

## PIRACY ON THE CHINA COAST

A. D. BLUE

For most of recorded history piracy has been a menace to sea-borne trade, and there have been times when it has been difficult to distinguish between pirates and honest — or should one say legitimate — traders. Nationality has often been the only mark of distinction, as Spanish and English views of Drake, Hawkins, and the like illustrate.

The Chinese were pioneers in piracy, as in so many other things, and a history of piracy in China would begin many thousands of years ago. The Chinese were probably skilled practitioners of the art before history began to be recorded. The earliest accounts are in the records of the Chou Dynasty in the fourth century B.C., and piracy continued in China long after it had been suppressed in other parts of the world.

When the first Europeans arrived in the China Seas in the sixteenth century, many of the pirates on the coast were Japanese. For three centuries after the defeat of Kublai Khan's invasion on Japan in 1281, Japanese pirates — mainly from Kyushu — were active along the whole coast, from the Liaotung Peninsula in the north to Hainan Island and the Straits of Malacca in the south. The famous Arctic explorer, John Davis, met his death at their hands in 1604. Davis was serving on an East India Company ship which was anchored off the island of Bintang, east of Singapore, when it was attacked by Japanese pirates. This was at the end of the Japanese era, which came about as the result of several different factors. One was the establishment of a strong central government in Japan by Iyeyasu, the first of the Tokugawa Shoguns at the beginning of the seventeenth century; and another was the increasing superiority of Chinese over Japanese junks.

The depredations of these Japanese pirates often extended far inland, and they were accompanied by atrocities reminiscent of the Japanese Rape of Nanking in 1937. Because of this the Ming Emperors banned all intercourse between the two countries, and this afforded the Portuguese the opportunity to act as

middlemen in trade between the two countries. There was a flavour of irony in this, as the Portuguese were to prove as great pirates as the Japanese. Their most famous pirate was Mendes Pinto, who flourished in the latter half of the sixteenth century, and who seems to have been a combination of Sir Henry Morgan and Baron Munchausen. Pinto's exploits are characteristic of Portuguese history during those early centuries, displaying that amazing mixture of gallantry and greed, of religious zeal, bigotry, and cruelty.

The eastern seas had always been full of violence, and the arrival of the Portuguese in the early sixteenth century, and the Dutch a century later, increased that violence. The Dutch lacked the religious zeal of the Portuguese, but substituted an equally unattractive obsession with trade. Much of the European trade in the Far East at that time was based on piracy. The Dutch, for instance, were excluded from direct trade with China until 1729, and in their Japan trade—in which Chinese silk was the most important commodity—they obtained much of their silk by plundering Portuguese and Chinese ships.

The persistence of piracy in Chinese waters for so long after regular trade had been established there by Europeans, was due to the peculiar conditions under which that trade developed. In India, and in the East Indies, European trade was succeeded by a steady increase in European power, although in both places there was a considerable time lag between establishing political power on land and the suppression of piracy at sea. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, British and Dutch naval power had made Indian and East Indian waters comparatively safe for European commerce. The situation in China was very different, however, and piracy continued there for fully another century. Not until after the First China War of 1841-42 were there any centres of European power in China, and the few centres established then were separated from each other by hundreds of miles of Chinese territory. The situation was aggravated by the increasing anarchy and lawlessness which became endemic over much of coastal China from the early nineteenth century, as the authority and power of the Manchu Government declined.

When the East India Company's monopoly of the China trade was abolished in 1833, and the trade thrown open to all comers,

piracy was firmly rooted along the South China coast. Then, during the First China War many junks were allowed to act as armed privateers, and when the war was over became pirates rather than return to peaceful trade. Hong Kong and its neighbouring islands had always been centres of piracy, or the home of fishermen ambitious to earn a dishonest dollar or two from piracy. The new British colony must have appeared like manna from Heaven to these people, and the colony's first years were marked by an increase in piracy. There was a similar increase in piracy around Singapore at the same time. The founding of Singapore in 1819 had resulted in a great increase in native trade in the area, and this suffered severely from attacks by well-armed Chinese junks, which sometimes attacked European ships. Captain James Brooke with his sea Dyaks played a big part in suppressing piracy in these waters.<sup>1</sup>

The period between the First and Second China Wars is one of the most confusing in Chinese history. On one hand is the founding of a British colony at Hong Kong, the opening of the treaty ports, and the inception of regular shipping services along the coast; while on the other is the persistence of lawlessness and piracy. In the background is the increasing weakness of the Manchu Dynasty, and during the last years of the period, the Taiping Rebellion.

When the East India Company controlled the China trade there was little need for naval protection in Chinese waters, and the Cantonese were traditionally opposed to the Royal Navy. The large and well-armed East Indiamen and "Country" ships were perfectly capable of fighting their way past the pirates who infested the Canton River delta, as were smaller, but faster and equally well-armed opium clippers. In spite of Chinese objections, however, British warships visited Canton on several occasions. Anson called in the *Centurion* in 1741, on the famous voyage on which he captured the Manila galleon, and Cook in 1779 with the *Resolution* and *Discovery* after his three-year cruise in the Pacific. Cook's ships were careened, refitted, and provisioned at Canton, the East India Company advancing the money in return for bills on the Admiralty in London.

---

<sup>1</sup> The first white Rajah of Sarawak.

For the first few years after the cession of Hong Kong, the British Government and Royal Navy practically ignored piracy on the South China coast; and the American, French, and Portuguese governments were equally indifferent. Any attempts at suppression by the Hong Kong Government were as feeble and ineffective as those of the Canton authorities. British traders in Hong Kong and the treaty ports, however, considered that they were entitled to much greater protection, and after repeated protests and representations to the home and Hong Kong governments the Hong Kong Government passed its first anti-piracy ordinance in 1847, and the Royal Navy began to take more effective action. As a result, many unsavoury practices were uncovered. It was found that certain British merchants were supplying arms and ammunition to the pirates against whom they were demanding protection; and that Hong Kong officials were licensing ships to provide convoy protection for Chinese traders, which ships were using the cover of the British flag to plunder the cargoes they were paid to protect. This licensed convoy system was open to much abuse, and a source of great trouble to the Navy. The Chinese called these ships "protecting tigers." The Navy itself was not blameless in its anti-piracy operations. The over-generous bounty system, which made pirate hunting a lucrative profession for the first decades after the cession of Hong Kong, often led to innocent Chinese traders and sailors losing their lives and property. Admiralty records ignore most of the errors committed by overzealous naval officers, but the Navy's anti-piracy campaign was one of the many British activities to draw unfavourable criticism from Lord Elgin in his mission to China and Japan in 1858.

The Royal Navy and the Hong Kong Government faced a difficult and complex situation when they undertook serious anti-piracy operations in the late 1840's. The Navy could attack pirates anywhere on the high seas, and commit them for trial to any British or Chinese court; but Hong Kong could only free its own waters of pirates. Piracy on the coast and rivers came within the jurisdiction of the Chinese Government, and neither the Navy nor Hong Kong could operate there without permission from the Canton authorities. Anglo-Chinese co-operation, therefore, was essential for successful anti-piracy operations, and this was not always available. The Treaty of Tientsin was the first

official agreement between the two countries to refer to piracy, and Article 52 gave British warships permission, when in pursuit of pirates, to enter any port on the coast. Provision was also made for co-operation between the Royal Navy and the Chinese for punishment of pirates, restoration of stolen goods, and so on, and later treaties and agreements followed the same pattern. Unfortunately, experience proved that the Chinese had undertaken more than they could carry out; and that the provincial authorities were as often unwilling, as unable, to implement the pledges of the Peking Government.

The pirates on the coast in the 1840's, 50's, and 60's, included British, American, French, and other foreign renegades, who often worked in league with Chinese merchants in Hong Kong and the treaty ports. The system of ship registry then in force in Hong Kong was even more liable to abuse than the present system, and allowed Chinese shipowners an easy means of claiming the protection of certain foreign flags. This increased the difficulties of the Navy, already hard pressed to distinguish between convoy and pirate, and between pirate, trader, and fisherman.

The most famous renegade among the pirates in the 1850's was an American sailor called Eli Boggs, for whose capture the Hong Kong Government offered a reward of \$1,000. This was won by an even more famous American sailor, more often associated with blackbirding in the Pacific, than with piracy on the China coast. Captain Bully Hayes, however, made his debut on the China coast, and when that part of the world became too hot for him he moved south to Australasian and Pacific waters.

Hayes first appeared in the Far East in 1854 at Singapore, as master of the American barque, *Canton*. He was then twenty-five years old. After selling the *Canton*, which did not belong to him, he appeared in Hong Kong a few months later as master of another American barque, the *Otranto*, which was probably under charter to the famous American house of Russell and Company. In Hong Kong's Victoria Hotel, and in the company of the masters of two Jardine opium clippers—Long John Saunders of the *Chin Chin* and King Tom Donovan of the *Spray*—Hayes made the acquaintance of some naval officers, and for the rest of his time on the coast he was a great favourite with the Navy. During

this time he visited Amoy, Foochow, and Shanghai several times, and it was in 1857 north of Shanghai that he captured his compatriot Eli Boggs. Hayes was a guest on H.M.S. *Bittern* when she attacked Bogg's fleet of between thirty and forty junks. When the junks fled into shallow water out of range of the *Bittern's* guns, Hayes persuaded Captain Vansittart to allow him to continue the chase in the longboat, and in this he personally captured Boggs. Boggs was taken to Hong Kong and found guilty of piracy. He escaped hanging, however, as no one could be found willing to swear to having seen him commit murder.

Hayes helped the Royal Navy on another occasion shortly afterwards, when he was on the steamer, *Paoushan*, and on this occasion obtained some of the pirates' ill-gotten gains for his trouble. He was a free spender, however, and everything went on a series of parties he gave for the officers and men of the *Bittern* in Shanghai, after which he left with his port dues unpaid and owing money to Chinese shopkeepers and tailors. This was a favourite trick which he repeated in Australian and South Pacific ports, and his final departure from the coast was in the same vein. He loaded a hundred coolies in Swatow for Australia, before Swatow was legally open as a treaty port, and did a large illegal trade in opium and emigrants. Hayes induced his passengers to pay him their poll tax for Australia as well as their passage money. After passing through Sydney Heads he flooded his bilges to give his ship the appearance of sinking, and then persuaded a tugboat to take the Chinese ashore to safety, by promising it the salvage work on its return. When the tugboat returned, however, Hayes and his ship had disappeared beyond the Heads.

The Navy had several spectacular successes against the pirates during this period, on a much bigger scale than those in which Hayes was involved. The most notable were Admiral Sir John Dalrymple Hay's actions against Shap-ng-tsai and Chu-apoo in South China waters in the summer of 1849, in which dozens of pirate junks were destroyed and hundreds of pirates killed. These actions cost the Admiralty £42,000 in bounty money, which was considered far in excess of the risks involved, and were responsible for the bounty system being modified. In spite of these naval successes piracy continued to flourish in South China, and new

pirate fleets appeared. The Hong Kong press was very critical of both the Navy and the Hong Kong Government, claiming that the latter was criminally careless in granting convoy and gunpowder licenses, and pointing out that scarcely a pirate junk was captured without having Hong Kong men in its crew and that many pirate junks were fitted out in Hong Kong. They omitted, however, to point out the connection between the opium trade and piracy. Opium was highly prized, and on one occasion in 1851 one hundred and fifty chests were seized from a Jardine opium clipper, and two of their European employees taken prisoner.

The steamship, more than the Royal Navy, was responsible for the decline in the old-fashioned style of piracy, in which a fleet of junks had an overwhelming advantage over a sailing ship becalmed in coastal waters. Steamships appeared on the coast in increasing numbers in the years between the two China Wars, and by the end of the Second War most of the foreign coasters were steamships. A steam hose was more effective against pirates than joss sticks, and the comparative immunity of foreign steamships from piracy was another powerful inducement for Chinese merchants to patronize them, thus weighting the balance more heavily in their favour.

An action in which the Peninsular and Oriental river steamer *Canton* was involved displayed other advantages which steamers brought to anti-piracy operations. The *Canton* was on her way from Canton to Hong Kong when she met H.M.S. *Columbine*, a sailing ship, engaged with a fleet of pirate junks. When the *Canton* arrived on the scene the wind had fallen, and the junks were using their oars and sweeps to get out of range of the *Columbine's* guns. The *Canton* took the *Columbine* in tow, enabling her to sink a number of the junks before they got clear. Two years later another river steamer called *Canton*, belonging in this case to the Hong Kong and Canton Steam Packet Company, captured a pirate junk in the river.

In these actions, in which dozens or hundreds of junks were involved, it would probably be more accurate to describe the Chinese as bandits or rebels, than as pirates. Such fleets attacked towns and villages as often as they attacked ships, and like the Japanese pirates of the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries, plundered

the countryside for miles from the coast. The leaders of such fleets were often opposed to the ruling dynasty, sometimes being disaffected former high officials. Koxinga, the greatest of all Chinese pirates, comes into this category. Koxinga was a supporter of the fallen Ming Dynasty against the Manchus, and the Chinese honour him to this day as a great patriot. His greatest exploit was the capture of Formosa from the Dutch in 1661. This type of rebel *cum* bandit *cum* pirate continued to appear down to modern times.

The expansion of the China trade, and the opening of Japan to foreign trade resulted in a great increase in British naval forces in the Far East. The first naval ships to operate in the China seas were based on the East Indies station, but very soon China became an important sphere of naval operations on her own. The suppression of piracy was only one of the Navy's responsibilities. The distance between Britain and China meant that unusual and interesting duties were often entrusted to naval officers, especially before telegraphic communications were established and when senior Foreign Office or Diplomatic officials were unavailable. Hong Kong became the headquarters of the China station, which extended from Singapore to Shanghai, and later to Japan. It continued as such until, as the result of a reorientation of naval policy in the inter-war period, Singapore became the major British naval base in the Far East. Even after that Hong Kong continued to be the headquarters of the anti-piracy forces.

Until France sent naval forces to co-operate with the Royal Navy in the Second China War, the Royal Navy was the only effective naval force in the China seas, and undertook the protection of all shipping. Even after the United States and France stationed naval forces permanently in these waters, the major responsibility for the suppression of piracy remained with the Royal Navy. It was British policy to station a warship at or near each treaty port, whether it was a coastal or a river port. This meant warships of two distinct types. There were the larger ships and their auxiliaries, which only saw action on rare occasions, and which were based in Hong Kong, with a summer cruise to Wei-hai-wei. Then there were the same shallow-draft river gunboats, specially designed to operate on the Yangtze and the



West River, and which were stationed permanently on those rivers. These were divided into two squadrons, one for the Yangtze, and one for the West River, with a senior naval officer in charge of each squadron under the overall command of the Commander-in-Chief of British naval forces at Hong Kong. The officer in charge of the Yangtze squadron was called Rear Admiral, Yangtze. The assumption of this title seems to have aroused little comment from the Chinese, unlike the British public's reaction when the Kaiser called himself Admiral of the Atlantic a few decades later.

As old-fashioned piracy died out with the coming of steamships, a new kind designed to cope with the new conditions appeared. While some of the new pirates may have been recruited from the old, the new piracy required a knowledge of modern shipping practices unlikely to have been common among the old fishermen *cum* pirates. As before, however, the new-style piracy was most prevalent around Hong Kong, embarrassingly close to the headquarters of the anti-piracy forces. It was adding insult to injury when the steam launch *Wo Fat Shing* was pirated in Hong Kong Harbour in 1927, and \$30,000 in gold bars stolen. The newspapers made great play out of such facts. Highly coloured accounts of pirate companies being established in Hong Kong along sound business lines, replete with boards of directors and so on, were common in the British and American press in the 1920's and early 30's. The rumour that some of these companies had attractive Chinese women in command added some spice to these stories.

One of the earliest cases of this new kind of piracy took place in 1874, when the Hong Kong, Canton, and Macao Steamship Company's small river steamer *Spark* was pirated between Canton and Macao.<sup>2</sup> The *Spark's* captain, mate, purser, one fireman, and four passengers were murdered. The pirates went ashore in the ship's boats, and the engineers — who had prudently taken refuge in the bunkers — then took the ship to Macao. The *Spark* was only 133 tons burden, but she had over 150 passengers

---

<sup>2</sup> The *Spark* was one of the oldest steamers on the river. She had been built in New York in 1849 for Russell and Company, sent out in sections and assembled at Whampoa. She was sold to the Hong Kong, Canton, and Macao Steamship Company in 1870.

on board at the time. A similar, but even more murderous case had occurred in 1858, on a river steamer between Canton and Hong Kong. As this was during the Second China War, and the attackers were definitely established to be Chinese soldiers in disguise, this case might be charitably described as an act of war.

Most China coasters carried deck passengers, in addition to a dozen or so saloon passengers. In the emigrant trades, however, hundreds and even thousands of deck passengers were carried, and the emigrant ships were the greatest temptations to the pirates. The strategy was to get control of such a ship, take her to Bias Bay or Mirs Bay, both conveniently just outside Hong Kong territorial waters, and then make off ashore in Chinese territory with the money and valuables of the passengers. A few wealthy passengers might also be taken for ransom. An operation of this nature required careful planning and organizing ability, some knowledge of the ship's geography and routine, and some knowledge of navigation and engineering. In many cases it became known afterwards that some members of the gang had travelled on the ship previously, so as to make themselves familiar with it.

A piracy of this kind required at least two dozen men, who boarded the ship along with the other passengers, with weapons concealed in their baggage. At a prearranged time a simultaneous attack would be mounted on the ship's key points — bridge, engine room, radio cabin, and saloon — often a meal time being chosen when everyone not on duty would be congregated in the saloon. While the ship was being taken to her destination under the supervision of a few pirates on the bridge and in the engine room, the others were robbing the passengers and broaching the most valuable cargo. As the destination was invariably Bias Bay or Mirs Bay, the piracy would take place as near there as possible, so as to reduce the time the ship was under pirate control and out of communication with Hong Kong.

The average coaster never had more than seven or eight European officers, and if the attack were well-timed they could all be immobilized in the first few minutes of the attack. There was usually little resistance from the Chinese crew, and a few men in the engine room and on the bridge were able to take the ship to its destination. There always seemed to be some pirates

with sufficient knowledge of navigation and engineering for this. When Bias Bay or Mirs Bay was reached one or more of the ship's lifeboats might be used to take the pirates, their loot, and their prisoners ashore. Sometimes junks were used for this, which might be innocent junks which had arrived fortuitously, or pirate junks which had arrived by prior arrangement. Invariably at least one of the ship's officers would be held as a hostage during this operation, being released when it was completed.

If everything went smoothly in a piracy of this kind, no lives would be lost. But the pirates were ruthless if they encountered any opposition or if a hitch occurred. A few shots were usually fired in the opening exchanges, perhaps causing a few injuries, but this made the rest of the crew and passengers more co-operative. Towards the end of this era of modern piracy, when the Hong Kong Government and the shipping companies had adopted more effective anti-piracy measures, casualties became more common, as the pirates intensified their resentment to these measures.

One important anti-piracy measure was the isolation of the centre part of the ship—bridge, engine room, and saloon accommodation—from the rest of the ship by steel grilles. Access was by a steel door, locked and under constant guard. The guards were usually Chinese or Sikh policemen, under White Russian officers; but on special occasions, British soldiers from the Hong Kong garrison were employed. In spite of all these precautions, piracy continued to flourish along the South China coast right down to the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937. However, there were no attempts on ships with British soldiers as guards.

There were fifty-one major cases of piracy on the China coast in the years between the two World Wars. The great majority involved British ships, and twenty British Merchant Navy officers were killed. There were also many Chinese casualties, and many Chinese kidnapped and never heard of again. There were also many cases involving Chinese junks which received little publicity in the foreign press. The worst years were 1922, 1927, and 1928, in which there were five, six, and eight piracies respectively. A few of the most famous cases of this period are described below.

The China Navigation Company's *Sunning* was pirated on 14th November 1926, on a passage from Shanghai to Hong Kong.<sup>3</sup> The officers recaptured the ship shortly afterwards, and when they refused the pirates an armistice the latter set the ship on fire. By turning into the wind the pirates were smoked out, and forced to leave in one of the lifeboats. When the fire got out of control the officers and crew were forced to do the same, but were picked up by a Norwegian ship. When the destroyer H.M.S. *Verity* arrived, however, they returned to the *Sunning*, and put out the fire with naval help. The *Sunning* was then towed to Hong Kong.

The *Haiching* piracy of 1929 was very reminiscent of the *Sunning*. The *Haiching* belonged to the Douglas Steamship Company of Hong Kong, and was pirated while on her way from Amoy to Hong Kong. There were two hundred and fifty deck passengers and four saloon passengers on board at the time, and the attack took place when passing Bias Bay, just a few hours before reaching Hong Kong. The third mate and a Sikh guard were killed in the first few minutes, but the wireless officer continued to send out messages for help. The pirates, unable to get control of the ship, set it on fire; and two lifeboats were burnt out before their resistance was broken. When British warships arrived, they helped to put the fire out, and then towed the *Haiching* to Hong Kong, where all the passengers were thoroughly screened. Three of them were charged with piracy and murder, but one was later freed through lack of evidence, while the other two suffered the death penalty. Captain Farrar of the *Haiching* was awarded the O.B.E. for his part in the case.

From the pirates' point of view the *Anking* piracy of 1928 was much more successful than either that of the *Sunning* or the *Haiching*. It was probably the classic piracy of modern times on the coast. The *Anking*, also a China Navigation Company ship, with over 1,000 deck passengers aboard, was on her way from Singapore to Amoy and Swatow when the piracy took place. These passengers were either returning to China to retire, or for a holiday after working in Malaya for several years, and were likely therefore to be well supplied with money and valuables.

---

<sup>3</sup> The *Sunning* had also been pirated three years earlier, on 23rd October, 1923.

The pirates boarded the ship in Singapore along with the other passengers, and after taking over the ship took her to Bias Bay, where they made off ashore with over \$100,000 in cash, and as much more in valuables. During the attack, the chief engineer, chief officer, and a Chinese quartermaster were killed, and the captain seriously injured. For some time after this, ships on this run were provided with guards from the British garrison at Hong Kong, and no piracy was ever attempted on any ship so guarded.

The piracy of the 4,500-ton Dutch motorship *Van Heutz* in December 1947 was notable for several reasons. It was the first serious piracy since the war, and the *Van Heutz* was the largest ship ever to be pirated on the coast. She left Hong Kong on 14th December for Amoy and Swatow with 1,600 deck passengers on board, repatriates from Indonesia, many with their life savings. The pirates, about twenty-five in all, captured the ship only four hours after she had left Hong Kong, and took her to Bias Bay. On arrival at Bias Bay they went ashore in commandeered junks, taking six wealthy Chinese passengers with them. During the few hours they had the ship, the passengers were robbed of cash and valuables worth more than \$90,000, but the pirates were disappointed at not getting another \$50,000 in currency which they believed was on board. On her previous trip when she had carried an even greater number of repatriates, the *Van Heutz* had had an armed guard of thirteen Dutch policemen. A few months after the piracy four men were arrested in Hong Kong, found guilty of being involved, and sentenced to long terms of imprisonment.

These four cases conformed to the traditional twentieth century pattern, where the pirates boarded as passengers, and when the passengers were likely to be well provided with money and valuables. During these same years, however, there were other piracies which did not conform to this pattern—the *Tungchow* piracies of 1925 and 1935, the *Nanchang's* of 1933, and the *Shuntien's* of 1935. All took place in the north, and all the ships belonged to the China Navigation Company. The *Tungchow* shares the distinction with the *Sunning* of being the only ship in modern times to have been pirated twice. On the first occasion in December 1925 it occurred between Tientsin

and Wei-hai-wei, in sight of a sister ship, the *Linan*. The *Tungchow* was turned south for Bias Bay, and a few days later was recognized by another sister ship, the *Sinkiang*, and flags were dipped. The *Sinkiang* accounted for the *Tungchow's* being off her usual route by assuming that she was bound for the Company's dockyard in Hong Kong. This was one of the most successful piracies in the interwar years. The pirates went ashore in Bias Bay with well over £30,000 in specie, \$10,000 in cash, and only the last-minute cancellation of a large consignment of silver taels prevented their haul from being much larger.

The second *Tungchow* piracy was almost ten years later, when she was carrying several hundreds of thousands of dollar notes from Shanghai to Tientsin. The pirates captured her the day after she left Shanghai and, as before, turned her south for Bias Bay. During the next few days they painted out her name and altered the colour of the funnel. A disquieting feature of this second piracy was the fact that the *Tungchow* was passed by several ships when under pirate control, including a British warship looking out for her.

This second *Tungchow* piracy had its amusing aspects. The passengers included a number of European school children, returning to school in North China after spending their holidays with their parents in Shanghai. The pirates made friends with them, and supplied them with fruit and other delicacies broached from the ship's stores. As before, the *Tungchow* was taken to Bias Bay, where the pirates went ashore with their loot. Unfortunately for them, however, the dollar notes were unsigned.

The *Nanchang* piracy of March 1933 was even further from the normal pattern than either of the *Tungchow* cases. The most normal feature was that the *Nanchang* was a China Navigation Company ship. This piracy took place at the mouth of the Newchwang River in Manchuria, well outside the pirates' range of operations. Also, the *Nanchang*, which was boarded by two junks when she lay at anchor, carried no passengers. There were no casualties in this case, but four British officers were taken prisoner, and only released after five months of tortuous negotiations and the payment of a ransom. This incident took place eighteen months after the Japanese had overrun Manchuria, and had set up the puppet state of Manchukuo; it might possibly be described as banditry — with political undertones.

Another case which might be said to have had political undertones was that of the China Navigation Company's *Shuntien* in June 1934. The *Shuntien* was the latest addition to the China Navigation Company's large fleet, and was making only her second voyage at the time. She was captured by some thirty pirates after leaving Tientsin for Chefoo, and was taken to the mouth of the Yellow River where she was beached on soft sand. The pirates then made off inland, taking five European and twenty Chinese passengers as hostages. Before leaving, they told the ship's comprador that the piracy was a reprisal for the Chinese Maritime Customs having stationed an extra customs cruiser in Shantung Bay, thus interfering with their smuggling operations. The Europeans returned a few days later, but nothing more was ever heard of the Chinese hostages.

Bias Bay, sixty-five miles northeast of Hong Kong, was notorious as the pirates' stronghold in the interwar years. Unfortunately it was just outside Hong Kong territorial waters, and came within the jurisdiction of the Cantonese authorities, who were either unwilling, or unable, to co-operate with the Royal Navy against the pirates. The nationalist and anti-foreign feelings of the Cantonese probably contributed to this, as did the fact that the warlords of Kwangtung were suspected of being in league with the pirates. Whether this was so or not, it was definitely established that pirates based on Bias Bay committed nine major piracies between 1924 and 1926.

Although the Navy was unable to suppress piracy on the China coast, so much of which took place almost on its own doorstep, the mere fact that naval ships were in the vicinity must have reduced its incidence. The pirates rarely boarded ships at Hong Kong, partly because of the strict naval and police control there, and also because passengers joining ships there were unlikely to have much money or valuables. In the case of the second *Sunning* piracy in 1926, it was definitely established afterwards that the pirates came on board at Amoy, and that their weapons were smuggled on board by stevedores. The lack of co-operation from Canton meant that the Navy was unable to follow up action at sea by punitive expeditions against the pirates' shore bases. The Kwangtung authorities had been much more co-operative in the first few decades after the cession of

Hong Kong, than in the 1920's and 30's. The latter period came within the warlord era when the writ of the central government at Peking or Nanking sat very lightly, if at all, on the southern provinces. In 1925 and 1927, however, the Navy sent expeditions into Bias Bay, to destroy — if possible without damage to innocent lives and property — villages known to harbour pirates and pirate junks. The second expedition was undertaken in exasperation after the pirating of the Jardine steamer S.S. *Hop Sang* in March 1927.<sup>4</sup> The official report issued after the expedition, claimed that one hundred and thirty stone and mat shed huts were destroyed in the two villages attacked, and forty junks and sampans destroyed. The raid had been no surprise, and definite evidence was found that the villages had been implicated in recent piracies. These raids only caused a temporary lull in the pirates' activities.

The Navy had one notable success in the *Irene* piracy of October 1927, which illustrates the difficulties with which the Navy and the Hong Kong Government had to contend in their anti-piracy campaign. H.M.S. submarine *L4* challenged the China Merchants Steam Navigation Company's *Irene* when entering Bias Bay without lights and in suspicious circumstances. When she refused to stop, and then ignored a warning shot fired across her bow, a live round was fired which still drew no response. The *Irene's* captain was navigating under the pirates' supervision, and tried to ring down to stop the engines, but was too late. The next shot struck the *Irene* amidships on the waterline, disabling the engines, killing a pirate standing beside the chief engineer, and starting a fire which almost gutted the ship before she sank. *L4* went alongside and rescued most of the crew, and 220 of the 248 passengers. Three other warships and the tug *Alliance* arrived later, but were unable to prevent the *Irene* from sinking. When *L4* arrived at Hong Kong the crew and passengers of *Irene* were screened by the police, and three men were identified as being pirates. A few days later seven other men were arrested, and all ten eventually hanged, after a sensational attempt to break out of Hong Kong's Victoria Gaol. The China Merchants Steam Navigation Company came under the control of the Chinese Government, and the *Irene*

---

<sup>4</sup> The only piracy of a Jardine ship in the modern era.



case had serious political repercussions. China considered *L4*'s actions as flagrant aggression, and disregard for international law. Two years later they brought a suit against the commander of the *L4* which was unsuccessful. This was one of the few cases in which the Navy came into actual contact with pirates, and it had several unsavoury features.

Piracy was on the decline in South China at the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937. As for the previous few years, the Kuomintang Government had been gaining more effective control of the southern coastal provinces. Isolated cases, however, still continued right down to the fall of Canton to the Japanese in October 1938. After that Japanese control over the coast of Mainland China curtailed the deck passenger and emigrant trade, as well as the coast trade in general. The pirates turned to smuggling arms through the Japanese blockade, assuming the guise of patriots as they had done so often in the past. When they resumed their normal profession after the war, their activities had a very short lease on life.

The last piracy involving a foreign ship on the China coast was in 1952. The victim, appropriately enough, was the *Hupeh* of the China Navigation Company, the company which had suffered so much from piracy in the past. The piracy followed the traditional pattern, with the *Hupeh* being taken to Bias Bay, where the pirates went ashore with their ill-gotten gains and some wealthy Chinese passengers to be held for ransom. Soon after this, the Communists secured complete control over the coast of Mainland China, and for the first time for centuries it became free of pirates. Unfortunately, there are now no British ships trading on the coast to enjoy this unusual immunity.