

Cover Page



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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CONCLUSION

DEFENSIVE AND AGGRESSIVE MONOPOLIES

Unquestionably social turbulence in the southeastern coastal regions of China lay at the heart of the rise of the seaborne empire of the Cheng lineage. This maritime mercenary power group in the Min-nan area founded its powerbase on the skillful exploitation of foreign trade and by claiming the monopoly on violence. In origin it was the offshoot of the agriculture-rooted tax administration of the Ming dynasty which did not obtain enough revenue to pay for the maintenance of a permanent naval fleet to defend the coastal regions precisely in a period of change and foreign intrusion when this was so desperately needed. Forced to look elsewhere, the provincial government of Fu-chien had no option but to exploit the revenues it derived from maritime trade to secure the coastal frontier. By the expedient of promising the trading revenues to the maritime mercenaries, the local authorities conceded them a substantial autonomy to act as they pleased, on condition that they kept stable order in coastal waters to the satisfaction of the imperial court in Peking.

Historians generally consider the Edict issued by the Chinese Ming court in 1568 which partly lifted the *Hai-chin* or maritime prohibitions in southern Fu-chien to mark a milestone in the protracted struggle of local merchants and sailors to obtain a profit from the bounties of overseas trade. This exceptional 'privilege' permitted overseas trade from one local harbor, Yüe-kang, a port in the Haich'êng district of Chang-chou prefecture. It seems to have been devised to serve two purposes: it undercut piracy by offering unemployed sailors job opportunities, and it guaranteed the presence of a sea-going fighting force for the coastal defence, on call all the time. By any standards it would seem to have been a well-calculated decision but recent research reveals that, instead of being a well-devised move by the imperial court which would allow it to gain control of the overseas trade, it was

CONCLUSION

actually no more than an *ad hoc* arrangement to secure the survival of the commercial shipping whose existence was continuously under threat from local piracy. In short, the measure resembled the ‘Macao Formula’ under whose terms the Ming court allowed the Portuguese to remain in Macao.

The implementation of this policy to pacify the coastal waters and combat piracy as effectively as possible laid the financial foundation for being able to maintain a coastal defence force. Under the circumstances, the relationship between the coastal defence troops and the junk owners and their skippers who could now sail to overseas destinations with official permission evolved as a flexible arrangement.

The onus of getting the priorities right was placed fairly and squarely on the shoulders of the coastal defence troops. The coastal defence troops, or rather their leaders, were faced with many choices. Should they simply escort the trading junks to protect them, charging high prices for their services? Should they actively harass and arrest pirates and ordain a scorched earth policy on nearby islands to prevent them being used as bases by pirates and smugglers? Or would it be better for them to neglect these onerous duties and exploit their own trading junks and pursue a more forward-looking strategy? The share in the trading revenues collected was used for the upkeep of the coastal defence depended on the judgement of the provincial authorities, principally the Grand Co-ordinator who was in charge of the budget of the province.

The rise and decline in the number of maritime mercenaries was closely related to the barometer of fear of foreign aggression. At this early stage of globalization, the Grand Co-ordinators of the coastal provinces of China in the Ming period did not have the advantage of a comprehensive knowledge of what was happening in international waters. The more terrified the Ming court grew of the threat posed by maritime invaders, whether Chinese or Japanese pirates or Dutch privateers, the more strongly it supported the local monopoly rights in the seaborne trade of the maritime mercenaries, who were supposed to keeping the peace along the coast. As a

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

consequence of their fairly impregnable position, this ‘defensive monopoly’ policy, as I call it, made a strong contribution to the increase in trade revenues.

Just at this juncture, when the Japanese civil war was drawing to an end at the end of the sixteenth century and Toyotomi Hideyoshi and his successor, Tokugawa Ieyasu, unified the country, Japanese piracy on the Chinese coast was also declining. Japanese traders, provided with passes from the Shogun, sought to reconnect their links with the China coast intent on engaging in peaceful, legal trade, but their pacific ambitions were obstructed by the imperial prohibition on trade with Japan, which had not been repealed .

In 1617, a merchant, a member of the local gentry in Chang-chou, Chao Ping-chien, was recruited by the Coastal Defence force of Fu-chien province when rumours began to spread about impending Japanese attempts to move to the nearby island of Taiwan. As he was covertly involved in trading with Sino-Japanese smugglers, he was happy to make use of his official position to exclude all other smugglers from this trade. When the Japanese ‘threat’ did not materialize, the provincial authorities decided to get rid of Chao Ping-chien and executed him once they no longer had any need of him. Likewise, the famous Japan-based smuggler Li Tan, who mediated between the Ming coastal defence troops and the Dutch who occupied the Pescadores between 1622 and 1624, had also been a low-ranking officer in the coastal defence force before he began organizing his smuggling network between China and Japan. Li Tan tried to regain a central position in the coastal defence by mediating between the Chinese court and the VOC, but he passed away before his plans could come to fruition¹ His death left the way open for Cheng Chih-lung, alias Nicolas Iquan, a former member of Li Tan’s

¹ Élie Ripon, *Voyages et aventures du capitaine Ripon aux grandes Indes: journal inédit d’un mercenaire 1617-1627* [Voyages and Adventures of Captain Ripon in Greater India: unpublished journal of a mercenary 1617-1627], Yves Giraud (ed.), (Thonon-les-Bains, Haute-Savoie: Éditions de l’Albaron, 1990), 113.

CONCLUSION

smuggling network, to join the coastal defence with his followers in 1629, after he had briefly collaborated with the VOC as a mercenary.

After the Dutch had occupied Taiwan in 1624 and continued to press the Fu-chien authorities to open up trade relations, the power of the Fu-chien coastal defence forces under Iquan reached unprecedented heights during the 1630s. Trade with Japan, first the smuggling via the Dutch in Taiwan and later the direct trade with Nagasaki, contributed immensely to the development of Iquan's 'defensive monopoly'. In effect he remained a maritime mercenary while assuming the guise of serving as a high officer in the coastal defence troops. He was helped out in his ambitions by a succession of Grand-Co-ordinators who realized that inevitably they would have to make concessions in exchange for coastal security and prosperity. Iquan's 'defensive monopoly' reached its zenith in the 1640s when the Ming court was facing the menace of the Manchu troops at the northeastern border of the empire. At this time, the Grand Co-ordinators of Fu-chien virtually openly tolerated his illegal trade with Japan because the prolonged war against the Manchus had exhausted the treasury. This all happened at the wrong moment for the Dutch. The rapid expansion of Iquan's foreign trade monopoly emerged as an uncompromising threat to the VOC trade on the Sino-Japan route just when the Dutch were expecting to be able to step in and replace the Portuguese after their expulsion from Japan in 1639. When Iquan arranged for the establishment of a restored Southern Ming court in Fu-chien province in 1646, he hit on the perfect way to develop a crown trade under the guise of the tributary system which would allow him to contest the trading privileges of the VOC in Siam, Sumatra, the Malay Peninsula and Cochin-China. Realizing that his chance had come, Iquan grasped the sole authority over all coastal maritime activities in China and ironically grabbed the power to execute a maritime ban and turn it in to an 'aggressive' weapon. After Iquan's son Cheng Ch'eng-kung, alias Coxinga, succeeded in becoming the leader of the Fu-chien coastal mercenaries in 1653, he also employed the maritime prohibition as a weapon to bargain for more profits as he dealt with his various trading partners or competitors including the Japanese, Dutch and

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Spaniards. All his military actions were concentrated on the sites on which his maritime network relied most. The last two full-scale attacks he waged against Nanking and Taiwan were designed to protect the rich silk trade with Japan and to launch into the gold trade with India. The attacks waged by his successor, Cheng Ching, against the Dutch still holed up in Chi-lung in Formosa and Phnom-Penh in Cambodia, ran along the same lines and represented an aggressive monopoly enforcement, which consistently tried to secure its own trading networks by force. Even during the implementation of the maritime ban and the evacuation policy imposed by the Manchu court in the years 1663-1670 (in Fu-chien until 1684), secure in its position, the Cheng regime in Taiwan was still able to continue to trade with China by exchanging contraband cargo at various footholds along the coast.

The occupation of Taiwan by Coxinga in 1662 provided the Cheng lineage with a stronghold from which to negotiate its relations with the Chinese Ch'ing Empire. At the beginning of the seventeenth century Taiwan had been a 'stateless' space between China and Japan. The VOC occupation in 1624 upset this arrangement, which was further thrown out of kilter in 1636 when the Japanese adopted their own *Sakoku* or 'locked country' policy under the newly established Tokugawa Shogunate. Originally the maritime mercenaries in the Min-nan area did no more than serve as middlemen between China and Japan at their bases on the Pescadores and in Taiwan, but this situation changed radically in the 1630s when Iquan actually became an intermediary between China and the VOC in the An-hai- Taiwan axis. Later, in the 1650s, Coxinga widened his network to include Siam and Japan. The dramatic change in the geo-political conditions in China contribute greatly to the reinforcement of Coxinga's 'aggressive monopoly.' It threw such a spanner in the works of local trade, it prompted the VOC to seek an alliance with the Ch'ing naval forces in the period 1663-1665. Having weighed up their options in the area, the Dutch decided that their best course would be to seek a solid relationship with the Ch'ing court, on the basis of their mutual interest in toppling the Cheng regime.

CONCLUSION

When new rebellions by Ming loyalists against the Ch'ing court erupted in the southern provinces in 1673, they threw the competition in foreign trade between the Cheng regime and the rulers of the rebellious provinces of Fu-chien and Kuang-tung wide open. As the Cheng regime was not in a position to wage war against its Fu-chien and Kuang-tung erstwhile allies, its 'aggressive monopoly' ebbed away. It was reduced to being only one of many competitors in the Sino-Japanese trade. After the Fu-chien rebels surrendered to the Manchu court in 1677, the new Fu-chien coastal defence troops originally posted to guard the southern coastline of China by the Ch'ing court gradually began to recoup the status they had lost in earlier struggles with the Cheng and adopted a 'defensive monopoly' in which they depicted the Cheng regime as a threat to the common cause.

One of Iquan's former followers, Admiral Shih Lang, seized this opportunity to take command of the coastal defence troops in Amoy and attack the Cheng regime in Taiwan. His decision was ill-timed as his personal position became uncertain when, in its efforts to secure the coast, the Manchu court considered evacuating the whole littoral, a decision which would have made the defence troops superfluous. If Shih Lang was not to see everything he had fought for and planned for so long collapse, he had to eliminate the Cheng regime as soon as possible. However, he was only partially vindicated. After he destroyed the Cheng naval force off the Pescadores and accepted its surrender in Taiwan, the maritime threat, the principal reason for maintaining a 'defensive monopoly', also evaporated. Determined to preserve his hard-won position, Shih Lang plotted to lure the VOC into coming back to Taiwan again so that he could parade it as foreign threat to be reckoned with.²

Times had changed and the VOC was not very willing to fall in with his plans. It had already withdrawn from the direct trade with Fu-chou in China

² Cheng Wei-chung, 'Shih Lang t'ai-wan kui-huan hê-lan mi-i[Admiral Shih Lang's Secret Proposal for Returning Taiwan to the VOC]', *T'ai-wan wên-hsien*[Taiwan Historica], 61:3, (2011), 35-74.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

and even more importantly Japan had ceased to export silver, which it needed for its intra-Asian trade. Faced with the fact that Chinese goods were gradually becoming less profitable in Japan, the Dutch re-evaluated the ever worsening ecological conditions in the harbour in the Bay of An-ping (Taijouan) and judged that the port had become too shallow for Dutch ships. When all the conditions had been weighed up, in 1685 Governor-General Johannes Camphuijs in Batavia decided that the Company no longer had any use for a settlement in Taiwan, unless it could obtain the sole right of free trade with China from there.³ On its part, as it felt itself fairly secure on the Dragon Throne, the Manchu court judged that no more foreign threats could be expected from the sea and decided to open up all the coast to the Chinese overseas trade. The upshot was that the military budget was uncoupled from the monopolistic trading revenues. This radically affected the character and purpose of the coastal defence troops as there would no longer be any real need for other maritime mercenaries in the years to come.

In the long history of China, it has not been unusual for local warlords to rise and make bids for power whenever the might of the central government declined. The late East Han, the late Tang and even the late Ch'ing dynasty as well as Southern Ming period are good examples, not to mention the fall of the Ch'ing dynasty just a century ago. The common foundation for this phenomenon was the implementation of certain expedient measures by the court to enable local defence forces to pacify local rebellions when the court itself was no longer able to do so. For example, the Yellow Turban Rebellion (AD 184), the An-Lu-shan Rebellion (AD 755) and the Tai-ping Rebellion (AD 1850) were all the result of the rise of warlords and the demise of the power of the central government. Viewed from this perspective, the rise of the Cheng lineage is not much different from other local warlords under the Southern Ming Emperors. The feature which

³ *Generale Missiven*, IV 1675-1685, p. 722-3; VOC 700, Resolutie van Batavia, Batavia, 8 May 1685, fos. 214-5.

CONCLUSION

distinguishes the Cheng from the other Chinese warlords was its maritime capability which gave it its monopoly access to overseas trading revenues which provided it with generous funding for carrying out its plans. Instead of relying on the agricultural revenues plus military forces on land, it relied on its capability to secure maritime trade routes and a steady stream of useful commodities. The birth of the maritime mercenary was a creation of the newly emerged oceanic contacts as a consequence of the new wave of globalization. The way the Cheng regime dealt with its overseas trading partners, whether they were East Asians or Europeans, had more in common with the polities found in the Malay port principalities than Sino-centric tributary system of the Ming court.

Taken at the flood, the decline of Chinese central power coincidentally allowed the formation of this port principality but, as did so many others, it withered largely because of the effects of changes in oceanic trade and the competition of other coastal polities, rather than because of the embargo of the Chinese empire. However, in the long history of the Chinese maritime frontier, it stands out as an exception. It seems it was the outstanding leaderships characteristics shown by its first two rulers which made it the sole exceptional instance in which a coastal region almost escaped the control of the central power through its astute manipulation of its divergent economic base.