

CROSS-CURRENTS



EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

“Righteous Yang”: Pirate, Rebel, and Hero on the Sino-Vietnamese Water Frontier, 1644–1684

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Abstract

This article is a case study of a little-known but important historical figure, known variously as Yang Yandi (Dương Ngạn Địch), Yang Er, and, more colloquially, “Righteous Yang” (Yang Yi), who lived during the turbulent Ming-Qing transition (1644–1684). In that age of anarchy, it was easy for charismatic individuals like Yang to possess multiple identities and affiliations—in Yang’s case, pirate, rebel, and hero. Based on written historical documents and historical fieldwork, this article traces Yang’s life in the chaotic water frontier of the Gulf of Tonkin and argues that he was but one in a long line of pirates and dissidents who operated in this region.

Keywords: Yang Yandi, Dương Ngạn Địch, Gulf of Tonkin, water frontier, piracy, Vietnam, South China

Introduction

In the first month of the Year of the Goat [1679], the Ming leader from Longmen, Yang Yandi; his lieutenant, Huang Jin; and the leader Chen Shangchuan and his lieutenant, Chen Anping, from Gao, Lei, and Lian prefectures [in Guangdong province] brought three thousand men and over fifty warships to the estuaries of Tur Hiền and Đà Nẵng. They introduced themselves as stateless subjects of the Ming who refused to surrender to the Qing and wished to become servants [of the Nguyễn lord].

The court considered that their customs and language were different, so it would be difficult to make proper use of them; however, these men were in desperate straits and in need of succor. It so happened that Đông Phố in Chenla [Cambodia] was fertile, but the court did not yet have the resources to bring that area under control. Would not it be a good idea to use them to open up the land? It would be useful in three different ways. The lord then ordered that they be treated to a banquet and then turned them over to officials to take them to Đông Phố. (*Đại Nam thực lục tiền biên* 1962, 136–140)¹

This is how the *Veritable Records for Vietnam* (*Đại Nam thực lục*) begins its account of the arrival in Vietnam of Yang Yandi (Dương Ngạn Địch). Yang eventually settled in Mỹ Tho in

the Mekong Delta (about 70 kilometers from present-day Saigon), where he and his forces received protection and support from the Nguyễn lords. Yang and his men engaged in trade, farming, and fishing, as well as the occasional plundering of passing ships. To repay his new lord, Yang helped the Nguyễn lords consolidate control over southern Vietnam by fighting their Cambodian rivals. Prior to presenting himself to the Nguyễn lords as a Ming loyalist (*minh huong*), Yang Yandi had had a colorful life as a pirate. This article explores the life of this little-known but important figure, variously called Yang Yandi, Yang Er, and, more colloquially, “Righteous Yang” (Yang Yi) before he settled in the Mekong Delta.

The years from 1644 to 1684 were times of chaos and anarchy in China and Vietnam. The Sino-Vietnamese water frontier became a haven for pirates, dissidents, and refugees; it was also an area where heroes were born (see figure 1). Piracy, in its multiple forms, was in fact a persistent and intrinsic feature of this water frontier and a dynamic and important force that helped to shape the region’s history and development.



Figure 1. Gulf of Tonkin, seventeenth century. Map prepared by the author.

Who was Yang Yandi? How did he fit into the long tradition of maritime piracy on the Sino-Vietnamese water frontier? What role did he play in the Ming-Qing transition? What we know about Yang comes from a *mélange* of official documents and legends that have circulated

over the past several centuries. Although we do not know when Yang was born, we do know that his family hailed from southwestern Guangdong province, perhaps on the Leizhou peninsula in Suixi County or in the neighboring county to the east in Maoming. Some say he was born near Qinzhou, in present-day coastal Guangxi province.² All these areas claim Yang as a native son. During the upheavals of the Ming-Qing transition, from the 1640s or 1650s through the early 1680s, Yang was most active in the Gulf of Tonkin, but he also reportedly ventured as far away as Fujian and Taiwan sometime in the 1660s. In 1682 (Vietnamese sources say 1679), when the Qing military finally drove the pirates from their bases in southwestern coastal China, Yang led about three thousand followers to southern Vietnam, where, as the *Veritable Records for Vietnam* states, he sought asylum from the Nguyễn lord. In 1688, his lieutenant, Huang Jin, assassinated him in an apparent power struggle.

Over the centuries, Yang has been variously labeled pirate, rebel, Ming loyalist, and hero. Based on historical writings, legends, and fieldwork, this article attempts to piece together, in a preliminary way, the story of Yang Yandi and his times in the nebulous water frontier of the Gulf of Tonkin. I divide the article into five sections. The first two sections are contextual: I first briefly describe the Sino-Vietnamese water frontier and then discuss in greater detail the turbulent Ming-Qing transition in the Gulf of Tonkin. In the last three sections, I examine Yang Yandi, first as a pirate, then as a rebel, and, finally, as a local hero.

The Sino-Vietnamese Water Frontier

Yang Yandi was but one individual in a long line of pirates, rebels, and dissidents who operated throughout history on the Sino-Vietnamese water frontier, that area between the Leizhou peninsula in western Guangdong, Hainan Island, and the central and northern coastal regions of Vietnam, covering the wide water world of the Gulf of Tonkin. Except for the flatlands of the Leizhou peninsula and Red River estuary, most of the gulf's narrow coastline is hemmed with rugged mountain ranges that separate the littoral from the interior. The jagged coast is lined with innumerable bays, harbors, sandy shoals, mangrove swamps, and lagoons. Figure 2, a section of a late eighteenth-century Chinese coastal defense map of Guangdong province, depicts the open, rugged geography of the Sino-Vietnamese sea frontier. These geographic conditions made this an ideal area for piracy, smuggling, and other dissident activities.³

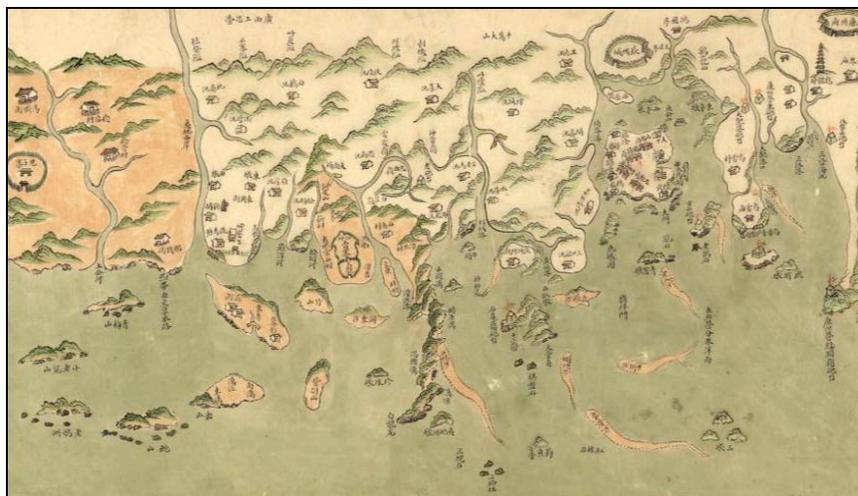


Figure 2. Late eighteenth-century map of the Sino-Vietnamese water frontier. From the author's collection.

Much of this region, but especially its northwestern littoral and hinterland, remained a wild frontier, with shifting borders and unruly “savages” on land and “sea bandits” offshore (see, for example, *Qin zhouzhi* 2009, 70). It was not until 1887, two years after the Sino-French War ended, that borders were firmly set (*Fangcheng xianzhi* 1993, 567–568).⁴ Before that time, neither Vietnam nor China could say precisely where the border separating the two countries was located. Because on land the rugged terrain hindered the demarcation of exact boundaries, both countries utilized zones or belts of natural obstacles, such as mountains, deep forests, and rivers, as natural boundaries to separate one country from the other. In this area the border was simply marked by a series of military posts, which moved forward or backward according to changing circumstances.⁵ Along the littoral, borders were even more imprecise, and the sea, of course, was open and boundless. This water frontier had always been a troublesome and unruly region for officials in both countries; the Chinese therefore characterized the area as a “turbulent sea frontier” inhabited by rebels, refugees, smugglers, bandits, and pirates (Pan Dingqui [1689] 1985, 4).⁶

Throughout most of its history, the Gulf of Tonkin was an ungovernable no-man's-land, and even today the gulf is still a contested zone between China and Vietnam. Over the past several centuries, the gulf region experienced unrelenting internecine wars, rebellions, and border conflicts, creating political, economic, and social anarchy that was conducive to the development of protracted piracy. Merchant vessels were necessarily heavily armed and readily

engaged in both trade and plunder, depending on the circumstances. Besides the innumerable local, petty gangs of pirates, which were at all times present in the region, the geographic remoteness and political instability of this sea frontier also attracted larger, well-organized gangs of professional pirates, who came mostly from outside the region to seek safe haven on the many islands and in the mangrove swamps that lined the coast. Frequently, newly arisen and relatively weak local polities, such as the Nguyễn in south-central Vietnam and the Zheng on Taiwan, directly or indirectly supported both petty and professional pirates as a means to generate revenue through plunder and as inexpensive naval forces employed to fight economic and political rivals. Pirates, too, astutely maneuvered in the contested spaces between polities, using the rivalries and wars to their own advantage. Given the hectic, uncertain conditions, sharp distinctions between trade, smuggling, and piracy were always blurry.⁷ This, then, was the chaotic sea frontier in which Yang Yandi lived in the turbulent seventeenth century.

The Ming-Qing Transition in the Sino-Vietnamese Water Frontier

The Ming-Qing dynastic transition between 1644 and 1684 was a watershed event in early modern Chinese history. According to the historian Frederic Wakeman, “the fall of Ming and the rise of Qing constitute the most dramatic dynastic transition in Chinese history” (1984, 631). Another historian describes this period as a “cataclysm” and “one of the most trying periods in Chinese history” (Struve 1998, 1). For one contemporary witness, Chen Shunxi, it was simply a time of “chaos and abandonment” (*luanli*). Chen, who was a local scholar and healer in Wuchuan County in southwestern Guangdong province, kept a diary of the things he saw and heard from the 1630s to 1679, the year that he passed away (Chen [1880] 2010). In fact, during those forty years, few if any local communities escaped the turmoil and devastation of unrelenting wars, banditry, and piracy. While historians have written much about the Ming-Qing transition in other areas of southern China, we still know very little about this period in the Sino-Vietnamese water frontier.

Our witness, Chen Shunxi, methodically and purposefully juxtaposed extraordinary phenomena (eclipses, comets, vapors, and so on), natural disasters (typhoons, floods, droughts), and man-made calamities (wars, banditry, piracy). To him, man, nature, and the cosmos became entwined in a great chaos. The term *chaos* (*luan*), however, merely approximates the suffering and loss experienced by several million people across China between 1644 and 1684. In

southwestern Guangdong, as throughout southern China, those forty years were truly catastrophic. First, there were the dynastic wars between the Ming and Qing that continued until the early 1660s. Then, between 1661 and 1683, the new Qing rulers instituted a draconian coastal population removal policy. About the same time, wars continued all across south China, with the Rebellion of the Three Feudatories from 1673 to 1681.⁸

Besides these large-scale social disorders, widespread banditry and piracy, urban riots, and peasant and ethnic uprisings assured that the carnage and devastation did not cease. The near-complete anarchy forced local communities to arm themselves for self-protection against all intruders: Manchu and northern soldiers, pro-Ming bands, deserters, armies of beggars and refugees, and roving gangs of bandits and pirates. Adding to the chaos were the numerous famines and epidemics, caused by both man and nature, that led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of displaced people. According to Professor Robert Marks, Guangdong's population in 1640 was about nine million, but by 1661 it had been reduced to seven million, a substantial loss of two million people, or 22 percent; by 1650, in southwestern Guangdong, nearly a quarter of the arable land was laid waste (Marks 1998, 158–159, tables 4.1 and 4.2).

After the Manchus occupied Beijing in 1644, several Ming loyalist regimes continued to resist the Qing in the south into the 1660s. In 1646, one of the Southern Ming rulers, the Yongli Emperor, established his court in Zhaoqing on the West River, not far from Guangzhou. To dislodge the loyalist forces and conquer the province, the Qing launched two major campaigns, first in 1646 and again in 1650. In the first campaign, resistance was weak, as most Ming regulars had already deserted their posts, thereby adding to the increasing numbers of refugees, bandits, and pirates. After Qing troops took Guangzhou in the winter, and the Yongli court fled upriver into neighboring Guangxi, Li Chengdong, the Qing commander, split his army into three routes: Li led the major force to pursue the Yongli Emperor into Guangxi, while another force moved up the North River; the third force, under Xu Guodong, campaigned southwestward into Gaozhou, Leizhou, Lianzhou, and finally Hainan Island (*Qingshi liezhuan* 1962, j.80: 6689–6690; see also Jiang and Fang 1993, 320–321).

The Qing armies became greatly overextended, resulting in a political and military vacuum in many areas of the province that allowed for a further upsurge of riots, uprisings, banditry, and piracy throughout 1647. When the Qing recalled its armies to put down the disturbances in the core Pearl River Delta, several “righteous uprisings” (*qiyi*) erupted in the

southwest in Maoming, Wuchuan, and Siuxi counties; in Wuchuan, one of the leaders was Deng Yao (Chen [1880] 2010, 20). Huang Hairu, a Chaozhou pirate who had earlier surrendered to the Qing and was later sent to defend Leizhou, also rebelled in the summer of 1647. For about a year, Huang and his pirate-rebels battled with Qing naval forces off the Leizhou and Wuchuan coasts, finally fleeing back to Chaozhou but then dying at sea in a storm in 1650 (*Haikang xianzhi* 1938, 542). In the meantime, Li Chengdong, the Qing commander in Guangdong, switched sides in 1648, but died during a campaign against his former comrades the following year. Switching sides, sometimes several times, was quite common during the Ming-Qing wars. Once again, in the interlude, Yongli moved his court back to Zhaoqing (*Qingshi liezhuan* 1962, j.80: 6690; Jiang and Fang 1993, 321–323).

With so many setbacks in Guangdong, in 1649 the Qing court sent a fresh banner army under Shang Kexi to reclaim the province, and the following year, after a prolonged siege, Guangzhou fell for the second time. What followed was a bloodbath in which soldiers massacred between sixty thousand and one hundred thousand city residents (Chen [1880] 2010, 24; Marks 1998, 149–150). Once again, the Yongli Emperor retreated with his armies to neighboring Guangxi province. Deng Yao withdrew to Longmen Island in the Gulf of Tonkin, which became a base from which he launched numerous raiding and plundering expeditions throughout the gulf region over the next decade. His most famous raid was on Qinzhou in 1656, when his band looted the God of Literature Temple, making off with a 300-catty (*jin*) bronze incense burner and various other bronze altar pieces, totaling over 1,500 catties in weight. According to local legend, Deng Yao melted these down to make weapons to fight the Qing. In 1659, he again attacked Qinzhou but was repulsed; a year later, Shang Kexi's army drove him out of his base at Longmen. Deng fled to Vietnam and soon afterward reportedly shaved his head and became a Buddhist monk. Later he snuck back into China but was apprehended and executed (*Fangcheng xianzhi chugao* 2006, 789–791; *Qin xianzhi* 1946, 190; author's fieldnotes from Qinzhou and Fangcheng, July 2011). Remnants of Deng's forces escaped to Hainan, where they continued as pirates and insurgents for several more years (Zheng Guangnan 1998, 295).

During the Ming-Qing dynastic wars, Longmen and neighboring islands became the most notorious refuges for pirates and dissidents. Located at the mouth of the Qinjiang and Yuhongjiang Rivers, Longmen served as the chief port of entry for the walled city of Qinzhou. It was on the main coasting route between Vietnam and southern China. According to the early

Qing scholar Pan Dingqui, in his *Travel Record of Annam (Annan jiyou)*, published in 1689, Longmen was the “outer door” to Qinzhou, strategically located between Guangdong and Vietnam. Pan describes the area, with its many islands, lagoons, and mangrove swamps, as an imposing “sea frontier” and veritable “refuge for pirates” (Pan [1689] 1985, 3–4). A huge mangrove swamp, called the “Seventy-Two Passages” (*Qishier jing*) because of its intricate waterways and dense vegetation, had a deserved reputation as a retreat for pirates and smugglers since at least the Song Dynasty (see, for example, Zhou 1178) (figure 3). From there, ships could easily and clandestinely sail eastward toward Hepu and Leizhou, or westward toward northern Vietnam; in either direction the journey took about one day. In the late seventeenth century, Longmen in fact became the one of the most important centers for anti-Qing resistance in southwestern China (Pan [1689] 1985, 3–4; *Qin Zhouzhi* 2009, 37; Li 2010, 271–272; author’s fieldnotes from Qinzhou, January 2010).



Figure 3. The Seventy-Two Passages, 2010. Photo taken by the author.

Besides Deng Yao, several other notorious pirates and rebels operated in the Gulf of Tonkin in the 1650s and 1660s. Another Ming loyalist, Du Yonghe, fled to Hainan with his supporters in 1652, and the Leizhou pirate-rebel Wang Zhihan, along with over five thousand followers, repeatedly harassed the Qing military and plundered ships and coastal villages in the region for the next four years. Chen Shangchuan (Trần Thượng Xuyên), another Ming loyalist

and pirate, today is a popular deified hero in southern Vietnam as the founder of Biên Hòa, outside modern Ho Chi Minh City (see figure 4). Originally, Chen hailed from a family of merchants who lived on one of the many islands located in the northern corner of Guangzhou Bay in Wuchuan County in southwestern Guangdong. His family had moved there from Fujian several generations earlier. During the turmoil of the Ming-Qing transition, Chen joined the Ming loyalist cause under the Yongli Emperor. He soon became associated with Deng Yao and other pirate-rebels on Longmen Island. After his defeat in 1682, Chen, together with Yang Yandi and others, fled to southern Vietnam around Saigon with several thousand followers (Xu and Xie 2000, 3, 25; Li 2010, 276–277).



Figure 4. Chen Shangchuan, a deified hero in southern Vietnam. *Source:* Wikipedia Commons.

Over those same years, most of southwestern Guangdong was in turmoil, as Southern Ming armies under Li Dingguo campaigned in Lianzhou, Gaozhou, Leizhou, and Hainan, and as far eastward as Xinhui County in the Pearl River Delta (*Qingdai dang'an shiliao congbian* 1980, 6:248). During the fighting, some areas changed hands several times; for example, Chen Shunxi

reported that his native Wuchuan changed hands three times in 1653, four times in 1654, and again four times in 1655 ([1880] 2010, 29–32). After Qing forces defeated Li Dingguo (in early 1655), many of his troops fled to sea to join Deng Yao and other pirate bands. Between 1655 and 1660, there was not only a noticeable upsurge in piracy across the whole region, but also an increase in uprisings of ethnic “mountain bandits” (*shanzei*) on Hainan Island and in Lingshan County on the rugged Guangdong-Guangxi border. The protracted fighting in the region, accompanied by typhoons, floods, droughts, and locusts, also caused severe food shortages and immense suffering and death, which continued into the late 1650s (*Qin xianzhi* 1946, 190; *Lianzhou fuzhi* 1721, 59–60; *Chengmai xianzhi* 2004, 269, 574, 576–577; *Lingao xianzhi* 2004, 32, 162). Between 1661 and 1662, Deng Yao, Wang Zhihan, the Yongli Emperor, and a number of others on the Qing most-wanted list had been captured and executed. Effective resistance against the Qing by organized pro-Ming forces finally had been crushed (Jiang and Fang 1993, 327).

Although the Qing had virtually defeated the Southern Ming on land by 1661, Zheng Chenggong and numerous other pirate bands continued to cause serious problems for the new dynasty at sea and on the southern coast. To cope with this problem, between 1661 and 1683 the Qing government exacted a sweeping coastal evacuation policy from Shandong to Guangdong that forced millions of residents to abandon their homes and livelihoods and to move inland some thirty to fifty *li*.⁹ Soldiers erected barriers, ditches, guard posts, and watchtowers to make sure that the area remained clear of all inhabitants. No one was allowed, under pain of death, to live or work inside the evacuation zone or to go out to sea to trade or fish. Because people in Guangdong continued to sneak out to sea, however, the government issued another coastal removal order in 1664 (*Fangcheng xianzhi chugao* 2006, 792; *Lianzhou fuzhi* 1721, 60–61). Only the Portuguese enclave at Macao and Hainan Island escaped these bans; however, although people on Hainan were allowed to remain in their homes along the coast, they were forbidden to set out to sea to trade or fish (Jiang and Fang 1993, 330–331).

As a result of this draconian policy, an estimated 5.3 million hectares (*mu*) of land remained unproductive for over twenty years. In Wuchuan County alone, for instance, by 1664 some 586 villages had to be abandoned and their fields turned to wastelands. Because several hundred thousand people suddenly lost their homes and no longer had the means to make a living, many became wandering refugees and ready recruits for the ever-increasing numbers of bandit

and pirate gangs (Chen [1880] 2010, 34–36). The bans were so disruptive to maritime trade, and to the economy in general, that more than one historian has suggested that they were a major cause of the so-called “Kangxi Depression” between 1661 and 1683 (Kishimoto-Nakayama 1984; Marks 1998, 142–143, 153). Although the bans were slightly loosened in 1669, it was not until the Qing had defeated the Zheng regime on Taiwan in 1683 that the policy was rescinded (*Qing shilu Guangdong shiliao* 1995, 1:103, 186, 189; and *Fangcheng xianzhi chugao* 2006, 795, 799).

In the meantime, Wu Sangui, one of the three “pacification princes” in southern China, declared open rebellion against the Qing in the winter of 1673. This marked the start of the Rebellion of the Three Feudatories, which was not suppressed until 1681. The revolt inaugurated another period of intense political and social instability in south China. In Guangdong, although Shang Kexi, another pacification prince, remained loyal to the new dynasty, his son, Shang Zhixin, simply pushed aside his aged father (who died shortly afterward) and joined Wu’s revolt in the spring of 1676. Like so many others, Shang Zhixin would change sides several times during the rebellion. Wu Sangui raised the banner of a new Zhou dynasty and handed out official titles and positions to his supporters (*Qing shilu Guangdong shiliao* 1995, 1:121–123; Wakeman 1985, 2:1101, 1109). In Gaozhou, between 1675 and 1676, Zu Zeqing abandoned his post as the Qing military commander (*zongbing*) to accept commissions and seals of office from Wu, first as his “Trustworthy and Imposing General” (*xinwei jiangjun*) and later as the “Marquis who Pacifies the Periphery” (*jingyuan hou*). At the same time, military garrisons in Leizhou and Lianzhou also revolted, and Zu Zeqing appointed his henchmen in those areas to both civil and military offices. In 1677, Shang Zhixin shaved his forehead and returned allegiance to the Qing. Once again, southwestern Guangdong was in a state of anarchy and chaos, and, as in the 1650s, many areas changed hands several times. Wu Sangui died of dysentery in 1678, and Zu Zeqing was arrested the following year and sent to Beijing, where he and his entire family were executed in 1680 (*Qing shilu Guangdong shiliao* 1995, 1:127–128, 132, 135–136, 138–139, 142, 146; *Qingshi liezhuan* 1962, 80:6658–6659; Chen [1880] 2010, 42–46). Also in 1680, Shang Zhixin, after lingering in a Beijing jail for some time, was allowed to commit suicide out of respect for his father, who had served the dynasty loyally for many years (Wakeman 1985, 2:1117, 1119). With the leaders gone, Qing armies crushed the rebellion within a year.

Because of the chaos and anarchy of the times, it is difficult to make clear distinctions between regular Qing or pro-Ming military forces, rebels, bandits, pirates, and local militias.

There was, in fact, as Lynn Struve has explained, “a tangled profusion of activities” that greatly blurred identities (1984, 64). Countless numbers of army deserters, from all camps, joined the sizable bandit and pirate bands that were already active in the province. It was not unusual for Southern Ming and Qing armies to collaborate and even incorporate outlaw groups into their own forces. As Robert Marks and others point out, in most cases Ming loyalist troops were not composed of gentry-led militias but instead often contained large contingents of bandits, pirates, and deserters from one army or another (1998, 147). The same was true of the Qing armies fighting in Guangdong. I have noted above that the Qing used the pirate Huang Hairu and his forces in the defense of Leizhou in 1647, and, during the siege of Guangzhou in 1650, Shang Kexi relied on local pirates to assist in the amphibious attacks on the city. During the Rebellion of the Three Feudatories, things were much worse: Zu Zeqing’s army had degenerated into a motley horde of deserters, ruffians, bandits, and pirates. Chen Shunxi describes the absolute pandemonium in Wuchuan in 1679, where soldiers, village paramilitary units (*xiangyong*), bandits, and pirates were all fighting one another and indiscriminately pillaging villages and towns ([1880] 2010, 45).

Village militias (*tuanlian*) were often no better. Many were composed of hired “braves” (*yong*), who were mostly unemployed young juvenile delinquents and local bullies, referred to in the records as “bare sticks” (*guanggun*) or “rotten lads” (*lanzai*). On the pretext of community defense, militias were often organized in fact to settle old scores with rival villages, as was the case in Haikang County in Leizhou. According to a local gentry named Chen Shiqi, near his home there were two villages: Taiping, which was dominated by the Tan family, and Xinqiao, dominated by the Feng family. At the start of the Kangxi period (early 1660s), both villages, using the excuse of defense against pirates and bandits, hired braves and formed militias, which in fact, engaged in feuds or “armed affrays” (*xiedou*) with one another (*Haikang xianzhi* 1812, 149). Sometimes, too, local militias took advantage of their numbers to plunder and burn down neighboring, often rival, villages, and kidnapped women and children for ransom (Chen [1880] 2010, 22; *Lingao xianzhi* 2004, 154–155).

Yang Yandi as Pirate

Yang Yandi lived his entire adult life during these forty years of extreme chaos and anarchy. During these troubled times, he developed a reputation as a daunting pirate chieftain. It

is likely that he and his younger brother, Yang San, began their outlaw careers as petty, local pirates (*tudao* or *tuzei*) in the 1650s, or a decade earlier, carrying out small hit-and-run raids on boats and villages around the Gulf of Tonkin. At first, they would have operated small fishing craft, perhaps like the ones depicted in the photo of Longmen harbor today (figure 5). As Yang Yandi's gang became larger and more formidable, his attacks became bolder; in 1656, he gained the attention of the authorities with his raid on the port town of Tongxi on Hainan Island. He not only robbed the trading ships anchored in the harbor, but also many shops and homes on shore, and he killed several merchants who resisted (*Lingshui xianzhi* 1673, 2:39; Niu and Li 2011, 139). In 1658, he commanded seven ships and, over the next several years, he continued his pillaging of ships and looting of towns along the Hainan and Leizhou coasts. In 1661, now with about twenty ships, Yang's gang raided a Li aborigine village at Xiamaling, at the southern tip of Hainan, and abducted a village leader named Lin Wu as well as several dozen women, whom they held for ransom. Yang and his followers also plundered a number of other coastal towns and villages, kidnapping more than three hundred men, women, and children. In 1665, a gang of pirates in thirteen ships, probably associated with the Yang brothers, who were operating from bases on the Sino-Vietnamese frontier, plundered a Dan (Tanka) anchorage and village on the Chengmai coast of Hainan, killing two people and kidnapping for ransom four others (*Yai zhouzhi* 1988, 231–232; *Chengmai xianzhi* 2004, 257; *Fangcheng xianzhi chugao* 2006, 793).



Figure 5. Fishing boats anchored in Longmen harbor, 2010. Photo taken by the author.

Between 1656 and 1665, Yang and his brother were mostly involved in raids along the coasts of Hainan and the Leizhou peninsula. In the early 1660s, Yang Yandi probably commanded about a thousand followers, and their attacks were so effective that for a time they upset communication links between Guangzhou and Hainan. Although the sources are unclear on this point, it is likely that at this time the Yang brothers became associated with Deng Yao, Wang Zhihan, and Chen Shangchuan and also operated from a base on one of the many islands near Longmen (*Qin xianzhi* 1946, 190; Niu and Li 2011, 139). In any case, in 1661, when Qing forces drove Deng Yao from Longmen, Yang Yandi likely fled to Vietnam to recuperate his losses.

With Deng Yao out of the way, however, Yang Yandi quickly rose to prominence in the Gulf of Tonkin. For a short time, he and his forces reoccupied Longmen, only to be once again driven away by Shang Kexi in 1663. With this loss of the island stronghold for the second time, Yang and his followers scattered. One subordinate, Huang Guolin, led about a thousand men into Guangxi, where they continued to plunder villages and battle with Qing troops until Huang was captured and executed later that same year (*Qin xianzhi* 1946, 190–191, 901; *Fangcheng xianzhi chugao* 2006, 793). The Yang brothers and several notorious associates, such as Huang Mingbiao and Xian Biao, together with family members and followers, fled to a port called Hải Nha (Haiya) in Vietnam (likely in Hải Dương province), where they received shelter and protection from a local official and strongman named Phan Phú Quốc (Pan Fuguo). He not only provided them with a base from which to launch their expeditions in the gulf region, but also supplied them with provisions, weapons, and ships. When Qing forces were sent to Hải Nha to suppress Yang and his comrades in 1666, Phan Phú Quốc refused to hand over his guests, closed the gates to the city, and fired on the Qing soldiers. Pressured by the Qing court in Beijing, the Vietnamese king in Thăng Long (Hanoi) reluctantly ordered the arrest of Yang and his associates (*Qing shilu Guangdong shiliao* 1995, 1: 96–97; Niu and Li 2011, 139).

Forced to flee Vietnam, Yang Yandi escaped (in 1666 or 1667) to Fujian and Taiwan, seeking the shelter of the Zheng regime. The next mention of Yang is ten years later (in 1677), when he and Xian Biao left Taiwan, with about a thousand men in eighty ships, to once again return to the Gulf of Tonkin and retake Longmen Island (*Fangcheng xianzhi chugao* 2006, 797–798). For the next five years, Yang launched from his base repeated raids on towns and ships around Qinzhou, Leizhou, and Hainan and also battled almost continuously with the Qing navy

in the region. In 1678, Yang Yandi and another local pirate named Liang Yuhe looted several settlements on the east coast of Leizhou and then blockaded the mouth of the Nandu River, the main entranceway to the upriver ports in the prefectural capital. The following year, with about forty ships, Yang's band robbed ships in Shiqu harbor and the markets at Senshan and Datie, on Hainan's northwest coast. They once again kidnapped women and children for ransom. In 1680 and 1681, now with about a hundred ships, Yang pillaged Shipai harbor in Lingao County, looting, burning, and kidnapping, and then Dongshui harbor and the Chengmai coast, with more looting and kidnapping (*Qing shilu Guangdong shiliao* 1995, 1:149, 161–162, 165–166; *Leizhou fuzhi* 1811, 3:35b; *Lingao xianzhi* 2004, 164, 166; *Chengmai xianzhi* 2004, 257–258).

Then, in 1681, Qing forces attacked Longmen, finally defeating and driving Yang from his base for the last time early the following year. Once again, Yang retreated to Vietnam, with three thousand followers in seventy ships, eventually settling in the southern city of Mỹ Tho in the Mekong Delta (about 70 kilometers from present-day Saigon), where he and his forces received protection and support from the Nguyễn lords. Yang and his men settled in their new home and engaged in trade, farming, and fishing, as well as the occasional plundering of passing ships. To repay his new lord, Yang helped the Nguyễn consolidate control over southern Vietnam by fighting the regime's Cambodian rivals. Yang died in 1688, when one of his followers, a man named Huang Jin, assassinated him (*Fangcheng xianzhi chugao* 2006, 798; Sakurai 2004, 40).

Let me speculate a bit on Yang's motives. Certainly, as a pirate, Yang had a simple economic motive for his robberies: to make money. But there is more to the story. The years between 1656 and 1665, when Yang and his gang were actively plundering the Hainan coast, were times of repeated typhoons, floods, droughts, and famines all around Qinzhou, including in his base on Longmen Island. Hainan was the "breadbasket" (or, rather, "rice basket") of southern China, producing grains, vegetables, fruit, and livestock all year round, and there were fewer, less severe food shortages in Hainan during these years. Furthermore, the island was remote and poorly defended, and therefore a relatively easy target for hungry, rapacious pirates. In 1659, for example, Lianzhou prefecture suffered from a severe famine followed by epidemics that lasted for several years. There was a food shortage, and rice prices shot up to three silver coins per peck (*dou*), which was extraordinarily expensive (*Qin xianzhi* 1946, 890; *Lianzhou fuzhi* 1721, 60–61). During that year, when Yang's gang looted the Li villages on Hainan Island, his starving men

stole oxen, other livestock, and rice. In another raid in 1661, when Yang plundered Panrentang and several other villages, kidnapping women and children, he asked that the ransom be paid in grain and livestock. In other words, these were foraging raids in search of food (*Yai zhouzhi* 1988, 232). Later, in 1677–1678, when there were severe food shortages across most of western Guangdong, Yang and his bands again raided Hainan and the Leizhou coasts, even blockading the ports of Leizhou city, where his men once again demanded food (*Haikang xianzhi* 1938, 543–544). The point here is that many of Yang’s attacks against administrative cities, port towns, markets, and villages, and even a few military bases, were conducted during times of severe food shortages in his base area on Longmen. These raids, in particular, were about survival.

Yang Yandi as Rebel

Yang Yandi emerged out of this milieu of chaos in the 1650s as a pirate and rebel leader. But what exactly made him a “rebel,” and what was he rebelling against? In official sources used in this study, the most commonly used term to indicate “rebel” or “rebelliousness” is *ni*, usually seen in the compounds *nizei* (rebel) and *haini* (sea rebel). Although the term *rebellion* implies, at least in English, overt intent to overthrow an established government, this was not the only meaning of the term in imperial China. Actually, the term *ni* is loaded with several meanings, including outright open attacks against the state and its officials (but not necessarily with intent to overthrow the government), attempts to assassinate the emperor and the royal family, and attempts to desecrate the royal tombs. It also indicates treason and absconding, aiding, and abetting foreign states and rulers. The first mention of Yang in connection with rebels or rebelliousness (*ni*) that I have discovered is in an entry in the *Veritable Records (Shilu)* from 1666, in which Yang is mentioned with several other pirates (*haikou*) who were hiding out in Vietnam under the protection of Phan Phú Quốc, mentioned above. Later, in 1678 and thereafter, the *Veritable Records* clearly identifies Yang as a sea rebel (*haini*), beginning with his involvement in a raid on the administrative city of Qinzhou (*Qing shilu Guangdong shiliao* 1995, 1:96–97, 149).

What were Yang Yandi’s credentials as an anti-Qing rebel? We can start to answer this question by examining, first, his associations with other known rebels and, second, his actual activities. Fundamentally, Yang associated with three anti-Qing rebel camps: Deng Yao on Longmen, the Zheng regime on Taiwan, and Zu Zeqing, a supporter of the Rebellion of the

Three Feudatories in southwestern Guangdong. Although several recent writers (such as Zheng Guangnan, Li Qingxin, and Gu Cheng) claim that Yang was a Southern Ming general, and therefore a staunch Ming loyalist (*Qin xianzhi* 1946, 190; Qian 2006, 66:3174), I have not yet found any contemporary evidence that supports this claim. Most sources, however, do mention him as an associate or subordinate of Deng Yao, who is described in the Qing dynasty sources as both a “notorious pirate” (*haizei* or *haikou*) and “rebel” (*nizei* or *haini*) (*Lianzhou fuzhi* 1721, 60; Chen [1880] 2010, 35). I have previously noted that Chen Shunxi singled out Deng as one of the leaders of the “righteous uprisings” in 1647 in Gaozhou, which was Deng’s home area. Yang Yandi likely became associated with Deng on Longmen Island in the 1650s.

After Deng was defeated and executed, Yang fled to Vietnam, and later to Taiwan, where he and Xian Biao became followers of Zheng Jing (the eldest son of Zheng Chenggong, or Koxinga). According to several sources from the Republican era and later, Zheng Jing commissioned Yang as a general, and more than one source claims that Yang raised the banner of “oppose the Qing and support the Ming” (*fan Qing fu Ming*), though by this time (1666–1667) the pro-Ming resistance in Guangdong was virtually dead (see, for example, *Qin xianzhi* 1946, 901; and *Fangcheng xianzhi chugao* 2006, 797). Several mainland China scholars claim that Zheng Jing actually sent Yang back to the Gulf of Tonkin area to open up a second maritime front to fight the Qing (see, for example, Li 2010, 273). However, if Zheng sent Yang back to the gulf, it was more likely to protect the important trade and communication routes that linked Taiwan with Vietnam, Cambodia, and Siam.¹⁰ Another possibility, however, is that Zheng did not send Yang back west, but that Yang simply abandoned the Zheng camp soon after Zheng suffered setbacks on the mainland. Unfortunately, for ten years between 1667 and 1677, we have little concrete information about Yang and his activities; these were the crucial years during which he was reportedly in Taiwan and a follower of Zheng Jing.

Other sources, namely the Jiaqing edition of the Leizhou prefectural gazetteer and a book by Du Zhen called *Yue Min xunshi jilue* [A record of campaigns in Guangdong and Fujian], said that Yang Yandi and his associates, Xie Chang and Liang Yuhe, were subordinates of Zu Zeqing, who rebelled against the Qing under Wu Sangui in the 1670s (*Leizhou fuzhi* 1811, 14:14a–b; Du Zhen cited in Li 2010, 275). These associations with known rebel leaders did not, however, necessarily mean that Yang himself was a rebel or took up the banner of “oppose the Qing and support the Ming.” After all, we must remember that during the Ming-Qing transition, the

Southern Ming, the Zheng camp, and later Wu Sangui armies were composed of large contingents of bandit and pirate groups, who often used the cloak of legitimacy provided by being associated with a “righteous army” (*yijun*) to continue their nefarious activities.

It is better perhaps to judge Yang Yandi by his actions, as did the Qing government. If Yang was a rebel, then we would expect him to have attacked the symbols of Qing authority and power—administrative cities and military installations—and to have killed Qing officials. In 1663, Yang assailed the military base Baihezhai in Leizhou and killed the commander, Fang Xing, and other officers and soldiers (*Leizhou fuzhi* 1811, 3:21a–b; Qian Haiyue 2006, 42:3175). For the next two years, Yang battled almost continuously with Qing forces under Shang Kexi. In 1666, as previously mentioned, Yang absconded to Vietnam, where he “betrayed his country” (*ni*) by receiving shelter and protection from a foreign official. Later, Yang joined the rebel regime of Zheng Jing on Taiwan and, with Zheng’s support (perhaps), returned to reoccupy Longmen in 1677. Once again, Yang and his followers stepped up attacks against Qing forces in the gulf region. In 1677–1679, the Yang brothers and Xie Chang reportedly collaborated with Li tribesmen led by Han Youxian in an uprising on Hainan. While Yang’s forces attacked Qiongzhou, Chengmai, and Dingan from the sea, Han Youxian and his followers attacked from land. The Li aborigine disturbances were not suppressed until 1681 (*Yai zhouzhi* 1988, 232, 272–273). Also during this time, in 1678, we have the first clear mention of Yang Yandi as a sea rebel (*haini*), with his attack on the walled capital of Qinzhou, but his forces were repulsed by Qing soldiers. In 1679, Yang’s forces captured the important Qing garrison at Haian in Leizhou (*Leizhou fuzhi* 1811, 3:26a; *Qing shilu Guangdong shiliao* 1995, 1:149, 161–162, 165). Finally, before retreating to southern Vietnam in 1680–1681, Yang attacked and occupied the Qing fort at Haikou, where the Qing commander surrendered to Yang, and then plundered the county seat of Chengmai (*Chengmai xianzhi* 2004, 258; *Qing shilu Guangdong shiliao* 1995, 1:177–178).

We have strong, convincing evidence that Yang and his followers attacked Qing administrative seats and military installations and killed and wounded a number of Qing civil officials, military officers, and soldiers, which in Qing parlance qualified him as a rebel (*ni*). What is less convincing, however, are the later assertions by several Chinese scholars, first in the Republican era and continuing until today, that Yang was an anti-Qing, pro-Ming rebel. There is little actual evidence that Yang was a Ming loyalist. He was most active in the years after 1650, but especially in the 1660s and 1670s, by which time the Southern Ming had been defeated and

Ming restoration was only a dream. As one scholar put it, “Armies of righteousness were seldom to be seen. People harbored in their hearts the memory of Ming, but nobody started actual warfare” (Hsieh 1932, 576). Furthermore, there is no evidence that Yang ever intended to overthrow the Qing dynasty, and his battles against the Qing can best be viewed as self-defensive or preemptive attacks carried out for his own survival. If Yang was a rebel, he was a rebel without a clear cause. He apparently fought for no cause other than his own. He was a pragmatist, not an idealist.

Yang Yandi as Hero

If he was simply a pirate, what made Yang Yandi “righteous”? The Chinese word for righteousness is *yi*, which, according to China historian Derk Bodde, “characterizes the conduct of those individuals who are consciously aware of the existence of certain moral standards and obligations, and who strive in their every act to live up to them to the best of their ability” (1955, 238). These are lofty ideals that I suspect few people could live up to in real life. But here I will discuss the Yang Yandi of legends, the “righteous hero,” portrayed below in a contemporary illustration (figure 6). It is impossible to know exactly when people began to call him Righteous Yang (Yang Yi). Although legends about Yang appeared in written form only in the 1930s and 1940s (during the Republican era), it is certain that they existed earlier, in one form or another, in the oral traditions of local communities around Qinzhou and Fangcheng. As several scholars have demonstrated, storytelling usually exists as an oral tradition long before the tales are put to writing. However, most stories about Yang were handed down orally from generation to generation, and few have ever been written down, even to this day. Interestingly, in many cases, the villagers I interviewed in January 2010 and July 2011 knew of Yang only by the name Righteous Yang (Yang Yi); they were completely unaware that his real name was Yang Yandi.

Some stories and yarns about Yang apparently began to be told during his lifetime, or at least soon afterward, and were recorded in local gazetteers (*difangzhi*) and personal memoirs (*biji*). Although most of the early recorded tales (those dating from the Qing period) depict him as a villainous pirate, we do nonetheless have occasional hints about his righteousness, his sense of a higher moral duty. One of the earliest such examples, recorded in the Guangxu period (late nineteenth century), comes from Chengmai County, Hainan. In 1681, when Yang’s gang attacked his village, Li Chaoqing was sixteen years old (*sui*); he recounted how Yang and his

men treated the villagers badly and severely wounded his father, who was then abducted with a demand of 300 taels (*liang*) of silver for his ransom. The family did not have such a large amount of money, so, being a filial son, Li volunteered to go with the pirates aboard their ship so he could nurse his injured father. Li suffered various hardships and humiliations among the pirates, and his unwavering devotion to his father so impressed Yang that the pirate chief released both father and son when the gang finally neared the Yangjiang coast. Although the story is about a filial son, Li Chaoqing, we do nonetheless get a glimpse of Yang's sense of righteousness and moral obligation (*Chengmai xianzhi* 2004, 395–396). From such stories, legends are born.¹¹



Figure 6. Contemporary depiction of the hero Yang Yandi. From the author's collection.

However, most of the legends I have read or heard depict Yang as a righteous rebel, a Ming loyalist, or an anti-Qing hero. This tradition first appeared in the Republican period and continues today in historical accounts and in oral legends. It is now impossible to know if these versions of a patriotic Yang were the same as the ones told by storytellers over the previous two centuries. Legends evolve over time and change according to historical circumstances.

Nonetheless, this does not mean that Qing-period legends did not also portray Yang as a righteous anti-Qing hero (whether he actually was one or not). After all, throughout the Qing period in south China there was a resilient, mostly clandestine anti-Qing sentiment, epitomized in Triad legends and rituals (see, for example, Antony 2004; and Ter Haar 1998).

The most frequently told legends about Yang Yandi describe how he built a citadel, a palace, and a canal near his base on Longmen Island. In some stories, Righteous Yang was a Ming general who, after being defeated in the north, retreated with the Southern Ming's Yongli Emperor to the south, where Yang ended up building a base near Longmen. Several legends say he was a subordinate of Zheng Chenggong on Taiwan. In other stories, Yang was a self-proclaimed king, and the locals called him King Yang (Yang Wang). In all the legends today Yang is an "oppose the Qing, support the Ming hero" (*fan Qing fu Ming yingxiong*). The alleged ruins of his citadel are known locally as the "King's City" (*Wangcheng*), or even the "Emperor's city" (*Huangcheng*).¹²

Legends and rumors abound about imperial treasures being uncovered around the ruins over the past centuries: large ceramic urns filled with copper coins or, in some tales, silver dollars, pieces of jade, ancient bronze mirrors, a solid gold cat figurine, and a book made of gold (*jinshu*). According to one informant, the golden book was found buried beneath a mysterious tree: when it rained, it would not get wet; in the summer, it would not get warm; and in the winter, it would not get cold. The book was made up of one or several gold pages with archaic writing on them. Some say the book was actually an imperial edict, awarded to Yang for valorous service to the Ming cause; others say it was written by Yang himself, who used it to legitimize his claims as king. Although the site of the ruins is considered good land (informants said "good *fengshui*") and there are several villages located nearby, no one dares to live or work the land on the actual site.¹³

Villagers claim that at least two actual canals, both in the vicinity of Longmen, were built by Yang; they are variously called Righteous Yang's Canal (Yang Yi Jiao) or Emperor [Yang's] Canal (Huangdi Gou), as well as other similar names. The canal that I saw in 2010 (figure 7) was originally about 12 kilometers in length and, according to one villager, it had been in use until the time of the Japanese occupation in World War II, when it was used for clandestine activities against the new wave of foreign invaders. The canal (or canals) were supposedly built when Yang was engaged in a desperate battle for survival against Qing armies. With no way to escape,

so the story goes, he built an altar at the highest point in or near his citadel, where he earnestly prayed to the Jade Emperor, the Sea Dragon King, and the Gods of the Mountains and Earth (in other stories, he prayed to Heaven) for help in building an escape route. Seeing that Yang fought a righteous cause—that is, that he fought against the alien Manchu invaders—the gods took pity on him and at night sent forth an army of celestial soldiers (*tianbing*) to dig out a canal and then brought forth a heavy rain, which allowed Yang and his men to escape to sea.¹⁴



Figure 7. Righteous Yang's Canal, 2010. Photo taken by the author.

Such tales are revealing: taken together, they give Yang credibility as a righteous hero. Yang had magical powers to call down the gods, who were willing to aid him in his righteous cause against alien invaders. Objects, such as buried treasures of silver, gold, and jade, have a double meaning. On the one hand, they can be interpreted as imperial treasures bestowed on Yang by the Southern Ming emperor for his loyal and valorous services; on the other hand, they may be simply the booty Yang and his men gathered over many years of raiding expeditions. The latter interpretation does not make Yang any less a hero in the popular imagination. Yang represented a poor commoner who made good as a righteous pirate hero, perhaps something of a “social bandit” who robbed the rich and powerful to help the poor.

Conclusion

Throughout history, the Gulf of Tonkin has had a reputation as a “turbulent sea frontier,” where piracy, smuggling, and rebellion remained endemic. Its remoteness from centers of government and its rugged coastline dotted with countless bays, islands, and mangrove swamps provided ideal geopolitical conditions for illicit activities. Until recently, the region remained a hub for pirates, who often worked in collusion with officials on both sides of the border. As late as the 1990s, for instance, pirated vessels frequently showed up in Beihai harbor, where they were repainted, refitted, and renamed, all under the watchful gaze of Chinese military and customs officers, who provided protection to the pirates in return for a share in the spoils (see, for example, Stewart 2006, 211–247). Even today, although the pirates have mostly disappeared, the gulf is still an important smuggling zone. In fact, the area retains much of its past rough-and-tumble frontier character.

Piracy played a significant role in the gulf’s political, economic, and social history. Politically, various polities sanctioned pirates, gave them official titles, provided them with safe harbor, and outfitted their ships; in return, the pirates provided their supporters with military aid and shares in their prizes. For the Southern Ming and the Zheng regime on Taiwan, the Gulf of Tonkin became a second maritime front in the struggle against the Manchus and an important outlet for trade. In Vietnam, pirate-refugees such as Yang Yandi were instrumental in securing the Mekong Delta for the Nguyễn lords. Economically, throughout the seventeenth century, trade, smuggling, and piracy were usually intermingled and often indistinguishable. Violence was a trait not only of piracy but of trade in general. While many people suffered, others were able to take advantage of and profit from the wars and maritime prohibitions. Socially, piracy provided a large number of marginal people with opportunities to improve their status, or at least their own self-image. Political sanctions gave some pirate leaders a sense of legitimacy, purpose, and respectability beyond simple pillaging and killing. Yang Yandi developed a reputation as a “righteous” hero. When he and other Ming loyalists fled to Vietnam in the late seventeenth century, they were quickly transformed from pirates to respectable merchants and prominent social elites, and, at least in one case (Chen Shangchuan), even deified.

Yang Yandi, in fact, emerged simultaneously as both historical figure and legend. For writers in the Qing dynasty, Yang was little more than a violent criminal—a pirate and a rebel. He and others like him were the cause of chaos (*luan*). Officials manipulated astrological omens,

such as eclipses and comets, claiming that they foretold the downfall of pirates like Yang Yandi. And when he did fall shortly afterward, such omens only served to prove that the Qing house held Heaven's mandate and favor. However, by the twentieth century, nationalist writers of the Republican era (such as those mentioned in the 1946 gazetteer), and later Communist writers (such as Gu Cheng and Li Qingxin) as well, depicted Yang as an "anti-Qing, pro-Ming hero." For *them*, the same omens, such as eclipses and comets, presaged the fall of the Qing dynasty. As the writers of the 1946 Qinzhou gazetteer explain, it was wrong to treat men like Deng Yao and Yang Yandi simply as pirates, as the earlier Qing dynasty gazetteers had done, because these men had actually fought a just cause against the alien Manchu invaders, and therefore they should be considered patriotic heroes (*Qin xianzhi* 1946, 192, 902). For the common people, legends, first handed down orally by storytellers and later written down by folklorists and propagandists, were the stuff of history, and in these versions of the past Yang Yandi became a righteous hero. Heaven favored and aided him, not the Qing, according to the popular tales.

Yet Yang Yandi lived in troubled times. He passed his entire adult life during a forty-year period of immense turmoil and lawlessness—truly, as Professor Lynn Struve writes, a cataclysm. It is impossible for us to know how or what Yang felt, thought, or believed. What we do know is that under such trying conditions it was impossible to make clear distinctions between pirate, rebel, and hero. Identities were fuzzy and constantly changing. It is not so much that the Chinese sources are inconsistent or contradictory, but rather—and to the contrary—that the traditional Chinese terms for pirates, bandits, outlaws, and rebels (such as *kou*, *zei*, and sometimes *ni*) generally treat all these identities as categorically the same. Such terms were used indiscriminately and interchangeably. When official accounts labeled Yang Yandi as a *haikou*, for example, this identified him as both pirate and rebel. And when Yang and his associates plundered the Gaozhou, Leizhou, and Lianzhou coasts in 1678, for instance, officials used both the terms *nizei* and *haizei* to depict the assailants. It was highly unlikely, however, that Yang called or viewed himself as either a pirate or rebel. Although we cannot know for certain, it is easier to imagine that he thought of himself as a righteous hero, much the same way as many common people saw him.

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Notes

- 1 Note that the date of Yang's arrival in Hue differs from that given in the Chinese sources. The author is grateful to Professor Hue-Tam Ho Tai for sharing and translating this document. All other translations are by the author.
- 2 The areas that today make up coastal Guangxi—such as Hepu, Qinzhou, Longmen, and Fangcheng—were part of Guangdong province in the seventeenth century.
- 3 For an insightful essay on a later period that places the Sino-Vietnamese borderland in the context of the tributary system, see Wills (2012).
- 4 The Treaty of Tianjin in 1885, which ended the Sino-French War, set up a joint commission to demarcate the border between Tonkin and China. With its work completed two years later, France and China signed an agreement in Beijing in June 1887 confirming the new border. China was awarded Jiangping and the Bailongwei peninsula, areas long claimed by Vietnam.
- 5 As for the shifting borders, in 1662, for example, Vietnamese bands raided the coastal border area, destroyed the fort at Fangcheng, and forced the Qing government to relocate the fort and market further to the northeast (where it is located today). In 1684, the Qing reoccupied and refortified some of the areas between Qinzhou and Dongxing, but other coastal areas around Jiangping and Bailongwei remained under Vietnamese control until 1887.
- 6 It also should be pointed out that, since ancient times, Chinese governments have used this area as a dumping ground for convicted criminals (frequently bandits and pirates) sentenced to exile.
- 7 For a detailed discussion of this water frontier and the role of piracy, see Antony (forthcoming a); for a detailed discussion on piracy, war, and trade in this same region, see Antony (forthcoming b).
- 8 For general histories of the Ming-Qing transition, see Struve (1984), Wakeman (1985), and Gu (2011).
- 9 See Ho (2013, 53–74) for insightful analysis and graphic details of the destructiveness of the forced coastal evacuation policy in Fujian province.
- 10 I am grateful to Professor Xing Hang for pointing out this possibility to me (personal communication, November 4, 2012).
- 11 Interestingly, also in the late nineteenth century and in this same area (Qinzhou and Fangcheng), a more recent hero emerged: Liu Yongfu. Like Yang Yandi, Liu was a bandit and rebel who became a patriotic national hero for his struggle against French imperialism in the region.
- 12 Author's fieldnotes from Qinzhou, January 2010, and from Qinzhou and Fangcheng, July 2011.
- 13 Author's fieldnotes from Qinzhou, January 2010, and from Qinzhou and Fangcheng, July 2011. For a written account, see *Fangcheng xianzhi chugao* (2006, 1127–1132).
- 14 Author's fieldnotes from Qinzhou, January 2010, and from Qinzhou and Fangcheng, July 2011; and *Qin xianzhi* (1946, 946–947). In an alternate legend, also recorded in the 1946 *Qin xianzhi*, Yang constructed the canal not to escape the Qing forces but to give him easy access to the sea, so that he could plunder ships and villages. Another legend says

that the canal was built not by Yang Yandi, but rather by the Eastern Han Fubo general Ma Yuan, who pacified Nan Yue and northern Vietnam (*Qin xianzhi* 1946, 946).

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