao took power of the fleet. Her ruthlessness and tactical genius allowed her crew to rise in power and eventually become one of, if not the single, most powerful pirate crews of all time. She created a strict set of rules and was able to escape the government for years. The Chinese government went to America, England, and Portugal in an attempt to put an end to her reign.¹⁷ Many countries sent ships, men, and supplies to the Chinese navy, but despite these countries sending lots of resources and manpower, Zheng Yi Sao continued to thrive. In early 1809, there were attempts to convince pirates to defect from their fleets. Many pirates defected in exchange for safety and positions of power in the Chinese Navy.¹⁸

This caused the pirates to have to take more extreme measures to maintain their wealth and influence.

Analysis and Solutions

The Chinese government has opened up to negotiate with pirates in an attempt to gain control over their country again. Government officials began to discuss ways to discourage pirates and improve their standing internationally. They started sending messages to pirates asking them to surrender, and in exchange they were offered pardons and safety from other pirates.¹⁹ Some pirates chose to negotiate very aggressively, demanding high positions in the government and the option to keep everything they had stolen. Others chose to surrender unconditionally, simply hoping to be able to survive and live comfortably. The Chinese government is willing to offer money, amnesty and positions of power to pirates in the hopes of gaining skilled officers for their navy. Many pirates went from hiding and fighting the government to being illustrious generals in the navy. However, plenty of pirates also choose to continue fighting the government independently.²⁰ Those who chose to stay loyal to their crews would continue to control vast areas of land. Individual pirates could defect from their crews, but the crews as a whole must decide whether to tolerate this or to cut off any further negotiations and defections

Questions to Consider

1. How do relationships with other countries affect choices in negotiation?
2. Is it more important to be able to have freedom with the risk of death than to have safety?
3. Should people who try to leave the crew be punished? If so, what should the punishment be? Is it worth the risk of angering the government further by going after former pirates in their employ?

4. Should pirates within the government be used as assets, or should they be denounced as traitors to the federation?
5. How should negotiations be held? In person or through proxies? Should negotiations be civil?
6. How should leaders of fleets react to their pirates leaving?

Further Research

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2. <https://globalcapitalism.history.ox.ac.uk/files/case20-chinesepiratespdf>: Gives more insight into the history of piracy in China and its interactions with different countries
3. https://www.jstor.org/stable/41298765?read-now=1#page_scan_tab_contents: Goes in depth about Zheng Yi Sao and her rise to power
4. http://zw.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgj/202112/t20211216_10470554.htm#:~:text=From%20the%20middle%20of%20the%20poverty%20or%20even%20extreme%20poverty: Talks about the reasons and growth of piracy in China

Endnotes

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12. Ibid.

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